

FEATHERED GLORY:
A POET IN FLIGHT FROM MEDIEVAL IRELAND TO THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY

by

DENELL MARIE DOWNUM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
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17 June 2006
Date

Dr. Catherine McKenna
Chair of Examining Committee

17 June 2006
Date

Dr. Steven Kruger
Executive Officer

Dr. Jane Marcus

Dr. Catherine McKenna

Dr. Joshua Wilner

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

Abstract

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Advisor: Dr. Catherine McKenna

Feathered Glory explores the relevance of the medieval Irish character Suibhne, usually anglicized as Sweeney, to twentieth-century writers. Suibhne is the protagonist of the twelfth-century text *Buile Suibhne*, in which he is depicted as a minor king who goes mad on the field of battle, abandons his kingdom and his role in society, and flies like a bird into the woods, where he becomes a poet of exceptional power and beauty. This tale languished in obscurity for many centuries, but following J.G. O’Keeffe’s publication of a scholarly edition and English translation of *Buile Suibhne* in 1913, Suibhne has come to serve as an important precursor figure for a number of modern writers, especially in Ireland. My dissertation opens with an examination of the medieval Suibhne, with particular emphasis on his role as a figure of the artist, and then moves on to consider three of the most substantive twentieth-century iterations of his tale: Flann O’Brien’s exuberantly experimental novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Seamus Heaney’s volumes *Sweeney Astray* and *Station Island*, and the unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes* as well as four poems by T. S. Eliot that feature the character Sweeney, who bears a significant thematic resemblance to the medieval Suibhne.

While these texts vary widely both in form and in the use they make of the figure of Suibhne, they share an interest in the role and portrayal of the artist that tends toward a

modernist revision of the Romantic model. *Buile Suibhne* supplies particularly fertile material for such a project, for the text embodies numerous tensions relevant to the role of the artist, most notably conflicts among the political, religious, and aesthetic realms and an internal contradiction between the solitary model of the poet that the work seems to extol and the anonymous, collective process by which the text itself was compiled. Walter Benjamin's groundbreaking work on reproduction is a theoretical lynchpin of my analysis, together with Jacques Derrida's discussion of iteration in "Signature Event Context" and *Limited, Inc.*

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Leda and the Swan

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

--W. B. Yeats (*Collected Poems* 214)

INTRODUCTION

In “Leda and the Swan,” William Butler Yeats casts Zeus’ rape of the mortal woman Leda as a violent annunciation of the birth of Greek civilization. Further, the brutal event serves him as a model of the process of artistic creation, for which the world of Greek tragedy stands in synecdoche. The model is an exceedingly masculine one, depicting the “helpless” woman as largely passive, “caught up,” “mastered,” and unable to defend herself with her “terrified vague fingers,” while Zeus engenders within her the seeds of the Trojan war and of Agamemnon’s death, events that will inspire great works of art by Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. The god is not merely male but also intensely physical, his “brute blood” and fiercely beating heart insistent reminders of his animal nature, and he is also alien, his creative power generative of a strangeness expressed in his assumption of a bird’s shape and a “feathered glory” that cloak his appearance in a blinding “white rush.” His initiatory act of violence will spark a continuing cycle of brutality, both on the plains of Troy and within the house of Atreus, and while the casualties will be mourned, the strong implication is that struggle and suffering are the necessary preconditions for creation. Interestingly, while Leda may be helpless, her daughter is not, for Clytemnestra will engineer her husband Agamemnon’s death, partially in vengeance for his murder of their own daughter. Women, then, are both victims and perpetrators of the sexual and familial violence endemic to Leda’s progeny, but the tantalizing hint that Leda might have taken on the god’s “knowledge with his power” may not be enough to suggest the possibility of a female poet within this tradition. It is certain, however, that in “Leda and the Swan,” creation is at once a violent

act and a dazzling one, an expression of a strange, “indifferent,” generative power cloaked in the brilliant plumage of a bird.

The central references in this influential poem are obviously to Greek myth, but “Leda and the Swan” is surprisingly resonant with an Irish tradition that predates Yeats by roughly a millennium. At some point between the seventh and twelfth centuries¹, a legend arose in Ireland of a king named Suibhne, usually anglicized as Sweeney, who went mad on the field of battle, fled like a bird into the woods, and, living an ascetic life of exile and deprivation, became a great poet. Recounted in the twelfth-century text *Buile Suibhne*², this is one of the great stories to come out of medieval Ireland, and it presents a striking portrait of the process of artistic inspiration and production. Hearing the roar of the armies about to meet on the battlefield, Suibhne gazes upon the heavens and is struck by a force analogous to the “sudden blow” suffered by Leda: “[Suibhne] looked up and was filled with frenzy and darkness and rage and confusion and madness and frenzy and quickness and horror and anxiety” (O’Keefe 14; my translation). His fingers go weak, his legs quiver, his reason is overwhelmed, and he flies from the field of battle, “like any bird, through the air,” (14). The text never defines the exact nature of the psychic blow that so overmasters this battle-tested king, but Joseph Nagy suggests that it may well be the force of poetry itself, for “the moment that a person receives the inspiration to see and speak like a poet can also be the moment that he is robbed of his identity, his autonomy, and his freedom from the tyranny of words” (“A New Introduction” 2). Astray in the woods, without shelter or companionship, the mad king suffers loneliness and deprivation, and *Buile Suibhne* is justly celebrated for its clear-eyed depiction of the harsh exigencies, as well as the wild beauty, of the natural world.³

Though Suibhne's initial passivity and suffering parallel Leda's, even to the "terrified vague fingers," the king attains strange knowledge and powers that move him toward the creative role of Zeus, becoming adept at flight, prophecy, and poetry. Feathers grow upon his body, his physical form becomes shifting and indeterminate, and the richness and sufficiency of his verse begins to overcome the narrow conditions of his bestial existence.

This story is unusual in the context of medieval Irish literature in that it depicts the poet as a wild, exilic being, suffering and necessarily separated from his societal roles of king, husband, father, and warrior. Distinguished poets in early Irish society, called *filid* ('seers'), were esteemed members of the culture who played central roles in civic affairs, serving as jurists and historians as well as storytellers and mingling with kings and powerful ecclesiastics.⁴ Williams and Ford describe the "dignified and honourable position accorded the *filid* in Irish society," noting that the early Irish law tract *Uraicecht Becc* places poets in the same social rank as lords (*flatha*) and bishops (22). In his disgraceful exit from the battlefield and subsequent abandonment of his role within society, Suibhne thus presents an anomalous portrait of the early Irish poet, who normally would be as fully integrated into court life as, prior to his exile, was the king himself. Further, the pacific Suibhne, who characteristically flees at the first sign of danger, contrasts markedly with the warlike champions such as Cúchulainn and Finn Mac Cool that dominate the pages of most early Irish epics.

Perhaps because of its oddity, Suibhne's story was neglected for many years, leaving few traces in the literary record from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries, but the twentieth century saw a resurgence of interest. J. G. O'Keeffe

published a scholarly edition and translation of *Buile Suibhne* in 1913, and a number of novelists and poets have subsequently translated or adapted portions of the tale.⁵ The story's anomalous aspects may contribute to its appeal to modern readers, as the mad, suffering, and exiled protagonist is much closer to the concept of the poet predominant in the post-Romantic English literary tradition than to the aristocratic and assured *fili* of most medieval Irish literature. Further, Suibhne's transformation into a bird-man, and the equation of his verse with birdsong, taps into a rich vein of imagery resonant throughout the Western tradition. The Biblical King Nebuchadnezzar, driven from his kingdom by a voice from heaven, endured seven years of bestial exile before regaining his reason⁶: "He was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws" (Dan. 4.33). Penelope Doob suggests that Nebuchadnezzar forms the type for a long line of literary "wild men" who suffer physical transformation, sometimes into bird-like form, subsist in the wilderness on a diet of berries, roots, or raw flesh, and frequently become unable to speak or reason⁷ (134). While Suibhne's tale seems related to many aspects of this tradition, he emphatically does not lose the power of speech, gaining instead the consolations of poetry. Another important strain in Western literature affirms *Buile Suibhne*'s association of birds and poetry, offering figures like the bird-catcher Papageno of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*⁸, the melodious nightingale of Keats' ode, and, as we have seen, the swan guise of Zeus in "Leda and the Swan."

As a rebellious, exiled, and suffering poet, whose beautiful utterance is accompanied by his strange growth of feathers and mastery of flight, Suibhne is a figure at once familiar and alien, alluring and challenging. The textual history of *Buile Suibhne*

significantly complicates this already-ambiguous picture, for this depiction of the creative power of the individual artist is itself the product of many hands, consisting of prose and poetry apparently composed over a period of several hundred years and eventually collected into one story by an unknown scribe or scribes. This anonymous, collective process of artistic production stands in direct contrast to the solitary poet that the work depicts, and challenges the claims of originality and authenticity seemingly anchored by Suibhne's purported status as both protagonist and author of *Buile Suibhne's* poetry. Rather than a direct expression of the oral tradition from which it gains its authority, Suibhne's poetry is instead a patchwork of citation, sewn together from numerous sources and lacking any identifiable author. The text becomes, therefore, a suggestive one through which to interrogate a specifically modernist constellation of concerns centered on authority, authenticity, citation and repetition, and changing modes of artistic production. The interaction of these twentieth-century concerns with the medieval Irish text *Buile Suibhne* forms the substance of my inquiry in this dissertation.

The modernist period in literature was characterized by a self-consciously revolutionary stance from its very inception. "Make it new," commanded Ezra Pound, and the poets struggled to obey, experimenting with meter, rhyme, and subject matter in their attempt to overturn poetic convention. The novelists, too, were notable for technical and thematic innovation, as the work of Joyce, Woolf, and Stein, among many others, amply demonstrates. Intermingled with this revolutionary impulse, curiously, was an equally strong pull toward repetition and citation. In the exuberantly experimental *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Flann O'Brien's narrator insists that the modern novel should be assembled from fragments of past works, with creation necessary only in the rare

occasions when the author “failed to find a suitable existing puppet” (25). Though this narrator is a callow youth of dubious authority, O’Brien’s novel nevertheless reflects his principles. It is replete with passages reproduced verbatim from an almost bewildering array of sources, exhibiting a particularly heavy reliance on medieval Irish tales featuring Finn Mac Cool and Suibhne. At about the same time, though surely unknown to O’Brien, Walter Benjamin indicated that “his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations” (Hannah Arendt, Introduction to *Illuminations*, 4). Gertrude Stein obsessively repeated key words and phrases throughout her work, while Joyce, Eliot, and others made intense allusiveness one of the hallmarks of high modernism. The interaction of these characteristic and contradictory impulses toward innovation and repetition points to an unresolved and productive tension at the heart of the modernist aesthetic.

Little known during his lifetime, Walter Benjamin has become one of the central voices of modernism. His current ubiquity owes something, no doubt, to the fact that his interests, so difficult to categorize during his own lifetime (was he an art critic? a literary theorist? a philosopher?) coincide nicely with the materialist focus of the burgeoning field of cultural studies. In his oft-cited essay, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin anticipates the postmodern fascination with the impact of technology on the production and reception of works of art, suggesting perhaps that he was a writer ahead of his time. A closer look, however, reveals that Benjamin’s exploration of mechanization and its effect of fragmentation, repetition, and multiplication was very much in tune with the concerns and experimental literary modes of his contemporaries. As a theorist, he was among the first to recognize and wrestle

fruitfully with the specific effects on art of society's increasingly mechanized nature—a subject that both haunted and exhilarated many of his contemporaries.

In the “Work of Art” essay, written in 1936, Benjamin refines the concept of “aura” that he had introduced in 1931 in his “Little History of Photography.” While the earlier essay links what Benjamin calls aura to early portrait photography, and especially to the relationship between the rising bourgeois class and the new technology it had invented to record itself, by 1936 the aura of photography had beckoned for the last time and instead the concept became associated with the unique physicality of traditional art forms (Haxthausen 3). The aura of a work of art seems to be that which is lacking in its reproduction: “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 220). Originally, this uniqueness was tied to the cult value of aesthetic objects used in magical and religious practice. “This ritualistic base,” Benjamin asserts, “is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty” (224). Keats’ Grecian urn no longer carries its original religious connotations, but it would have had little value had it been one of a numbered series of reproductions, for its authority rests on the history that it uniquely expresses. The urn “shalt remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st/‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” (Keats 283). The urn’s status, then as one of the foundations of the cult of beauty, relies upon its physical endurance through time as a unique object, for “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning,” (Benjamin 221). These historical, transmissible qualities of an object tied to particular times and places were what allowed Keats to imagine that the urn spoke to man, or, in short, what allowed him to perceive and express its aura.

Given the centrality in Benjamin's discussion of an art object's unique existence through history, it is not hard to see why the proliferation of reproductive technologies dating from the nineteenth-century inventions of lithography and then photography seriously endangers the aura of all works of art. With photography, it is meaningless to speak of an "original" print; any number of prints may be produced from any given negative, thus substituting "a plurality of copies for a unique existence," (Benjamin 221). Signed and numbered limited editions seem to represent a desire on the part of both photographer and public to cling to a notion of authenticity not inherent in the medium. The technical challenge to a work of art's unique existence obtains not only in the new forms of photography and film, but also affects traditional art objects newly subject to reproduction. A concert or play, formerly a completely singular presence that dissipated forever in the moment of its performance, could now be recorded and repeated indefinitely. Photography could capture the image, if not the form, of any type of visual art, ranging from painting and sculpture to cathedrals and other great buildings. Previously the Mona Lisa could only be viewed by traveling to a specific place, the Louvre in Paris, where the painting hangs surrounded by other *objets d'art* and testifying to its own authentic history through the cracks in its frame, the slight yellowing of its varnish, and, now, some fading caused by the flash of innumerable tourists' cameras. Today, of course, that famed enigmatic smile tantalizes us from many angles, in the pictures that tourists tirelessly produce, in art history texts and coffee table books, in prints tacked carelessly to college dorm walls or lovingly framed in tasteful drawing rooms. In this process, the authority of such a work of art, its historical testimony, and its

expression of “the unique phenomenon of a distance,” (222), which relies on its particular positioning in time and space, are all undermined.

Many of Benjamin’s contemporaries responded with dismay to the decline of the aura of works of art. Carl Einstein, for instance, like Benjamin a German Jew and no reactionary, condemned the mechanical repetition of artwork characteristic of early twentieth-century technologies. A passionate believer in the power of art to transform reality by generating new forms of vision, he stresses the importance of uniqueness in insisting that works of art should be “living beings” that represent “the distinguishing sign of the visually active human being, constructing his own universe and refusing to be the slave of given forms,” (qtd. in Haxthausen 5). For Einstein, repetition destroyed the necessary individual perspective, creating a simulacrum of durability that denied the flux, the constant need to construct the world anew, which he saw as key to the socially transformative possibilities of art (Haxthausen 1). More conservative thinkers, of course, simply denied that photography was even an art form, or denigrated any type of cultural production enjoyed by and available to the masses—a view not entirely unfamiliar even today.

Benjamin took an opposite tack, in part because of his interest in and awareness of how changing reproductive technologies altered the way art was received by its audience. The existence of multiple copies of any given work of art not only eliminates the concept of a unique original, but also allows the artwork to meet viewers or listeners on their own terms (in their homes, at their local cinemas, etc.). This produces a vast shift in focus away from the cult value of a traditional work of “high art” that insists on the particularities of its own history and demands that the observer travel, sometimes

great distances, to its site. Instead, the important time and place become for each observer the point at which he or she encounters a reproduction of the art object, producing a democratizing effect and greatly increasing the “exhibition value” of art at the expense of its older, ritualistic function (for ritual does not necessarily require an audience; in fact, at times, it demands secrecy). Thus, Benjamin asserts that mechanical reproduction of art is by no means to be lamented; instead, it represents a desirable “shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind” (221). By means of reproduction, art is at last emancipated from “its parasitical dependence on ritual” (224) and freed to further revolutionary political aims.

In the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin sounds like a thoroughgoing revolutionary, celebrating a clean break with history and lauding the radical potential of new forms of art accessible to the masses through reproduction and repetition. Some of his other writings reveal more conflicted feelings, however, and suggest a lingering attachment to the peculiarities of unique objects. In “Unpacking My Library,” for instance, Benjamin explores his passion for book collecting and his genuine fondness for specific volumes in his library. He speaks of the collector in a relationship to books that “does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate,” (60). All of the particulars of the volume’s background are important, including when and where it was made, the materials and craftsmanship, the circumstances of purchase, and the history of its ownership. Where has the book been kept? What physical changes has it experienced over time? Have prior owners written in it, torn out pages, left letters or bookmarks pressed between its leaves? “Not only books,” Benjamin asserts, “but also copies of books have their fates,”

(61) seeming to indicate that the mechanical reproduction of books does not destroy their aura but, if anything, multiplies it, for each copy of a printed book has its own unique being, history, and fate—terms nearly identical to his definition of aura.

Books, of course, are a special case in terms of the mechanical reproducibility of art, since the printing press was invented long before photography or sound recording became technically possible. With the exception of cherished antiquities such as illuminated manuscripts, the notion of a single authentic original had ceased to apply to books long before the mechanization characteristic of the early twentieth century. How, then, would writers and readers be affected by the break with tradition and concomitant diminishment of aura that Benjamin insists affected all forms of art in the modern period? Certainly printing became quicker and more cost-effective in the past century, allowing publishers to produce cheaper editions and eventually mass market paperbacks within the means of a growing reading public. This would have enhanced the “exhibition value” and political potential of books along lines similar to those laid out in Benjamin’s discussion of film in the “Work of Art” essay. The change, however, was a quantitative one, not qualitative as in the emergence of the entirely new motion picture, and the gradual enhancement of printing capabilities had been in progress for centuries; it would not have been felt as the sudden “shattering of tradition” Benjamin describes. Perhaps, paradoxically, the longer history of mechanical reproduction of books allowed for a greater appreciation of the uniqueness of each individual volume, since printed copies had existed long enough to acquire their own distinct histories and identifying features, such as marginalia, damage, and inscriptions. In any case, it seems that with respect to books, the modernist interest in and anxiety about repetition manifested itself not in the

physical and technological aspects of books but rather within the texts themselves. Here, again, Benjamin shows the way, tantalizing us with the dream, incompletely realized in his Arcades Project, of creating a book consisting entirely of quotations.

The notion of an entire book built of fragments repeated from the past is very much in keeping with the general thrust of Benjamin's theoretical writings. Combining the revolutionary ardor of the man who wishes to shatter tradition with the collector's elegiac love for salvaged pieces of the past, the project would unmoor citations from their historical roots while simultaneously paying tender tribute to the fractured moments of history that they represent. As Benjamin writes in "Unpacking My Library," the ultimate goal of the collector is to "renew the old world," for an old book is reborn when it joins a new collection (61). Similarly, the collector of literary fragments—quotations—allows old words to be reborn into new worlds and new meaning through the radical alteration of their context. Like the narrator in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Benjamin shores fragments against his ruins, simultaneously elegizing the world that is lost and anticipating the new world being forged in part through the agency of mechanical reproduction. As such, he expresses eloquently the simultaneous looking back and looking forward so characteristic of modernist writers.

Jacques Derrida's inquiry is focused on the structures of language itself, rather than on the material conditions of literary production, but his ideas in many cases echo and amplify Benjamin's earlier work. In his essay "Signature Event Context" and at greater length in *Limited Inc*, Derrida challenges the Anglo-American strain of speech act theory formulated by Austin and Searle. Problematizing the clear demarcation of oral and written utterance long prevalent in philosophical thought, and upon which speech act

theory relies, he demonstrates that the qualities considered to be constitutive of writing, namely its iterability, its ability to be separated from context, and its subsistence in the absence or even death of its author, are in fact possibilities inherent in the structure of all language. Writing, in Derrida's account, therefore becomes not merely one species of communication, but the type of all semiotic systems. This move overturns the traditional philosophical analysis in which writing is considered to be supplementary, derivative, or even parasitical upon oral communication. Benjamin disrupts the conventional wisdom that considers mechanical reproduction an inferior, inauthentic, and parasitical mode of artistic production, finding instead the revolutionary potential in its capacity for dissemination. Likewise, Derrida celebrates the iterability inherent in all language, that is, the possibility that every sign, "linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written ... can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" ("Signature Event Context" 12). Kierkegaard had declared repetition to be the modern condition as early as 1843⁹; in the work of Benjamin and Derrida, repetition in the material means of reproduction and within the text in the form of citation emerges as a structural condition with liberating and generative potential.

In her essay "The Flat, the Round, and Gertrude Stein: Race and the Shape of Modern(ist) History," Laura Doyle argues that a racial narrative lies at the heart of modernism's conflicted desires to simultaneously repeat the past and escape it. At the core of this narrative concept of race is the belief that "characteristics are passed from one generation to the next through time; it is the claim that behavior in the present and future is predictable because it is based on characteristics inherited from ancestors who lived in

the past" (250). Noting that the period demonstrates "a double orientation toward the rounded and the flat, history's curve and contingency's crisscross, the weight of tradition and the flight of transgression," (250) Doyle insists that modernist fiction paradoxically seeks to destroy the very traditions and ideologies upon which it depends. In the curious properties of repetition, these writers found a double-edged sword, for as modernist writers seek to innovate, to experiment, to fold over and flatten out the novelistic tradition of sensibility and origin, they inevitably encounter the racial (as well as gender and class) narratives that so thoroughly inform the tradition they are reworking. "In the case of Joyce," Doyle argues, "the epic narratives of race at first attracted and then repulsed and outraged but always permeated his imagination" (255). Because modernism, like racial mythology, must persistently encounter the past in order to remake itself as something new, modernist writers cannot avoid the narrative logic that, by the turn of the century, had brought the West to a certain cultural stand-off in matters of race, class, and gender. This argument sheds light on one of modernism's most troubling aspects—the odious persistence of anti-Semitism in the work of such stylistically innovative writers as Woolf, Eliot, and Pound—as English identity has long been constructed over against the stereotyped Jewish other. Irish writers of the period, in contrast to these English and transplanted American figures, seem to feel less need for a Jewish bogeyman, perhaps because they have the imperial British to despise and emulate instead. Negotiating the twin hazards of an idealized Gaelic past and a dominant Anglo present, Irish modernists too find themselves constructing a national racial narrative, reliant in many cases on the citation of early Irish epic, and for Flann O'Brien as well as James Joyce, repetition becomes an essential formal element.

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus famously declares his mission: "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (276). It is no accident that his project is conceived in explicitly racial terms, that it aims to bring into being something entirely new ("uncreated"), or that Stephen's movement toward this goal is depicted largely as a matter of repetition, for Joyce clearly understands that to create something new, whether it be a new model of the artist or a new sense of national identity, is to engage with the past. Repetition serves as a basic organizing principle in *A Portrait*, with phrases, images, and patterns of experience recurring insistently throughout Stephen's story. The link between repetition and race is explicitly signaled by the use of nearly identical phrases in two crucial moments to depict a woman as "a type of her race and his own, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness" (198) and again as "a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness" (239-240). Consciousness of racial identity seems to dictate, as Doyle indicates, a narrative practice of repetition. Despite the dark loveliness of the doubled batlike image, the fiery sermon that forms the book's centerpiece makes it clear that repetition is, quite literally, hell:

A holy saint (one of our own fathers I believe it was) was once vouchsafed a vision of hell. It seemed to him that he stood in the midst of a great hall, dark and silent save for the ticking of a great clock. This ticking went on unceasingly; and it seemed to this saint that the sound of the ticking was the ceaseless repetition of the words: ever, never; ever, never. Ever to be

in hell, never to be in heaven; ever to be shut off from the presence of God, never to enjoy the beatific vision (143).

Father Arnall's sermon both enacts and explicates the horrors of repetition, then, in a nightmarish manner that anticipates Stephen's identification of history as a repetitive nightmare from which he is trying to awake. Joyce ironically undercuts his young alter-ego's drive to break free of history, or in Benjamin's terms to shatter tradition, by stressing Stephen's dependence on the past, as for instance in the centrality of St. Thomas Aquinas' aesthetics to his own theory of art. Stephen's final epiphany suggests that a renewal of the world and the self through art is possible; the book's repeated pattern of failure following each breakthrough leaves the reader less confident.

The relevance of the figure and story of Suibhne to these issues of repetition, citation, traditional authority, and racial identity becomes evident in Flann O'Brien's 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The protagonist is a student at an unnamed Dublin university who, not unlike Stephen Dedalus, seeks to break free from repressive authority and reinvent himself as an artist. In the first instance, then, O'Brien's novel must be considered as a repetition and revision of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, for Joyce's towering influence necessarily casts its shadow over his younger contemporary. In a classic case of anxiety of influence, O'Brien complained that his work was frequently compared to Joyce's, but at the same time he invited such comparison by frequently echoing and alluding to Joyce's work, even going so far as to include "James Joyce" as a character in his novel *The Dalkey Archive*. O'Brien seems to object to the egotism of the romantic concept of the artist embodied (and perhaps ironically undercut) in Stephen Dedalus, the lone genius who, working in silence and secrecy, proposes to

speak for and indeed create the collective soul of his people. Ignoring the ways in which *A Portrait* works to deflate the very hero/artist figure that it sets up, O'Brien may misread Joyce, but in Harold Bloom's terms his is a strong misreading, and an artistically productive one. O'Brien's unnamed narrator functions in part as an hilarious parody of Joyce's protagonist, possessing in exaggerated measure Stephen's more unpleasant traits of arrogance, laziness, prudery, and abysmal personal hygiene. These faults are not hallmarks of genius, as they may be in Stephen's case, but simply the amusing foibles of a rather immature young man who is trying to figure out how to make his way in the world. The reader is never encouraged to take the pointedly unnamed narrator seriously, nor to believe that he does so himself. Far from thinking of his work as the sort of grand venture that Stephen projects, O'Brien's narrator consistently refers to his writing as "spare-time literary activity," and his aesthetic theory is a direct rebuke to any notion of the artist as solitary Promethean creator. The repetition of the Suibhne story, which forms one of the main subplots in the narrator's novel-within-the-novel, generates multiple resonances within the text that it does not resolve, interacting ambiguously with the central question of the role and nature of the Irish artist and the comment upon Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that this question implies. The double impetus toward a shattering of tradition and a simultaneous reinforcement of the poet's traditional authority seen in O'Brien's use of Suibhne interacts suggestively with Benjamin and Derrida's analysis of repetition, while also evoking the related Derridean concept of spectrality.

Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx* that whenever writers borrow from the past, as happens most frequently during periods of crisis when time is perceived to be "out of

joint,” the borrowed figures become revenants whose citation cannot be entirely controlled. Rather than simply being assimilated into their new contexts, they speak to us, haunting new texts with the languages, names, and concerns of the past (152). Benjamin is haunted by the ghostly echoes of history that he hears in the crinkling pages of the rare books in his collection; likewise, when Suibhne appears in a modern text he brings with him his own specters, resurrecting in new contexts the concerns embedded in *Buile Suibhne* itself. As Chapter One will demonstrate, these concerns are especially resonant in the modernist period, which perceives itself to be a time of crisis and change, for *Buile Suibhne* records a time of dramatic changes in Irish society, both cultural and technological, as paganism gave way to Christianity and the oral tradition yielded its place to written literature.

In my first chapter, “*Buile Suibhne: Mediated Origins*,” I explore the medieval Irish origins of the Suibhne story, both in terms of its historical context and of the aesthetic qualities of the text itself. In Chapter Two, “A Huddle Between Earth and Heaven: Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*,” I address the repetition of the Suibhne story within O’Brien’s novel. In the medieval tradition, Suibhne is depicted as suffering from the ravages of a life exposed to the elements, but O’Brien pushes this to an extreme, portraying him as a bleeding, torn, half-dead body, reciting poetry in a fevered and delirious state. Nevertheless, Suibhne retains the power to exert an enormous influence on the text, lending the novel not only its unusual title, but also a crucial model of the process of artistic production. Chapter Three, “*Sweeney Astray: The Other in Oneself*,” considers Seamus Heaney’s 1984 version of *Buile Suibhne*, a translation at once remarkably faithful and strikingly personal. Heaney retains, for example, many repetitive

prose passages that a poet-translator might well be forgiven for excising, and on a quatrain-by-quatrain basis the sense of the text does not depart significantly from the Irish original. At the same time, though, the modern poet undertakes a thorough assimilation of the medieval text to his own concerns, subtle shifts in emphasis and tone generating changes that the figure of Suibhne himself seems at times to resist. Finally, in Chapter Four, “Apeneck Sweeney’s Penitential Path,” I consider T.S. Eliot’s Sweeney character in light of the hero of *Buile Suibhne*. While “Apeneck Sweeney” is not generally considered analogous to the medieval Suibhne, important thematic links suggest a relationship. Like Suibhne, Eliot’s character is repeatedly associated with nature, especially birds, with the body, and with the forthright telling of hard truths. Many of the issues that arise during analysis of *Buile Suibhne* are of great relevance to Eliot’s work as well, among them the poet’s relationship to tradition, the practices of citation and literary allusion, the characteristics of liminality and hybridity, and the impetus toward flight and escape. Most importantly, reference to Suibhne not only enriches Eliot’s Sweeney texts but also clarifies them, suggesting a model for the character’s problematic assumption of the penitential role in *Sweeney Agonistes* that has long troubled critics.

Notes to Introduction

¹ See Chapter One for a detailed discussion of the manuscript evidence and likely dates of origin of the legend of Suibhne.

² The title is usually translated “The Madness of Suibhne” or “The Vision of Suibhne.” The word *buile* means both madness and vision, and both senses are clearly intended in the title.

³ See, for instance, Seamus Heaney’s essay “The God in the Tree,” (*Preoccupations* 181) in which the poet equates *Buile Suibhne*’s evocation of Suibhne’s straits to Shakespeare’s depiction of Lear’s madness on the heath.

⁴ Joseph Nagy’s describes the role of the *filid* within early Irish society in *Conversing with Angels and Ancients* (7-11).

⁵ In addition to T. S. Eliot, Flann O’Brien, and Seamus Heaney, whose Sweeney figures are the main focus of this dissertation, modern writers including Austin Clark, Tom MacIntyre, John Montague, Derek Mahon, William Saroyan and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill have incorporated the story of *Buile Suibhne* into their work.

⁶ William Sayers argues that in the Nebuchadnezzar story, as in *Buile Suibhne*, the principle concern is with the adequacy of royal rule. In each case, avian exile is the result of a deficiency in kingship.

⁷ In *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*, Doob identifies numerous examples of the “wild man” type, including the Welsh figure Merlin or Myrddin, who many scholars believe is related to and perhaps cognate with Suibhne. While Myrddin attains the gifts of prophecy and eventually of salvation through his purgation in the wilderness, Doob’s account makes no mention of the poetic inspiration that is the central focus of the Suibhne tradition (153-158). Nevertheless, the Myrddin legend is known through a body of seven poems of roughly twelfth-century date that Myrddin is said to have spoken, so while poetry may not be the central aspect of his tradition, as it is with Suibhne, he too is a poet. See A. O. H. Jarman, “The Merlin Legend and the Welsh Tradition of Prophecy,” in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, ed. Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman, and Brynley F. Roberts (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1991), pp. 117-45.

⁸ Papageno, a birdcatcher who was played by Schikaneder in a suit of feathers, shares not only bird symbolism but also thematic similarities with Suibhne. In *Silence and Selfhood*, Peter Lang discusses the importance of Papageno’s voice in disrupting the opera’s tendency toward monological discipline, asserting that the birdcatcher’s song embodies “the emergent self, and its claims regarding the right to bodily fulfillment, the liberation of the pleasure principle, the refusal to fear human appetite or to accept the dictates of an externally imposed morality” (177).

⁹ Kierkegaard explores the issue in *Repetition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

CHAPTER ONE. MEDIATED ORIGINS: *BUILE SUIBHNE*

Dord daimh dhíthreibhe ós aille
 bios a Síodhmhuine Glinne,
 nochan fuil ceól ar talmain
 im anmuin acht a bhinne.

--(O'Keeffe 34)

'The lone stag bells from the clifftops/above the peaceful hollow of the glen/its music beyond earthly melody/Sweetness alone abides.'¹ With these words, Suibhne, the poet/protagonist of the medieval Irish text *Buile Suibhne*, hauntingly evokes the almost uncanny beauty of nature, but also highlights the loneliness of a life dedicated to celebrating this beauty. The belling stag is alone; so too is the poet, a former king bereft of his realm and afflicted with madness at the command of an outraged priest. In verse that is metrically precise and lyrically evocative, *Buile Suibhne* simultaneously celebrates the poetic revelation of nature and laments the hardships of the poet, who is depicted as necessarily separated from society, possessions, and the comforts of ordinary human life. This twelfth century text creates a portrait of the artist that is startlingly recognizable to twenty-first century eyes while at the same time magnificently strange, depicting as it does a lucid madman cloaked in mysterious feathers and singing gloriously in an alien tongue.

One of the legacies of the Romantics is the image of the poet as a solitary, imaginative (male) genius whose intimate connection to nature is both a source of poetic inspiration and a force that separates him from ordinary social bonds, sometimes even to the extent of Byronic rebellion against the accepted moral order. Suibhne seems to

possess all of these traits, making him a very early Irish figure of a poetic ethos that would not emerge in England for more than half a millennium. The textual history of *Buile Suibhne* significantly complicates this picture, however, for this seeming paean to the individuality of the artist is itself the product of many hands, consisting of prose and poetry apparently composed over a period of several hundred years and eventually collected into one more-or-less coherent work by an unknown scribe or scribes. This anonymous, collective process of artistic production stands in direct contrast to the solitary poet that the work depicts, making *Buile Suibhne* a particularly suggestive text with which to interrogate and perhaps reformulate the idea of authorship. It is not surprising, then, that Suibhne should be an interesting (if ambivalent) figure for modernist writers, many of whom struggled productively with the image of the poet inherited from their Romantic precursors².

The influence of *Buile Suibhne* is readily apparent in a number of twentieth century texts³, including J.G. O’Keeffe’s influential edition and translation (published in 1913 and still the standard), Austin Clark’s “The Trees of the Forest” (1932), Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), Seamus Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray* (1983) and “Sweeney Redivivis” (1984), Tom MacIntyre’s “Sweeney Among the Branches” (1982) and *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* (1985), poems by Derek Mahon, John Montague, and Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and, as I shall argue, the Sweeney poems and theatrical fragments of T.S. Eliot (1918-1927). This efflorescence of interest and attention is all the more striking because it appears to have followed many centuries of deep obscurity from which few traces of *Buile Suibhne* remain. Pádraig Ó Riain asserts that the tale “might never have been composed as far as the native *literati* of the period 1200-1600 were concerned”

(174), noting that neither he nor James Carney has been able to find any references to Suibhne in Irish bardic poetry of the period. Ó Riain has located a single mention of a Suibhne in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, which was compiled in Scotland between 1512 and 1526. The editor W. J. Watson concludes that the Suibhne mentioned here is indeed the protagonist of *Buile Suibhne*; if so, it certainly presents him in an unfamiliar light:

Fear mar Shuibhne nach beir buadh
 is fear mar Ioruath armruadh;
 saoi nach sgradach go lámhach,
 is daoí meattach míolámhach,

Watson translates thus: “The one is as Suibhne, who wins no triumph; the other is as red-weaponed Ioruath, the battle-terror, the one is a hero who blenches not at spear-cast, the other is a shrinking handless poltroon” (qtd. in Ó Riain 174). If he is correct that our Suibhne is intended by the blenching coward of the verse, this fleeting reference may provide an important clue as to why the bardic poets largely eschewed the character in favor of the warlike folk-hero Finn Mac Cool. Following the onset of the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1169⁴, the native Irish kingdoms faced increasingly dire military straits. Joseph Nagy notes in his influential essay “The Wisdom of the Geilt” that although Suibhne “fails in his role as a king and drops out of society, Irish tradition places a high value on his remarkable failure,” celebrating the enrichment of the literary tradition that his poems and stories represent (44). As a voice contrapuntal to the heroic, Suibhne may have come during this time of military crisis to be seen primarily as a failed warrior, a faithless leader of men who cast down his weapons and abandoned his army in the midst

of battle. Certainly it appears that there was little interest in *Buile Suibhne*'s ecstatic yet pacific verse during the desperate centuries of Ireland's long defeat.

Scholarly opinion largely agrees that the text of *Buile Suibhne* as we know it was compiled at some point in the twelfth century, although some of the individual poems within it may be of earlier date. The three extant manuscripts, however, were prepared considerably later. They include a brief summary written by Michael O'Clery in 1629, a manuscript completed by Daniel O'Duigenan in 1674, and a later manuscript, not derived from O'Duigenan's, transcribed by Tomaltach Mac Muirghiosa in 1721-22⁵ (O'Keefe iii). That three learned scribes undertook the task of copying distinct versions of this material within this period may suggest a slight resurgence of interest in *Suibhne* during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Brian Ó Cuív notes three eighteenth-century poems that reference the legend of *Suibhne*⁶, further indicating renewed interest among Irish poets in this part of their literary heritage. These references, however, are slim, and for the most part *Buile Suibhne* appears to have remained an obscure text until the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. J. G. O'Keefe's 1913 translation into English, published in Volume XII of the proceedings of the Irish Texts Society, introduced a version of *Suibhne*'s tale for the first time to a broader English-language readership, and the numerous literary interpretations since have reinvigorated this long-moribund legend.

The roots of *Buile Suibhne*'s appeal for modern writers lie in the Old Irish origins of the tale, during what appear to have been several centuries of lively development prior to the period of bardic neglect. While we do not know exactly when the first stories and poems about *Suibhne* were composed, the events that they depict can be dated precisely,

for he is said to have been driven mad during the violence and tumult of the battle of Magh Rath, a significant conflict that took place in Ulster in 637 A.D. Suibhne is depicted as a minor king among a people called the Dál nAraide who lived in what is now County Antrim in Northern Ireland. Suibhne's overlord, a more influential king named Congal Cláen, formed an alliance with Domhnall Brecc, king of a people called the Dál Riata who had colonized parts of Scotland some 150 years previously. Domhnall brought an invading army from his Scottish stronghold of Argyll to join Congal's forces in an attempt to challenge the powerful king of Tara, Domhnall son of Aed, who sought to extend his authority throughout the north of Ireland. The crushing defeat of the allies at the battle of Magh Rath established the effective dominance of the kings of Tara throughout the region, though pockets of resistance remained (Ó Cróinín 325).

As James Carney has shown, early accounts of the battle of Magh Rath, among which the most nearly contemporary is found in Adomnán's *Vita Columbae*, differ greatly from later literary treatments, including *Buile Suibhne*, *Fleadh Dún na nGédh* 'Banquet of Dún na nGédh' and *Cath Maighe Rath* 'Battle of Magh Rath,' all of which are ascribed to the twelfth century. There is no mention in *Vita Columbae* of the battlefield participation of a minor king named Suibhne, nor does Suibhne, son of Colmán Cuar, appear on the Irish king-lists, the carefully maintained genealogical rolls of the Irish kings (Carney 132-133). For these reasons, Suibhne is assumed by most scholars to be a completely unhistorical figure whose legend was later grafted onto accounts of the battle of Magh Rath. Further, the *Vita Columbae* and other early sources state that the king of Tara's primary opponent was Domhnall Brecc, while the twelfth century tales omit the Scottish invader and cite only Congal Cláen, king of the Ulaid, as

the aggressor. Both Carney and Jackson observe that the earliest mentions of a character named Suibhne in connection with the battle of Magh Rath identify him as a Scot, sometimes even as the brother of Domhnall Brecc, while *Fleadh Dún na nGédh* includes both a Scottish Suibhne and our native Irish Suibhne, king of Dál nAraide. Carney and Jackson each conclude that Suibhne's story was borrowed from Scotland, although they differ on the particulars of when, where, and how it made its way to Ireland.⁷ It is clear, however, that over time the trend in Irish accounts of the battle of Magh Rath was to naturalize the tale, replacing the Scottish Domhnall Brecc with Congal Claen, king of an important Irish dynasty, and eliminating overt reference to Suibhne's Scottish origins. This naturalizing tendency offers an aesthetic and mnemonic benefit as well, as it eliminates characters with duplicate names, albeit at the cost of historical accuracy.

The earliest extant reference to Suibhne is found in a ninth-century manuscript belonging to the monastery of St. Paul in Carinthia, southern Austria. Of four poems preserved in this fragmentary manuscript, one is ascribed to Suibhne and a second to Moling, a saint whose legend has become intertwined with that of Suibhne. The scribe of the manuscript wrote *Suibne Geilt* ('Mad Suibhne') in the left-hand margin above Suibhne's poem (Murphy 224), simultaneously confirming the attribution and suggesting that the legend of his madness was already established by the ninth century, as there is nothing in the poem itself to suggest that its speaker is a *geilt*. This well-known poem has been edited and translated many times; I have used the Irish text edited by Gerard Murphy in *Early Irish Lyrics*:

M'airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir:

ni lántechdais bes sestu—

conna retglannaib a réir,
 cona gréin, cona escu.

Gobban du-rigni in sin
 (co n-ecestar duib a stoir);
 mo chridecan, Dia du nim,
 is hé tugatoir rod-toig.

Tech inna fera flechod,
 maigen 'na áigder rindi;
 soilsidir bid hi lugburt,
 os e cen udnucht n-imbi. (112-113)

Reflecting the “freshness of spirit and perfection of form” that Murphy considers characteristic of Irish lyric poetry from the Middle Ages (xiii), this poem is a fine example of the *rannaigeacht* meter. This verse form, which is used frequently in *Buile Suibhne*, features lines of seven syllables⁸, with rhyme between the final words of lines b and d. Alliteration, both within and between lines, is a frequent ornament, as is *aicill*, or rhyme between an end-word and an interior word in the next line. Note that in Irish prosody consonants within related groups are considered true rhymes for one another, rather than near-rhymes as they would be in English; thus, *réir* and *gréin* in the first stanza form a perfect example of *aicill*-rhyme. I have made no attempt to preserve the meter in my translation, which was composed with reference to Murphy’s:

My little oratory in Túaim Inbir,
 (no great house would be fuller)
 with its ordered stars,
 with its sun, with its moon.

Gobban⁹ has made it,
 that its tale may be told to you;
 my dear heart, God of heaven,
 he is the thatcher that thatched it.

House where no rain pours,
 shelter where no spear-point strikes,
 bright-shining as a garden,
 with no wattled walls around it.

The poem's speaker imagines a natural space, roofed by the sky, which serves as a place of refuge, much like a monk's cell. This conceit aligns the poem with an important strain of early Irish monastic verse, in which nature is often celebrated as a setting for worship and a manifestation of God's creative power. Some commentators, in fact, find this similarity so significant that they believe this is a monastic poem that was misattributed to Suibhne by the ninth-century scribe, while others find the monkish overtones entirely in keeping with the reluctant piety of the Suibhne of *Buile Suibhne*. The scribal gloss *barr edin* 'ivied tip,' written over the place-name Túaim Inbir, further indicates that the manuscript's scribe read the reference to a "little oratory" as one of

Suibhne's tree-top roosts, which are often associated with that phrase. The reference to spear-points may also connect the poem to Suibhne, who is fated to die at the point of a spear. Whether the poem was originally conceived as a Suibhne poem or simply as part of the Irish hermit tradition, the scribal glosses taken together with the poem indicate that by the early ninth century several crucial features of the Suibhne Geilt tradition were already in place. First, Suibhne is identified as the speaker of this poem, suggesting that he was known as a creator and not merely a subject of verse. Second, he is strongly associated with nature, inhabiting a refuge bright as a garden and roofed only by the sky. Third, he expresses a deep sense of Christian piety that is closely connected to nature and related to early monastic verse.

The next important mention of Suibhne comes in a Middle Irish commentary on the legal tract *Bretha Éitgid*, known to O'Keeffe as the *Book of Aicill*¹⁰. O'Keeffe dates the text to the ninth or tenth century (iv), while Cohen argues for a slightly later, eleventh-century date of composition (116). The reference assumes the existence of a significant body of poems and stories attributed to Suibhne:

Three virtues of that battle [Magh Rath]: the defeat of Congal Claen in his untruth at the hands of Domnall in his truth; Suibne Geilt's becoming a *geilt*; and the excision of his brain of forgetfulness out of Cenn Fáelad's head¹¹. Suibne's becoming a *geilt* is not counted a virtue *per se*, but on account of the stories and poems he left behind in Ireland as a result of it.¹²

(trans. Nagy, "A New Introduction," 11)

By this point, Congal Claen has replaced Domhnall Brecc as the leader of the defeated army and Suibhne's madness, unmentioned in the earliest accounts of the battle, has

become one of its chief virtues. The reference to Suibhne's enrichment of the Irish literary tradition suggests that many more stories and poems were known at the time than have survived in manuscript form, either because they were confined to the oral tradition or because the original manuscripts have been lost. Further evidence of the prevalence of the Suibhne tradition in this Middle Irish period comes in the *Anecdota* poems attributed to St. Moling and dating to the eleventh century. As David Cohen notes, the collection begins with a group of five poems recounting the story of Suibhne's association with Moling. These poems identify Suibhne as a Scot and the son of Eochaid Buidhe (Domhnall Brecc's father), but otherwise are in agreement with the account of *Buile Suibhne* (Cohen 116). It seems likely, then, that a robust tradition centered on the figure of Suibhne, originally depicted as a Scot and gradually naturalized as a native Irishman, emerged within a few hundred years of the battle at Magh Rath in 637 A.D. and continued to grow and develop until it reached its fullest expression in the compilation of *Buile Suibhne* sometime in the twelfth century.

The fragmentary manuscript evidence detailed above provides sufficient reason to believe that a considerable body of Suibhne material was available to the author (or authors)¹³ of *Buile Suibhne*. As Pádraig Ó Riain argues, that author was almost certainly a twelfth-century monk who "brought together a number of floating traditions to form a coherent and highly artistic composition" (173). The interplay between Suibhne and various saints points to this monastic provenance, as does what we know of the primary role that clerics played in preserving and transmitting the Irish literary tradition through the end of the twelfth century. While the secular poet, or *fili*, appears to have held a respected place in society, Robin Flower explains that "whatever part the poets played in

the oral preservation of the tradition, its written record was the work of the church” (73). Writing itself seems to have arrived in Ireland with the coming of Christianity, and many of the means of its production, such as the manufacture of vellum, were largely confined to the monastic scriptoria. As Flower notes, early Irish monastic scholars were strikingly willing to preserve secular lore and literature in the vernacular, but they “were no passive transmitters of the traditions recited to them by the poets” (73). We may expect that the poems selected for inclusion in *Buile Suibhne* were edited to suit the author’s interests, as well as to insure a coherent narrative. Many of the poems likely predated the composition of the text as a whole; Ruth Lehmann, relying on linguistic analysis, finds that the verse is of varying date, with some of the poems containing verb forms and other grammatical features that were already archaic in the tenth century (132). Ó Riain, noting that the prose sections of the tale seem to make use of a twelfth-century list of saints’ genealogies, argues that the prose was composed later than much of the verse, and may likely be ascribed to the author of the text, though no doubt it drew upon traditional elements of the Suibhne legend (187).

For scholars taking a folkloric or philological approach, the materials comprising *Buile Suibhne*, its probable origins in Scottish or Welsh lore, its affinity with other tales in the Irish “wild man” tradition, and its parallels to Indo-European mythology have been primary focuses of interest and scholarship. Such work has been profitably undertaken by a number of excellent scholars, notably Jackson, Carney, Ó Riain, and Nagy, to whom my study is indebted. My approach, however, is to consider *Buile Suibhne* as an aesthetic object that has influenced the work of later artists, so my primary interest is interpretation and analysis of the text as we have it today, rather than in its sources or in possible

alternative redactions. For an English-language readership, O’Keeffe’s translation remains the standard, although it does little to capture *Buile Suibhne*’s artistry. Those able to read Middle Irish, including Flann O’Brien and Seamus Heaney, have been able to bypass O’Keeffe’s translation, but remain reliant upon his well-regarded edition of the text, prepared for the Irish Texts Society in 1913. O’Keeffe’s edition draws primarily on manuscript B, transcribed by Daniel O’Duigenan, which is the fullest of the three extant accounts. Footnotes provide variant readings from K, the eighteenth-century manuscript transcribed by Tomaltach Mac Muirhiosa, while an appendix provides the complete text of L, the earliest version but merely a summary. For the most part, then, reference to *Buile Suibhne* since the early twentieth century has meant reference to O’Duigenan’s manuscript as edited by O’Keefe, as is the case in the present study.

Buile Suibhne opens with a brief reference to *Cath Maige Rath*, a romanticized rendition of the battle that precedes our tale in both manuscript B and manuscript K and contains an account of Suibhne’s derangement and flight. Though the work is best known for its poetry, it begins in prose, and quickly establishes a distinctive prose style that is at once economical and ornamental, marked especially by frequent alliteration. As Ruth Lehmann argues, the prose demonstrates a sensibility notably different from that of the preceding *Cath Maige Rath*. While the two tales are concerned with many of the same events, and share some very similar phrases, Lehmann contends that *Cath Maige Rath* is marred by the excessive rhetorical flourishes that became increasingly prevalent in Irish prose of the late Middle Ages, pointing out for instance that the passage describing Suibhne’s derangement at the battle is three times longer in that account than in *Buile Suibhne*, while providing no further detail or information (292).

After noting that the tale of Suibhne's flight from the battle has already been told (presumably in *Cath Maige Rath*), our text promises to reveal the reason behind his *fúalaing 7 foluaimhnighe sin fáoi-siumh tar chách a ccoitchinne 7 febh tecómhnaccair dhó iaromh* (2) 'fluttering and flying far beyond common men and to tell what befell him thereafter.' Even in this brief passage, alliteration of both consonant and vowel sounds is evident, as is the frequent use of the Tironian ampersand, here represented by the number 7, which is a scribal abbreviation for the Irish word *ogus* 'and.' The use of *ogus* is not a mere shortcut, however, but a stylistic device that allows the compounding of adjectives and descriptive phrases into densely material passages. Repetition of closely related words such as *fúalaing* 'fluttering' and *foluaimhnighe* 'flying' that also echo one another's sounds heighten the intensity of description as well as the sensual, physical nature of the text. That the artistry of *Buile Suibhne*'s prose has rarely been recognized may be due in part to the fact that these effects are alien to the English prose tradition and therefore difficult to preserve in translation.

Following the brief opening paragraph, the text turns to an introduction of St. Ronán Finn, son of Berach, a relatively minor figure in the Irish hagiographical tradition but a crucial character in this tale. Calling him a *naoimh-erlumh uasal oirdnidhe* (2) 'saintly noble ordained man,' this introductory paragraph depicts Ronán as a selfless servant of God, given to the ascetic practice of punishing his body for the good of his soul, and committed to shielding the people from the evil both of the devil and of their own inherent tendencies toward vice. In a text that will be largely concerned with the clash between a pagan king and a Christian saint, this paragraph appears to establish an

authorial point of view that privileges the piety and goodness of the saint and praises the spiritual value of mortifying the flesh.

Conflict quickly emerges when Ronán sets out to designate ground for the construction of a church within the territory of Suibhne's kingdom. Noticing the ringing of the saint's bell, Suibhne asks his people what he hears and is told of Ronán's activities. Suddenly infuriated, the king rushes out to drive the cleric from his land. Significantly, no explanation is given for Suibhne's swift anger, nor for his opposition to the establishment of a church in his territory. That Suibhne reacts furiously without consideration or stated reason might be read as a sign of his impetuous nature, for which he will soon be punished, but it seems more likely that the lack of explanation reflects an authorial assumption that the cause of Suibhne's anger would be readily apparent to a twelfth-century audience. Suibhne's sovereignty has been impinged by Ronán's act of appropriation, as the people's explanation of the sound of the bell illustrates: Ronán Finn, they say, *ata ag tórainn chile it chrich-si 7 it fheronn* (2) 'is delineating a church in your territory and your land.' The redundant *chrich* 'territory' and *fheronn* 'land' highlight the assault on the king's domain, while the emphasizing pronoun *si* 'your' leaves no doubt as to whose territory is under assault. Rather than simply indicating Suibhne's rash temperament, it therefore seems likely that his unexplained anger points to the familiarity of this clash between pagan and Christian leaders. As T. M. Charles-Edwards notes in *Early Christian Ireland*, serious evangelism in Ireland had begun not, as popularly believed, with St. Patrick¹⁴, but rather with the arrival of Ireland's first bishop, Palladius, sent from Rome in the middle part of the fifth century (239). The first of the great Irish monasteries had emerged in the sixth century, most notably at Bangor, Clonmacnois,

Clonard, and Iona, each laying claim to surrounding lands and tribute, while innumerable smaller churches were built by various competing priests, monks, and evangelists as well (Charles-Edwards 224). Although Ireland's conversion was famously bloodless, such a large shift in ownership of resources and land cannot have taken place without some friction between the Church and the secular kings whose lands were appropriated for monastic construction. Suibhne's swift wrath upon hearing the ringing of a cleric's bell, audible symbol of the Church's reach and authority, appears to be a textual witness to that inevitable friction.

As Suibhne rushes from his home, his wife Eorann clutches at his mantle in an attempt to restrain him, an act for which she will later receive Ronán's blessing. Her attempt fails, but it is notable in several respects. First, she pulls the mantle from her husband, leaving him naked as he sets out to confront Ronán. This anticipates the nakedness to which he will soon be condemned and ensures that his punishment will be suited to the manner of his crime. The text, however, lavishes extraordinary descriptive energy upon Suibhne's dress, interrupting what has been a swift-moving summary of events to describe his *bhrait chortharaigh chorcra* 'fringed purple mantle' fastened at his breast with *an sioball airgid aeinghil co míneagur óir* (4) 'a silver clasp beautifully inlaid with gold.' This meticulous description is the first instance of what will remain throughout the text an intense scribal interest in the material condition of Suibhne's body and attire; a focus that seems to belie the text's overtly expressed disdain for the physical in favor of spiritual concerns.

Suibhne finds Ronán glorifying God by chanting psalms from a beautiful psalter, and, significantly, he fixes first upon the book as the object of his anger. Seizing the

psalter, Suibhne “drowns” it in a nearby lake. The verb *báidid* ‘to drown’ is used twice in connection with this act, serving to personify the churchman’s book as this is the word that would be used in reference to the drowning of a person. Having finished with the psalter, the enraged king seizes Ronán himself and begins to drag him from his church. Things may have gone ill with the cleric had not a servant of Congál Claen arrived to call Suibhne away to fight at the battle of Magh Rath. Suibhne departs at once, leaving Ronán to lament the drowning of his book and the dishonorable treatment that he has suffered. Notably, throughout the paragraph describing these events, Ronán is called by name only once, while Suibhne is named six times. The king is the grammatical subject of most of the sentences and the actor throughout, while *an cléirech* ‘the cleric’ is the passive object of Suibhne’s assault (4). Physically, the saint is no match for the sinner in this depiction.

Ronán’s authority is reestablished after a day and a night, when an otter, frequent agent of the miraculous in Irish literature, returns his psalter to him unharmed from the bottom of the lake. This evidence of God’s favor, combined with the return of his book, symbol of the written authority of the church, emboldens Ronán to exercise his own will by placing a powerful curse on Suibhne: *Mo ched-sa fri ced an Choimdedh chumachdaigh, amail tainic-siomh dom dhiochur-sa 7 é lomnocht, gurab amhlaidh sin bhías doghrés lomnocht ar faoinnel 7 ar folúamhain sechnóin an domhain, gurab bás do rinn nosbéra* (6). ‘By my leave and the leave of the mighty Lord, as he came to me bare-naked to banish me, it is thus that he will be forever, bare-naked, straying and flying all over the world, until death at spear-point takes him.’ Ronán’s power is in language, not physical action, and his words will have a devastating effect upon his adversary.

On the day in which Ronán's curse is to take effect, stripping his adversary of his kingship, banishing him from his family and his home, and separating him from his self, Suibhne, still king of Dál nAraidhe, arrives at the Battle of Magh Rath adorned with all of the accoutrements of his royal status:

As amhlaidh robaoi 7 leine sreabhnaidhe síodae i cusdul fri gheilchnes dó
7 fúathróig do srol righ uime 7 an t-ionar tuc Congal dó an lá romarbh
Oilill Cédach rí Úa bFaoláin for Magh Rath, ionar corcra comhdatha esein
co cciumhius dluith degfhighthi d'ór aluinn órloisghthi ris, co sreithegar
gem ccaomh ccarrmhogail on chionn gór arail don chiumhais sin, go
stúaghlúbaibh síoda dar cnaipidhibh caoimetrochta re hiadhadh 7 re
hosgladh and, go bfoirbreachtadh airgid áoingil gacha cáoi 7 gacha
conaire imtheighedh; crúaidhrinn chaoilsnáithaide don ionar sin. Dhá
sleigh sithfhoda slinnleathna ina lámhaibh, sgíath breacbhuidhe
bhúabhallda for a mhuin, claideamh órdhoirn for a chlú. (10)

'He came dressed like this: a gauzy silk shirt close against his white skin, a girdle made from royal satin wrapped around him, the tunic that Congal gave to him on the day he killed Oilill Cédach, king of the Úa Faoláin upon Magh Rath— it was a tunic all of purple inset with close-fitting, well-woven, beautiful gold on its border, and a row of fair carbuncle gems from one end to the other, silk looped over the shining buttons to open and close it, its spangling visible from every angle, in all his comings and goings; a sharp and slender needle kept the tunic closed. Two spears—long-shafted, broad-bladed—were in his hands, a shield of buffalo-hide speckled in

yellow hung from his shoulder, and a gold-hilted sword was close at his left side.’

Once again, the interest in Suibhne’s attire is striking. The style of this passage, as adjectives are piled upon each other and descriptive compounds fight for space in an overrunning sentence, is indicative of the dense and rich materiality of the text as a whole. Like many passages in *Buile Suibhne*, this description is studded with nouns and adjectives – grammatical and poetic valuables – in the same way that the tunic is studded with gems and laced in gold. There are few verbs, and the only motion inscribed is the continual fascination with Suibhne’s raiment, textually figured in the long-running sentences and frequent compounding of descriptions with *ogus*, the Irish word for “and,” that emblem of textual excess.

The intensity of textual focus upon Suibhne’s tunic has been noted by a number of commentators. Lehmann finds it distinctive enough to suggest that it signals the presence of “a half forgotten motif of a magic tunic” as one of the folkloric elements underlying Suibhne’s tale (121). Others agree with Nagy’s suggestion in his introduction to *Buile Suibhne* that the “monarchical arrogance” indicated by the king’s battle-dress is one of the offenses for which he will be condemned to a condition of deplorable nakedness (14). This explanation seems very much in keeping with the overtly ascetic, Christian tone taken at the outset of the text. It does not account, however, for the evident enjoyment with which Suibhne’s raiment is described in a passage that sounds much more indulgent than disapproving. In the realm of monastic literature, it might seem that such open appreciation of material splendor is out of place, but in the case of medieval Irish

literature, in which even primarily secular literary remains were transmitted through the monasteries, it is much less unusual.

Throughout the corpus of literature in Old and Middle Irish, tales of heroes, kings, and cattle-raids frequently evince fascination with the beauty of the male protagonists and of their attire. Clothing and weaponry are richly symbolic, indicative of the tribal affiliations, otherworldly connections, material wealth and social status of their owners. By wearing appropriately noble garb, a king and his warriors display and in part fulfill their proper roles in society. For example, sumptuous clothing figures largely in the Old Irish prose tale *Táin Bó Fraích* ‘The Cattle-Raid of Fróech,’ which has been dated to the late seventh or early eighth century (Meid xxv). This tale concerns a young nobleman named Fróech who is said to be *áildem ro buí do feraib Hérenn 7 Alban* (1) ‘the most desirable of all the men of Ireland and Scotland.’ This young man falls in love with a king’s daughter, Findabair, simply upon hearing tales of her great beauty, and sets out to woo her in her father’s court. Knowing that this will be a challenging task, Fróech asks his aunt Boind, a powerful queen of the *Síde*, the fairy people, for her assistance, and in response she outfits her nephew and fifty of his warriors for their journey. Their raiment is described in a lengthy and fastidious passage reminiscent of *Buile Suibhne*’s account of Suibhne’s tunic. As they ride to the fortress of Findabair’s father Ailill, Fróech and his retainers are attired as follows:

coícait mbratt ngorm, 7 ba cosmail cech áe fri druimne ndoíle, 7 cethéora
 oa dubglassa for cech brutt, 7 mílech derggóir la cech mbratt, 7 lénti
 bángela co túagmílaib óir impu, 7 coíca scíath n-argdide co n-imlib óir
 impu, 7 caindel ríghthigi i lláim cech áe, 7 coíca semmand findruine ar cech

n-áe. Coíca toracht di ór forloiscthi im cech n-áe. Eirmitiuda di charrmocul fóib anis, 7 is di lecaib lógmairib a n-airiarn. No lastais in aidche amal betís ruithni gréni. (2)

‘fifty blue mantles, and each of them with intricate embroidery, and four black-gray corners on each mantle, and a brooch of red gold on each mantle, and white tunics with interlaced figures of gold about them, and fifty silver shields with borders of gold about them, and a bright spear in the hand of each of them, and fifty rivets of white bronze on each of them. Fifty circlets of refined gold about each of them. Spear-cusps of carbuncle below, and spear-points of precious stones above. They kindled the night as if they were the rays of the sun.’

The passage continues for another fifteen lines, describing with exacting precision their purple saddles, silver bridles, and gilded horsewhips. This account from *Táin Bó Fraích* lacks the artistry of *Buile Suibhne*’s descriptions, making less effective use of alliteration and simply using *ogus* as a workmanlike mechanism to join separate phrases, rather than a stylistic device to create overflowing compounds. The sensibility, however, with its precise attention to and enjoyment of the details of masculine attire, is strikingly similar, and may be found in many other Old Irish heroic tales.¹⁵ That the author of *Buile Suibhne* should align himself with this secular tradition, enacting the plenitude of his descriptions in the richness and materiality of language itself, reveals a fissure within the text. In the moment of Suibhne’s arrival at the battle, *Buile Suibhne* abandons its overtly ascetic and Christianizing tone, eschewing disapproval of “monarchical indulgence” in

favor of another sensibility, notable in much early Irish literature, that frankly revels in the beauty and puissance of material things.

By depicting Suibhne as a hero in the secular mold, complete with the trappings and ornaments of kingship, *Buile Suibhne*'s author sets up the renewal of his conflict with Ronán as not merely a dispute between individuals, but as the clash of alternative modes of being. The secular and the sacred, the traditional social order based on kingship and the newer monastic order, the material and the spiritual, all are crystallized as opposing pairs in the figures of Suibhne and Ronán. Initially, the cleric seems no match for the physical violence of the warrior. Ronán arranges a temporary truce between the armies of Congal and Domhnall, but is powerless to prevent Suibhne's brazen slaying of a man each morning and each night in violation of the truce. After Suibhne kills Ronán's foster-child with one spear-cast and aims another at Ronán himself, damaging the saint's bell, Ronán repeats and intensifies his curse upon Suibhne. As the armies charge into battle, the noise and tumult of their battle-cries overwhelm Suibhne, and Ronán's curse takes effect at last:

O'dchúala thrá Suibhne na gaire mora sin 7 a fhuamanna 7 a freagartha i
 nellaibh nimhe 7 i fraightibh na firmaminnte rofhéich Suibhne suas iarum
 co rolíon nemhain 7 dobhar 7 dásacht 7 fáoinnel 7 fúalang 7 foluamain 7
 udmhaille, anbsaidhe 7 anfhoinne miosgais gach ionaidh ina mbíodh 7
 serc gach ionaidh noco roichedh; romheirbhlighset a meoir,
 rocriothnaighsiot a chosa, roluathadh a chroidhe, roclódhadh a chedfadha,
 rosaobadh a radharc, rotuitset a airm urnocht asa lámhuibh co ndeachaidh

la breithir Rónáin ar gealtacht 7 ar geinidecht amail gach n-ethaid n-aerdha. (14)

‘When Sweeney heard these loud cries and their noises and echoes against the heavens’ clouds and in the walls of the firmament, he looked up and was filled with frenzy and darkness and rage and confusion and madness and frenzy and quickness and horror and anxiety and hatred of every place where he had been and love of every place he had not yet reached; his fingers went weak, his legs shook, his heart sped, his substance was overthrown, his speech gave out, his weapons fell naked from his hands, so that by Ronán’s curse he went in madness, like any bird, through the air.’

This difficult passage both describes Suibhne’s transformation and re-enacts it by way of its own textual combustibility. Ronán’s curse removes Suibhne from himself, psychologically, physically and socially, and this passage figures this removal through its own uncertainties. Taking place over the course of a single over-running sentence, the description of Suibhne’s transformation is made up of simple noun phrases connected by “and,” and a good deal of repetition or near-repetition. As in the previous descriptive passage, the text performs the excess and physicality it describes. Pronouns, verbal prefixes, and verb endings come together in dense “word-clots,” contributing to an intensely saturated linguistic texture. Syntactically, the passage is fairly simple, but the vocabulary is rich and the descriptions are unyielding. Like the battle-cries that trigger Suibhne’s transformation, each of the words in this passage sound and re-sound in a

consistent alliterative strategy that emphasizes the intensely physical dimensions of Suibhne's ejection from his physical life.

Significantly, this violent transformation does not take place immediately after Ronán curses Suibhne, either for the first or the second time, but only after the Battle of Magh Rath has begun. Carney finds in this circumstance support for his theory that the Ronán episode is a late addition to the tale, arguing that in the story “as originally told the din of battle, the carnage, and a vision in the sky” were the sole catalysts of Suibhne's madness (137). If this argument is correct, the events surrounding Ronán have been woven into the pre-existing story with great skill, neatly balancing Suibhne's subsequent nakedness with the affront of his nude assault upon the cleric, utilizing Suibhne's spear-cast to merit the punishment of death at spear-point, and introducing the king's wife Eorann as the original agent of his stripping, which becomes important in later episodes. In any case, as Ronán is present in the earliest extant versions of the tale, speculation regarding possible earlier, more “original” renditions must remain inconclusive.

For the purposes of this study, the crucial point is that the author of *Buile Suibhne* made the decision to include this delayed onset of the curse in his version of the tale, whether or not this reflects lost, earlier renditions of the tradition. This choice has the effect of magnifying Suibhne's failure to fulfill his proper role in society, for not only does he abandon his kingdom and flee to the woods, but he does so at the height of battle, when it is most crucial that he perform effectively as a leader of warriors. Further, it mitigates Ronan's priestly authority, for the saint appears impotent in his first encounter with Suibhne, as he would not had his curse taken immediate effect. When the curse does eventually strike, it seems that Ronan's words were not, in themselves, enough to

bring about Suibhne's transformation, but rather that they work in conjunction with the terrible cries of battle and, perhaps, something that Suibhne sees when he looks up to the *fraightibh na firmaminnte* (14) 'walls of the firmament.' The description of this event oddly mixes the aural and visual registers, as the clouds and skies are normally something seen, not heard, and the catalyst for Suibhne's upward glance is the unusual reverberation of sound against the clouds. Here we may detect a remnant of the vision in the sky that James Carney observes in other, related, Celtic accounts of occasions of battlefield madness (136-137), but whatever Suibhne sees remains tantalizingly unspecified. This lacuna in the text opens a liminal space in the clash between king and priest, allowing the possibility that another force, beyond or behind or above them both, contributes to the fulfillment of Ronán's curse and the dislocation of Suibhne from his past life. Carney is likely right to see in this gap a spectral trace of older elements underlying this tale, while a pious monastic audience might find clear reference to the Christian God in Suibhne's turn to the clouds of heaven. Another possibility, however, is enacted by the words of the text itself, irrespective of any external frame of reference. The description of Suibhne's seizure on the battlefield displays a persistent thickening of the intangible, the transparent, into visible, tactile materiality. The insubstantial sky coalesces, becoming walled and dense enough to echo, while the sound of shouting verges on the visible, prompting Suibhne to look, not listen. Fear itself takes visible and concrete form, altering the stricken warrior's body as well as his mind. These changes mirror (and, inevitably, are mirrored by) the thickness and materiality of the language of *Buile Suibhne*, in descriptive prose passages like this one but most especially in the poetry,

suggesting that the unspecified agent acting to eject Suibhne from his wanted life may well be the force of poetry itself.

Joseph Nagy observes in his introduction to *Buile Suibhne* that “the force of poetry can dislodge the occupants of the roles of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ in the poetic utterance.... The moment that a person receives the inspiration to see and speak like a poet can also be the moment that he is robbed of his identity, his autonomy, and his freedom from the tyranny of words, both his and those of others” (2). This formulation figures poetry as the cause, and not merely the result, of Suibhne’s battlefield transformation. From a strictly chronological standpoint, this seems mistaken; Suibhne utters his first staves of poetry well after his flight from Magh Rath. On a deeper level, however, Nagy’s comment feels exactly right. In that indescribable gap in the sky where sight, sound, and language come together in one overwhelming impression, Suibhne’s destiny is fulfilled. If it is not the destiny the king might have imagined for himself, neither is it precisely the fate to which Ronán’s curse would seem to condemn him. Suibhne becomes a *geilt*, a victim of a form of madness “characterized by living in the wilderness, leaping or flying, eating raw foods, and having visions,” (Nagy, “Wisdom of the Geilt,” 44) and eventually dies at spear-point in fulfillment of the curse, but he also becomes a poet, and here again a force and will other than Ronán’s appear to be at work. Suibhne’s state of *geltacht* ‘madness’ is not unique in Irish literature¹⁶, nor is the idea that he should gain unusual knowledge while living apart from society, but the body of stories and especially poems attributed to him is indeed remarkable, and unmatched by any other *geilt* in the Irish tradition.

After his seizure at Magh Rath, Suibhne flees through woods, fields, and mountains, traveling so quickly that his feet scarcely touch the ground, until he eventually comes to rest in the branches of a yew in a place called Glenn Earcáin. Warriors from both Congal's defeated army and Domhnall's victorious one come upon Suibhne and attempt to succor him, but he rejects them, speaking for the first time in verse: *romsgar Dia rem dheilbh nad ró / sgaraidh re mh'eol, a ogó* (16). 'God has sundered me from my own shape / sunder yourselves from knowledge of me, o warriors.' This abrupt and unexplained acceptance of God's power over him is in striking contrast to Suibhne's earlier, equally enigmatic antipathy toward God's servant Ronán, producing a tension that the text never fully resolves. The surrounding prose reinforces Suibhne's own assessment of his loss of shape, for it recounts the unsuccessful attempts of onlookers to describe him, some saying that they see a woman, others a man. His form and even his gender have become indistinct, not only in his own mind but to the eyes of outsiders as well, in sharp contrast to his exquisitely delineated and kingly appearance prior to the battle. Fearing the noise and chaos of the crowd of gawkers gathering around him, Suibhne flees once again, rising like a bird toward the firmament and passing over the summits and crests of the land (22).

Suibhne journeys alone for a long time until he reaches Glen Bolcáin, a lovely place of fair woods, clear brooks, and abundant watercress. Having rejected the society in which he formerly played such an important role, he joins a different sort of society, for Glen Bolcáin is the favored home of the *gealta Eirenn* 'madmen of Ireland,' who gather there and fight one another for the choicest watercress and most comfortable perches (22). Despite the beauty of the glen, life in the wilderness is hard, and after a

year in exile Suibhne utters the first of his famous laments. The poem begins with a poignant sketch of the bleakness of his condition:

Bliadhain gus aréir	A year to last night
dhamh fo chiamhair chraobh	bare branches about me
eitir tuile is traigh	between flood and ebb
gan tuighe fom tháobh. (24)	no shelter on any side.

Latter stanzas specify the many things Suibhne misses: the company of women, the plunder of victorious battle, the title and honor of kingship, conversation with generous men, and the enjoyment of music. Despite his almost overwhelming sense of loss, the madman is not without pride:

Robadhus-sa feacht,	There was a time,
ge béo mar ’tú anocht,	though I am thus tonight,
ba neamhfhann mo nert	when my sway was not paltry,
ar ferann nárbh olc.	over land that was not bad.
Ar eachaibh co hán	Upon glorious horses,
i mbeathaid can bhrón,	alive without sorrow,
ar mo righe raith	for my graceful kingdom,
robsam righ maith mór. (26)	I was a great, good king.

Though Suibhne concludes with a perfunctory statement of regret that he has been reduced to his current state because he “sold Christ,”¹⁷ the poem feels anything but contrite. Suibhne lingers over the material and social details of his lost life and glories in his past splendor. The meter used in this poem, called in Irish *lethrannaigeacht mór*, is

relatively rare in *Buile Suibhne*, and is distinguished by a five syllable line, whereas seven syllable lines are much more common. The shorter line, together with the simple rhyming couplets, contributes to the spareness and sense of loss that pervade this lament.

In his dismay, Suibhne leaves Glen Bolcáin, arriving at last at a church called Cluain Cille in a border region between two kingdoms. Lingerin in the margins of the churchyard, he endures a severe snowstorm, promptin him to utter perhaps his best-known lament. It is worth quoting in full:

Anocht is fúar an snechta,	Tonight the snow is cold,
fodeachta is búan mo bhochta,	my poverty is endless,
nidom neirt isin deabuidh	there is no strength in me for battle,
im geilt romgeoghuin gorta.	hunger aches me among madmen.

Atchid cach nidom chuchtach,	Everyone sees my unshapeliness,
as lom i snáth mo cheirtach,	my ragged threadbare coat,
Suibhne mh'ainm o Ros Ercain,	Suibhne is my name of Ros Ercáin.
as misi an gealtán gealtach.	Myself, the madman, the frenzied.

Nidom fois o thig aghaidh,	I have no rest at night-fall,
ni thaidlenn mo chois conair,	my feet tread no path,
nocha bíu sonna a ccána,	I am not long for this,
domeccad ialla omhain.	fear and terror chain me.

Mo bháire tar muir mbarcláin	My end is across the full sea,
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ar ndol tar sáile soclán,
 rogab time mo nertan,
 as me gealtán Ghlinne Bolcáin.

a voyage over prow-filled waves.
 But I am weak,
 a madman of Glen Bolcáin.

Gaoth an reoidh ag mo rébadh,
 sneachta romleón go leige,
 an tsíon dom breith a n-éccuibh
 do géccuibh gacha geicce.

The frost-edged wind tears me,
 the snow wounds me,
 the storm has given me a death
 on every branching of the branches.

Romgonsat géga glasa
 co rorébsat mo bossa,
 ni fargaibhset na dreasa
 damna creasa dom chossa.

Grey branches have torn my hands,
 they have ripped through me.
 The briars have not left
 a strip of skin on my feet untouched.

Ata crioth ar mo lámha
 tar gach mbiath fatha mbúaidre,
 do Slíabh Mis ar Sliabh Cuillenn,
 do Sléibh Cuillen co Cuailgne.

My hands shake.
 Everything vexes me,
 from Mount Mis to Mount Cuillenn,
 from Cuillen to Cuailgne.

As trúagh mo nuallán choichche
 i mullach Cruachán Oighle,
 do Ghlinn Bolcain for Íle,
 do Chinn Tíre for Boirche.

My lament is miserable and endless,
 on the peak of Cruachan Aighle,
 from Glen Bolcain to Islay,
 from Cenn Tíre to Boirche.

Beg mo chuid o thig laa,
 ni thaét ar scath la noa,
 barr biorair Chluana Cille
 la gleorán Chille Cua.

My day-lit lot is no better:
 no new dawn in my meager place.
 Only a sprig of watercress
 from Cell Cua's cuckoo-flower.

An gen fil ag Ros Earcach
 ni thair imnedh na olcach,
 as edh dombeir gan nertach
 beith re sneachta go nochtach. (32)

The one who is safe in Ros Earcain,
 no trouble will come to him.
 But to me comes evil and toil,
 strengthless and naked in the snow.

This poem is in quatrains, like all of the poetry in *Buile Suibhne* (and most of the poetry in the Old and Middle Irish tradition), and it features the common *rannaigeacht* meter based on a seven-syllable line with rhyme on the second and fourth line. As an additional ornament, some of the stanzas keep a common rhyme in three or four of their lines.

Juxtaposed against this well-wrought formal structure is the rambling tone of *Suibhne's* lament. He repeats himself constantly, naming himself and his madness several times over the course of this forty-line poem. By taking refuge in a tree beside a church on the borders of two kingdoms, *Suibhne* approximates his own uneasy position within (or without) society. The churchyard is neither precisely a part of nor completely excluded from the two kingdoms whose borders it straddles; rather it is an in-between space, emblematic of a society in transition. *Suibhne's* physical shape evinces a similar uncertainty. In the prose passage directly before this poem, he is said to have taken himself into the air to travel from Glen Bolcáin to Cluan Cille, but he still seems to have

a more-or-less human form. He describes the shabbiness of his coat in words that might refer to a man's garment or to a bird's coat of feathers, but his description of the pain in his hands and feet sounds utterly human. His anxiety over his "shapeliness" indicates the text's continuing emphasis on Suibhne's physical form, however unstable it has become. The ascetic deprivation forced upon him by Ronán has the ironic effect of re-centering his own concern for his body. In this passage, the fear and uncertainty that he feels are externalized and made into physical symptoms, even as the text in general has tended to materialize the intangible. Suibhne's hands ache, his feet are cut, his naked body is "chained" in cold, he is constantly hungry, and he does not sleep.

A shift in the exiled king's attitude begins to emerge in his next poem, which he speaks in the margins of another churchyard, this time at *Snamh dha Én* 'Swim Two Birds,' a ford on the river Shannon. Flann O'Brien takes the name of this place for the title of his novel, although characteristically he obscures the connection by omitting this poem from the translation of *Buile Suibhne* that he builds into the novel. Upon his arrival at the church, Suibhne observes a community engaged in its social and productive duties. Clerics are fulfilling their offices, several women are beating flax, and another woman is giving birth to a child, a detail that initially seems odd but upon reflection is essential to the preservation of the social order that Suibhne himself has fled. Suibhne objects to the labors of the women (both of the flax-beaters and of the woman giving birth), chiding them for working on the day (implicitly, Friday) that the madman fasts in honor of the Lord, thereby privileging his own ascetic lifestyle as spiritually superior to the organized religious and productive life of the churchyard. The ringing of the church bell further provokes him, prompting him to say: *Ba binne lem-sa éimh guth na ccúach do chloinsin*

ar brauch na Banna do gach leith inás grig-gráig an chluig (32) ‘Far sweeter to me to hear the voices of the cuckoos from the banks of the Bann on every side than the grinding-grate of the bell.’ A poem extolling the virtues of his wild life in contrast to the strictures of the churchyard includes the following gorgeous stanzas:

O Loch Diolair an aille	From Lake Diolair of the cliffs
go Doire Coluim Chille	to Derry Colum Cille,
nocha deabaidh rochúala	one hears no sound of strife,
ó ealaib búadha binne.	but the sweet triumph of the swans.

Dord daimh dhíthreibhe ós aille	The lone stag bells from the clifftops
bios a Siodhmhuine Glinne,	above the peaceful hollow of the glen
nochan fuil ceol ar talmain	its music beyond earthly melody.
im annuin acht a bhinne. (34)	Sweetness alone abides.

Here for the first time Suibhne celebrates the natural life to which he has been condemned, finding it both spiritually and aesthetically superior to the domesticated alternative he witnesses at the church of Swim Two Birds. This shift has often been interpreted as an indication of Suibhne’s acceptance of his punishment and of Christ’s authority¹⁸; an argument that finds support in the poem’s final stanza:

A Chríost, a Chríost romchluine,
 a Chríost, a Chríost gan bine,
 a Chríost, a Chríost romchara,
 na romscara red binne. (34)

“Oh Christ, oh Christ hear me / oh Christ, oh Christ without sin / oh Christ, oh Christ love me / do not sunder me from your sweetness.’ The language of this stanza attempts to connect Christ’s sweetness (*binne*) with the sweet music of the swans and stags, creating a kind of natural piety that stands in contrast to the organized church, replete with its officious clerics and grating bells. In its rigidly repetitive structure and constrained vocabulary, however, this final stanza seems to have more in common with the regimented life of the churchyard than with the freer and more complex verses celebrating the natural world. The contrast in style and sensibility between the concluding stanza and the rest of the poem lend a discordant feel to this closing cry to Christ, while for many readers the haunting worldly music of stag and swan will ring more true. In this poem, as elsewhere in *Buile Suibhne*, the text speaks in multiple voices, the overtly Christian tones of the repentant sinner striving to assimilate and contain the more sensual and material voice of the exiled king who is learning to value his new life.

Though the Swim Two Birds poem may suggest that Suibhne is beginning to appreciate certain aspects of his new life, it certainly does not indicate a complete change of heart, and the remainder of *Buile Suibhne* oscillates between celebrations of natural beauty and statements of wretchedness, sorrow, and regret. For seven years the bird-man wanders Ireland, returning always at length to his favored resting place at Glen Bolcáin. He is not, however, as utterly alone as one might expect in the course of his exilic wanderings. As Nagy notes in his introduction, the majority of the poems are not soliloquies, but rather “much if not most of this verse is cast within the framework of exchange between Suibhne and the diverse characters whom he engages, and by whom

he is engaged, in dialogue” (16). In addition to his moderately antagonistic interactions with the clerical inhabitants of several churches that he visits, Suibhne has meaningful encounters with a number of other characters, including a shadowy relative named Loingseachan who repeatedly tries to wean him from his madness, a fellow *geilt* with whom he forms a deep friendship for one year, an old woman known as the “mill-hag,” and, most poignantly, his abandoned wife Eorann.

Among the lost pleasures of Suibhne’s old life, the company of beautiful women, especially his wife, looms large. After many years in madness, the tattered king ventures to Eorann’s house, where she now lives with a nobleman named Guaire. Suibhne chides her at first for her easeful life with her new lover, while he suffers restless in the cold, but Eorann responds lovingly:

As mochen duit, a gheilt ghlan,
 tú is tocha d’ feruibh talman,
 gidh súanach is suaill mo chlí
 on la itcuala tú are neimhni. (46)

You are most welcome, unsullied madman,
 dearest among the men of the earth,
 though I rest, I have been wretched
 since I heard you were brought to nothing.

The king and his lost love proceed with a dialogue in verse, using the arrhythmic rhyming couplets of the *debide* meter. This meter, the most common in *Buile Suibhne*, features both a tightly-wrought formal structure and a light cadence, as the rhyme is de-

emphasized by the fact that it falls on the second, lighter syllable of the end-word in every second line. Although the poem begins with jealousy and recrimination, it moves toward understanding and generosity. Eorann swears that she would prefer to sleep with her husband among the narrow branches than on her royal couch with Guaire, but Suibhne responds kindly that his hard, bare path is not suitable for his beloved wife, and that he does not begrudge her a comfortable life with her new lover. As with much of the poetry in *Buile Suibhne*, the focus on the condition of Suibhne's body is insistent. Eorann laments that Suibhne has become *eittigh imsniomhach* (48) 'ugly and dejected,' and that his skin has lost its color. The erotic subtext underlying the work's sensual, physical focus comes to the fore in this poem. It was Eorann, of course, who originally stripped her husband at the beginning of *Buile Suibhne*, and here her contemplation of his body leads her to desire to share his physical life:

Robadh maith lem ar mbeth aráen
 co ttigeadh clumh ar ar ttaobh,
 co sirfinn soirchi is doirchi
 let gach lá is gach énoihche. (48)

Better that we should be together,
 until feathers cover our forms,
 I would seek you out in light and in darkness,
 at my side each day and each night.

The feathered idyll that Eorann contemplates does not come to pass, for the pair is interrupted by the return of Guaire's warriors and Suibhne once again takes flight.

Nevertheless, Suibhne and Eorann's duet, emotionally one of the high points of *Buile Suibhne*, leaves an indelible mark on the text, making it clear that Suibhne's ascetic life is also a sensual one, and that his nakedness signals not only deprivation but also erotic possibility. Significantly, the next woman that he comes across, the wife of a lay member of the church at Ros Bearaigh, attempts to lure him from his perch in a scene with clear sexual overtones.

Suibhne is desired not only by Eorann and other women, but also by his people, who wish him to return as their king. Most dogged in pursuit of him is Loingseachan, a kinsman identified by the text as either his foster-brother or his mother's son (but not, evidently, his father's son, as Loingseachan does not appear to figure in the noble hierarchy of Dál nAraidhe). After several attempts, Loingseachan deceives and captures Suibhne, intending to keep him in fetters until he recovers from his madness. As in the encounter with Eorann, Suibhne is tempted by his people's welcome, and a glimmer of sanity returns to him after six weeks of captivity. He is goaded back into madness in part through his pride, when an old woman, Loingseachan's mother-in-law, challenges him to a leaping contest. In the midst of this contest, in full mad flight through the woods and peaks of Ireland, Suibhne returns also to his full powers as a poet, uttering his longest and perhaps his most famous poem, and reinforcing the links among madness, flight, and poetry in this work. This 257 line poem in praise of the trees of Ireland occupies the center of *Buile Suibhne*, both literally and thematically, and thus is worth quoting at some length:

A bhennáin, a bhuiredháin,
a bhéiceadháin bintt,

Oh little stag, little bellowing one,
oh tuneful little clamourer,

is binn linn an cuicherán
dogni tú 'san ghlintt.

to us it is sweet music
you are making in the glen.

Eolchaire mo mhendatain
doralá ar mo chéill,
na lois isin machaire,
na hois isin tsléibh.

An aching for my homestead
has edged into my senses:
herds in the field,
a deer on the peak.

A dhair dhosach dhuilledhach,
at ard os cionn croinn;
a cholláin, a chraobhacháin,
a chomhra cnó ciull.

Oh leafy, brimming oak
high above other trees;
along your body, through your branchings,
hazelnuts meet and hang.

A fhern, nidot naimhdidhe,
as aloinn do lí,
nidat cuma sceó sceanbaidhi
ar an mbeirn a mbí.

Oh alder tree, you don't hate me,
colored, beautiful, full,
in the hollow where you stand
you do not gash or tear.

A dhroighnéin, a dhealgnacháin,
a áirneacháin duibh,
a bhiorair, a bharrghlasáin,
do bhrú thobair luin.

Oh blackthorn, little thorny one,
small black bitter-fruited tree;
oh watercress, oh green-tipped one,
in the heart of the blackbird's well.

A mhinen na conaire
 at milli si gach luibh,
 a ghlasáin, a adhghlasáin,
 a lus forsa mbi in t-suibh.

Oh minen on the pathway,
 sweeter than any herb,
 oh green one, so green one,
 your shoots are spilling with berries.

A abhall, a abhlachóg,
 tren rotchraithenn cách,
 a chaerthainn, a chaeirecháin,
 as aloinn do bhláth.

Oh apple-tree, small apple-tree,
 you are shaken and roughly swayed.
 Oh rowan tree, small and berried,
 your fame has traveled far.

A dhrioseog, a dhruimnechog,
 ni damha cert cuir,
 ni ana gum leadradh-sa
 gursat lomlán d'fuil.

Oh briar, curved and arching,
 you give me no safe haven,
 you never leave off shredding me
 until you've had enough of my blood.

A iubhair, a iubhracháin,
 i reilgigh bat reil,
 a eidhinn, a eidhneacháin,
 at gnáth a ccoill cheir. (62-66)

Oh yew tree, little yew tree,
 unsullied in the churchyard.
 Oh ivy, little ivy
 everywhere in the darkened wood.

This paean to the natural world is one of the most often cited (and most often parodied) passages in early Irish literature. While not quite personifying the various flora of Ireland, Suibhne uses them as figures to register his own emotional state. Although he goes on to lament the harshness of his lot, and the wealth and status of which he has been

deprived, the text is rich, sonically dense, and indulgent throughout. These quatrains contain a good deal of repetition and alliteration, displaying the “too-muchness” that is so characteristic of *Buile Suibhne*. While most of the trees and plants addressed are described in diminutive terms, almost everything is called twice, as though to be named once is not enough. Likewise, while Suibhne laments his own meagerness and smallness, he names himself obsessively, so that his own identity, like that of the natural world that forms his milieu, is over-saturated, a sign of a text that enacts its own plenitude and performs its own linguistic growth throughout its sumptuous descriptions of destitution.

As in the dialogue with Eorann, Suibhne is most interested in the physical dimensions of his suffering, and this is constantly emphasized by the intensely physical nature of the poem. The natural world is made into a metonymic index of Suibhne’s plight. The trees and plants are praised if they give him nourishment, or blamed if their thorns tear his flesh. Even emotional states are quickly given their physical analogues, as when Suibhne tropes his homesickness using bodies in their natural and solitary settings: herds in the field, a deer on the peak. This is most clearly evident in his quatrain to the oak tree, which is given a lexical body (*cholláin*) as a replacement for Suibhne’s own solitary and uncertain form.

After his celebration of the trees of Ireland, Suibhne defeats the mill-hag in their contest, leaving her body broken at the base of a cliff and continuing on his mad career for several years until at last he reaches Tech Moling, the church of St. Moling, an important literary figure in his own right. In a clear echo of his initial encounter with St. Ronán, Suibhne finds Moling reading from a beautiful psalter, but this time cleric and king speak civilly and find that they share common ground. Indeed, Suibhne’s

interactions with Moling are so different in character from all of his previous encounters with churchmen that Pádraig Ó Riain, among other authorities, has concluded that this final episode developed separately from the rest of *Buile Suibhne* (“Materials and Provenance” 175). Its inclusion in the tale illustrates a point that has been implicit throughout the text, however, demonstrating that Suibhne’s poetic inspiration is akin to the divine knowledge possessed by saints.

The relationship between madman and saint is quickly established through the formal features of their dialogue in verse, as they speak in couplets that complete one another’s rhymes, forming joint quatrains. Likewise, they greet one another as fellow prophets, each acknowledging the other’s possession of special knowledge and confirming, as Nagy notes, that “they each receive their knowledge from the same source,” namely, the Christian God (“Wisdom of the Geilt” 45). Moling offers Suibhne shelter and sustenance, and in return asks that the *geilt* visit the church each night so that Moling can write down his stories and poems. Suibhne accepts though he knows he is fated to die at spear-point in Moling’s churchyard; a doom that comes to pass when a swineherd named Mongan mistakenly thinks that Suibhne has seduced his wife and slays him in revenge. Moling comes upon the dying Suibhne in time to hear his confession, give him communion and anoint him. This passage is from Suibhne’s final poem:

Ba binne lium robháoi tan	There was a time when I would rather
na comhradh ciúin na muintear,	hear the turtledove’s soft quaver,
bheith icc luthmhairecht im linn	vividly circling a shallow pool,
cuchairecht fhéaráinn-eidhinn.	than the people’s talk and blather.

Ba binne lium robháoi tan
 na guth cluigín im fharradh,
 ceileabhradh an luin don bheinn
 is dordán doimh ar doininn.

There was a time when I would rather
 hear the blackbird's song to the mountain
 or the stag's deep chant in the storm
 than the bell's clangor around me.

Ba binne lium robháoi tan
 na guth mná aille im fharradh,
 guth circe fráioich an tsléibhe
 do cluinsin im iarmhéirghe.

There was a time when I would rather
 listen at the start of dawn
 to the mountain-grouse's matins,
 than a beautiful woman breathing near me.

Ba binne lium robháoi tan
 donálach na gcon alla,
 ina guth cléirigh astoigh
 ag meiligh is ag meigeallaigh. (152)

There was a time when I would rather
 listen to the screaming wolves,
 than the priest's voice within walls
 bleating and squawking the psalter.

This anaphoric litany continues for another six quatrains until Suibhne finishes by giving thanks to God and repenting his sins in the final stanza. There is an odd and telling disconnect between the ostensible function of this final speech and the sensibility expressed within it. The overwhelmingly nostalgic tone, underscored by the repeated refrain at the start of each stanza, tends to belie the conversion that Suibhne insists he has undergone. His love and praise of the natural, non-social world is obsessively maintained even as he supposedly forswears these things in giving himself to Christ, and it scarcely seems that the time when he loved the woods better than the churchyard is safely contained by the past tense. Suibhne protests too much. This final poem shows a figure

still devoted to the animals, woods, and the wild, and still unsure, if not unambiguously scornful, of the “bleating and squawking” priests. After completing the poem, Suibhne collapses in a swoon, but with Moling’s help he rises one last time to walk toward the door of the church. Hand in hand, madman and saint reach the doorpost, whereupon Suibhne dies at last, literally on the threshold of the church, a fitting end for a figure whose positioning within or without the religious tradition is never fully resolved.

In her book *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, Maria Tymoczko discusses the difficulties involved in understanding and appreciating literary works produced by a marginalized culture. A dominant-culture audience is unlikely to be aware of many aspects of the material culture and social structures of the marginalized group (in this case, the medieval Irish), making opaque rather than transparent basic points of plot and character as well as the intertwined issues of symbolism and literary reference (47). The symbolic weight of clothing and martial accoutrements in medieval Ireland is extremely important in *Buile Suibhne*, for example, in ways that may not be readily apparent to a modern audience. Post-structural theory has revealed the essentially intertextual nature of all literature, but many of the works that constitute the web of reference and citation surrounding *Buile Suibhne* have been lost or are unfamiliar, obscuring intertextualities and sometimes contributing to a false impression of a singular, isolated text. Further, for most readers translation will be a necessity, as few can be expected to be competent in a language like Middle Irish; by comparison, many more students and scholars will have at least a basic familiarity with a language such as ancient Greek, which occupies a more privileged place in the hierarchy of Western literature. In the course of translation, problems arise “with the transference of literary features such as genre, form,

performance conventions, and literary allusions; as well as the inevitable questions of linguistic interface” (Tymoczko 47). These difficulties, inherent in any translation, are exacerbated in the case of a marginalized text like *Buile Suibhne*, which utilizes unfamiliar verse forms and generic conventions.

Foremost among the special challenges that *Buile Suibhne* poses for a translator is its unfamiliar mixture of prose and verse. While this formal structure is quite common in medieval Irish literature, it has relatively few analogues in the English tradition and seems especially unwieldy because of the frequency with which prose segments and poems repeat (in slightly different form) the same events and dialogue. The verse portions may be more suited to modern tastes, but as Ciaran Carson has noted, the interplay between poetry and prose is an essential feature of the text, as the verse reflects Suibhne’s inward journey while the prose recounts the outward events of the story, thereby generating a creative tension between inside and outside (142). The verse forms used in *Buile Suibhne* also pose difficulties for the translator, as they are not only intricate but also quite different from the poetics dominant in the English tradition. Syllabic meter, a distinctive concept of rhyme, and complex rules of assonance and alliteration are among the unfamiliar elements of Middle Irish poetry. In my own translation, I made little attempt to retain the Irish prosody, although where possible I did endeavor to roughly approximate line length and some linguistic effects such as alliteration and adjectival compounds. My primary goal was to render closely the sense as I understood it (understanding that entirely transparent translation is never possible) while presenting aesthetically appealing prose and poetry in English. In an effort to avoid totally

naturalizing what is in fact an artifact of an alien culture, I have retained the Irish names, most notably Suibhne, rather than using Anglicized forms.

Despite the unfamiliarity of many aspects of the text, Suibhne's story depicts the figure of the poet in a light that readily appeals to sensibilities shaped by the dominant Western literary tradition. The conceit that poetic words take flight has been with us since ancient times, and is satisfyingly evoked in *Buile Suibhne*'s transformation of the poet into a soaring bird-man. Likewise, the association of the poet with woods, mountains, and streams is familiar, having been firmly established by the Romantics, together with the idea that dedication to the craft of words can lead to loneliness and exile from ordinary society. Baudelaire and the French Decadents popularized the notion that an artist is a being constantly torn between exultation and despair, achieving artistic ecstasy only at the cost of a derangement of the senses not unlike Suibhne's. Upon closer examination, however, the Irish Suibhne does not fit precisely into any of these dominant Western molds, as countervailing tendencies within the text resist the too-easy appropriation of this figure. Suibhne's apparent similarity to many culturally dominant notions of the poet, together with the challenge he poses to the very formulations that he initially seems to embody, make him a useful figure to modern writers who are themselves attempting to stake out their position relative to the Western literary tradition. Especially relevant to twentieth-century writers are a cluster of ideas centered around a shift in modes of artistic production and reception, in this case from an oral to a written culture.

Buile Suibhne is a product of a society that had undergone several major transitions in the process of conversion to Christianity. Among the most significant of

these was a technological shift in the means of artistic production, as Ireland slowly moved from an oral culture to a written one that was strongly associated with the arrival of the church. In his book *Conversing With Angels & Ancients*, Nagy convincingly establishes the strong connection in medieval Irish culture between the early Christian saints and the advent of writing and literature. Crucially, Nagy asserts that the highest-ranked poets of the oral tradition, known as *filid*, “appear to have joined forces with the church early on,” leading to the creation of a written literature in both Irish and Latin that attempted to encompass the body of pre-Christian, oral tales (9). The primarily monastic creators of this new literature had a complex relationship with the oral tradition, as Nagy describes: “[The] emerging written tradition attempted to find its own identity and authorize itself, assuming in the process various postures toward other modes of transmission, especially the ongoing oral tradition from which it distinguished itself. At times, literature depicts itself as emerging from oral tradition; at other times, it appears to be running alongside it, intersecting with it, running counter to it, or all of the above simultaneously” (7). Although the early Irish church shows an extraordinary willingness “to preserve and transmit what were basically secular literary remains” (Ó Riain, “Materials and Provenance” 173), the scribes also clearly attempted to bring the oral material under the control of their emerging written tradition. Thus, for example, the extant written accounts of the death of the pre-Christian hero Cúchulainn have him returning from the grave to prophecy the coming of Christ, thereby both harnessing the enormous authority of this Ulster hero in support of written Christian culture and diminishing the threat that he poses as an exemplar of a rival tradition. Similarly, *Acallam na Senórach*, ‘Tales of the Elders,’ a text roughly contemporaneous with *Buile*

Suibhne, depicts Saint Patrick in conversation with Caílte and Oisín, two heroes of the Fenian tradition who have miraculously survived for hundreds of years. They share their tales and lore with Patrick, demonstrating their own native knowledge and authority, and each recitation ends with the saint commanding a scribe to copy down their words, thus appropriating their tales under the sign of writing, even as by baptizing the ancient heroes Patrick marks them with the sign of Christianity.

The complex relationship between written, Christian culture and the native oral tradition forms an important part of the subtext underlying *Buile Suibhne*. One of the great oddities of the work, however, is that *Buile Suibhne* was probably composed some six centuries after Ireland was converted to Christianity, for Charles-Edwards argues that the conversion of the island was largely accomplished by the second half of the sixth century (239). It is striking that the tensions between pagan and Christian belief, secular and religious authority, and oral and written traditions, which might be expected to have been largely settled by the later part of the twelfth century, are so sharply delineated. *Suibhne*'s pointed assault upon St. Ronán's psalter acts as a metonymic sign of his hostility toward writing in general, while the alignment of his own poetic production with the oral tradition is emphasized by the clearly spoken nature of his verses, which are invariably introduced with the word *adbert* 'he said.' The written text works to bring under its control the threat to its authority posed by *Suibhne*, and the oral tradition that he represents, first through the mechanism of Ronán's curse. By stripping him of garments, social status, and distinct physical form, the text seeks not only to chasten the impetuous king, but also to bring him within a Christian context, for *Suibhne*'s deprivations align him with the tradition of hermetic asceticism that was especially strong in the Irish

church in the eighth and ninth centuries. This curse does not completely succeed in its normalizing function, however, as Suibhne's nakedness comes to have erotic as well as ascetic connotations, while the erosion of his kingly authority paradoxically unleashes another source of knowledge and power, generating poetry that will destabilize Ronán's claim to mastery of the realm of words and language. The final episode of Suibhne's encounter with Moling illustrates a different strategy, in which the saint explicitly chooses to act as the preserver and transmitter of the poet's oral lore by inscribing it in his own written medium. This approach is more successful than Ronán's antagonism, for Suibhne agrees to return to Moling each evening to recount his adventures and willingly accepts communion and anointment, indicating again the entanglement of writing and Christianity in this milieu. As highlighted by Suibhne's death on the threshold of the church, rather than within, as well as by his nostalgic final lament, the conversion is not complete and the alliance of written and oral traditions achieved at the end of *Buile Suibhne* remains tenuous. Moling says to Suibhne: *Aluinn duille an liubhair-si / psaltair Cháoimhghin cháidh* 'Beautiful are the leaves of my book / the psalter of chaste Kevin,' prompting Suibhne to respond: *Aille duille mh' iubhair-si / i nGlinn Bolcáin báin* 'More beautiful are the leaves of my yew / in pure Glen Bolcáin' (140). This exchange beautifully epitomizes both the text's desire to equate Suibhne's tradition with Moling's and its failure to completely do so, as the two standpoints are related but still at odds and in competition with one another.

At stake in the relationship between oral and written tradition that *Buile Suibhne* engages are issues of authority, citation, and originality that are particularly relevant to twentieth-century writers, themselves struggling with changes brought about by the

increasing mechanization of society. As the older tradition, orality has the claim of priority, and furthermore oral performance appears to be anchored in a kind of presence that seals its authority as original, authentic, not a copy or reproduction¹⁹. If Benjamin is right that among the crucial aspects of a work of art's aura is "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" ("The Work of Art" 220), an oral performance, as a singular occurrence, possesses a special kind of authenticity. By co-opting the heroes and poets of oral culture and incorporating them into literary works, the architects of the Irish written tradition sought to appropriate this authority. Paradoxically, however, they could do so only by given up any claim to originality, as their appropriations from the oral tradition take the form of quotation. *Buile Suibhne*, then, like the *Acallam na Senórach*, is presented as largely a work of citation, in which St. Moling as the ostensible author does not create, but rather simply transcribes the words of the representative oral poet. The anonymous author or authors of the text are masked by the practice of citation, while Suibhne, the written hero of a literary text, becomes the metonymic sign of the oral tradition.

Suibhne is often referred to interchangeably as a "marginal" or "liminal" character, but he is far less marginal than he at first appears. Despite his frequent lamentation of his status as an exile, he is more accurately depicted as in-between different segments of society, rather than outside of it altogether. He moves freely from churchyards to homes in his former kingdom of Dal nAraide to the society of madmen in Glen Bolcáin, and in each context finds and resists characters who seek to bring him fully into their sphere, including Eorann, Loingseachan, his fellow madman Alladhán, and ultimately the priest Moling. Similarly, the indeterminacy of his physical form is caused

by his movement between shapes, as he seems to shift from bird to man and back again, while his fluid positioning relative to Christianity, symbolized by his death on the threshold of Moling's church, demonstrates his liminal position in a society in the midst of a transition from pagan to Christian culture.

Homi Bhabha writes that "'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (2). The creative possibilities of moving within and between liminal spaces, Bhabha continues, allow for "interstitial passage between fixed identifications," making possible "a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (5). Suibhne, shifting fluidly among multiple physical shapes, societal forms, and means of artistic production, invokes the combustible possibilities of such "interstitial passages" for articulation of new identities at a time of cultural transformation. He ultimately escapes the totalizing agents of control that threaten his hybrid identity, whether Ronán's curse, Loinseachan's fetters, or Moling's church, exposing the fissures and interstices in a society and in a text where elements like Christian and pagan, sacred and secular, oral and literary, are uneasily mingled. Wandering mad and bare, Suibhne produces poetry of such lyrical beauty, insistent physicality, and keen eroticism that the richness of the text itself overwhelms its own ascetic and totalizing tendencies. In so doing, he allows modern readers to indulge a nostalgic desire for what Benjamin calls the "outmoded concepts" of "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery" ("The Work of Art" 218) while simultaneously

exposing the foundation of citation, reproduction, and inauthenticity upon which *Buile Suibhne*'s literary claim to such concepts rests.

Notes to Chapter One

¹All translations from the Irish in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise noted. I am grateful to my colleague Eric Falci for his collaboration on this project.

² See, for instance, Stephen Spender's *The Struggle of the Modern* (Berkeley: University of CA Press, 1963), which explores the modernist desire to retain the primacy of the imagination granted by Romanticism while simultaneously asserting a contradictory, restraining critical sensibility.

³ Ann Clune's "Mythologizing Sweeney" provides a useful annotated summary of Suibhne's appearances in modern literature.

⁴Although the invasion began with a relatively small force of some 600 men, the military superiority of the Norman armored cavalry and longbowmen allowed them to defeat considerably larger Irish armies. For an illuminating account of this period in Irish history, see *A New History of Ireland, Vol. II: Medieval Ireland 1169-1534*, edited by Art Cosgrove (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁵ The manuscripts are, respectively: Brussels, MS 3410, fo. 59a -61b; Royal Irish Academy, MS B IV I, p. 82a - 95b; and Royal Irish Academy, MS 23 K44, p. 131 - 80.

⁶ O Cuív infers that the three poets in question had read *Buile Suibhne* because the verse forms in their poems, as well as specific references to place-names and events, appear to mimic the earlier work (290-293).

⁷ Carney believes that the legend of Suibhne originated in the British kingdom of Strathclyde and is derived from the same tradition that produced Myrddin, Lailoken, and Merlin of the King Arthur cycle. Jackson disagrees, commenting that Carney's contention that the Irish word *geilt* is borrowed from Welsh *gwyllt* "is hardly very convincing," and suggesting instead that Scottish Dál Riada is the most logical point of origin for the tale. See Carney's "'Suibne Gelt' and 'The Children of Lir'" (*Studies in Irish Literature and History*: 129-164) and Jackson's "A Further Note on Suibhne Gelt and Merlin" (*Eigse* 7: 112-116) for the substance of this dispute.

⁸ Medieval Irish verse forms count syllables, rather than stresses, and often specify the number of syllables in the final word in each line. The first syllable in a word always carries the stress, so alternating between one- and two-syllable rhymed words diminishes the impact of the rhyme, contributing to the characteristically light effect of Irish verse.

⁹ A mythical builder in Irish tradition, or perhaps not a proper name but a noun signifying any skilled craftsperson derived from this name.

¹⁰ There is some dispute about the proper title of this legal tract. For a thorough exploration, see Liam Breatnach, *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2005), p. 182 (5.12.3).

¹¹ This refers to a delightful story that, like the legend of Suibhne, highlights the significance of the literary arts in Middle Irish culture. Cennfhaelad lost the ability to forget after suffering a blow to the head during the battle, and subsequently became a great poet scribe, remembering and then writing down all of the poems and stories of Ireland (Williams 88).

¹² The Irish text of the law tract is edited by Binchy in *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, Vol. 1. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978.

¹³ While it seems almost certain that *Buile Suibhne* was composed in a monastic setting, it is impossible to know if authorship was shared among a group of monks or if one was individually responsible. For convenience, I will henceforth use the word “author” in the singular, with the caveat that more than one writer may actually have been involved.

¹⁴ The traditional date for St. Patrick’s arrival is 432, but Charles-Edwards argues that his missionary activities more likely took place in the later half of the fifth century (239).

¹⁵ The early Irish tales *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, for instance, both feature extensive catalogues of masculine beauty and martial attire. Here, as translated by Jeffrey Gantz in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, is a description of the warrior Conall Cernach in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*: “I saw a man in an ornamented apartment, and he is the handsomest of the heroes of Ériu. He had a fleecy crimson cloak about him. As bright as snow one cheek, as speckled red as foxglove the other; as blue as hyacinth one eye, as black as a beetle’s back the other. His fair, yellow hair would fill a reaping basket, and it was as fleecy as the wool of a ram. If a sackful of red nuts were emptied over his hand, not a single nut would reach the ground. In his hands, a gold-hilted sword, a blood-red shield studded with rivets of white gold and gold plates, and a long, three-ridged spear with a shaft the thickness of an outer yoke” (88).

¹⁶ There is some dispute as to whether the word *geilt* originally entered the language as an epithet to describe Suibhne and subsequently became a common noun, or if on the other hand the concept of *geltach* was already established in Ireland prior to the emergence of Suibhne’s story. Carney and Jackson once again take opposite sides in this debate; see Jackson’s “A Further Note on Suibhne Geilt and Merlin” and Carney’s “The Origin of *Suibhne Gelt*” (*Studies in Irish Literature and History*: 385-393) for more on the subject.

¹⁷ *dot chreic, a Chríst cáidh* (O’Keeffe 26).

¹⁸ See, for instance, Eva Wappling’s book *Four Legendary Figures in At Swim-Two-Birds*, in which she suggests that *Snamh dha Én* is significant because it is the place where both Suibhne and Finn Mac Cool came to believe in Christianity (36).

¹⁹ As discussed in Chapter 3, Derrida has shown that spoken language is no more necessarily grounded in presence than written language, and that it is equally subject to citation and reproduction.

CHAPTER TWO. "A HUDDLE BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN":

FLANN O'BRIEN'S *AT SWIM-TWO-BIRDS*

A bird-man is a chimera, as much the inheritor of humanity's propensity to fall as of the avian gift of flight. In his exuberantly experimental 1939 novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Irishman Flann O'Brien borrows the flighty Sweeny (his preferred spelling) from *Buile Suibhne* and repeatedly brings him crashing down to earth. The first appearance of the mad poet announces that this is not going to be the Suibhne of romantic legend:

[T]here came the rending scream of a shattered stirk and an angry troubling of the branches as the poor madman percolated through the sieve of a sharp yew, a wailing black meteor hurtling through green clouds, a human prickles. He came to the ground with his right nipple opened to the wide and a ruined back that was packed with the thorns and the small-wood of the trees of Erin, a tormented cress-stained mouth never halting from the recital of inaudible strange staves. There were feathers on his body here and there, impaired and shabby with vicissitude (126).

O'Brien's Sweeny has been transliterated into the vocabulary of a realistic novel, with the result that aspects which seemed glorious in *Buile Suibhne*, such as his poetic creativity and his mysterious growth of feathers, have become negligible, "inaudible" and "shabby," while much greater attention is paid to the agonizing details of his physical suffering. And yet, diminished though he initially seems, Sweeny's influence utterly pervades the novel, lending it both a title (*Swim-Two-Birds* is a place name in *Buile Suibhne*) and a model of creation and suffering that is reiterated in the lives of many of its characters. Indeed, it is tempting to state that Sweeny is at the center of the novel, both

structurally and thematically. Such an easy claim would, unfortunately, be not just wrong but meaningless in the context of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. To understand why, we need to take a step back from Sweeny himself to consider the structure of a novel quite deliberately crafted to trouble any notion of center.

At Swim-Two-Birds is loosely a frame story, but it is built on so many levels and incorporates such fluid boundaries that the clear delineation of frames and privileging of one main narrative that typify conventional frame stories are absent. As O'Brien's biographer Anthony Cronin has noted (84), the novel's design reflects the influence of Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, which contains this suggestion:

Put a novelist into a novel. He justifies aesthetic generalizations, which may be interesting – at least to me. He also justifies experiment.

Specimens of his work may illustrate other possible or impossible ways of telling a story. And if you have him telling parts of the same story as you are, you can make a variation on the theme. 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? (Huxley 294)

Taking this hint, O'Brien's novel chronicles one school term in the life of a Dublin university student who lives with his phlegmatic uncle; rarely attends class but loves conversation (intellectual and otherwise) with his fellow students; drinks, smokes, and lazes about as much as possible; and intermittently attends to his "spare time literary activity," that is, the writing of a novel. A large portion of the text represents extracts from this unnamed narrator's manuscript, which itself is about a character named Dermot Trellis who is engaged in the writing of a novel about "sin and the wages attaching

thereto” (O’Brien 35). Yet a third novel-within-a-novel emerges when several of Trellis’ characters rebel against him and draft a manuscript that enacts the sadistic punishment of their creator for his alleged despotism.

At Swim’s apparent Chinese-box pattern of novel within novel within novel creates the illusion of a neatly ordered construct in which each concentric layer surrounds and contains the next. Presumably at the core there would be a stable center – an original that anchors the increasingly fanciful iterations in each layer of the tale. O’Brien’s narrative technique radically flattens this structure, however, obscuring distinctions between inside and outside through frame-breaking metaleptic moves¹ that make it nearly impossible to assign any definitive frame to many of the characters and events. For instance, early in the novel, the narrator offers an “*Extract from my typescript descriptive of Finn Mac Cool and his people, being humorous or quasi-humorous incursion into ancient mythology*” (13; italics O’Brien’s). Humorous indeed, the extract introduces readers to the physical characteristics of the outsized folk hero Finn Mac Cool:

The chest to him was wider than the poles of a good chariot, coming now out, now in, and pastured from chin to navel with meadows of black man-hair and meated with layers of fine man-meat the better to hide his bones and fashion the semblance of his twin bubs. The arms to him were like the necks of beasts, ball-swollen with their bunched-up brawnstrings and blood-veins, the better for harping and hunting and contending with the bards. Each thigh to him was to the thickness of a horse’s belly, narrowing to a green-veined calf to the thickness of a foal. Three fifties of fosterlings could engage with handball against the wideness of his

backside, which was wide enough to halt the march of warriors through a mountain-pass. (15)

The description is parodic, though less so than a reader unfamiliar with medieval Irish literature, itself rather hyperbolic, would imagine. It introduces the narrator's (and ultimately O'Brien's) characteristic practice of making words come alive by taking them literally: if one part of the leg is customarily referred to as a calf, why not describe another part as a horse's belly or a foal? More importantly for our purposes at the moment, it misleads the reader, suggesting that Finn Mac Cool is a character on the level of the narrator's novel (what we would consider the secondary level, if the narrator's life were the primary). In fact, as we later learn, Finn is a character in Dermot Trellis' novel, the tertiary level in this scheme, who has been "hired by Trellis on account of [his] venerable appearance and experience" (61). For the reader, by this time accustomed to thinking of Finn as a part of one frame (the narrator's novel), it is jarring enough to discover suddenly that he belongs to another (Trellis' novel), but the situation is further muddied when we learn that Trellis' characters escape his control and lead independent lives while he sleeps. The independent actions of characters such as Finn occur outside the confines of Trellis' novel, suggesting that they simultaneously inhabit two different narrative levels and thus blurring the neat inside/outside division between Chinese boxes. This effect is further magnified in the case of Sweeny, who is first introduced in a tale told by Finn. As Rüdiger Imhof has noted, critical opinion is divided as to whether this episode should be considered a part of Trellis' novel, or a part of the narrator's novel, or as an independent "book" created by Finn without Trellis' knowledge and perhaps outside of the narrator's conscious control as well (169). To attempt to assign decisively

one frame or another to any character in the book, especially to Sweeny, who as we shall see inhabits all narrative levels, is to fall into O'Brien's carefully laid trap, for while the novel's structure almost compels readers to attempt this exercise, it refuses any definitive answers. As Anthony Burgess argues, despite the multiple layers at play in the book, "[t]here is no feeling of recession, of one order to reality (myth or novel or narration) lying behind another: all are presented on the same level" (71). There can be, then, no center, not even an empty one, for any attempt to find a center is simply deferred as one flattened narrative layer substitutes for another in an endless chain.

As Derrida reflects in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," structure traditionally has been:

neutralized or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.

(278)

By crafting a self-consciously elaborate narrative, O'Brien demands that his readers explicitly consider the structurality of the text, but this process soon verges on the unthinkable due to the lack of any stabilizing center. Hence *At Swim's* famous difficulty,

but also its wild fun, as O'Brien gleefully exploits the enormous potential for Derridean freeplay that his decentered narrative allows. Having blown open and smashed flat his nested Chinese boxes, he encrusts their shards with a dazzling array of citations, extracts, and parodies, including freewheeling translations of traditional Irish tales of Finn Mac Cool, more faithful translations of the staves of Sweeny, a tipsheet about horseracing, excerpts from Dublin newspapers, and selections from other books in the narrator's collection, among them a broadside from the Christian Brothers on the evils of alcohol and an account by William Cowper of how a Methodist's day should be spent. Structurally, the presumably main narrative is treated no differently than the others, appearing as extracts under the heading "*Biographical reminiscences*" and delineated in the same manner as all of the other citations, which appear under labels such as "*Relevant extract from the press.*" The overall effect is one of kaleidoscopic intertextuality—a novel composed largely of citations in which allegedly original elements interact freely and interchangeably with those that are repeated from other sources, real or imaginary.

Roland Barthes insisted that "any text is a new tissue of past citations" (39). The radical import of this statement is not the simple fact that writers tend to be allusive, but rather that citationality is the condition of all language; an insight that tends to efface the epistemological distinction between "quoted" and "original" text². O'Brien enacts this effacement throughout his work. His novel *The Third Policeman* opens with two epigraphs, one a familiar citation from Shakespeare and the other a rather outlandish bit of pseudo-philosophy attributed to one "de Selby." Presented in the ratifying company of the Bard, de Selby appears to be a genuine, real-world authority, and he has sent more than one earnest reader³ scrambling for her reference books. As the de Selby citations

become ever more bizarre, including for instance the assertion that night is “simply an accretion of ‘black air’, i.e., a staining of the atmosphere due to volcanic eruptions too fine to be seen with the naked eye,” (O’Brien, *Third Policeman* 116) all but the most credulous of readers will come to understand his fictionality, but de Selby’s presence in the text, underpinned by copious footnotes, remains that of a respected scholarly source.

A similar game is afoot in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Confronted with an avalanche of citations, many of them from demonstrably genuine sources, the academic reader’s natural inclination is to look for the originals. For instance, the narrator’s letter from one V. Wright, “the backer’s friend,” offering tips on a “three-star cast-iron plunger” of a horse (O’Brien 13), turns out to be a transcript of a sales letter from a Newmarket tipster that was given to O’Brien by his friend Niall Sheridan by Sheridan’s own account (Imhoff 77). On the other hand, not even the most exhaustive search of the Dublin newspapers will reveal an original for O’Brien’s “*Relevant Excerpt from the Press*” recounting the death of “eminent novelist” William Tracy (53), an O’Brien creation. The situation becomes even more tangled in the case of the narrator’s twenty-one volume *Conspectus of the Arts and Natural Sciences*, which is the stated source of many of his extracts. Anthony Cronin asserts that the narrator’s reference source was modeled on a real multi-volume conspectus of the same name that was lent to O’Brien by his friend Cecil French-Salkeld (85). He provides no evidence in support of this claim, however, and no subsequent O’Brien scholar has been able to discover any bibliographical reference to this *Conspectus*. The narrator’s extracts from it, on the other hand, have been shown by Sue Asbee to be genuine and traceable to their original texts, most of which could be found fairly easily had O’Brien cited more widely available sources (29).

Thus the account of Cowper's day, for instance, which presents strenuous religious observances and hearty outdoor exercise in amusing contrast to the narrator's own indolence, is a "real" citation misidentified by an almost certainly fictional (or at least extremely rare) source. As with the fabricated footnotes in *The Third Policeman*, O'Brien plays with the conventions of bibliographic reference in order to further elide any distinction between cited sources and original, fictional work. The joke here surely is on academic readers who attempt carefully to locate the sources of the narrator's citations, for the form and tenor of the novel suggest that quoted blocks of text are no different, and that their use is ultimately no more or less creative, than any others.

Early in *At Swim*, the narrator offers his friend Brinsley the following explanation of his literary principles:

Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before – usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblerriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature (25).

This passage, which is quoted in full by almost all of O'Brien's commentators, is sometimes taken at face value as a self-reflexive description of the author's own methods. Kieth Hopper, for instance, refers to the narrator's theory as "O'Brien's stated ideal" and "the public manifesto of his art" (20). Although the narrator is a callow youth of questionable authority, O'Brien's novel undeniably reflects some of his principles, replete as it is with borrowed characters and passages reproduced verbatim from widely ranging sources. Given the evident sarcasm of the passage, however, with its expressed goal of preventing "persons of inferior education" from understanding literature, it seems clearly to contain a parodic swipe at O'Brien's recent precursors, particularly practitioners of high modernism such as Pound, Eliot, and of course Joyce, whose dense webs of literary reference make their work inaccessible to many readers. Further, Asbee appears to be on the right track when she argues that O'Brien has in fact gone to some lengths in *At Swim* to disprove the narrator's theory. The deep obscurity of many of his references, the likely non-existence of the *Conspectus* that is so frequently his cited source, and the spurious citations of fictional authors such as "the eminent novelist" William Tracy, combine to ensure that these literary borrowings do not in fact instantly acquaint the reader with his characters or remove the need for explanations, as the narrator's theory claims, but rather sow confusion (Asbee 29). It is imperative, then, to reassert some critical distance between Flann O'Brien and his narrator, who have too often been conflated in analysis of this crucial passage.

Bearing in mind that the student narrator's statement cannot be read as a straightforward proxy for authorial intent, it becomes clear that some aspects of his theory are supported by the text as a whole while others are not. The wealth of references

in *At Swim* do not provide a convenient shorthand for explanations and character introductions, nor do they reliably point to existing works. The goal of restricting readership to a literary elite is clearly facetious, albeit a timely jab at writers whose allusions do seem motivated by this purpose. Indeed, it is scholarly readers, not “mountebanks” and “upstarts” (much less “thimblerriggers”) who are likely to be led astray by attempting to track down O’Brien’s unreliable references. The narrator’s theoretical justifications for extensive citation and borrowing of characters, therefore, are not supported by the text, but the practices themselves certainly are. Borrowed characters, especially Finn Mac Cool and Sweeny, are integral to the tale. Citation is not just a frequent practice but also a model for the novel as a whole, inasmuch as it uses the typographical codes of citation even when presenting original text. The result is a strikingly original and successful work of art with a growing circle of admirers, both within and without academia. As John Wain writes in *A House for The Truth*, O’Brien’s novel is “so richly imagined, so concrete . . . we do not hear the click of scissors and the swish of the paste-brush, we see and participate” (80).

In one respect, Wain’s remark seems off base: Not only do we hear the scissors and paste brush as we read *At Swim*, but O’Brien makes sure that they cannot be missed, highlighting their presence with the section headings that serve in place of chapters and emphasize the citational nature of much of the text (e.g. “*Further extract from my Manuscript, descriptive*”). Wain’s overall point, however, is well taken. O’Brien’s patchwork of textual borrowings, whether of language or of characters, does not seem to diminish the impression of unity, creativity, and originality that *At Swim* generates; in fact, they appear to be constitutive of it. This suggests a deeper insight about the nature

of language that anticipates the work of theorists like Barthes and Derrida. O'Brien's text seems to embody a working out of the idea that citation and iteration are not linguistic parasites or abnormalities⁴, but rather are integral to artistic originality. Viewed another way, it could support the conclusion that artistic originality is itself a myth, at least in the linguistic arts, for all language is simply the citation of endlessly iterable marks. Opening up a liminal space between these opposing positions, *At Swim-Two-Birds* accomplishes the Derridean feat of suspending their apparent incompatibility and sustaining both possibilities. It is in this space between opposite interpretations that much of the playfulness and humor, the open-ended freeplay, of the novel develops.

With respect to the issues of citation, iteration, and artistic originality, the web of associations surrounding the poet Sweeny is especially suggestive. The central character in the twelfth-century Irish text *Buile Suibhne*, Sweeny, as we have seen, is depicted as a pagan king who, having insulted the early Irish Catholic saint Ronán, was cursed to a life of exile and madness. This punishment went to some extent astray, for the exiled king came to love the wild lands he roamed, and though he suffered physical deprivations he produced poetry of extraordinary beauty, lamenting his suffering but also celebrating the natural world. Far predating the Romantic movement in England and Germany, Sweeny thus became an early Irish emblem of the artist as Promethean creator, producing verse of startling beauty and originality through his rebellion, suffering, and connection to nature. This image is complicated from the start, however, by the fact that there probably was no historical model for King Suibhne; the character is a poet, but the poetry itself was almost certainly composed by others. *Buile Suibhne* is the work not of a solitary creator but rather of many hands, including unknown poets from the oral tradition who began

composing Sweeny poems as early as the eighth century and one or more twelfth-century monks who, according to the Irish scholar Pádraig Ó Riain “brought together a number of floating traditions to form a coherent and highly artistic composition,” (173) thus ensuring the final irony that the story of Sweeny, legendary rebel against priestly authority, was preserved and transmitted through the monastic tradition.

Given O’Brien’s interest in interrogating the figure of the artist and engaging with literary means of rendering experience, Sweeny becomes a very apt character to “hire” from the “corpus of existing literature,” as his narrator would put it. He is by no means the only storyteller in *At Swim*, however. The narrator, of course, is a writer, and one of the great fascinations of the novel is its depiction of how he transforms the day-to-day occurrences of his life into material for his manuscript. Conversations with friends, conflicts with his uncle, events such as his first drink in a pub, and, always, cullings from his omnivorous reading are equally grist for the mill, with startlingly little distinction made between things the narrator has himself done and those he has read about. The already-written nature of experience is emphasized by the narrator’s reflexive tendency to think through the events of his own life using the language of other writers. Consider, for instance, the narrator’s Keatsian questions to himself as he prepares to drink his first glass of porter:

Who are my future cronies, where our mad carousals? What neat repast shall feast us light and choice of Attic taste with wine whence we may rise to hear the lute well touched or artful voice warble immortal notes or Tuscan air? What mad pursuit? What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (22)

The porter consumed, the narrator's rather coarse and literal friend Kelly announces with satisfaction that "a pint of plain is your only man" (22). As we shall see, this phrase too finds its way into the manuscript-in-progress, and thus even the distinctly non-literary Kelly contributes to this literary composition. The narrator's other friends, especially the intellectual Brinsley, tend to be writers themselves, while his uncle is fond of storytelling, albeit in a plangently moralizing vein.

The characters in the narrator's biographical reminiscences, then, are all storytellers in one way or another. This is doubly true of those who populate the manuscript-in-progress, for they not only tell stories but call others into being through the force of their telling. Thus Trellis, the unsavory novelist who is ostensibly the narrator's main character, creates his own cast including the Pooka Fergus MacPhellimey, a devilish figure loosely based on Irish folklore; Sheila Lamont, a stereotypically angelic beauty meant to epitomize moral goodness; a trio of rascals known as Furriskey, Shanahan, and Lamont (Sheila's brother); and Finn Mac Cool, who is intended to serve as a wise, fatherly advisor to the young Miss Lamont. These characters soon learn that Trellis's power over them is suspended when he falls asleep. Through the expedient of drugging their creator so that he sleeps upwards of twenty hours a day, they are able to lead largely independent lives outside of the pages of Trellis's manuscript. Sheila quickly meets a tragic fate as Trellis, blinded by the beauty of his own creation, rapes her, leading to her death in childbirth (and to a further blurring of frames, as Sheila and Trellis have a "quasi-illusory" son, Orlick, who appears to exist physically in Trellis's world as well as to be a character in his book). The others spend much of their time engaged in what is clearly a favorite occupation, the telling of tall tales. These stories cannot

properly be said to take place in the frame of Trellis's manuscript, as they are told while he sleeps, but they produce another set of characters who will ultimately appear not only in the narrator's manuscript but in Trellis's as well. Along with a ragtag band of Irish cowboys, this new cohort includes the working class poet Jem Casey and, most significantly, Sweeny himself.

As this abbreviated account illustrates, characters in *At Swim* proliferate as the narrative levels do, and in a similar way they blend into and substitute for one another. Personality seems malleable and even interchangeable in the novel because these are features of language, the writer's only descriptive tool. So when the narrator's uncle is described as "rat-brained" (30) and the devilish Pooka is later called a master of "rat-flight," (176) a connection or transference is forged between the two, while shared traits such as an excessive fondness for bed create points of commonality for many of the characters. In her essay "Convenient Fictions," Holly King notes that the novel's organizing principle is not plot, but rather the fact "that the various characters, Finn Mac Cool, Mad Sweeny, Dermot Trellis, and the narrator among them, have a common bond, an inheritance of repetitive and recurrent concerns, despite their sometimes mutual incomprehensibility" (155). This common bond is delineated throughout the novel by shared character traits, shared language, and, especially, by what King identifies as the shared "pattern of teller and tale, of the art of storytelling," (166) in which they all participate.

At Swim's Greek epigraph, "Ἐξίσταται γὰρ παυτ' ἀπ' ἀλλήλου ζίχνα," has been translated in a variety of ways, but Cronin argues convincingly that O'Brien understood it to mean "For all things go out and give place to one another" (85). This

aply describes the way in which characters, as well as narrative levels, continually substitute for and give way to one another, without any single one playing a central, stabilizing role. Unfortunately, many of O'Brien's commentators have missed this crucial point, apparently because of their interest in pinning down exactly what the text has to say about the role and nature of the artist. For many critics, the central figure in this respect resides outside the pages of *At Swim*, in the person of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus. In this formulation, O'Brien's novel is largely a response to and reworking of its famous precursor, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and O'Brien's many storytellers are all reflections or revisions or parodies of Joyce's Dedalus. Anne Clissman, in her critical introduction to O'Brien's work, asks how to account for "the persistent emphasis on the squalor of the narrator's life, his cold and aloof bearing, his pose of hostility and general degeneracy," and quickly concludes, "The answer is, surely, that these aspects of the narrator's life are intended to be a mockery of the overstatements, conscious posturings and squalid habits of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus" (106). Just as surely, Clissman finds reason to determine that Trellis, Sweeny, Finn, and other storytellers in *At Swim* may also be seen as Stephen-figures, as well as that the narrator's aesthetic theory functions as a parody of Stephen's (109). Likewise, Sue Asbee notes that, "*At Swim*'s narrator cultivates a stance as the isolated artist, alienated from uncongenial surroundings – a particularly literary pose and one that, because it had its most celebrated antecedent in Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, seems deliberately to invite comparison" (22).

Clissman, Asbee, and the many others who see connections between *At Swim* and *Portrait* are by no means wrong to do so: O'Brien's narrator bears an unmistakable (and

sometimes hilariously parodic) resemblance to Dedalus. Lest readers should miss the connection, the narrator states explicitly that his small collection of contemporary literature includes the works of Joyce (11). In any case, O'Brien's anxiety of influence with respect to Joyce is well-documented⁵ and doubtless at play in the text of his novel—in 1930s Ireland, one could hardly write a book about the figure of the artist without acknowledging the towering influence of *Portrait*. Nevertheless, the frequent implication that Stephen Dedalus is the central (if technically absent) artist around whom all the storyteller figures in *At Swim* are organized seems to mistake the structure and implication of the novel, which as we have seen resists the very notion of having a center, even an absent one. As the book's epigraph suggests, "all things" including characters, events, words, and even storytellers are fleeting and may be exchanged for one another, implying that *At Swim* offers no single primary portrait of the artist on which the others are modeled, but rather a potentially illimitable chain of artist figures. This is reflected throughout the novel in the way that a single tale may pass through a multiplicity of tellers, seeming to display a force and resonance of its own independent of any particular shaper. O'Brien's development of the story of Mad Sweeny through several different tellers best illustrates this point.

Sweeny first appears in the words of Finn Mac Cool, a legendary Irish hero employed by Dermot Trellis in his novel within the narrator's manuscript. A well-known figure in Ireland, Finn appears in folkloric tales passed down through the oral tradition as well as in a number of literary compositions, many of which draw upon the twelfth-century *Acallam na Senórach*⁶, a compendium of early Fenian tales and poetry. Traditionally Finn is celebrated for his enormous size and martial ability, his skills as a

leader of a warrior band, and his talents as a seer and poet. According to the *Acallam*'s most recent translators Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, one of the text's most notable features is its attention to the art of storytelling, and especially "the repeatedly expressed pleasure of the tales' listeners in the stories they are hearing" (xvii). Finn thus shares with Sweeny the distinction of being both a storyteller and the subject of many tales, making him an appropriate character to introduce his fellow poet. He is wildly inappropriate, however, for the task that Trellis has assigned him, namely to act as a venerable father figure and chastise female characters for their immoralities (61). Upon arriving in the story, Finn immediately "assails the virtue" of a young servant girl, an act quite contrary to the role Trellis had envisioned for him but entirely in keeping with the legendary folk hero's nature, as Finn is also a legendary ladies' man. This rebellion against an assigned role prefigures the general uprising against Trellis that will occur later in the novel and illustrates that borrowed characters, like cited words, are not entirely under the control of their users. They carry with them a web of associations and referents that remain in force irrespective of the wishes of their current employer.

Trellis' attempt to borrow Finn from Irish legend for a task to which he is drastically unsuited fails, then, but the old hero fits comfortably into *At Swim* in his more authentic role as a storyteller. Finn establishes his own layer of sub-narration when he determines to relate the tale of the madness of Sweeny to Shanahan, Furriskey, and Lamont. "The first matter that I will occupy with honey-words and melodious recital," Finn announces, "is the reason and the first cause for Sweeny's frenzy" (64), and he proceeds with an accurate if archaic and peculiarly phrased translation of large segments of *Buile Suibhne*. Possessing a scholarly knowledge of Middle Irish, O'Brien is alert to

the syntactical oddities of the original, which he accentuates by bringing them into the English of Finn's account. Thus he renders Saint Ronan's curse on Sweeny as follows:

The holy bell that thou hast outraged
 Will banish thee to branches,
 it will put thee on a par with fowls—
 the saint-bell of saints with sainty-saints.

Just as it went prestissimo
 the spear-shaft skyward,
 you too, Sweeny, go madly mad-gone
 skyward. (65)

Overall, this is a valid translation that moves with a good deal more energy and style than the standard version by O'Keeffe. "Prestissimo," while an anachronistic import from Italian, nicely captures the urgency and musicality of the original, and the tendency to pack repetitive words together for emphasis, unusual as it seems in English, will be familiar to readers of *Buile Suibhne*. "The saint-bell of saints with sainty-saints" may be an excessive rendering of "*an clog náomh re náomhaibh*," (12) which might be translated, "the saint-bell before saints," as the word *náomh* 'saint' appears only twice in the phrase, but it reflects a stylized practice common in Irish literature. *Buile Suibhne*, itself a performance of verbal excess, regularly piles similar or identical words together in densely alliterative clots, referring to *Suibhne*, for instance, as "*an gealtán gealtach*," or "mad-driven mad one." Holly King observes that in O'Brien's work, "language comes alive in an unexpected manner" (179). Surely this effect is due in part to his practice of

pushing linguistic devices to their limits, thereby forcing readers to take active notice of what language is doing within the text⁷. Thus when Finn faithfully describes the onset of Sweeny's madness as an attack of "fury and fits and frenzy and fright-fraught fear," (66) readers must perforce observe the dense physicality, the alliterative richness, that is common in Middle Irish texts but sounds quite alien to the English ear.

Finn's recitation is regularly interrupted by his bored listeners, whose highly colloquial and irreverent interjections form a hilarious counterpoint to the archaic tale. After hearing a particularly long verse recitation of Sweeny's praise for the trees of Ireland, Shanahan breaks in to say that Finn's poem reminds him of something "bloody good," and proceeds to tell the group about his own favorite poet, the rough-hewn Jem Casey, "a hard-working well-made block of a working man ... with the handle of a pick in his hand like the rest of us" (73). Furriskey and Lamont listen with interest and offer encouraging comments, in marked contrast to their skeptical response to Finn. Spurred on by his comrades, Shanahan rises to recite a Casey poem called "Workman's Friend," a bit of doggerel in celebration of porter that features the refrain (borrowed of course from the narrator's friend Kelly) "A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN" (77). Wearily, patiently, Finn eventually continues his tale, "the voice of the old man from the dim bed" (79) calling his listeners back to Sweeny's long-ago praise for the wildlife around his forest home. Soon, Shanahan breaks in again, this time excitedly, to recite a verse of his own composition that melds the language of Sweeny and Casey: "When stags appear on the mountain high, with flanks the colour of bran, when a badger bold can say good-bye, A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN!" (80).

Most readers, if not Furriskey and Lamont, will find Shanahan's poetry clearly inferior to Sweeny's haunting verse. Even the simplest of the Sweeny stanzas convey a pathos and breadth of feeling alien to the likes of "Workman's Friend," as the following unadorned yet poignant description illustrates:

Small foxes yelping
to me and from me,
the wolves tear them –
I flee their cries (79)

Noting the contrast between Finn's translation of *Buile Suibhne* and the literary efforts of the modern characters, some critics have concluded that their juxtaposition serves to disparage modern literature and culture. In her essay "Flann O'Brien's Theory of Fiction," Ninian Mellamphy suggests that O'Brien intends a critique of the genre of the novel, "which does not reflect our awareness of life's actualities as well as it pretends to do and which does not reflect our dreams of a grander and simpler life as well as the epic and the romance have done" (159). With its attention to the artificiality of linguistic devices and the perhaps unintended connotations attached to all words, *At Swim* does rebuke the naïvely realist assumption that language transparently reflects "life's actualities." On the other hand, O'Brien reproduces the sounds of Dublin dialogue (a most novelistic tactic, as Bakhtin's dialogic theory of the novel argues) far too lovingly, and far too amusingly, to support the notion of a blanket critique of modern culture, or, for that matter, the modern novel.

Consider another lengthy interruption of Finn's tale, this time initiated by Lamont. Generally an inattentive listener, Lamont tunes in when Sweeny's great leaps

are recounted, interjecting: “Come here, what’s this about jumps?” (85) and launching into a tale of his own about one Sergeant Craddock, an honest hard-working policeman who once out-leaped the long jump champion of all Ireland. Lamont sets the stage colorfully:

The two of them lined up and a hell of a big crowd gathering there to watch. Here was my nice Bagenal [the champion] as proud as a bloody turkey in his green pants, showing off the legs. Beside him stands another man, a man called Craddock, a member of the polis. His tunic is off him on the grass but the rest of his clothes is still on. He is standing as you find him with his blue pants and his big canal-barges on his two feet. I’m telling you it was something to look at. It was a sight to see. (87)

His audience hooked, Lamont proceeds with the tale of Craddock’s incredible jump, in which the policeman spans twenty-four feet six in his blue uniform trousers and bests the cocky Bagenal. Gasps of pleasure and surprise follow, and Shanahan offers a paean to the allegedly famous leaping ability of the Irish: “Go to Russia, go to China, go to France. Everywhere and all the time it is hats off and a gra-ma-cree to the Jumping Irishman” (87).

Craddock’s twenty-four feet six represent a comedown, surely, from the mythic expanse of Sweeny’s mountain-spanning flight, but Lamont’s story, told in a deadpan mock-epic style, is vivid, entertaining, and, for many readers, a welcome respite from “droning dark-voiced Finn” (88) and his medieval tale. The exquisite ear for language that informs O’Brien’s mimicry of Middle Irish linguistic patterns likewise contributes to his thoroughly convincing rendition of the speech of the Dublin “man in the street.”

While the literary judgment of Shanahan, Furriskey and Lamont is palpably laughable, their conversations and stories are among the greatest pleasures of *At Swim*. Contra Mellamphy, then, it does not appear that stories like that of the Jumping Irishman are juxtaposed with excerpts from *Buile Suibhne* in order to diminish modern literature with respect to the medieval romance. Rather, the modern interpolations serve to bring the stories into relationship with one another, showing how storytelling begets storytelling as words and themes move from Finn to the other characters and back again. At the conclusion of his tale, Lamont asserts that, “[w]hen everything’s said, the Irishman has his points. He’s not the last man that was made,” and Finn picks up the baton, echoing Lamont’s words as he begins again, “When everything had been said by Sweeny...” (88).

While no diminishment of either tradition seems implied, then, the interweaving of archaically phrased citations from *Buile Suibhne* with colloquial, 20th century conversation does serve to pull Sweeny’s tale from its proper context. On the one hand, this liberation from context opens new fields of possibility, allowing Finn’s words to mingle freely with such unlikely suspects as tales of jumping policemen and poems about porter. From another perspective, as Benjamin argues in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” loss of context produces a tradition-shattering effect. “The technique of reproduction,” he asserts, “detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition,” leading eventually to “the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (221). Though Benjamin refers here to mechanical techniques of reproduction, Finn’s English-language retelling of *Buile Suibhne* appears to have a similar effect. The authority of the traditional storyteller is compromised as Finn’s companions come to see him as a droning windbag, and the sanctity of the original text is challenged when

Shanahan combines some of Sweeny's natural imagery with Casey's porter poem to create his bastardized lines. For Benjamin, any loss in the authenticity or traditional aura of the original is more than repaid by the ability of a reproduction to "meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation," creating a new perspective that "reactivates the object reproduced" (221). Translated into English and intermingled with colloquial twentieth-century conversation, *Buile Suibhne* in Finn's rendering is no longer a revered but dusty manuscript in a museum (but then again it never was, as there are three extant manuscript versions, none of which could be said to be the "original"). Instead, it is a living story that can be reshaped to suit new circumstances, cited in any number of contexts, and adapted by new storytellers.

Although Shanahan and company gleefully participate in the debunking of the aura surrounding Sweeny's tragic tale, they nevertheless cling to a sentimental fondness for "the real old stuff of the native land" (75), preferring not to hear it but still finding in traditional Irish literature a source of national and racial pride. In a comic twist on the writers of the Gaelic literary revival, who found in Irish folklore and mythology a source of traditional authority that they turned to their own nationalistic purposes, O'Brien's gang of ruffians use Sweeny's story to justify their pride in the jumping ability that they claim as an Irish racial characteristic. In doing so they seem to be clinging to an ersatz ideal of cultural authenticity that has no place in the world of *At Swim*, where anything can be cited and nothing has the authoritative standing of an original. Displaying a dubious but vivid grasp of history, Shanahan lectures his friends on the value of Irish literature:

[It's the] stuff that brought scholars to our shore when your men on the other side were on the flat of their bellies before the calf of gold with a sheepskin around their man. It's the stuff that put our country where she stands today, Mr. Furriskey, and I'd have my tongue out of my head by the bloody roots before I'd be heard saying a word against it. But the man in the street, where does he come in? By God he doesn't come in at all as far as I can see. (75)

Unaware that they themselves are excluding the "man in the street" by their insistence on maintaining the old stories as embalmed cultural artifacts, Shanahan and his friends cannot grasp the democratizing potential of a story unmoored from nationalistic ritual and fetishistic claims of originality. Instead, they pompously applaud themselves for being sophisticated enough to enjoy Finn's tale, but conclude that "you can get too much of that stuff. Feed yourself up with that tack once and you won't want more for a long time" (75).

Finn, unfazed, continues his melancholy recital, concluded with the death of Sweeny and the ensuing lament of St. Moling over the mad poet's grave. His rendition of *Buile Suibhne* is fairly complete, although some sections are omitted or abbreviated. Many of the long verse sections, in particular, receive a brief prose gloss rather than a full translation, with the effect that the balance of the tale tilts away from poetry and toward prose. In Finn's telling, the physical hardships of Sweeny, already of great importance in the tale, are even more emphasized. For instance, after a fall through a thorny thicket, Sweeny is described thus in Finn's rather gruesome account: "not one inch of him from toe to crown that was not red-prickled and blood-gashed, the skin to his body being

ragged and flapping and thorned, the tattered cloak of his perished skin” (67). *Buile Suibhne*’s account of the same incident is somewhat less dramatic: *co nach raibhe méd n-orlaigh ann o a bhonn go a bhathais gan fhuiliúgudh, gan forrdergudh fair* (24).

While “red-prickled and blood-gashed” is a reasonable rendering of *gan fhuiliúgudh, gan forrdergudh fair*, there is nothing in the Irish in this passage that corresponds to O’Brien’s vivid image of Sweeny’s skin as a ragged and flapping cloak.

Finn further heightens his focus on the poet’s suffering through his selective omissions, leaving out moments of respite such as Sweeny’s lovely and sympathetic colloquy with his wife Eorann and, with a coyness typical of O’Brien, the poem uttered at the church of *Snamh dha Én*, or Swim-Two-Birds. In *Buile Suibhne*, this lay offers a beautiful and peaceful moment as Sweeny, hearing the melodious swans and belling stags, celebrates the music of nature and, for the first time, calls repentantly upon Christ. In Finn’s account, no such respite is vouchsafed. The narrative voice likewise emphasizes the melancholy nature of the tale, as well as its remoteness, by consistently describing Finn’s voice as thin, faint, dim, and far away. Authority rooted in the past, in cultural tradition, is fading away, and Finn’s listeners have failed consciously to grasp the revolutionary possibilities that might replace it, though in fact they exploit those possibilities with their own stories and poems inspired by Sweeny’s tale.

Thus far, then, Sweeny’s out-of-context citation in *At Swim-Two-Birds* seems to mirror Benjamin’s analysis of the effects of mechanical reproduction: His traditional status shattered and aura diminished, Sweeny becomes an accessible figure who may be employed by ordinary people for their own (perhaps revolutionary) purposes. In a cunning satire on the literary enthusiasts of the Gaelic revival, Shanahan, Furriskey, and

Lamont are depicted as latching on to the tale primarily as a tedious source of misplaced national pride. Laura Doyle's analysis of the racial basis of narratives of modernity, while focused on the English literary tradition, is especially apt here, for explicitly racial claims of the purity, nobility, and courage of the Irish provided both a justification and a rallying cry for nationalist demands that Ireland take her place among free, modern nations. Flann O'Brien, like James Joyce, deeply resented the appropriation of Irish literary figures for nationalistic purposes, especially objecting to the creation of a falsified and impossibly noble version of Irish history for which some of the Gaelic revivalists were responsible. Following the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921, this nationalist agenda quickly passed from revolutionary to establishment status. The government made the Irish language a compulsory school subject, and, as Cronin notes, possessing (or appearing to possess) some knowledge of the Irish language and literature became a prerequisite for political and civic advancement in the newly independent state (122). In his day job as a clerk in the Civil Service, O'Brien would have seen careerists and social climbers using the Irish forms of their names and making pious reference to the heroes of Irish literature in furtherance of their own advancement. Moreover, interest in the Irish language and literature "was associated with the Puritanism and the moral witch-hunting which had unfortunately become part of Catholic nationalism," leading narrow-minded bigots to insist "somewhat against the facts that in its literature the language had always been the repository of pious and chivalric feelings" (Cronin 122). Despite O'Brien's "keen sense of the ridiculous aspects of the language movement" (123), he himself had been brought up speaking Irish in the home and was a student of Middle Irish literature, which was the subject of his master's thesis at University College

Dublin, and he “understood quite well that its [the language’s] final disappearance would be a cultural tragedy” (124).

O’Brien’s mixed feelings about the language movement and the resurgence of interest in Irish-language literature found expression in much of his work. His novel *An Béal Bocht* (‘The Poor Mouth’) is both a wicked parody of and an homage to Tomás Ó Criomhthainn’s 1929 account of life on Great Blasket Island, *An tOileánach*, a memoir greatly celebrated by the Irish language movement for its depiction of a seemingly simple and noble life on the remote Irish-speaking island. In the newspaper column *Cruiskeen Lawn* (‘Little Overflowing Jug’), which O’Brien wrote for many years under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen, much fun is made of the Irish tongue, “a distant language in which absolutely nothing could be said” (*Best of Myles* 103), but many of the columns are themselves written in Irish. O’Brien’s own feelings are carefully disguised in the columns, which are sarcastic, playful, and filtered through the outlandish persona of Myles, but there is no mistaking his concern for the state of Irish literature. The humor is self-deprecating; having parodied peasant life in *An Béal Bocht*, O’Brien comments in a column that to write is “mechanically to multiply communication⁸,” and then immediately observes that this is “sometimes a very strong assumption, particularly when one writes a book about peasants in Irish” (237). Myles’ frequently expressed indignation at the literary falsification of Irish history and character for nationalist purposes feels, however, quite genuine:

Convulsions and contortions foul and masochistic have been passing for literature in this country for too long. Playing up to the foreigner, putting up the witty celtic act, doing the erratic but lovable playboy, pretending to

be morose and obsessed and thoughtful ... And now the curse has come upon us, because I have personally met in the streets of Ireland persons who are clearly out of Synge's plays. They talk and dress like that, and damn the drink they'll swally but the mug of porter in the long nights after Samhain. (235)

Unwilling to leave Sweeny as a character to be similarly exploited by Shanahan for a shabbily nationalistic purpose, O'Brien transports the mad poet bodily into the novel and allows him to speak for himself. Sweeny, presumably conjured by Finn's honeyed if distant recitation of his tale, becomes a part of O'Brien's narrator's novel as well as of the Trellis manuscript, having escaped the frame of Finn's narration. Upon physically appearing in the novel, Sweeny is found roosting in a tree by another group of characters, who immediately threaten to shoot him if he does not come down. His treatment here differs from the prior episode, for Sweeny's language is no longer presented solely in Finn's discrete, anachronistic recitations; rather, it begins to infect the narration itself. After Sweeny's descent from the tree is demanded, the scene is described as follows:

There was a gentle rustle in the thick of the green branches, a slow caress like the visit of a summer breeze in a field of oats, a faint lifeless movement: and a voice descended on the travelers, querulous and saddened with an infinite weariness, a thin voice that was occupied with the recital of these staves (125).

Sweeney goes on to lament his cheerless lot and express his distrust of other humans. While the poetry sounds much as it did in Finn's account, it is interactive; Sweeney responds, however obliquely, to the other characters. Further, in a novel that has

thus far featured no depictions of natural beauty or attempts at lyricism outside of Finn's tale, this description is extraordinary, and it is the first sign of a dramatic change in the way the other characters and the narrative itself are written. Under Sweeny's influence, his companions notice "young shoots and stalks and verdure," (126) they ply him "with honey-talk and long sweet-lilted sentences full of fine words," (129) and "they [do] not cease, either walking or eating, from the delights of colloquy and harmonized talk contrapuntal in character nor [does] Sweeny desist for long from stave music or from the recital of his misery in verse"(131). While O'Brien's language here is still clearly parodic, it is also at times frankly beautiful, and it incorporates the rhythms and motifs of *Buile Suibhne* in an organic way quite unlike the jarring contrast between Finn's recitation and the surrounding narrative.

In this second iteration of the Sweeny story, the poet is literally incorporated, present in body, and the physical is even more relentlessly emphasized. His poetry may be beautiful, but his bird-man's body is not. Sparsely feathered and shabby, Sweeny immediately proceeds, appropriately enough, to fall out of a tree, tearing his skin, rending his right nipple, and suffering a deep gash in his side. He is promptly pounced upon by a derivative group of characters from the Trellis manuscript: the Pooka MacPhellimey and the Good Fairy, loosely folkloric figures whose faux-intellectual speech is reminiscent of the philosophers' conversations in James Stephen's *The Crock of Gold*; Slug and Shorty, a pair of pistol-packing cowboys whom Trellis is said to have plagiarized from the novels of William Tracy; and Jem Casey, poet of the people, evidently answering the call of Shanahan's recitation⁹. That Casey and Sweeny, poets both, have been interpolated into the manuscript through the tales of other characters emphasizes the point that in *At Swim*,

storytellers beget other storytellers in a potentially endless chain. Fortunately for Sweeny, Casey immediately recognizes his kinship with his fellow poet and prevents Shorty from shooting the fallen Sweeny, insisting instead on packing his wounds with moss and bringing him along on their journey. As they set off, the strength of two men is needed to hoist “the madman to the tremulous support of his withered legs,” (128) and throughout the journey Sweeny totters, picks at the blood-soaked lichen packing his wounds, and mutters verses deliriously, emphasizing the wreckage of his body and mind.

Sweeny’s bleeding temporarily stopped, the unlikely company proceeds to the Red Swan Inn to await the birth of Trellis’ son Orlick. This curious event seems to take place in two frames simultaneously, both in Trellis’ manuscript and also in his “real” life, leading to so many “obstacles and difficulties of a technical, constructional, or literary character” (144) that the narrator interrupts his own account to announce that he will skip the section dealing with Orlick’s birth, excusing himself on the grounds that “the omission of several pages at this stage does not materially disturb the continuity of the story” (145). Here, as so often in *At Swim*, the reader is forced to focus on the construction of the narrative itself, rather than on the progress of the plot. Only in a novel primarily concerned with the process of storytelling, as opposed to the result, could the omission of a major plot point fail to disturb the continuity of the story. A model for this too can be found in *Buile Suibhne*, in which various events in Sweeny’s life are passed over, briefly summarized or even presented in two conflicting versions in obvious narrative intrusions that shift attention from the plot to the true subject, the act of literary composition.

Following the abortive account of Orlick's birth, the Sweeny story receives its third iteration. Having been born full-grown and quickly educated by the Pooka MacPhellimey in the arts of "evil, revolt, and non-serviam," (150) Orlick joins in the rebellion of Furriskey, Lamont, and Shanahan against his father and author. Because he has inherited Trellis' literary gifts, it is decided that the son will write a story punishing the father, and another novel-within-a-novel is begun. Interestingly, the mere act of composing a story about Trellis is depicted as abusive, "a fitting punishment indeed for the usage he has given others," (164) even before the overtly punitive content of Orlick's story is revealed.

The literary model Orlick chooses for his composition is, unsurprisingly at this point, *Buile Suibhne*. In extremely mannered prose reflective of the conventions of the Victorian novel as well as of medieval Irish literature, Orlick fashions a tale that begins with Trellis awakened from slumber by an intruder at his window. The intruder is St. Moling, the cleric who befriends Sweeny near the end of his life. He and his acolytes are engaged in "taping the wallsteads of a sunbright church and ringing their bells in the morning," (166) a clear echo of the beginning of *Buile Suibhne*, although the identity of the cleric has changed from Suibhne's antagonist, St. Ronán, to his eventual succorer. Orlick doesn't get far before his co-conspirators object that the story is a bit too "high up" for them and that they want to get more quickly to the good stuff, perhaps "a varicose vein in the bloody heart" (167). In a process that once again highlights the mechanics of literary composition, the rebellious author begins twice more, each time suffering the commentary and advice of his companions, before settling on the Pooka as the agent of Trellis' punishment.

Sweeny has served throughout *At Swim* as a figure not only of artistic creativity but also of the suffering that accompanies it. When Trellis takes the place of Sweeny in Orlick's tale, the suffering of the artist reaches its most gruesome depths. Trellis is quickly established in this role when he assaults the saint who is laying out a church on his property – the very crime that prompted Sweeny's condemnation to madness and exile. Soon the Pooka replaces the saint and promises to inflict on Trellis "a wide variety of physical scourges, torments, and piteous blood-sweats," which will include such agonies as "boils upon the back, a burst eyeball, a leg-withering chill, [and] thorn-harrowed ear-lobes" (174). There follows an unpleasant and extended sequence in which these and other horrors are inflicted upon Trellis. Again, O'Brien focuses unflinchingly on the mutilation of the human body, recounting the unfortunate novelist's suffering in minute detail. The connection to Sweeny is maintained throughout the ordeal both in the language used and in the details of the punishment, as Trellis roosts in a tree, falls repeatedly to the ground, and suffers the rending of thorns and spiky brambles.

Seeking to combine "justice with vengeance," (183) Orlick conceives a new scene in which Trellis is put on trial before a panel of judges drawn from the characters in his books. Included are Orlick's co-conspirators, Shanahan, Furriskey, and Lamont, which causes them great consternation and confusion at first, for in *At Swim* it is a risky business to take part in another teller's tale. Nevertheless, the trial proceeds and Trellis is accused of all the sins an author might commit. Abuse of his characters, including a short-horned cow who he employed in a novel but failed to have milked, arrogance and highhandedness, and plagiarism are among the charges. While Trellis' writing practices seem to conform to the student narrator's theory of novel-writing, insofar as they involve

the adaptation of characters from a wide range of existing literature, they slide into despotism because the characters are required to display uniformly angelic or depraved moral standards as the exigencies of plot demand, without regard to the individual's own proclivities. Thus Finn Mac Cool, noted womanizer, is expected to play the role of moralistic scold in furtherance of Trellis' didactic plans for his novel. Trellis therefore falls afoul of another of the student narrator's tenets, namely that:

The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic... It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. (25)

The testimony of the characters, in a trial drafted by another character, Orlick, makes it clear that Trellis has failed on each of these counts. As the accusations accumulate, it becomes apparent that any writer could be similarly indicted, reinforcing Finn's earlier complaint against storytellers in general: "Who but a book-poet would dishonour the God-big Finn for the sake of a gap-worded story? ... Indeed it is true that there has been ill-usage to the men of Erin from the book-poets of the world" (19). To write, it seems, is to be criminal, and therefore to suffer as do all the author-figures in *At Swim*.

As the trial nears its inevitable verdict of death, Trellis is saved by an unlikely novelistic contrivance. His maidservant, Teresa, enters his bedchamber and, finding him absent, determines to tidy it, throwing into the fireplace several sheets of paper littering the floor. The narration highlights the improbable nature of the *deus ex machina* that results: "By a curious coincidence as a matter of fact strange to say it happened that these same pages were those of the master's novel, the pages which made and sustained the

existence of Furriskey and his true friends” (215). The pages burned, these characters and all their works disappear, releasing Trellis from the clutches of their vindictive manuscript. He returns home, damp and disoriented, convinced that he has suffered strange hallucinations. In highlighting his own highly artificial rescue of his fellow author, the narrator indicates his complicity in the “crimes” for which Trellis stood trial.

Sweeny’s last appearance in *At Swim* takes place in the “*Conclusion of the book, ultimate,*” (216) which follows “antepenultimate” and “penultimate” conclusions that bring closure to the narrator’s biographical reminiscences and his manuscript extracts, respectively. This final brief section does not appear to be in the student narrator’s voice, suggesting the existence of another narrator behind the UCD student who has been the storyteller throughout. Sweeny’s presence is haunting:

When a dog barks late at night and then retires again to bed, he punctuates and gives majesty to the serial enigma of the dark, laying it more evenly and heavily upon the fabric of the mind. Sweeny in the trees hears the sad baying as he sits listening on the branch, a huddle between the earth and heaven; and he hears also the answering mastiff that is counting the watches in the next parish. Bark answers bark till the call spreads like fire through all Erin. Soon the moon comes forth from behind her curtains riding full tilt across the sky, lightsome and unperturbed in her immemorial calm. The eyes of the mad king upon the branch are upturned, whiter eyeballs in a white face, upturned in fear and supplication. His mind is but a shell. (217)

The baying of the hounds in this passage plays a role reminiscent of the fishing boat lights in Wallace Stevens' great poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West." Symbolic of the artist's rage for order, Stevens' lights "Mastered the night and portioned out the sea / Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles / Arranging, deepening, enchanting night" (130). At the conclusion of *At Swim*, Sweeny bears witness as the mournful baying of the hounds creates a pattern of communication that similarly adds depth and majesty to the chaos of the night. Bark begets bark in a colloquy that quickly spreads over all Ireland, recalling the way in which stories and tellers have multiplied throughout the novel. Sweeny's role in this is ambiguous. Does the presence and perception of the poet lend the dogs' voices their power to order and enrich experience? Or is Sweeny a madman merely, his mind destroyed by suffering, who is able only to listen uncomprehendingly as the hounds bay the sorrows of the world? O'Brien offers no answers, but leaves Sweeny suspended between opposing possibilities, even as the exiled poet's story ended ambiguously in *Buile Suibhne*. Caught up between heaven and earth, lunacy and artistic creation, hope and fear, fullness and emptiness, Sweeny huddles in the branches, the very figure of the liminality of the artist.

In the medieval tradition, Sweeny is certainly depicted as suffering from the ravages of a life exposed to the elements, but O'Brien pushes this to an extreme, portraying him as a bleeding, torn, half-dead body, reciting poetry in a fevered and delirious state. The mutilation of the poet is appropriate, given that O'Brien has already shown how Irish literary figures like Sweeny and Finn have been misused and abused by their modern appropriators. Limping, bleeding, muttering staves as in a dream, Sweeny is clearly a figure pushed to his limits, yet he retains the power to exert an enormous

influence on the text. Alone among the characters in the novel (including even the student narrator, who is absent from the final coda), Sweeny appears in all of the many narrative frames. Not only does the narrative style change dramatically following his appearance, but he also provides a model of artistic transgression and suffering that proves to affect all of the other characters, almost fatally in Trellis' case.

In her study *Four Irish Legendary Figures in At Swim-Two-Birds*, Eva Wappling argues that Sweeny's potency derives from his exemplification of *Buile Suibhne's* emphatic theme of crime and punishment, which O'Brien adopts in modified form:

The theme of crime and punishment is very strong in *Buile Suibhne*. It is the Christian tradition that has given the story its balanced pattern of evil deed and retribution... O'Brien follows the tale closely, but the omission of some significant verses and prose parts changes the balance of the original. In *Buile Suibhne* there is an even balance between crime and punishment. O'Brien puts more weight on the punishment. In his verses describing Suibhne's plight, he concentrates on Suibhne's punishment and omits those which show him in a calmer mood and better circumstances. The parallelism and balance in *At Swim-Two-Birds* are achieved, not by a balance between crime and punishment as in *Buile Suibhne*, but in the treatment of the punishment of Suibhne, Sweeny and Trellis. (64)

As we have seen, Wappling is right to point out the great weight that O'Brien places on physical suffering. The phrase "crime and punishment" is somewhat misleading, however, in a manner similar to Orlick's deceptive claim that his trial scene will mix justice with retribution, for both suggest that the suffering of the artist figures is just

recompense for their evil deeds. Throughout *At Swim*, though, we see that the ordeals of Sweeny, Trellis, and even the student narrator are neither just nor fair nor merited as punishment for crime. The narrator studies diligently and passes his exams with honors, but nevertheless is constantly hounded by his uncle and subjected to lectures on the ills of sloth. Trellis' trial is a mockery of justice in which his accusers serve simultaneously as judges, jury members, and witnesses, swilling porter all the while. As for Sweeny, Finn says it best: "Who could put a terrible madness on the head of Sweeney [sic] for the slaughter of a single Lent-gaunt cleric ... Who but a story-teller?" (20).

In *Buile Suibhne*, the descriptions of Sweeny's suffering soon overwhelm the rather cursory account of his crime, so that his plight comes to seem more closely associated with his poetic utterances than with his initial misdeed. Likewise, the ordeals of Sweeny, Trellis, and the narrator of *At Swim* suggest that suffering is a condition of the artist's life, not a punishment for any specific crime. As John Wain puts it, "The man who lives by the imagination, who is haunted by great memories that cannot be reduced to order, who sees the world in the colours cast over it by his dreams and longings, is doomed to suffer as Trellis and Finn and Sweeney suffer" (83). Further, this suffering that Sweeny so poignantly exemplifies is connected, not to any single crime, but rather to a species of transgressiveness inherent in the act of writing. As dramatized in Trellis' outrageous trial, all writers (even O'Brien) are tyrants, attempting to compel their characters and even language to do their will, and all writers are plagiarists, using words and themes that have already been written by others many times before.

The suffering of the artist is therefore connected through the charge of plagiarism to the issues of citation and iteration that the form of *At Swim* so relentlessly emphasizes.

In “Signature Event Context,” Derrida speaks of repeatability as the central condition of writing. “My communication,” he notes, “must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of readers. Such iterability...structures the mark of writing itself, no matter what particular type of writing is involved” (7). Writing thus seems to bear within itself a certain type of mechanical repeatability, always offering the possibility of an absolute break from context. Every sign, Derrida argues, “can be cited, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable (12). In “Limited Inc,” he further develops the argument, emphasizing that to iterate is always to alter: “Iterability alters, contaminating parasitically what it identifies and enables to repeat ‘itself’; it leaves no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say)” (62). By citing the *Buile Suibhne*, O’Brien alters what is said, changing both the original meaning of the citations he has separated from their medieval context and of his own novel, now contaminated parasitically by the earlier story with which it identifies and that it repeats.

Sometimes a parasitical, citational visitation can take the form of a haunting, as it does in *At Swim* when Sweeny appears not only in the lines of his poetry cited by Finn (himself, of course, a borrowed figure as well) but in his own flesh, speaking for himself. The revolutionary potential inherent in the possibility of an absolute break with context is evident, but Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* suggests that citation simultaneously contains another more ghostly potential as well:

The more the new erupts in the revolutionary crisis, the more the period is in crisis, the more it is “out of joint,” then the more one has to convoke the old, “borrow” from it. Inheritance from the “spirits of the past” consists, as always, in borrowing. Figures of borrowing, borrowed figures, figurality as the figure of borrowing. And the borrowing *speaks*” (152).

Thin-voiced, faint, more than half dead, Sweeny in O’Brien’s depiction seems at times merely a shadow of the vigorous poet/hero of *Buile Suibhne*. Derrida’s notion of spectrality illustrates that this is precisely right; he is a shadow, a shade, a revenant of Ireland’s past. Evoked in a period of revolution, both political, in the case of post-independence Ireland, and aesthetic, as the various modernist manifestos proclaim, the figure of Sweeny resists the pure appropriation of citation, of being spoken by others, and instead speaks back.

It is in this speaking back, perhaps, that the double movement of modernism can be located. Writers like Walter Benjamin sought in repetition and citation the revolutionary break with context, the illimitable multiplication of meaning, that would shatter tradition. In the process, it seems that they encountered (awakened?) the dead—and found that the corpses had something to say. One can hear whispers of this ghostly speech in Benjamin’s tenderness towards the battered volumes he describes in his essay “Unpacking my Library”, in Sweeny’s faintly uttered yet beautiful staves, and, more menacingly, in the persistent racial narratives on which nationalism often depends. If iteration always contains within it the prospect of spectrality, then it also contains the possibility that those we cite will speak back to us. Such a haunting, as Derrida shows,

can never be brought fully under the writer's control, no matter how explicitly revolutionary his or her intent.

In creating characters that rebel against their author, O'Brien illustrates his awareness of the limits of a writer's control over his material, but he does not give up that control altogether as some critics have suggested. Furriskey, Shanahan, and the rest rebel against the fictional Trellis; clearly they do so at the command of their and Trellis' mutual author, Flann O'Brien. By acknowledging the criminality inherent in writing, O'Brien illuminates the dilemma of the writer who cannot fully cede authority (a necessary condition of choosing to author) and yet who also understands the false premises upon which that authority rests. Thus it is the condition of the writer to occupy the threshold, like Sweeny the poet-king, between opposing spaces. On the one side there is the desire for control, originality and authenticity that the decision to author demands, on the other the awareness that all writing is parasitically contaminated, mediated, haunted by tendencies integral to the structure of all language.

In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Sweeny is the consistent exemplar of this model of the artist as a liminal, threshold being, suffering and always inherently criminal. He is not, however, the primary or central artist upon whom all the others are modeled. Rather, he illustrates the principle that no such center is possible, for any linguistic figure that should lay claim to such a grounding role would be open to the erosion of authority that the citational nature of language always makes possible. King Sweeny of *Buile Suibhne*, as a venerable character from medieval legend, would seem to offer an authoritative and original portrait of the poet from which later accounts derive. That authority vanishes upon closer inspection. The Sweeny who has been preserved in three seventeenth- and

eighteenth-century manuscript versions of *Buile Suibhne* is himself a citation, mediated through the monastic tradition, of a character created in the oral tradition nearly a thousand years before. The linguistic excess characteristic of *Buile Suibhne* perhaps represents a residue, a revenant, of the Sweeny of oral tradition who could not be completely reduced to the dimensions of a mark. This textual history makes Sweeny particularly valuable to O'Brien as a figure of citationality, for he embodies the impossibility of any claim of absolute originality within the domain of language, while simultaneously presupposing the conditions of a spectral haunting.

O'Brien's work is groundbreaking in part because rather than cherishing impossible dreams of artistic originality, he openly embraces the parasitical contamination of his novel by the words, characters, and ideas of others. The form of the novel emphasizes the free interaction of "original" text with cited words and borrowed characters. Gleefully abandoning any claim to the traditional authority that figures like Finn Mac Cool and Sweeny might be thought to possess, he opens himself to the potentially revolutionary possibilities that Benjamin saw in the radical break from historical context. And in the figure of Sweeny, torn between hope and fear, "a huddle between the earth and heaven," he saw in an old legend a new way to position the artist between the vexed poles of artistic originality and the iterable nature of all language.

Notes to Chapter Two

¹ See Keith Hopper's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* (Cork University Press, 1995) for an extended discussion of the functions of metalepsis in *At Swim*.

² Derrida argues in "Signature Event Context" that the possibility of citation is not only characteristic of all language but is the "very force and law of its emergence" (17).

³ Myself, as well as several of my undergraduate students, among them.

⁴ It should be noted that the terms "abnormal" and "parasitical" derive from J. L. Austen's work in *How To Do Things With Words* (2nd edition, eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Harvard University Press, 1975), and do not carry the pejorative weight that they do in everyday use, suggesting rather the sense that quotation, while not necessarily pernicious, is outside of the normal usages of language. Derrida disputes this point in "Signature Event Context" and at greater length in *Limited Inc.*

⁵ Nowhere more evidently (or amusingly) than in O'Brien's own essay about Joyce, "A Bash in the Tunnel."

⁶ For a highly readable recent translation, see *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, trans. Ann Dooley and Harry Roe (Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷ In a similar vein, O'Brien's narrator often announces his use of figures of speech, giving both their Greek and Latin names, in ostentatious asides set off from the body of the text. For instance, after reporting his remark to a friend that a pint of porter would do them no harm, he breaks off his narration to note, "*Name of figure of speech: Litotes (or Meiosis)*" (20). Again, this practice draws deliberate attention to language as an artificial construct, rather than pretending that it transparently conveys meaning.

⁸ This formulation points to the convergence between O'Brien's exploitation of literary practices of allusion and citation and Benjamin's interest in the effects of mechanical reproduction.

⁹ Doubt is soon thrown on the accuracy of Shanahan's citation of Casey's poem when Casey recites one of his own compositions. It proves to be a very straitlaced ballad featuring the refrain "THE GIFT OF GOD IS A WORKIN' MAN," (121) with nary a mention of the virtues of porter.

CHAPTER THREE. *SWEENEY ASTRAY*: “THE OTHER IN ONESELF”

In *The Redress of Poetry*, Seamus Heaney discusses several senses in which the concept of “redress” is essential to his understanding of poetry. One definition, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies as obsolete, seems especially attractive to him: “To set (a person or a thing) upright again; to raise again to an erect position. Also *fig.* to set up again, restore, re-establish” (qtd. in Heaney 15). Heaney’s own reputation as a redresser of the poetry of the past, in this sense of restoring and setting up again, was confirmed in the publication of his enormously successful *Beowulf*. His version of the epic poem has been in the main a critical as well as a popular success, despite the lonely voices of some Old English scholars who have objected to liberties taken in the translation and especially to Heaney’s use of distinctive words from his native Ulster dialect.¹ Many of the positive critical assessments focus on Heaney’s successful restoration of this Anglo-Saxon poem, in a manner that suggests it has been returned to itself as well as to a modern audience. “Heaney gives the poem back its earthy and unearthly reality,” writes Bruce Murphy (212), implying that the original, not just the translation, needed such a restoration, while the Anglo-Saxon scholar Michael Alexander notes that in Heaney’s translation, “a generous poet has brought back our own, in his own words,” with the result that “*Beowulf*, an elegy for heroism and a critique of feud and fratricide, is once again alive and well” (76).

Heaney’s publication of *Sweeney Astray*, which he calls a “version,” rather than a translation, of *Buile Suibhne*, represents an earlier act of literary redress. Given that this is an Irish text, rather than an Anglo Saxon one, and a poem that features as its hero a poet, rather than a warrior, it would seem that this project would have been a more

natural fit for the Irish poet's sympathies and talents than his translation of *Beowulf*. Heaney explains his personal and topographical relation to the tale in his introduction, noting that he lived for over thirty years on the fringes of what was once the kingdom of Dál nAraide, and that as a child he knew a family of tinkers named Sweeney who used to camp in the green fields and hedges nearby. "One way or another," Heaney writes, "[Sweeney] seemed to have been with me from the start" (viii).

Despite the evocative connections between poet and subject, *Sweeney Astray* is an odd bird in the Heaney oeuvre, a book often ignored or only lightly glossed in overviews of his work and available only by special order from his publishers. In an early review, Denis Donoghue writes: "*Buile Suibhne* is a difficult poem. It is my impression that Heaney found it, line by line, hard to deal with," and goes on to demonstrate that *Sweeney Astray* vacillates uncomfortably between the eloquent and the prosaic (28). By most measures of success, Heaney did not succeed in his attempt to restore and reestablish *Buile Suibhne* as he did with *Beowulf*, and the ancient Irish tale has not entered the mainstream of world literature in which the Anglo-Saxon epic is firmly entrenched. Nevertheless, if *Sweeney Astray* has not sparked a major revival of interest in the medieval Irish tale, Sweeney² himself emerges as a significant and revitalizing force in Heaney's own trajectory as a poet. Perhaps in this case, in contrast to Heaney's interaction with *Beowulf*, it is Sweeney who is the redresser, a venerable and half-forgotten figure from Ireland's medieval past offering an ancestral model that helps to set a modern Irish poet right again.

As a Northern Irish poet exiled from his home, Sweeney must have been an irresistible figure for Heaney, who himself had recently made the agonizing decision to

leave his native Ulster for the more peaceful County Wicklow in the Republic of Ireland. That Sweeney's exile is the result of religious conflict, and that through his poetry the bird-man becomes a paradigmatic "figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance," as Heaney's introduction would have it (vi), add to the attraction, although as we shall see *Sweeney Astray* places a somewhat different emphasis on these attributes than may be found in *Buile Suibhne*. Further, Sweeney's characteristic inhabitation of in-between, threshold places and his decentering of notions of originality and source are congenial not only to Heaney's own poetic sensibility but to broader trends in late twentieth-century thinking about literature and language as well.

Published in 1984, *Sweeney Astray* marks a period of transition in Heaney's work. The much-cited first poem in Heaney's first book established digging as a key metaphor for the act of writing, and as Catharine Malloy and Phyllis Carey argue, the poet's "artistic process, initially, is one that uncovers, digs, tills, seeks to crystallize experience through language" (13). In *Wintering Out* and *North*, the process of digging gains mythic dimension as well as local significance through Heaney's exploitation of the trope of the long-buried bog people, but the trajectory of the poetry remains earthbound, the vocabulary heavily weighted with the names of mud, dirt, brackish water and peat. In his more recent work, especially from Part III of *Station Island* on, the poet begins to lift his gaze, so that in Seamus Deane's words, "the thick trellises of earth and water have become more and more etherealized" (29) as Heaney strives to pass from "the holy and violent ground into the realm of air and fire, the zone of vision" (30). *Station Island* is the crucible in which this transformation takes shape, but it is in *Sweeney Astray*, published just a year earlier, that Heaney first gives sustained attention to poetry as the

possibility of flight. The embrace of Sweeney's "bird's-eye view," as Helen Vendler describes it (99), is a complicated rhetorical shift, however, as for Heaney the opposite movement downward into earth and mud has also meant traveling backward in time, into history. Peeling back the layers of soft peat in the early poem "Bogland" reveals the skeleton of an extinct giant elk, as well as traces of domestic, national, and geological history:

Butter sunk under
 More than a hundred years
 Was recovered salty and white.
 The ground itself is kind, black butter

Melting and opening underfoot,
 Missing its last definition
 By millions of years.
 They'll never dig coal here,

Only the waterlogged trunks
 Of great firs, soft as pulp.
 Our pioneers keep striking
 Inward and downwards,

Every layer they strip
 Seems camped on before. (Heaney, *Opened Ground*, 41)

While the soaring Sweeney offers a spatially uplifting change of direction, he too is a figure from the distant past, deeply imbricated in contested strands of Irish history, and thus he threatens to continue the backward pull into territory, both figurative and literal, that has been camped on before. In his Sweeney poems, and especially in the purgatorial journey that comprises “Station Island,” Heaney struggles to find a way to simultaneously incorporate the past (personal and cultural as well as literary) and win free of it. The figure of Sweeney, ambivalent, polysemous, and never quite what he appears to be, provides the poet with a useful vantage for this struggle. The utility of this alter-ego is most apparent not in *Sweeney Astray*, but rather in the twenty original poems that comprise the “Sweeney Redivivus” section of *Station Island*. Nevertheless, these poems, which Vendler notes are “as satiric and acerbic as any Heaney has ever written, while also providing new forms of lyric solace,” (99) could not have been written had the poet not come to inhabit so thoroughly the figure of the avian poet-king through his translation of *Buile Suibhne*.

Critical analysis of the significance of *Sweeney Astray* for Seamus Heaney tends to begin with the poet’s own assessment, in his introduction, of the title character’s role as a figure of the artist and of the work “as an aspect of the quarrel between free creative imagination and the constraints of religious, political, and domestic obligation” (vi). Unfortunately, many analyses essentially end there as well. In fact, Heaney criticism in general is unusually reliant on the author’s commentary about his work, which can be found in his introductions, prose collections, published lectures and interviews, and private communications. Because Heaney is not only perhaps the most famous of living English-language poets, but also one of the most approachable, hospitable, and willing to

discuss his work, it is quite common for critical analyses to begin on a personal note, thanking Heaney for his “time, thoughts, and interest” (Finn x), for revealing in an interview “the emerging shapes in his poetry” (Malloy and Carey 15), for “courteously provid[ing] answers to questions I asked about the poems” (Vendler ix), or even for hospitably offering the critic and his family “not just a superb meal, but a box of Lego blocks and the use of laundry facilities as well” (Hildebidle 130)³. Heaney’s remarks about his poems are almost invariably both thoughtful and thought-provoking, and much useful discussion of his work derives from them. Nevertheless, many critics seem overly reliant upon them, appearing to forget that it is their job, and not the poet’s, to analyze the poetry. Irrespective alike of New Critical warnings of “the intentional fallacy” and post-structuralist dicta about “the death of the author,” Heaney is often left with the last word about his own work. In the case of *Sweeney Astray*, this has led to an excessive critical focus on the similarities and affinities between Sweeney and Heaney (assisted, no doubt, by the euphony of their rhyming names), when the differences may actually be the more striking, and perhaps ultimately more important to Heaney’s poetic development⁴.

The easy identification of Heaney with Sweeney is predicated on a picture of both as Ulster poets, exiled from their homeland as a result of violence, plagued by guilt over their abandonment of home and communal responsibilities, caught up in religious conflict, yet transcending their circumstances and their suffering through the medium of poetic expression. Conor Johnston, for instance, argues that Heaney, suffering from concerns that “he may have abandoned his Catholic community in the Protestant-controlled North,” was naturally drawn “to the figure of fellow-Ulster exile, Sweeney, king of the seventh-century petty kingdom of Dal Araidhe in Ulster” (71). John

Hildebidle similarly notes that “it is Sweeney the exile who draws him,” (127) although Thomas C. Foster warns that this “common bond” may be “more instructive about the nature of the poet’s ‘exile’ than about the original tale” (3). The similarities between Heaney and his character are not imagined; as Foster goes on to say, “the empathy is real and heartfelt” (3). Nevertheless, the assimilation of Sweeney to Heaney’s concerns, expressed in a cluster of recurring terms with distinctive twentieth-century connotations—“Ulster,” “the poet,” and “exile” chief among them—tends to obscure the otherness of the medieval voice that Heaney attempts to inhabit and to elide the enormous distance between the twentieth century and the twelfth, when *Buile Suibhne* was compiled, itself already estranged from the seventh-century events and characters that it depicts.

In modern Ireland, “Ulster” is a word heavily fraught with historical and political significance. It recalls the most heroic of Irish legendary tales, known today as the Ulster Cycle, which feature such culturally resonant figures as the indomitable warrior Cúchulainn and the deposed king Fergus. Always important characters in the oral tradition, these ancient warriors were reclaimed for written literature during the Irish Literary Revival of the late nineteenth century, while the leaders of the 1916 Rising made them into potent symbols of Irish nationalism. The dauntless courage attributed to these heroes reinforces the image of Ulster as the Irish province that fought the hardest and suffered the most in the struggle against Queen Elizabeth’s armies as they attempted to consolidate English control throughout the island. The victory of the English forces led to the infamous Ulster Plantation, which carries strong connotations of the usurpation of Irish land from its rightful owners. Today, the name “Ulster” continues for many to be a

sore point, for it refers to a broken whole: The nine counties that traditionally formed the province of Ulster were divided by the Partition of Ireland in 1921, with six becoming British-held Northern Ireland. All of these associations come into play when Heaney is mentioned as an Ulster poet, but few of them would have had any meaning for a seventh-century king living in the north of Ireland, as Sweeney is said to have been. The word “Ulster” itself does not exist in Irish, as it was a coinage of Viking invaders that seems eventually to have passed from Old Norse to Anglo-Norman and thence into English (Ó Cróinín 632). The northernmost *cóiceda*, or province (literally “fifth,” as there were traditionally five provinces) was named for what had long been its most powerful dynasty, the Ulaid, although within recorded history they never directly controlled the entire province. By the seventh century the Ulaid kings, represented in *Buile Suibhne* by Sweeney’s overlord, Congal, had lost much of their territory to the encroaching Uí Néill dynasty. Thus, not only is the name “Ulster” an anachronism with respect to Sweeney, but it is misleading to think of the province as a united political unit. In the seventh century, a *rí túath* (petty king) like Sweeney would have been much more strongly identified with his own clan, the Dál nAraide, than with the largely-hypothetical *cóiced Ulaid*.

The designation “poet,” too, has very different connotations in Ireland today than it did throughout the medieval period. A far cry from the angst-ridden, marginal being that the modern poet has become (at least in the popular imagination), the medieval *fili* was, as we have seen, a respected and powerful member of society. Sweeney’s transition from king to poet, then, does not represent the wholesale loss of a role in society, but rather a transition from one type of culturally-sanctioned authority to another. Heaney’s

sometimes agonized questioning of “how poetry’s existence as a form of art relates to our existence as citizens of society – how it is of ‘present use’” (*Redress of Poetry* 1) would thus have had little meaning in the context of medieval Ireland, where the role of poetry was well-defined and central to the functioning of society. Notably, in *Buile Suibhne* Sweeney’s poetic production is never questioned, either by the poet himself or by other characters, but rather is accepted as a given of his new condition, and its value is universally recognized. Sweeney has regrets, certainly, but they do not involve an interrogation of the value or role of poetry itself, putting him in a very different position with respect to the figure of “the poet” than Heaney occupies.

Finally, the word “exile” in the context of Irish poetry after Joyce can hardly be read without reference to Stephen Dedalus’ strategy of “silence, exile, and cunning.” This places the concept of exile in a very particular light: a deliberate decision to withdraw physically from one’s homeland in the service of one’s art, with the ultimate goal of not only personal but national artistic expression, as Stephen declared his intent not only to create poetry but to forge the uncreated conscience of his race (Joyce 276). Heaney’s decision to place Joyce in the final section of “Station Island” is indicative of the significance of this example, and also of the qualms, expressed in poems like “Exposure,” that plague Heaney as to whether he has done the right thing in choosing to leave his home in Northern Ireland for the calmer environs of the Republic. Sweeney, on the other hand, partakes of a very different type of exile. His transformation and resultant exile are not chosen as part of a purposeful strategy, but rather come upon him involuntarily, almost as a force of nature (or language). He is not physically an exile from “Ulster,” as several of his favored haunts and roosting places remain within the

bounds of his former kingdom. Instead, his exile is largely internal; in *Buile Suibhne*, Sweeney tells a party of warriors who come across him soon after his flight from the battle of Magh Rath that *romsgar Dia rem dheilbh nad ró* (16) ‘God has sundered me from my own shape,’ while in the moment of his battlefield transformation *roclódhadh a chedfadha* (14) ‘his substance was overthrown.’ The internal rupture that sunders him from his own shape and substance leaves the erstwhile king unable to fulfill his former role in society, but he is not entirely separated from either the places or the people that he once knew, as his interactions with Loingseachan, Eorann, and others indicate.

The equation of Seamus Heaney with the character Sweeney, then, on the grounds that they are both exiled Ulster poets, has elements of truth, but it also serves to suppress the genuine otherness of Sweeney’s voice. If Sweeney has been useful to Heaney, has helped to free him in important ways, it is not simply because his discourse is, in Bakhtin’s terms, “internally persuasive” for the modern poet, and therefore apt to be “affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with [his] own word” (345). As we have seen in Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*, Sweeney is also a revenant, a ghostly visitor from the past, literally estranged and a stranger in modern-day Ireland. Derrida argues in *Specters of Marx* that spectral visitation is always characterized by repetition: “It (re)pays us a visit. Visit upon visit, since [the specter] returns to see us and since *visitaire*, frequentative of *visere* (to see, examine, contemplate), translates well the recurrence or returning, the frequency of a visitation” (145). Similarly, the apparently singular figure of Sweeney, visionary poet-king, has always existed as repetition: In several modern versions, which variously repeat a story that may be found in a mechanically reproduced copy of O’Keeffe’s edition, which repeats with some editing

and emendation a seventeenth-century manuscript, itself copied by hand from a lost manuscript or manuscripts in a chain of unknown length, leading back to the presumed twelfth-century composition of *Buile Suibhne*, which presents itself as a citation and compilation of previously-existing stories and poems referring to a (almost certainly fictional) participant in the seventh-century battle of Magh Rath. At no point in this sequence of visitations is there a text that could be said to be original, or a moment at which Sweeney is fully present; rather, he is always a figure of citation, a representation, as Derrida says of his specters, of that which is “not present, itself, in flesh and blood” (145). To learn from such figures, to communicate with them, Derrida goes on to emphasize, one must learn “how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself” (163). To let the other inside the self, one must identify with him or her, as Heaney has done by focusing on certain traits that he shares with Sweeney, but to learn from such a visitation, it seems necessary also to allow the other to remain *other*. *Sweeney Astray* oscillates between these positions, at times appearing to assimilate entirely Sweeney’s voice into Heaney’s own concerns and meters, at other times allowing the strangeness of *Buile Suibhne*, and of Sweeney himself, to emerge.

Many of Heaney’s choices in his approach to translating (or versioning) *Buile Suibhne* tend toward the acculturation of the text, reducing, at least on a line-by-line level, the degree of unfamiliarity that a modern, English-language reader would encounter. Notably, he has anglicized and modernized many of the Middle Irish names, so that the alien orthography and uncertain pronunciations of words like Suibhne, Dál nAraide, Alladhán, and Magh Rath become less challenging as Sweeney, Dal-Arie, Alan, and Moira. As Maria Tymoczko illustrates in *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*,

names present a number of difficulties for translators, for they are “dense with information” conveyed in multiple registers, including the lexical, the phonological, the orthographical, and the semiotic (223). Simply importing Irish names unchanged into an English-language text would create phonetic problems, for the different sound repertoires of the two languages would cause the names to be pronounced differently in the translated text. If “proper names are labels signaling reference,” as John Stuart Mill and others have argued, then the sound sequence is perhaps the most important attribute in the definition of a name (Tymoczko 224). By adopting English phonology in his rendition of proper names, Heaney paradoxically ensures that they will be pronounced in a way that more closely approximates the Irish sound sequences of the names and prevents the confusion that readers confronted with, for instance, the unfamiliar “bh” in “Suibhne” would otherwise face. Lost along with the unfamiliar Middle Irish orthography, however, is any clear indication that the names come from a radically different culture, in which they possessed not only lexical meaning but also sociolinguistic significance, “indicating tribal and family affiliation; gender and class; racial, ethnic, national, and religious identity; and the like” (Tymoczko 223). While the original names would no longer signify in this way for modern readers, they would by their very strangeness point to the lacuna in the translated text, forcing a reader to acknowledge consciously that, for instance, she does not fully grasp the significance of “Dál nAraide.” Further, the pronunciations that Heaney’s spellings generate are closer to modern Irish than to the Middle Irish in use when *Buile Suibhne* was composed, or the Old Irish of the seventh century, and thus they tend to telescope history, eliding the large gaps in time between *Sweeney Astray* and earlier iterations of Sweeney’s tale.

Robert Brazeau argues that in his translation, Heaney “preserves the cultural integrity of the original by stressing, in his introduction to the work, both its Irish textual history dating back to the Book of Aicill and its topographical specificity” (83). He goes on to cite the following passage from Heaney’s introduction:

[Sweeney’s] kingdom lay in what is now south Antrim and north County Down, and for over thirty years I lived on the verges of that territory, in sight of some of Sweeney’s places and in earshot of others.... When I began work on this version, I had just moved to Wicklow, not all that far from Sweeney’s final resting ground in St. Mullins. (vii-viii)

As Brazeau rightly points out, this introductory passage emphasizes Sweeney’s strong sense of place, but the “topographical specificity” provided here has much more relevance to Heaney’s landscape than to Sweeney’s. By equating the ancient kingdom of Dál nAraide with modern counties Antrim and Down, and by giving the name St. Mullins rather than the Middle Irish Tech Moling, Heaney again eliminates strangeness and historical distance, seeming to resist the pull of this story back into time. Rather than allowing Sweeney to speak as a genuine other from a distant past, in this instance Heaney assimilates the difference of the medieval character into names and points of reference comfortable in his own, twentieth-century voice.

In terms of formal strategies, Heaney largely preserves *Buile Suibhne*’s division into alternating sections of poetry and prose, although he normalizes the practice to some extent by eliminating redundancies between the two formats. He seems to be more interested in the poetry, however, as evidenced by several heightened sections, originally in prose, which Heaney renders in verse, as well as by the flat nature of much of the prose

in *Sweeney Astray*. The prose sections of *Buile Suibhne*, as we have seen, are often marked by a high degree of artistry, demonstrating an alliterative prose style that Tymoczko notes became popular in Irish literature in the eleventh century, and that is “characterized by rapid pace, nominal structure, parallel syntax, and strings of compound adjectives” (95). Heaney’s prose is, as Denis Donoghue argues, “far prosier than the Irish,” (28) eschewing the formalities of *Buile Suibhne* for a much simpler, more colloquial narration of events. Consider, for example the opening paragraph, which reads in Irish as follows:

Dála Shuibhne mhic Colmán Chúair, rígh Dál Araidhe, roaisneidhsem
remhainn do dhul ar fainneal 7 ar folúamain a cath. Ba hedh ann fochann
7 tucaitt tresa ttangattar na hairrdhena 7 na habarta fúalaing 7
foluaimhnighe sin fáoi-siumh tar chách a ccoitchinne 7 febh
tecómhnaicair dhó iaromh. (2)

As noted earlier, this paragraph opens the tale in a rhetorically elevated style, featuring many of the characteristics identified by Tymoczko as typical of heightened Middle Irish rhetorics. The style is difficult to render in English, although I have attempted to approximate some of its effects in my gloss translation:

Concerning Suibhne son of Colmán Cúar, king of Dál nAraide, we have
declared already how he went straying and flying from battle. This was
the cause and the way he was brought from the fight so that these signs
and feats of fluttering and flying far beyond common men came upon him
and also the distinctions that befell him thereafter.

Heaney takes a much more conversational (and more easily readable) approach:

We have already told how Sweeney, son of Colman Cuar and king of Dal-Arie, went astray when he flew out of the battle. This story tells the why and the wherefore of his fits and trips, why he of all men was subject to such frenzies; and it also tells what happened to him afterwards. (3)

Here, Heaney establishes an economical narrative style graced with a certain easy flow. There is some flattening of affect, however, and a toning-down of the heightened elements of the original. The opening paragraph of *Buile Suibhne* suggests that its hero is beyond or above ordinary men, emphasizing flight by repeating the word in two closely-related forms (*folúamain* and *foluaimhnighe*) and noting that these feats take place above (*tar*) every one of the commoners (*chách a ccoitchinne*). The word *airrdhena* ‘signs’ or ‘tokens’ carries implications of the miraculous, while *habarta* ‘feats’ suggests the deeds of a warrior; both recollect the word *ardae* or *airde*, meaning ‘height.’ This series of connotations, with its specifically spatial dimension, is largely lost in Heaney’s more down-to-earth wordplay of “the why and the wherefore” and “fits and trips.”

As the opening paragraph illustrates, the prose narrative in *Sweeney Astray* moves efficiently from one plot point to the next, but it does so at some cost in terms of nuance and artistry. This is in keeping with Heaney’s sense that the “points of poetic intensity, rather than the overall organization of the narrative, establish the work’s highest artistic levels,” (vii) and clearly he has lavished his considerable talents on the verse sections, producing the finest extant English-language version of the poetry. In addition to trimming some of the narration, especially where it duplicates the poetry, he has rendered in free verse some of the most dramatic moments, including Sweeney’s arrival at Magh

Rath, his battlefield transformation, and his pursuit by ghostly apparitions sent by Ronan to drive him back into madness. Considered individually, these sections of free verse are quite effective, but the appropriation of these heightened moments for the poetry contributes to upsetting the delicate balance between prose and verse that is an important feature of *Buile Suibhne*. Ciaran Carson suggests that in the Irish text, while “the prose delineates the outward events of the story; the verse recounts an inward, psychological journey; and certainly, much of the effect of the original is gained by this creative interplay” (142). This interplay contributes to the tension not only between outward events and inward journey that Carson notes, but also between society and the individual, insofar as the prose, depicting events from an external perspective, can stand in for the communal gaze that determines social position in part on the basis of appearance. For instance, Heaney renders Sweeney’s arrival at Magh Rath, originally a prose segment, in free verse⁵:

He was dressed like this:
 next his white skin, the shimmer of silk;
 and his satin girdle around him;
 and his tunic, that reward of service
 and gift of fealty from Congal,
 was like this—
 crimson, close-woven,
 bordered in gemstones and gold,
 a rustle of sashes and loops,
 the studded silver gleaming,

the slashed hem embroidered in points.
 He had an iron-shod spear in each hand,
 a shield of mottled horn on his back,
 a gold-hilted sword at his side. (7)

On its own terms, this verse is effective – stately, finely-etched, appropriately attuned to the rustling movements of Sweeney’s garb. The poem’s slender lines, however, do not fully render the denseness and materiality of the Irish prose, undermining the almost obsessive sensuality of the gaze directed at the king’s body and raiment. A similar shift in emphasis takes place soon thereafter, when Heaney again uses free verse to describe Sweeney’s battlefield seizure⁶:

His brain convulsed,
 his mind split open.
 Vertigo, hysteria, lurchings
 and launchings came over him,
 he staggered and flapped desperately,
 he was revolted by the thought of known places
 and dreamed strange migrations.
 His fingers stiffened,
 his feet scuffled and flurried,
 his heart was startled,
 his senses were mesmerized,
 his sight was bent,
 the weapons fell from his hands

and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion
like a bird of the air.

And Ronan's curse was fulfilled. (9)

To modern readers, steeped in the twentieth-century fascination with psychology, this may appear to be a passage of primarily internal, psychical interest, so in Carson's schema it would belong in verse. Heaney's rendition, with its emphasis on the workings of Sweeney's mind and brain and its references to hysteria, mesmerism, and dreaming, reinforces this impression. That this description is in prose in *Buile Suibhne*, however, highlights the external aspects of the calamity that befalls King Sweeney. This seizure takes him on the very battlefield at which he had arrived so triumphantly that morning; the hosts of the contending kings surround him, seeing his unseemly behavior, his fit of weakness and fear, his loss of the gold-hilted blade that formerly distinguished him.

Syntactically, the "dark rending energy" (Heaney 9) that afflicts him does not issue from within his convulsing brain, as Heaney's version would suggest, but from outside:

rofhéach Suibhne suas iarum co rolíon nemhain 7 dobhar 7 dásacht 7 fáoinnel 7 fúalang 7 foluamain 7 udmhaille, anbsaidhe (14) 'Sweeney looked up and was filled with frenzy and darkness and rage and confusion and madness and frenzy and quickness and horror and anxiety.' Something he sees in the skies above him, the ferocious noise of the clashing armies, Ronán's curse, the force of poetry itself – all of these are implicated in the overthrow of Sweeney's senses, to which no single definite cause is attributed, but it seems clear that the frenzy, darkness, etc., that assail him are external in origin. This does not diminish the psychological disruption that his battlefield transformation brings about. Clearly Sweeney's exile is ultimately internal in nature, as it is the rupture within

the self that prevents him from returning to his home and kingship, but the exterior focus of the descriptive passage in *Buile Suibhne* places the emphasis on the social significance of his disenfranchisement. By moving the passage in the direction of psychology, and of what Carson refers to as “twentieth-century *angst*,” Heaney presents a distinctly different interpretation of the import of this event.

Heaney’s treatment of the prose, then, essentially works to get it out of the way, reducing it to the status of a linking narrative and emphasizing instead the poetic passages, with their more interior focus. Certainly this strategy makes sense, given the poet’s interest in Sweeney as, again, a “figure of the artist, displaced, guilty, assuaging himself by his utterance” (vii). This focus, however, diminishes the dialogic nature of the tale, making it appear to be primarily about the utterances of a singular poetic figure.

Joseph Nagy debunks this impression:

A cursory reading of the *Buile Shuibne* might give us the impression that Suibne’s poetry, the glorious outcome of his *geltacht*, consists of soliloquies, of the deranged poet’s talking primarily to himself about himself, his condition, and his natural environment. In fact, much if not most of this verse is cast within the framework of exchange, between Suibhne and the diverse characters whom he engages, and by whom he is engaged, in dialogue. (“A New Introduction” 16)

Nagy’s perception here, taken together with Carson’s comment that the poetry and the prose interact creatively, point to a larger insight about the structure of *Buile Suibhne*. Not only is Sweeney engaged in dialogue with those around him⁷, but the poetry and the prose themselves are in conversation with one another. This provides a formal context

for the interplay between the various matched pairs implicated in this tale, including poetic and scribal, secular and religious, oral and written, pagan and Christian, individual and societal, internal and external, and so forth. That the poetry and prose in *Buile Suibhne* frequently overlap, repeating plot points as well as key words and phrases, illustrates that these pairs are not static opposites, but rather that they interact and sometimes blur into one another, demonstrating the intrinsically liminal nature of the text. Heaney, by downplaying the prose, makes the text individual rather than communal, presenting a monological poetic voice in lieu of the dialogue created by the interactions within each of the matched pairs indicated above.

As might be expected in the hands of so remarkable a poet as Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* takes flight in the verse passages, rather than in the more pedestrian prose. Heaney does not attempt to replicate the intricate prosody of the original syllabic poetry. Instead, he writes the quatrains using a short, stressed line with irregular rhyme that is reminiscent of his manner in *North*. The vocabulary and syntax are fairly simple and straightforward, giving the verse a plainspoken feel, although occasional archaic uses of language – Donoghue cites “thole,” “cantreds,” and “scuts” (29) – are at once characteristic of Heaney’s work and reminiscent of the venerability of the source material. The result is poetry that is, on its own terms, far more enjoyable than the standard translation by O’Keeffe. Thomas Foster asserts that Heaney “possesses a clearly superior ear,” (4) offering for comparison the following two quatrains in O’Keeffe’s translation and in Heaney’s:

O alder, thou art not hostile,
delightful is thy hue,

The alder is my darling,
all thornless in the gap,

thou art not rending and prickling	some milk of human kindness
in the gap wherein thou art.	coursing in its sap.

O little blackthorn, little thorny one;	The blackthorn is a jaggy creel
O little black sloe tree;	stippled with dark sloes;
O watercress, little green-topped one,	green watercress in thatch on wells
from the brink of the ousel spring.	where the drinking blackbird goes.

--(O'Keeffe 65)

--(Heaney 37)

Most readers would join Foster in judging that Heaney's version offers "greater euphony" (6). Feeling less obliged to follow the strict sense and syntax of the Irish, Heaney avoids such awkward phrasing as O'Keeffe's "in the gap wherein thou art," while generally approximating the meaning of the original at the level of the quatrain, if not line-by-line. Although *Sweeney Astray* does not exhibit the intricate patterns of rhyme and alliteration that characterize *Buile Suibhne*, it does make effective, if more irregular, use of rhyme and slant rhyme, as well as sonically dense and suggestive phrasing like "jaggy creel."

Ciaran Carson, citing the same passage at greater length, approves Heaney's decision not to attempt a "literal" translation, noting that O'Keeffe's English version "rarely gives an adequate idea of the hypnotic density of the original" (144). He observes, however, the subtle but significant shift in emphasis occasioned by Heaney's abandonment of Sweeney's apostrophic address to the trees. Carson argues that in this passage in *Buile Suibhne*, "nature is not observed, it is addressed," while in *Sweeney Astray*, "Heaney's descriptive method alters the relationship to that of observer and observed, an attitude that is at once more romantic and less dramatic; it is, perhaps, more

meditative” (145). This move in the direction of the meditative mind and its observation of nature heightens Heaney’s focus on the psychology of the solitary figure of the artist and diminishes, as we have already seen, the dialogic, interactive nature of the tale. Sweeney’s compulsion to name all of the natural things he encounters, and in most cases to name them twice (e.g. “oh yew tree, little yew tree”) expresses his more general fear that identity is unstable, and thus that the boundaries of his own form, as well as the forms of others, are permeable. By placing Sweeney in the more secure and distanced position of the observer in this passage, Heaney minimizes this uncertainty.

Such changes in emphasis notwithstanding, *Sweeney Astray* is in at least one respect the most “faithful” English-language version of *Buile Suibhne*, for unlike either O’Keeffe’s or O’Brien’s translations, it features poetry that is at times transcendent⁸. As Brazeau points out, this is not a minor matter: “In order to understand what modest benefits accrue to Sweeney as a result of his madness, it is important to see him as a capable poet” (89). If the poetry is clumsy, stilted, or uninspired, the story and, perhaps more importantly, the affect of *Buile Suibhne* are simply not convincing. To understand how Sweeney might, at least in some moods, prefer his ascetic and solitary life to ordinary human companionship, one needs to soar with the poet-king in verses that embody the aesthetic transcendence of the natural world⁹:

From the cliff of Lough Dilar
to Derry Colmcille
I saw the great swans, heard their calls
sweetly rebuking wars and battles.

From lonely cliff-tops, the stag
 bells and makes the whole glen shake
 and re-echo. I am ravished.

Unearthly sweetness shakes my breast. (19-20)

Here, Sweeney's affectionate calling of the names of some of his favorite places anticipates the call of the swans, while the enjambment in the second stanza enacts the increasing interpenetration of poet and nature. The full stop before "I am ravished" is a moment of sudden stillness following the mighty belling of the stag. After that absolute quiet the echoes and reverberations continue, but this time within the poet, shaking his breast. Reading this, we can begin to grasp the ecstatic sufficiency that Sweeney finds in his wild life, and to sense why he has turned his back on his former kingly role, in which wars and battles played so prominent a part.

Donoghue argues that "Heaney comes into his own eloquence when the Irish poem sets him free in ways we have known since *North* and his earlier books," (29) and certainly many of the best moments in *Sweeney Astray* are also the ones that sound most characteristic of Heaney's work. The "jaggy creel" of the blackthorn comes to mind, as do the direct earthiness with which nature is observed and the relish in the naming of natural things evident in lines like these:

All night there I glean and raid
 and forage in the oak wood.
 My hands feel out leaf and rind,
 roots, windfalls on the ground,

they comb through matted watercress
 and grope among the bog berries,
 brooklime, sorrel, damp moss,
 wild garlic, raspberries,

 apples, hazel-nuts, acorns,
 haws of the sharp, jaggy hawthorn,
 and blackberries, floating weed,
 the whole store of the oak wood. (65)

This poem brings Heaney back to his well-known soil, digging amongst words and images familiar from the bog poems, and his hand here is sure. He domesticates nature in this passage, making it a more convenient larder for the poet's gleanings than are the *doiribh doirchibh* 'dark oak-woods' (O'Keeffe 116) of the original. Nevertheless, writing simply and with confidence, he achieves something of the direct and concrete effect that he praises in early Irish nature poetry in his essay "The God in the Tree," (*Preoccupations* 181) doubtless one of the features of *Buile Suibhne* that inspired him to attempt his own version.

If Heaney has succeeded, then, at the crucial task of giving Sweeney some extraordinary verses in English, perhaps a reader cannot blame him too much for not attempting to find equivalents for certain other aspects of the Irish text. Translation is, as Maria Tymoczko illustrates in *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, an inherently metonymic process, rather than a metaphoric one. Because there is no such thing as a total translation¹⁰, which would "carry across" all elements of a text into the new

language, any would-be translator “must choose which aspects of the poem to privilege, which aspects to represent,” and accept that these choices will stand, in the new language, for the whole of the source text (52). In *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney’s priority seems to have been the production of reader-friendly and beautiful English-language lyrics for Sweeney, whom he sees primarily as a figure of the solitary, suffering, yet ultimately transcendent (and clearly male) artist. To achieve this goal, Heaney had to sacrifice certain elements of the Irish text, including metrical form, syntactical structure, and some degree of cultural specificity. His focus on the singularity of the artist entails some diminishment of the dialogic nature of the text, while his privileging of his topographical relationship to the Sweeney elides, to some degree, the temporal gap between them. That such sacrifices are a necessary part of translation is acknowledged even by Ciaran Carson, who is in many respects quite critical of *Sweeney Astray*. Ultimately, Carson says, “we cannot quibble too much. Until *Sweeney Astray*, *Buile Suibhne* has lain nearly moribund in the shelves of libraries.... Its resurrection in a new voice can only be commended” (148).

In some cases, Heaney was able to find dynamical equivalents in English for aspects of the Irish text that he abandoned, but inevitably there are losses in translation. For instance, the decision to abandon the intricate prosody of *Buile Suibhne* comes at the cost of a certain ambiguity in Sweeney’s character. On the one hand, *Buile Suibhne* presents the mad king as an unschooled poet whose songs of praise and lamentation pour forth in a spontaneous overflow of emotion. On the other, the formal structure of the poems highlights their status as the products of artifice and craft. Thus, while the medieval Sweeney never questions or reflects upon his own poetic production, the meters

themselves foreground the act of writing, making the composition of poetry perhaps the text's truest subject.

Further, the syllabic, rhyming meters in which *Buile Suibhne* is composed seem to have evolved in the seventh and eighth centuries¹¹ and are strongly associated with Ireland's monastic tradition (Williams and Ford 79). Consequently, the use of these meters (in an obviously late stage of development) is not only anachronistic for this supposedly early-seventh century poet, but it also complicates Sweeney's relationship to the Church. He is not merely its enemy or its victim, as the encounter with St. Ronán would indicate, but is complicit in the development of a literature that was largely composed and transmitted in a monastic setting, at least through the end of the twelfth century. The cultural significance of these meters is clearly not something that would be transparent to a modern English-language readership, and thus even if the meters were retained in translation, they would not have the same effect.

Nevertheless, Heaney was able to highlight the act of composition through the addition of self-reflexive references to language itself. Sweeney, leading the mill hag on a ruinous chase over the hilltops of Ireland, overtly calls attention to the strongly iambic meter and rhyming line used to describe the event: "She challenged me a second time. / We kept in step like words in rhyme. / I set the pace and led the dance—" (72). Likewise, his verbal dexterity is emphasized when the poet, pursued by disembodied demons, "gave them the slip and escaped / in a swirling tongue of low cloud" (70). Such references constitute a recognizable code for contemporary readers, familiar with poetry whose subject is composition itself, and thus approximate some of the effect that the metrical forms on *Buile Suibhne* may have had on that text's own contemporaries. The

emphasis is different, however, for Heaney's references to poetry make explicit an aspect of the encounter with the mill-hag that was only implicit in the original: the old woman's status as a female rival for poetic supremacy. Sweeney's anxiety over the instability of his own form, his loss of the physical and social markers of masculinity, appears to make him especially prone to rivalry with women (perhaps he fears he is becoming one?), and his vindictive expression of pleasure at the mill-hag's death indicates the curious extent to which he perceives her as a threat.

Some aspects of the Irish text simply had to be abandoned, as *Sweeney Astray* sought to find its own music in English. One of the most intriguing features of *Buile Suibhne* is the intricate wordplay deriving from what Carson calls the "deep structure" of the language (143). Most notably, much is made of the homophony among *binn* or *benn*, meaning 'sweet, melodious,' *dá mbeinn*, the subjunctive case of the verb 'to be,' and *beann* or *beinn*, a word whose broad semantic range encompasses the peaks or tips of things, and thus may refer to tree-tops, spear-points, mountain peaks, antlers, and so forth. Versions of these words interact variously throughout the text; as Carson notes, this verbal play reaches its apotheosis in the following lines from section 40:

Mó ná adhbhur leinnine
 roliathadh dot chenn,
 dá mbeinn ar gach beinnine
 beinnini ar gach mbenn.

A dhoimh do[g]ni an fogharán
 chugum tar an nglenn,

maith an t-ionadh foradhán

i mullach do bhenn. (80)

O'Keefe, in attempting a literal translation, illustrates the impossibility of the task:

Greater than the material for a little cloak

thy head has turned grey;

if I were on each little point,

there would be a pointlet on every point.

Thou stag that comest lowing

to me across the glen,

pleasant is the place for seats

on the top of thy antler-points. (81)

What has happened here is a manic compounding of meaning, characteristic of Sweeney's madness, that illustrates the "too-muchness," the overflowing nature, of language. In the next stanza, Sweeney names himself *fer benn*, 'man of the antlers,' perhaps, in the immediate context, but we are to understand all of the overlapping meanings. He is a man of sweetness and melody, as a poet; he is a man of the heights, both lyrical and literal; he is associated with lonely mountain peaks and with tree-top aeries; he is a man of being, particularly in his intense perception of both suffering and of natural life; he understands also the end of being, as he knows his fate is to die at the tip of a churl's spear. Heaney, understanding that this web of meaning is inextricable from the original language, makes no attempt to simulate it in his version:

I would be cloaked in the grey

sanctuary of her head,
 I would roost among
 her mazy antlers

 and would be lofted into
 this thicket of horns
 on the stag that lows at me
 over the glen. (45)

One might quibble with his knowledge of zoology (would a female deer have antlers, mazy or otherwise?), but Heaney's decision to relinquish the elaborate play on the word *benn*, which has no English equivalent, seems sound. In place of the ambiguous interactions of the original, Heaney substitutes a more straightforwardly heterosexual dynamic, introducing an almost romantic relationship between Sweeney and the female deer.

In many respects, then, Heaney has reshaped *Buile Suibhne*, and thus its main character, to reflect his own strengths and interests as well as to conform to the exigencies of poetry in English. It may be, though, that the points of resistance, where Heaney seems to suppress aspects of the original text, are the most telling reflections of Sweeney's influence upon him. Derrida reminds us that a specter must be conjured, in an action that is often "meant to conjure away. One must, magically, chase away a specter," but in doing so we end up in pursuit of the very thing that we seek to banish (141). If Heaney conjured up the figure of Sweeney, a revenant of Ireland's nearly-forgotten past, in order to exploit, as Vendler argues, the liberation afforded by "metaphors of flight and

exile,” (91) then there were other aspects of the poet-king that he needed to try to conjure away, notably the interrelated dangers that attachment to Sweeney would lead to further entanglements in the past, in interpersonal and communal relationships, and in guilt itself.

Archaeologist Christine Finn writes in *Past Poetic* that Heaney’s poetry initially displays “more obvious earlier links between things and places” (she includes examples from all of his books through *Field Work*), but in *The Haw Lantern* and afterwards takes a more ambiguous and post-modern approach that “leaves both literary and archaeological evidence open to constant re-interpretation” (111-112). It would be unfair to Heaney to suggest that his use of, for instance, the bog people is unambiguous or monological. The controversy over these poems, especially in *North*, with many critics accusing the poet of condoning or aestheticizing violence while others rise with equal fury to his defense¹², illustrates the multiple interpretations possible of these poems and of their exploration of archaeological remains. Nonetheless, many commentators have noted that Heaney’s poetry in recent years seems to move, as Finn puts it, “out of the soil and into the air,” (113) with a concomitant lifting of the weight of history. Finn does not explore how this change takes effect, but the two books left unmentioned in the chronology of Heaney’s work given above – *Sweeney Astray* and *Station Island* – inhabit the space of the transition.

We have seen how Heaney’s identification with Sweeney as a fellow exiled and guilty Ulster poet required him to reshape the mythical king of the Dál nAraide in his own image, and thus to suppress, to some extent, the otherness and sexual ambiguity of a voice far separated from his in time. Even the title of the work demonstrates this tendency. As a *buile*, this story is an example of a recognized literary genre in medieval

Ireland, in which madness is the price of ecstatic vision¹³. Common translations of the word include ‘frenzy’ and ‘madness,’ but also ‘vision,’ suggesting a concept dense with culturally-specific intersections of meaning and thus difficult to translate. In choosing *Sweeney Astray* for the title of his version, Heaney saps some of the strength of the original, converting, as Barbara Hardy argues of his use of Sweeney in *Station Island*, “wildness into mildness” (158). To be ‘astray’ is to have wandered off the path, to have lost one’s way, perhaps to be, as Denis Donoghue suggests, a bit “daft or simpleminded” (29). These meanings conform well to a common late twentieth-century view of poets as eccentric yet harmless creatures, and thus represent a take on Sweeney that should feel familiar to many of Heaney’s readers. ‘Astray’ does not convey the force of *buile*, nor does it give readers any indication that this work partakes of established literary conventions belonging to an alien culture and a different time. And yet flashes of fierce strangeness do emerge in Heaney’s version, as when Sweeney curses a woman for eating his watercress:

As you snatched cress, may you be snatched
by the foraging, blue-coated Norse.
And live eaten by remorse.
And cursing God that our paths crossed. (50)

The diatribe seems wildly out of proportion to the woman’s offense, a result perhaps of Sweeney’s anxiety about gender, while reference to the blue-coated Norsemen, conventional in medieval Irish literature, makes no concessions to a modern audience unfamiliar with the association. Throughout *Sweeney Astray*, Heaney seems to be feeling his way toward engaging with a figure from the past without becoming mired in history,

for as his earlier poetry has shown, identity politics based on self-serving versions of history have had devastating consequences in Northern Ireland. His own subject provides his best clue, for as Eugene O'Brien argues, "the deracinated figure of Sweeney allows Heaney to achieve precisely this disruption [of identity politics], as Sweeney has an attachment to his territory and yet transcends it at the same time" (158). This is a model that Heaney will attempt to emulate in *Station Island*, where he confronts history more directly yet also seeks to fly free of it.

Another aspect of Heaney's attempt to avoid the dangers of entanglement is his diminishment of what Nagy has identified as the "engaged" aspect of *Buile Suibhne*. By downplaying the extent to which Sweeney is consistently engaged in dialogue with those around him, Heaney is able to depict the poet as a solitary figure removed from communal demands. Certainly this stance is suggested by the original text, as Sweeney's abandonment of his people and of his role as king is a crucial element of the tale. As we have seen, however, it is at odds with the structure of *Buile Suibhne*, which insistently puts prose and poetry in dialogue with each another, and with the nature of Sweeney himself, a consistently threshold being who occupies the boundaries amid kingdoms and churches, negotiates between nature and artifice, and produces most of his poetry in the course of engagement with others. Heaney's struggle with this aspect of *Buile Suibhne* expresses itself in some of the awkwardness of *Sweeney Astray*. Having stripped down the prose so that it is no longer a balanced partner of the poetry, Heaney is left with a prosaic narrative that feels clumsy at times, and also stands as an atrophied sign of the formal strangeness of the source text. Further, Heaney employs some of his least felicitous phrasing in the course of Sweeney's conversations with other characters, which

often include jarring commonplaces like “judge not and you won’t be judged,” (49) and “Aren’t you the early bird?” (76). Still, one of the lyrical high points of the work comes in the course of Sweeney’s conversation with his wife Eorann, as he reproves her for taking a new lover:

Sweeney: Restless as wingbeats
of memory, I hover
above you, and your bed
still warm from your lover.

Remember when you played
the promise-game with me?
Sun and moon would have died
if ever you lost your Sweeney!

But you have broken trust,
unmade it like a bed—
not mine in the dawn frost
but yours, that he invaded.

Eorann: Welcome here, my crazy dote,
my first and last and favourite!
I am easy now, and yet I wasted
at the cruel news of your being bested. (26)

The duet reaches a gentle conclusion as the couple reconcile yet relinquish their relationship, and the moment stays in the memory. Sweeney's reflexive hostility toward women, evident in his initial accusations, is tempered in the course of the dialogue, and eventually he accepts that his path, "cold and hard as stone," (27) is his alone, while Eorann is right to choose a new life with a new husband. This successful lyric conversation anticipates the much more serious engagement with dialogue that Heaney will make in *Station Island*.

Finally, the question of the nature and extent of Sweeney's guilt forms a third locus of tension in Heaney's translation, but here the more alienated stance of *Sweeney Astray* works to intensify and personalize the feeling. As Foster argues, Heaney has taken his main character "toward a modern melancholy and anxiety," (3) betraying a fascination that Conor Johnston suggests is "indicative of the poet's attempt to come to terms with the guilt he felt about the move from Ulster" (72). Because Sweeney's interpersonal connections are de-emphasized, the objective and external causes for the former king's sense of guilt concomitantly diminish, leaving him instead with a primarily internal landscape of recrimination haunted by dreams, ghosts, and memories of his lost past. Heaney's version offers, then, a guiltier Sweeney, but strangely one with smaller cause for self-reproach, as the following characteristic stanza from the end of section 67 illustrates:

Cóir cía roghuibhinn-si olc,	I have deserved all this:
mor n-oidhchi rolinges loch,	night-vigils, terror,
mór do rosgaibh ban mbáidhe	flittings across water,

doradus fo eccaoine.

women's cried-out eyes.

--(O'Keeffe 130)

--(Heaney 73)

Sweeney's claim that he has "deserved all this," which appears several times in Heaney's text, translates somewhat loosely the Irish line *Cóir cía roghuibhinn-si olc*. The word *cóir* is usually rendered as 'right' or 'fitting,' which would yield a first line closer to 'It is right that I have gotten evil,' suggesting more a clear-eyed acceptance of fate, a trust that what has happened is just, than an emphasis on Sweeney's status as a penitent who has deserved his punishment. Curiously, though, the remainder of Heaney's stanza decontextualizes Sweeney's guilt by equating syntactically the women's teary eyes with the night terrors and restless flittings that constitute the bird-man's penance. The Irish, on the other hand, makes it clear that Sweeney has *caused* the women's lamentation, rather than simply being afflicted by it as a part of his punishment. In the third and fourth lines of the stanza, the only verb, *doradus*, is the first person singular of *do-beir* 'to give/bring,' and thus it supplies also the grammatical subject of these lines: it is Sweeney who has brought lamentation to the drenched eyes of grieving women. Heaney's stanza elides this causal relationship and diminishes the connection between Sweeney and the weeping women, probably inhabitants of his former kingdom, thereby eliminating a clear, external cause for recrimination. Sweeney must be guilty of something, as he acknowledges that he has deserved his punishment, but the "why and the wherefore," promised at the beginning of the text, has slipped away. This slippage, evident throughout *Sweeney Astray*, moves the title character in the direction of being an enigmatic and empty signifier of an existential guilt that has no referent or obvious cause,

a tendency latent in *Buile Suibhne*, to be sure, but there balanced by Sweeney's more consistent engagement with those around him.

Without an immediate external cause for Sweeney's feelings of guilt¹⁴, the fault appears to lie in the nature of the character himself and particularly in his status as a poet, of which the many self-referential lines in the verse remind readers. At this point, the similarity between Heaney's interest in the figure of Sweeney and Flann O'Brien's becomes evident. As we have seen, the Sweeney of *At Swim-Two-Birds* serves as an exemplar of the criminality inherent in the act of writing, and yet he is also a hollow target for accusation; his mind, at the last, "is but a shell" (217). In the showcase trial of the seedy Trellis, himself an iteration or avatar of Sweeney, O'Brien makes explicit the link between the transgressiveness of the author and plagiarism, the most unequivocal form of the appropriation of the words and experiences of others that characterizes all writing. For both Heaney and O'Brien, the choice of Sweeney as the figure to personify this sense of authorial guilt reenacts the cause and condition of that originaive fault, which is also the condition of authorship, for it is a clear appropriation from the literary tradition of a voice that is very much "other." The ultimate emptiness of the figure, though, the lack of any stable, original author to anchor and authenticate Sweeney's story, suggests a way out of the authorial bind, through the citationality inherent in language.

Some of the tension or perhaps resistance that one senses in *Sweeney Astray* may be attributable to the extent of Sweeney's otherness, for despite the critical focus on Heaney's identification with the character, there are marked differences in sensibility between the author and his chosen alter ego. These differences may usefully be sketched

through recourse to what Rand Brandes has identified as Heaney's affinity for the "scribal function," a role contrapuntal to the "author function" as elucidated by Foucault. Brandes suggests that Heaney has strong "cultural, aesthetic, and ascetic connections with the ancient monastic scribes of Ireland, represented by figures such as Moling," (47), noting that scribes, cloisters, illuminated manuscripts, and the physical materials of the craft of writing provide the poet with a significant set of images and metapoetic tropes used throughout his verse. Further, and perhaps more importantly, Brandes argues that the "scribal function" provides a crucial aesthetic and ideological model for Heaney: "The scribe rejects pop culture and believes in the continuity of history and tradition; he turns to the past," but he is "a maker and not a creator.... [He] inscribes his name on a text not as sole creator, but in the awareness that he is only part of a larger literary and historical activity" (48-49). By conceiving of himself in the role of a scribe, Brandes argues, "the poet reduces the egocentrism that accompanies the ownership of the text," thus finding some relief from poststructuralist 'ambivalence toward notoriety' and anxiety about authorship (49). These impulses seem inherent in Heaney's decision to take on a translation of *Buile Suibhne*, for the task involves both the citation of a voice from the past and the relinquishment of any notion of sole, authentic authorship, which the translator must share with everyone involved in the long textual history of Sweeney's tale, including not only the unknown medieval author or authors of the tale, but also O'Keeffe, to whose edition Heaney had recourse, and other modern authors who have previously translated parts of *Buile Suibhne*¹⁵.

The potential for conflict arises, however, when Heaney engages in the scribal task of translating *Buile Suibhne*, for the main character, with whom he would like to

identify, is the avowed enemy of the monastic scribes and reaches only an uneasy accommodation even with Moling at the end. Heaney puts himself in the difficult position of inhabiting imaginatively the figures of both the assiduous, workmanlike scribe and the soaring, liberated poet. As Brandes notes, the relationship is further complicated by the fact that the scribe is not only Sweeney's nemesis, but is also the very threshold through which he must pass if his stories and poems are to move into the medium of writing and survive for future generations (52). Heaney, like the anonymous monk who composed *Buile Suibhne*, makes himself into such a threshold, allowing Sweeney to pass through into his English and to reach a new readership thereby, but only in the shape that Heaney gives him. Inevitably, the passage (like all written passages) is partial and provisional, and marked by sites of resistance. In Heaney's text, Sweeney walks with Moling to the door of his church but dies on the threshold, leaning his shoulders against the jamb (86). Likewise, the Sweeney who preexisted the written text of *Buile Suibhne*, whether he was a single, historical figure, a compilation of poems and stories from the oral tradition, or even just one monk's idea of a legendary poet, did not fully pass through into the regime of the written mark. Rather, what we have in *Buile Suibhne* and in subsequent versions like *Sweeney Astray* is a textual trace, a ghost, mediated by writing and marked by the particularities of each threshold through which it has traveled. If in *Sweeney Astray* we see moments of tension or awkwardness in the translation, it may be that at these points the ghost is bumping up against the jamb, resisting the shape of the passage through which Heaney would bring it.

These sites of apparent resistance in Heaney's translation of *Buile Suibhne* may delineate the areas where his interaction with the main character is ultimately the most

fruitful. In many ways the scribal exercise of producing *Sweeney Astray* seems to have prepared the poet for the writing of *Station Island*, especially the “Sweeney Redivivus” section, considered by Helen Vendler among other critics the finest result of Heaney’s interest in *Buile Suibhne* (92). The first two sections of *Station Island* contain significant traces of Sweeney’s influence as well, and the volume as a whole faces squarely the issues that *Sweeney Astray* seems at times to evade, including entanglement in history and community, the dialogic and engaged aspects of the poet’s work, and the overriding guilt and anxiety of authorship. Their overt emergence in *Station Island*, and their dramatization in the direct and confrontational form of the Dantéesque purgatorial journey that constitutes the book’s central sequence, suggest that Heaney was well aware of these latent issues as he labored to translate *Buile Suibhne*, and further that the figure of Sweeney may have not only provoked him to face them openly, but also shown him a way to do so without becoming hopelessly mired in their contradictory demands.

Numerous traces betray Sweeney’s presence throughout the substratum of *Station Island*. In the lyrics that make up the first part of the book, the bird-king is never mentioned by name, but his feathers can be glimpsed behind the many images of flight, whether of birds, bats, or, memorably, the weighty childhood toy in the poem “A Kite for Michael and Christopher.” More explicitly, “Widgeon,” although dedicated to Paul Muldoon (like Heaney, a frequent and accomplished translator) seems to make self-referential allusion to *Sweeney Astray*. This brief poem depicts a hunter cleaning the body of a badly shot bird. He has found the voice box in its mangled throat:

and blew upon it

unexpectedly

his own small widgeon cries. (48)

The image recalls, surely, Heaney's ventriloquism of Sweeney's own birdsong while leaving open a crucial ambiguity: whose voice is heard when the mechanism of speech, whether a voice box or a narrative structure, is appropriated by another?

The clearest Sweeney reference in Part One occurs in the final poem of the section, "The King of the Ditchbacks." Readers familiar with the introduction to *Sweeney Astray* will immediately connect this countryside king with Sweeney, recalling Heaney's remark that "the green spirit of the hedges embodied in Sweeney had first been embodied for me in the persons of a family of tinkers, also called Sweeney, who used to camp in the ditchbacks along the road to the first school I attended" (viii). Ditchbacks, the green, earthen banks separating rural fields from the roadways, are a feature of Ireland's modern agricultural landscape, not of the woodlands that would have dominated in the early medieval period, but as we have seen, Heaney's process of imaginative identification with Sweeney involves associating the *geilt* with the familiar topography of today's Northern Ireland. The identification of the title figure with Sweeney is strengthened by his description as a restless, alert observer of nature:

He lives in his feet
and ears, weather-eyed,
all pad and listening,
a denless mover. (56)

The structure of the poem, too, recalls *Buile Suibhne*'s prosimetric pattern, for Part I features short-lined quatrains reminiscent of the early Irish metrical forms, albeit unrhymed; Part II introduces a meditative prose narrative, unusual in Heaney's poetry but

of course evocative of the prose sections in Sweeney's tale; and Part III returns to poetry with a closing sequence of unrhymed couplets.

"King of the Ditchbacks" is, as Conor Johnston argues, a "poem of calling" (78). Alluding to Sweeney himself and to the text that Heaney translated, it casts the titular king as "a figure of the artist," and depicts him enticing the poet to follow him into the alluring darkness beyond the hedges of the visible. The language of the verse confirms that here is another frequentation of our by-now-familiar specter:

I am haunted
by his stealthy rustling,
the unexpected spoor,
the pollen settling. (56)

Because such visitations are characterized by repetition, their spoor is instantly recognizable; because they involve an eruption of the uncanny, they are, over and over again, "unexpected," as are their issue, the poet's own small widgeon cries.

Part II finds the poet recalling in prose his memories of the ditchback king: "I was sure I knew him. The time I'd spent obsessively in that upstairs bringing myself close to him.... He was depending on me as I hung out on the limb of a translated phrase" (57). The passage is nicely evocative of the interdependence between translator and source text, for as the poet hangs precariously on a translated phrase (such as those in Heaney's own translation of *Buile Suibhne*), so too does Sweeney depend on him, in both senses of the word. The precarious nature of this arrangement seems to send the poet's mind turning back recursively to childhood terrors, as he recalls fearing violent death and lying "awake in darkness a wall's breadth from the troubled hoofs" (57). Having

acknowledged these fears, the poet determines to follow Sweeney, demonstrating a stealth learned from the bird-king and declaring with confidence that he “had been vested for this calling” (57). Part III finds the poet donning hunting camouflage that is also a poet’s crown of laurels, peering through the leafy twigs:

so my vision was a bird’s
 at the heart of a thicket

 and I spoke as I moved
 like a voice from a shaking bush. (58)

His eyesight and perspective have become aligned with Sweeney’s, while the poet’s confidence in his voice prompts an almost arrogant simile recalling the voice of God from the burning bush. The poem concludes with the triumphant acceptance of a fate not unlike that of the king of the Dál nAraide, as the poet affirms, in another Biblical echo, that he has become “a rich young man / leaving everything he had / for a migrant solitude” (58).

Following the assertive identification of the poet with Sweeney that closes the first section, Part Two, “Station Island” itself, at last addresses frontally many of the issues that were elided in *Sweeney Astray*. The narrator casts himself in the role of a penitent undertaking the venerable Lough Derg pilgrimage on Station Island in County Donegal, a purgatorial conceit that allows for a number of dream encounters with what Heaney calls in his notes to the poem “familiar ghosts” (122). These ghosts include Irish literary figures who have influenced Heaney (Sweeney, of course, but also William Carleton, Patrick Kavanagh, and James Joyce) as well as deceased friends, family

members, and victims of Northern Ireland's sectarian violence. These often-grim encounters allow the poet to dramatize his struggle with the crushing self-doubt and guilt that arise from his sense of conflict between the poetic vocation and the competing claims of communal, religious, historical, and political responsibility. "The emotional trajectory of this process," as Sammy Crawford Greer argues, "is downward, ever more deeply and darkly into self-inculcation and artistic despair ... until the turn, in the middle of the ninth section, toward the transcendence that characterizes the final part of the sequence" (107). The poet's heady decision to descend into these depths, as well as his eventual transcendence of them, reveal that he has learned the lessons of engagement as well as of flight from his medieval forerunner. Many dimensions of the poet's journey in "Station Island" have been thoroughly explored by Greer, Vendler, Maureen Waters, Carolyn Meyers, and other critics. My intent, therefore, is not to attempt a comprehensive reading of the poem, but rather to focus on those aspects most relevant to my analysis of Sweeney's significance in Heaney's work.

The first section of "Station Island" opens with "a hurry of bell-notes" ringing in the hushed morning air (61), recalling the clanging of Ronán's bell at the start of *Buile Suibhne*. The poet's initial encounter is with Simon Sweeney, head of the family of tinkers mentioned in Heaney's introduction to *Sweeney Astray*, and thus already a figure analogous to Sweeney. This connection to the poet-king is strengthened by two significant details in the description of the tinker. First, he holds his bow-saw "stiffly up like a lyre," indicating that he too is a figure of the poet. Second, he is a "Sabbath-breaker," at work in the fields of a Sunday morning while the pilgrims begin their devotions, and thus he shares the ambivalence if not outright hostility toward Christian

religious practice displayed by the protagonist of *Buile Suibhne*. His parting advice as the poet joins the penitential pilgrims on Station Island is to avoid entanglement in community and in religious observance: “Stay clear of all processions!” (63). This counsel is in keeping with Heaney’s depiction of the poet-king in *Sweeney Astray* as a figure always in flight, always escaping from and severing bonds of responsibility and connection. Crucially, the poet here disregards the warning, setting his feet upon the path of pilgrimage and thereby accepting engagement with his community and with the tangled history of Catholic practice in Ireland. By stationing Sweeney as a door-warden at the bounds of Station Island, Heaney indicates his debt to the figure, as well as the extent to which his connection to *Buile Suibhne* helped to set him on a path that culminated in the writing of *Station Island*.

The procession joined, the poet begins his descent into what Conor Johnston describes as “the private purgatory of doubt and guilt which, for Heaney, centers primarily on the conflict between the poet’s relationship to calling and to community” (80). It may seem counterintuitive to consider the possibility that Sweeney’s influence has pushed him in this direction, for as we have seen much of Heaney’s initial attraction to the bird-king involved qualities antithetical to the downward movement of “Station Island,” such as his association with flight, disengagement, and exile. This apparent contradiction is the mark of the double nature of haunting. Derrida reminds us in *Specters of Marx* of the split force of the genitive:

But the specters *of* Marx come on stage from the other side. They are named according to the other path of the genitive—and this other grammar says more than grammar. The specters *of* Marx are also his. They are

perhaps first of all the ghosts that inhabited him, the revenants with which Marx himself will have been occupied... (142)

Similarly, while Heaney may have conjured up the shade of Sweeney in order to avail himself of the poet-king's congenial aspects as a figure of the artist, inevitably Sweeney bears within him the specters that the author of *Buile Suibhne* was unable to conjure away. *Buile Suibhne*, as we have seen, is a twelfth-century tale haunted by the events of the seventh century, not only the political realignments occasioned by the historical battle of Magh Rath but also the monumental shift from a predominantly oral, pagan culture to a Christian, literate one. The figure of Sweeney incorporates these unresolved tensions in his shifting, liminal nature as well as in his hybrid positioning with respect to the multiple dichotomies generated within the text of *Buile Suibhne*. Heaney, then, may have called upon Sweeney to emphasize the possibilities of flight, but the bird-king's presence inevitably recalls the cultural, religious, and historical tensions that precipitated his flight in the first instance. By working to suppress in his translation certain uncomfortable specters of *Buile Suibhne* relating to historical specificity, engagement in religion and community, and artistic responsibility, Heaney only intensified their power to haunt. He emphasizes his awareness of this dynamic through his explicit placement of Sweeney at the gates of Station Island. In the poetic sequence to come, he will give full attention to the shades that have haunted Sweeney as well as himself.

Having started the poet on his journey, Sweeney recedes, leaving him to face its horrors alone. The poet reaches his lowest point in a nightmare vision in section IX, in which he imagines himself adrift on loathsome night waters:

I dreamt and drifted. All seemed to run to waste

As down a swirl of mucky, glittering flood
 Strange polyp floated like a huge corrupt
 Magnolia bloom, surreal as a shed breast,
 My softly awash and blanching self-disgust. (85)

Through this confrontation with the worst that he fears in himself, expressed in the grotesquely maternal image of a “shed breast,” he is able to begin the process of atonement, crying out: “I repent / My unweaned life that kept me competent / To sleepwalk with connivance and mistrust” (85). At this, a lighted candle rises from the polyp of self-disgust, and with the appearance of this upright phallic image the whole strange structure rights itself and finds a course: “No more adrift / My feet touched bottom and my heart revived” (85).

His spirit thus refreshed (and masculinity reaffirmed), the poet wakes in section X to the comforting morning sounds of coffee pot, fireplace, and water pump, and the imagery of *Buile Suibhne* returns to him. Recalling a familiar old mug transformed through its use in a play into the loving cup over which a couple plights their troth, the poet aligns it imaginatively with the psalter of St. Ronán:

Dipped and glamoured from this translation,
 it was restored with all its cornflower haze

 still dozing, its parchment glazes fast —
 as the otter surfaced once with Ronan’s psalter
 miraculously unharmed, that had been lost
 a day and a night under lough water. (87)

As Greer argues, this moment constitutes the poet's epiphany, his realization that "as imaginative utterance gave the mug new meaning and vitality, so may his art reveal potential by envisioning historical circumstance in its symbolic context" (112).

Envisioning this artistic transformation as a translation, the poet gestures not only to the parchment of Ronán's psalter but also to Heaney's own translation of *Buile Suibhne*.

This creates an appropriately ambiguous image of the miraculous, drawing on Ireland's literary tradition in an attempt to imagine its artistic future, but doing so at a tangent, focusing not on the expected metaphor of Sweeney as artist but rather on the psalter, the aesthetic object itself and also a symbol of Sweeney's foe, the early Catholic church. In depicting the saint praising "God on the lough shore" (88) for this revelation of the impossible, Heaney demonstrates not only his own affinity for the scribal, but also his understanding of the hybridity inherent to the nature of the poet in *Buile Suibhne*.

Sweeney is the miraculous maker whose song transforms hardship into transcendence, but the saints too are agents of miracle, and are more deeply implicated in the bird-king's poetry than Heaney perhaps wished to acknowledge in *Sweeney Astray*. Recognizing, as Michael Patrick Gillespie argues, "that one does not become an artist by fleeing from all or even most of the cultural accoutrements of his culture," (121) Heaney's narrator embraces the culturally embedded story of Ronán's psalter as the symbol of his revelation. Simultaneously, he insures that he will be able to draw upon history without become enmeshed in it by capitalizing on the multiple ambiguities generated by the choice of Ronán rather than Sweeney, by the very different forms of Catholic belief represented by the early Irish saint as opposed to the modern-day penitential practice on

Station Island, and finally by the historical slipperiness of *Buile Suibhne* itself, which as we have seen is at once authentic and inauthentic, original and derivative.

The sense of release and of freedom that the poet feels, having made it through his ordeal, is emphasized in section XII, as the shade of James Joyce urges him to “Let go, let fly, forget” (93). There is an obvious irony in the placement of this call for forgetfulness in the mouth of Joyce, a figure from the past who is now deeply entrenched in the Irish literary tradition, and who of course built his novels out of his own remembrance of Dublin. The overall sense of the poet’s revelation, and of his challenge, is not simply to forget the past, religion, community, obligation, but to remake these givens of life experience through the transformative power of art without becoming immobilized in doubt and guilt. Heaney again indicates that he has found a successful model for this process in *Buile Suibhne* by following his pilgrim’s triumph in “Station Island” with the “Sweeney Redivivus” sequence of poems.

Helen Vendler senses a feeling of relief and liberation in Heaney’s adoption of the Sweeney persona (99), while Johnston notes that the poems of “Sweeney Redivivus” present Heaney’s voice “relatively unencumbered by the concerns he voiced in ‘Station Island’” (87). The title poem of the sequence indicates that it follows directly from the imagery and concerns of “Station Island,” for Sweeney first appears emerging from underwater, even as the pilgrim-poet was submerged in night water and Ronán’s psalter in the depths of the lough:

I stirred wet sand and gathered myself
to climb the steep-flanked mound,
my head like a ball of wet twine

dense with soakage, but beginning
to unwind. (98)

Having survived the iconic journey beneath the waters, his voice merging with that of the poet, Sweeney begins to lighten and unwind, recognizing in himself and, crucially, in his story, the workings of miracle:

And there I was, incredible to myself,
among people far too eager to believe me
and my story, even if it happened to be true. (98)

Here Sweeney becomes, like the rescued psalter, a figure of the transformation of the ordinary into the miraculous through the power of story, which bears an ambivalent and perhaps unknowable relationship to historical truth.

Although the “Sweeney Redivivus” poems introduce a new tone and vocabulary to Heaney’s work – Vendler notes that “scope, neuter, emptiness, whim,” (100) emerge as key terms in the sequence – they bear little resemblance to the poet’s voice in the medieval *Buile Suibhne*. Rather, they represent the new scope opened for Heaney’s own “widgeon” voice as a result of his willingness to let the specters of Sweeney speak within himself. Darcy O’Brien suggests that “the controlling, overriding metaphor,” of Heaney’s early books, “that of digging into things, had culminated in the bog people and was used up” (178). Though Heaney’s engagement with Sweeney pushed him to dig into the depths one last time, confronting in “Station Island” more directly than ever before the communal, historical, and religious responsibilities of the artist, the figure of Sweeney also helped to show him the way up and out, in part by suggesting the generative possibilities of emptiness. As we saw in our analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds*,

the character Sweeney seems to embody the possibility of a radical de-centering, which works to uncouple history from the notion of a stable, authoritative grounding point. Seamus Heaney, like Flann O'Brien, seems to have found this model liberating, discovering in it a way to engage with and even repeat history without becoming hopelessly ensnared in its net¹⁶. In this way, then, the voice of Sweeney, which in *Station Island* Heaney has allowed to speak within himself by internalizing and confronting its specters, offers the poet a surprising form of redress – a release from the dust of the past that does not require an unconscionable forgetting. “On the Road,” the final poem of “Sweeney Redivivus” and thus of *Station Island*, finds the poet examining the rock paintings at the caves of Lascaux and imagining a regeneration that would transcend the dust of history without forgetting it, discovering new possibilities in an image of an empty source:

For my book of changes
I would meditate that stone-faced vigil

until the long dumbfounded
spirit broke cover

to raise a dust
in the font of exhaustion. (121)

Notes to Chapter Three

¹ Nicholas Howe thoughtfully analyzes the effects of Heaney's use of Ulster expressions in "Scullionspeak" in *The New Republic* 222, no. 9 (28 February 2000): 32-37.

² I have followed Heaney's usage throughout this chapter, referring to our hero as "Sweeney," in order to emphasize the multiple iterations of the character Suibhne/Sweeny/Sweeney that we are dealing with.

³ In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I too have met Heaney and had a drink with him together with several of my undergraduate classmates in a Dublin pub circa 1992. He was indeed kind and generous to join us, but I fear our conversation turned more on porter than on poetry, and my personal recollections are minimally relevant to my analysis of his work, beyond a general flush of good will.

⁴ My articulation of this general concern about the state of Heaney criticism is not meant to suggest that there has not been much good and useful work in this field. Helen Vendler's *Seamus Heaney* has been extremely helpful to me in this project, as has Malloy and Carey's *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*.

⁵ See pages 39-40 for the Irish version and for my prose translation.

⁶ Again, I have given the Irish version and my prose translation previously on pages 43-44.

⁷ Sweeney is not the only speaker of poetry in tale; he is not even the first. The initial poem is made by Ronán and features the saint's curse upon Sweeney.

⁸ O'Brien's version in *At Swim-Two-Birds* is far more playful than O'Keeffe's, pushing the "literal" transference of Irish tropes and syntax almost to the point of parody. It is great fun, but its peculiarity and humor overshadow the beauty of the poetry. Here, for example, is O'Brien's version of two of Sweeney's quatrains in praise of Glen Bolcain:

Good its water greenish-green
 good its clean strong wind,
 good its cress-green cresses,
 best its branching brooklime.

Good its sturdy ivies,
 good its bright neat sallow,
 good its yewy yew-yews,
 best its sweet-noise birch. (78-79)

⁹ See page 54 for the Irish and my translation.

¹⁰ On the necessarily partial nature of translation, see Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹¹ Williams and Ford suggest that "the earliest [Irish] poetic forms were devoid of rhyme and rhythm and depended exclusively upon simple alliteration as a device to link small groups of words to each other" (79).

¹² Among the accusers are Ciaran Carson, Edna Longley, Conor Cruise O'Brien, and David Lloyd; Eugene O'Brien devotes his book *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2002) to defending Heaney against their charges.

¹³ Proinsias Mac Cana cites five examples of tales of the *buile* type, in addition to *Buile Suibhne*. Noting that all but one have ecclesiastical associations, he comments "the term itself is old, but its extended use to denote a category of tales may well be a late development" (75). By the time that *Buile Suibhne* was compiled, in the final flowering of Ireland's monastic literary tradition, this development would have been fully established.

¹⁴ The stated cause for Sweeney's madness and exile, in *Sweeney Astray* as in *Buile Suibhne*, is of course his enmity with Ronán. This is, if anything, even less convincing in Heaney's version than in the Irish text, for Heaney depicts Sweeney as the consistent enemy of the established church that the saint represents, without the mitigating entanglements built into the structure of *Buile Suibhne*, such as Sweeney's use of ecclesiastical verse forms. Toward the end of Heaney's text, Sweeney describes how he once felt about clerics:

There was a time when I preferred
 wolf-packs yelping and howling
 to the sheepish voice of a cleric
 bleating out plainsong. (82)

At the time of Sweeney's death, his position does not appear to have changed greatly, nor does he seem particularly to regret his fateful attack upon the saint.

¹⁵ As Brandes points out, Heaney acknowledges prior translators of the tale through his dedication of "The King of the Ditchbacks," one of the Sweeney poems in *Station Island*, to John Montague, who has also translated sections of *Buile Suibhne*. Notably, Montague's "Sweetness" translates the poem Suibhne utters at Swim-Two-Birds and is in turn dedicated to Flann O'Brien, who omitted this section from his own translation. See Montague's *Collected Poems* (Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 1995), p. 220.

¹⁶ Inevitably, Joyce too haunts this analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR. APENECK SWEENEY'S PENITENTIAL PATH

Sweeney is a baffling person. He runs in and out poems like a naughty boy; scarcely offers an explanation of his conduct; and generally confounds critics by his bad manners and rude behaviour.

– T. H. Thompson (161)

Names are crucially important in the poetry of T. S. Eliot. The brilliant choice of J. Alfred Prufrock characterizes the protagonist of Eliot's great early poem in a single indelible stroke, while names such as Grishkin, Mr. Apollinax, and Rachel *née* Rabinovitch are likewise famously memorable. Many readers have found similarly suggestive the name of Sweeney, the main character in three of the quatrain poems and the *Sweeney Agonistes* fragments as well as a bit player in *The Waste Land*, but there has been little consensus as to what the name might actually suggest. Some have heard in it a resemblance to swine, others to swans¹. Most agree that the name denotes an Irishman, but what it connotes appears to range widely, from a stereotypically drunken Irish-Catholic brute to an appealingly unsophisticated "natural man." Nancy Hargrove argues that the name "not only has a sound which is common, prosaic, unmusical, perhaps even vulgar, but also it evokes the word 'swine' with its connotations of bestial and gross physicality, ugliness, dirtiness, and stupidity" (150). In the wake of such a damning assertion, it seems important to remember that an Irish name may have more positive connotations as well, including the tantalizing possibility that an allusion to the bird-king Suibhne is intended.

As we have seen, both Flann O'Brien and Seamus Heaney deliberately and explicitly evoke and name the medieval King Suibhne as a figure of the artist. He

functions in their work in ways both authoritative and liberating, providing the traditional grounding of a literary ancestor while also exploiting the generative smashing of tradition that Benjamin saw as an effect of repetition. This freeing effect, which is closely related to Derrida's formulation of the break with context engendered by citation, is of signal importance in O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, where it becomes the structural principle that allows characters from different times, genres, and narrative levels to interact without limit or center. At the same time, however, citation invokes the inevitable specter of the plagiarist, the guilty and suffering author whose haunting of O'Brien's novel finds expression in the text's obsession with the mutilated human body. For Seamus Heaney, the bird-king functions primarily as a figure of flight, providing a model of an artist who has broken decisively with his social, religious, and historical context. While Suibhne's influence does help Heaney's poetry to find a new, upward trajectory, it also generates a countervailing pull back into the Irish literary tradition and into the contentious history of Northern Ireland, ultimately helping the poet to confront these forces directly in the dramatic "Station Island" sequence. In the work of both O'Brien and Heaney, Suibhne's presence may have had unintended consequences, as the disruptive force of citation can never be wholly controlled, but the character's symbolic and structural functions are evident and clearly related to tendencies observable in *Buile Suibhne* as well.

The case of T.S. Eliot's enigmatic character Sweeney is quite different. While a few critics have connected the sometimes-loutish Sweeney with the hero of *Buile Suibhne*, their relationship is not readily apparent, nor is there any evidence that Eliot knew the medieval Irish text². Further, Suibhne is only one of the many possible models for the character that have been identified. In the course of arguing for his own preferred

candidate, a banjo player named Joel Walker Sweeney who helped to popularize minstrel music in England, David Chinitz lists the other contenders as follows: “a Boston pugilist; a London pub-keeper; a St. Louis physician; King Suibhne, the mad hero of a Middle-Irish romance; Sweeney Todd, the ‘demon barber’ of English melodrama” (106). Eliot himself declined to select from among this rogues’ gallery, never identifying a source for his character. Much has been made of his remark to Nevill Coghill that he thinks of Sweeney, “as a man who in younger days was perhaps a professional pugilist, mildly successful; who then grew older and retired to keep a pub,” but this comment, made in response to the question, “who *is* Sweeney? How do you see him?” (Coghill 119) sounds much more like an elaboration of a character’s fictional backstory than the identification of a real-world source. In any case, Eliot was never particularly forthcoming about the genesis of his characters. Hugh Kenner reports, for instance, that the poet disclaimed any conscious knowledge of the St. Louis furniture wholesale company, named Prufrock-Littau, which is generally agreed to have suggested his most famous character name (3).

It appears unlikely that there will be any definitive confirmation of a single source for the character Sweeney, but this has not stopped a number of critics from proposing their own favored candidates. This does not always seem to be a particularly productive critical enterprise. The discovery of the Prufrock-Littau company is an interesting bit of trivia, but it contributes little or nothing to our understanding of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” Likewise, even if it could be established convincingly that Eliot based his character Sweeney on, say, his Boston-Irish boxing instructor, interpretations of the Sweeney poems probably would not change substantially. Why, then, should I enter the fray by suggesting kinship between Eliot’s Sweeney and the title character of *Buile*

Suibhne? The answer, simply put, is that the example of the medieval *Suibhne* can help us to become better readers of Eliot's Sweeney poems. The relationship between the two is not one of simple provenance but rather of structural and thematic similarity. Many of the issues that arise during analysis of *Buile Suibhne* are of great relevance to Eliot's work as well, among them the poet's relationship to tradition, the practices of citation and literary allusion, the characteristics of liminality and hybridity, and the impetus toward flight and escape. The insights gleaned from consideration of *Suibhne* will also shed light on some of the interpretative difficulties posed by the Sweeney poems. This does not necessarily prove that *Buile Suibhne* directly influenced Eliot, although I think it likely. It does, however, suggest an illuminating confluence of interests in the early twentieth century, both in 1913 when O'Keeffe's translation of *Suibhne*'s story was published in London, and several years later when Eliot began to write his Sweeney poems.

Confusion and conflict among the various interpretations of the Sweeney poems are evident in the essays collected in Kinley Roby's *Critical Essays on T. S. Eliot: The Sweeney Motif*, the most comprehensive treatment of the character to date. In his introduction, Roby argues that Sweeney cannot simply be dismissed as "a decayed version of the classic hero, the modern world's disgraceful entry in the lists of mythical heroes, a man without culture, traditions, ideals, or moral vision" (1), but many of the subsequent essays in the volume go on to do precisely that. Elizabeth Drew, in a piece excerpted here from her influential study *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry*, argues that the central point of the quatrain poems is the juxtaposition of a "uniformly stale and unsavory" present, of which Sweeney is the prime exemplar, with "the continuous

reminder of times when it was not so,” in the more glorious past captured in art and literature (41). Amplifying Drew’s notion of juxtaposition, John Ower identifies four contrasting levels of value in “Sweeney among the Nightingales,” locating Sweeney and his café companions in the lowest level as figures of “modern man’s gross materialism and spiritual degeneracy” (73). Jonathan Morse asserts that “Sweeney is physically and morally repulsive,” (137), while Nancy Hargrove finds in him a representation of “that element of humanity, and more specifically *modern* humanity, which is vulgar, physical, uneducated, and without human or spiritual values³” (149). In contrast, the collection includes several positive evaluations of Sweeney as well. Jerome Meckier notes that “Sweeney in his bath is closer to the baptized Christ than are the presbyters” in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service,” (192) and Robert DeGraaff sees Sweeney as “earthy but not unkind,” (221) an exponent of an “innocent simplicity” related to the “early, pre-theological Christian church” (222). Strikingly, there seems to be little or no common ground between the two camps, as few of the essays give serious attention to the possibility of differing evaluations. The sharp divergence of opinion extends even to what would seem to be more straightforward matters of interpretation, such as, for instance, whether Sweeney and “the man with heavy eyes” in “Sweeney among the Nightingales” are identical, or if they are two different characters⁴.

The perceived distance between the Sweeney of the poems and the title character in *Sweeney Agonistes* has presented further difficulties for critics. Many echo the complaint articulated in F. O. Matthiessen’s early and groundbreaking study, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot*: “The hero [of *Sweeney Agonistes*] is so different a character from the ‘apeneck Sweeney’ of the poems that Eliot might better have given him a

different name” (159). Why, as Carol Smith asks, did Eliot make Sweeney, “his representative of the natural man in earlier poems,” take on “the role of the penitent on the mystic path” in the unfinished play? (87). This question produces some of the starkest of interpretive differences in response, causing some readers to retroactively redeem the Sweeney of the poems in order to bring him in line with their reading of the play, some to conclude that the play is just another adumbration of Sweeney’s bestial and sterile milieu, and others to agree with Matthiessen that *Sweeney Agonistes* presents a fundamentally different character. As an illustration of the distinctly different conclusions produced by these varying approaches, consider the contrasting responses to Sweeney’s lines “I’ve been born, and once is enough / You don’t remember, but I remember, / Once is enough” (81). Sears Jayne insists that Sweeney serves as a clear Christ figure, and thus that his remark:

obviously refers to the fact that modern civilization has forgotten the sacrifice of Christ, and also to the Magi’s remembrance of the strange identity of birth and death at the nativity. One atonement, in Sweeney’s language, should have been “enough.” (112)

Despite Jayne’s assertion that his conclusion is “obvious,” directly contrasting interpretations abound, including Hugh Kenner’s argument in *The Invisible Poet* that Sweeney’s single birth is indicative of his failure to be born again; far from a Christ figure, Kenner sees him as a bestial creature who has experienced only a physical birth, not a spiritual rebirth (228).

It is by no means surprising that texts as subtle and allusive as Eliot’s Sweeney poems and dramatic fragments should produce a diversity of interpretation. If meaning in

literature were entirely transparent, after all, we would have no need for literary critics. What is striking, however, is the extreme polarization evident in criticism surrounding the figure of Sweeney. As the brief survey given above is intended to demonstrate, conclusions tend to be stated with great confidence and little room for any sort of middle ground, despite the existence of multiple opposing interpretations. Because Suibhne, with his inherently liminal and hybrid characteristics, offers the possibility of reconciliation between competing readings, he provides a useful lens through which to read Eliot's Sweeney texts.

The circumstantial case for Suibhne's relationship to Eliot's Sweeney is easily made. Eliot arrived in England in 1914, shortly after the London publication of O'Keeffe's translation of *Buile Suibhne*. There is no evidence for or against Eliot's having read O'Keeffe's text, but considering his interest in the use of mythical materials and, more generally, in the London publishing scene, it seems entirely likely that he would have. Superficial similarities between the two characters are numerous, as Herbert Knust indicates in his essay "Sweeney among the Birds and Brutes." "A general comparison," Knust argues, "reveals that both are fallen heroes, that both suffer a degeneration of their bodies, and that both are to some extent in a state of frenzy" (198). Each character, of course, is associated with birds, Suibhne through his transformation into a bird-man and Sweeney through his explicit connection to nightingales in "Sweeney among the Nightingales" and *The Waste Land* as well as to women, possibly prostitutes, in "Sweeney Erect" and *Sweeney Agonistes*⁵. Each, Knust notes, is also connected with swine, Suibhne through his death at the hands of Mongan the swineherd⁶, and Sweeney as he "shifts from ham to ham" in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" (202). Suibhne

was once a great warrior, while Sweeney, according to Nevill Coghill, was once “a professional pugilist, mildly successful” (119). Further, the nakedness that forms the substance of many of Suibhne’s laments is matched by Sweeney’s nudity in two of the four poems in which he appears (Knust 202). To Knust’s points, I would add the structural resemblance between the metrical form of the poems in *Buile Suibhne* and that of the seven quatrain poems in Eliot’s *Poems* (1920). This volume, which so prominently features Sweeney, represents the only time that the poet employed the traditional quatrain form with its short line and regular rhyme scheme. Kenner notes that Eliot’s use of quatrains reflects his interest in the poetry of Théophile Gautier, (84) as well as his desire to find “a vehicle for sudden juxtapositions” appropriate to the satiric intent of this volume (88). If Eliot did in fact know O’Keeffe’s edition of *Buile Suibhne*, he may well have been struck by the exacting yet supple quatrains used in Middle Irish poetry, providing a further impetus for his use of what was, for him, an unusually strict metrical structure.

Of more significance and interest than these surface similarities, however, are the thematic and structural relationships between *Buile Suibhne* and Eliot’s Sweeney texts. Eliot’s poetry, of course, is strikingly allusive, to the extent that the charge of plagiarism was frequently leveled against him by his early critics⁷. As Jewel Spears Brooker argues in *Mastery and Escape*, allusion functions in Eliot’s work not simply as an ornament or even as a shock tactic, but rather as a “fundamental structural dynamic.” Exploiting the fact that “an allusion is by definition a self-transcendent fragment,” he uses these fragments liberated from their context to create a poetic structure that “requires that readers be constantly shifting their vantage point—backwards, forwards, sideways—in

dimensions sometimes temporal or spatial, sometimes logical, sometimes both ... if they are to collaborate with Eliot in the poem's multicontextual technique" (88). Suibhne, as we have seen, comes to represent the very figure of citation as artistic creation, detached from his own original context and capable of "engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable," (Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 12) as for example in *Buile Suibhne*, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and *Sweeney Astray*, as well as other works featuring the character. In one of its aspects, this figure of the bird-poet represents the possibility of escape, perhaps the controlling motif of Eliot's Sweeney poems, through the release from and transcendence of context. Always though, as we have seen, "the very iterability which constituted [its] identity does not permit [it] ever to be a unity that is identical to itself"(Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 10). The figure of Suibhne, therefore, is perpetually haunted by inauthenticity, parasitical contamination, in short, the charge of plagiarism, whose sting Eliot too has felt.

Related to and perhaps emanating from this structural condition of iterability is Suibhne's status as an exile. The former king detaches from his context not only in linguistic terms but also on the narrative level. The essential condition of his emergence as a poet and a prophet is his separation from his relationships as king, warrior, husband, and comrade and his role within the community. "God has sundered me from my own shape," (*Buile Suibhne* 16) he declares, a lament that should be seen to encompass not only his physical form but also the social position that is deeply constitutive of his formulation of identity. Nevertheless, as Joseph Nagy insists, he remains "engaged⁸," interacting with members of his former community and negotiating among various competing forces such as church and state, as well as the oral and written traditions. The

example of this penitential path, in which the bird-king interacts with his old world but is no longer of it, transcends his circumstances through artistic/prophetic production but continues to feel the pain of separation from community as well as physical privation, seems to have helped to set Seamus Heaney on the road to *Station Island*. As Heaney struggled to find a way to incorporate into his art the givens of experience, in his case including the historical and political conditions of Ulster, Eliot also wrestled, as Brooker demonstrates, with the question of how to shape into poetry the material drawn from his own contemporary history and personal life (145). Laurie MacDiarmid argues in *T. S. Eliot's Civilized Savage: Religious Eroticism and Poetics*, that Eliot's poet figure repeatedly "is caught between impulses of prophecy and madness, divine inspiration and damnation," (xx) the penitent's acceptance of "repeated religious punishment" eventually finding self-transcendence in "poetic ecstasy" (98). Suibhne's example of "engaged" separation from community as the initial step on the penitent's path may help to illuminate this aspect of Eliot's work, especially in the case of Sweeney, whose assumption of a prophetic role in *Sweeney Agonistes* has proven a rich source of critical confusion.

On a more pragmatic level, reading Eliot with Suibhne in mind is useful simply because the bird-king provides a new perspective on a body of work that has been the subject of deeply entrenched critical opinion for many decades now. There are a number of assumptions about Sweeney and his milieu that are nowhere explicit in Eliot's texts but nevertheless have become received opinion in the critical literature. Sweeney is generally identified as not only Irish but Irish-American, Catholic, uneducated, and lower class. The women with whom he associates are widely assumed to be prostitutes, Mrs.

Turner's house in "Sweeney Erect" is either a brothel or at best a seedy boarding house, and the café or restaurant that sets the scene in "Sweeney Among the Nightingales" is a "low-life café," (Davidson 82) or 'low-class dive" (Hargrove 154). These responses to the Sweeney poems illustrate Christopher Ricks' observation in his important study, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice*, that Eliot's use of names is inherently prejudicial. Before one even begins to read the poem, the unforgettable title "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" invites, or perhaps incites, readers "to think and to feel our way through a prejudicial sequence" (2). Although intellectually we know that a man should not be blamed for his name, we nevertheless feel the comic possibilities in the sound of "Prufrock," assume frumpiness or pomposity in the insistence on "J. Alfred," and find the formality of the name "inimical to the thought of love's intimacy," (3) and thus quite incongruous with the first part of the title. Before we have even begun to read the poem, then, our initial reactions, formed by pre-judgment in the absence of further information, have begun to shape our response to it. Eliot's process, Ricks insists, is double, "a ministering to prejudice, but also an alerting to the fact that this, perilous yet not necessarily wrong, is what is working" (5). The workings of prejudice emerge again as a loaded name appears in the repeated lines, "In the room the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo." Critics have tended to assume that in the context of the great Renaissance artist, the women's speech must be tedious, ignorant, and trivial⁹, but as Ricks contends Eliot's phrasing is itself quite neutral, and thus this "sense of the lines is incited by prejudice—not therefore to be discounted but not to be counted upon.... For all we *know*, as against suspect (perhaps justifiably, but still), the women could be talking as invaluable as Kenneth Clark" (14). Eliot's own position in this is impossible to determine; he induces

an endlessly recursive suspicion (of the women, of the reader's own reaction to the women, and of the poet's intent) without offering any resolution.

Eliot's manipulation of the dynamics of prejudice has provoked the most outrage when the names that he uses are distinctively Jewish. The special horror of twentieth century anti-semitism, the apparent confluence of sentiment between the poetry and various insensitive statements in Eliot's prose writings, and the sheer ugliness of the prejudices expressed in poems like "Gerontion" and "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" combine to suggest that here is a type of prejudicial thinking quite different from Eliot's method in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." One clear distinction is that many of the Jewish allusions do not cagily invite speculation, like the reference to the women talking of Michelangelo, but rather encourage bigoted conclusions as in the following lines from "Burbank":

The rats are underneath the piles.

The Jew is underneath the lot.

Money in furs. (24)

While Eliot's apologists have tended to insist that the anti-Semitic sentiments in his poems are felt and expressed by his characters, such as the bitter old man in "Gerontion," rather than by the poet himself, few readers today find much excuse for such lines, which stand as a serious blot on Eliot's body of work¹⁰. The most interesting, and the most provocative, of Christopher Ricks' insights is the possibility that Eliot's anti-Semitism is not merely an aberration in the record of an otherwise great poet, but rather may be constitutive of the same prejudicial process that, unrecognized, elsewhere contributes to the effectiveness of his work¹¹.

The prejudicial technique that forms Ricks' subject is clearly at work in Eliot's Sweeney poems, although here it appears in its more neutral form, at least with respect to Sweeney's presumed Irishness, while the misogyny in the poems is often quite overt. Jonathan Morse explores what he sees as the sociological and historical context for Eliot's use of Sweeney in his essay "Sweeney, the Sites of the Irish, and *The Waste Land*." He interprets the epithet "Apeneck Sweeney," the famous opening phrase of "Sweeney among the Nightingales," as a reference to and evocation of a specific strain of nineteenth-century New England anti-Irish sentiment epitomized by the political caricatures of Thomas Nast. According to Morse, Nast's stock Irishman "is always pug-nosed, beetle-browed, and unshaven, with tiny, deep-set eyes and a wide, lipless mouth full of pointed teeth. He is, in short, an ape" (138). Fueled by both anti-Catholic prejudice and class-based disdain, given that Irish-Americans in the nineteenth century tended to be laborers, this stereotype depicted the Irishman as morally as well as physically repulsive: "he represents all that is less than human in humanity," giving bodily form to the terrifying irruption of the id (Morse 138). Although Morse acknowledges that New England anti-Irish sentiment was in sharp decline by the end of the Civil War, he believes that "the phrase 'apeneck Sweeney' demonstrates that Nast's Irishman remains psychologically alive for Eliot" (140).

Perhaps so. But it quickly becomes clear that in Morse's own analysis the prejudicial aspect that remains alive and well has little to do with nationality and everything to do with class. He represents the difficulties that readers have had with the Sweeney poems, comparable to J. Alfred Prufrock's failure to sympathize with the lonely men in shirt-sleeves, as largely a function of difference in social class:

The differences go beyond manners to physiology itself: the insignia of the lower classes which are displayed in “Preludes” (the smells of steak, at that time the cheapest meat you could buy; the beer, the dirty feet, the short square fingers stuffing pipes) are images of a bodily life fundamentally alien to consciousness.... We readers of poetry are at home in Prufrock’s world; we are uneasy tourists in Sweeney’s. (135)

Having assumed, apparently, that all readers of poetry form a single social class, Morse goes on to argue that a phrase such as “short square fingers stuffing pipes,” cited above from Eliot’s “Preludes,” “serves *our class* as a synecdoche for a complete image of a laborer, rich in connotations—say, the laborer described in Emerson’s ‘Fate’: ‘Let him value his hands and feet, he has but one pair. So he has but one future, and that is already predetermined in his lobes, and described in that little fatty face, pig-eye, and squat form’” (136; emphasis mine). While Morse expertly marshals evidence of one strain of prejudice frequently incited by Eliot’s portrayal of Sweeney and other working-class characters, he seems blind to the possibility that readers may bring an entirely different range of associations to the same images, especially considering that readers of poetry do not form the homogeneous social class that Morse imagines, and may in fact themselves be scions of the working classes. Failing to become suspicious, as Ricks insists readers of Eliot must be, of his own reactions to Sweeney’s class status, Morse also seems to miss the fact that Eliot himself does not appear to agree with at least one important aspect of the prejudiced thinking that Morse delineates. Although Sweeney certainly participates in the bodily, lower class life that Morse describes as “fundamentally alien to consciousness,” in *Sweeney Agonistes* he is also, as Nancy Hargrove acknowledges, “the

sensitive, conscious character who realizes and tries to communicate to others the essential vacuity of a world and an existence without human or spiritual values as well as the sinful nature of man and his need for redemption” (167). The poet’s willingness to give Sweeney a prophetic role seems to exceed his critics’ willingness to credit it. Hargrove goes on to argue that *Sweeney Agonistes* was abandoned as a failure in part because a lower class character was not appropriate to this role: “In subsequent plays [Eliot] continues to set a conscious character against others, but these major figures are always upper class, intelligent and educated” (167).

I have quoted Morse and Hargrove at some length because their analyses both describe and exemplify a strain of thinking, very prominent in Eliot scholarship, that is nevertheless not sufficiently suspicious, in Ricks’ terms, of its own response to the incitement to prejudice that Sweeney represents. Here the figure of Suibhne becomes a useful corrective, as it unleashes an entirely different range of associations. Perhaps most importantly, Suibhne provides a link between birds, madness or guilt, and poetry, as Lloyd Frankenberg notes in his 1949 volume *Pleasure Dome*, which makes the first sustained connection between *Buile Suibhne* and Eliot’s Sweeney that I have been able to find. Further, the bird-king casts a different light on the natural or physical life, which so many of Eliot’s critics have found to be brutish or repulsive. Suibhne’s experience of a life stripped to its bare essentials is not only productive of remarkably beautiful poetry, it is also part of a penitential path that leads him ultimately to a prophetic role with an analog in the portrayal of Sweeney in *Sweeney Agonistes*. Finally, as an exponent of the ancient Celtic lore that was eagerly revived and revisited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Suibhne calls to mind another strain of potentially prejudicial

thinking about the Irish famously formulated by Matthew Arnold in *Celtic Literature*. Given Eliot's interest in situating his poetry within a specifically literary tradition, it seems likely that Arnold's influential portrait of the sensual, passionate, melancholy Celt would have been as present an image in his mind as the nineteenth-century American formulation of the brutish Irishman. Certainly it is possible to see in Sweeney a satirical version of Arnold's Celt, stripped of sentimentalism and forced to abandon the misty woods for the stark landscape of the urban jungle.

In my consideration of Eliot's Sweeney texts, I have tried to read against the grain of the reflexively negative interpretations of the character that have carried so much weight in the critical literature, bearing in mind that the poet's incitements to prejudice invite multiple responses. Often these responses are conditioned by the carefully chosen epigraphs that are so central to Eliot's work. The first Sweeney poem¹², "Sweeney Erect," is preceded by an epigraph from Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1610), II.ii.744-747:

And the trees about me,
 Let them be dry and leafless; let the rocks
 Groan with continual surges; and behind me
 Make all a desolation. Look, look, wenches!

In this scene, the distraught heroine, Aspatia, recently deserted by her lover, instructs her ladies to take her as their model in the creation of a tapestry depicting the similarly abandoned Ariadne of Greek mythology. The epigraph thus encodes a double reference to abandonment, preparing readers to look for a similar theme in "Sweeney Erect." Further, it implies the interpenetration of two distinct timeframes, as the Renaissance

maiden proposes herself as the model for the Greek maiden whose trials long preceded her own. Finally, the citation of Ariadne's tale lends a derivative quality to Aspatia's own grief, which seeks to emulate and even outdo that suffered by Ariadne. As Jane Worthington notes, in *The Maid's Tragedy* Aspatia "lingers over the sorrows of the lovelorn," displaying "an almost voluptuous delight in grief" (238); she is not suffering an authentically personal calamity, but instead playing to the hilt a well-worn role with clear literary antecedents. This opening allusion thus illustrates the double nature of citation, as Aspatia's gesture enriches her own experience by liberating Ariadne's grief to enact multiple new resonances in the new context of Renaissance England, but also allows each woman's experience to contaminate parasitically the other's, suggesting that neither could claim that her feelings are wholly unique or authentic.

The poem opens with what appears to be a continuation of Aspatia's instructions to her maidens, as she demands "Paint me a cavernous waste shore" and describes the gales "Which tangle Ariadne's hair / And swell with haste the perjured sails," (25) no doubt the sails that carried Theseus away from Ariadne, deserted on the island Naxos. The first two stanzas are, as Charles Peake asserts, "in a style which is poetical, rhetorical and elevated," (51) a fact which should make the reader wary, although it does not appear to trouble Peake, as Eliot seldom gratifies without subversive intent his readers' desire for classically "poetical" verse. The next stanza, in clear contrast, introduces Sweeney and his bed-mate:

Morning stirs the feet and hands

(Nausicaa and Polypheme).

Gesture of orang-outang

Rises from the sheets in steam. (25)

The couple is described in extremely naturalistic terms, undercutting the heightened rhetoric of the preceding stanzas. They stir as day breaks, rising in steam that recalls a humid jungle struck by the first rays of morning sun. Sweeney awakens with “Gesture of orang-outang,” a delightful phrase in which the civilized connotations of his “gesture” contrast with the suggestion that he is apelike. The word “Orang-outang” derives from Malay *orang hutan* ‘man of the woods’; by hyphenating rather than simply writing “orangutan” Eliot emphasizes the word’s separate components and thus its derivation. Consequently, the reference reinforces the initial impression of Sweeney as a natural man, and perhaps also the connection with Suibhne, who of course is more literally a man of the woods. The parenthetical identification of the couple with lovely maiden and brutal Cyclops both maintains the parallel to Greek myth established in the first stanzas and suggests that it will soon be undercut, for the woman in the bed bears little resemblance to the beautiful Nausicaa, as the next two stanzas will illustrate. The interpenetration of time frames, introduced in the epigraph, becomes even more complex, for two reasons. First, the introduction of a “modern” couple implies the addition of a third historical period that will interact with and modify its predecessors even as it is acted upon by reference to them. Second, the standpoint of the narrative voice becomes unstable and uncertain. The opening two stanzas seem to be voiced for Aspatia, but how could she observe and comment on Sweeney and his bedmate?

The next two stanzas depict the unnamed woman in intensely physical and active terms. The numerous verbs used to describe her appearance as well as her actions suggest force and violence – “slitted,” “gashed,” “cropped,” “jackknives,” “straightens,”

“pushing,” and “clawing.” A hint of voracious sexuality is contained in the lines “Slitted below and gashed with eyes, / This oval O cropped out with teeth,” (25) which tend to conflate her mouth and genitalia. Hatred and fear of female sexuality is evident in the ugliness of these lines and in their absolute refusal to grant this woman full human status. She is described instead as a collection of body parts and movements, never as a coherent whole, a piecemeal approach that produces a disorienting and dehumanizing effect. Her frenzy, later explained by her identification as an epileptic, is in marked contrast to Sweeney’s stolidity in the following stanza:

Sweeney addressed full length to shave
 Broadbottomed, pink from nape to base,
 Knows the female temperament
 And wipes the suds around his face. (25).

Juxtaposed against the misogynistic portrayal of his companion, Sweeney is presented as a complete and unified entity, seen at full length in the mirror. Nude, his uniformly pink tone and broad bottom imply a healthy and robust physicality. The Latinate “addressed” suggests a degree of formality and intention absent from the harsh verbs that describe his erstwhile bedmate’s actions. While she frantically writhes about the bed, his only motion is to prepare for shaving, wiping the suds around his face. The smugness of the remark that he “knows the female temperament” seems to be an attempt on the part of the narrator to reassert control over the woman described with such violence in the previous stanzas. In his indifference, Sweeney plays the role of the consummate male, untroubled by feminine hysterics, but the terrified malice with which the unnamed woman is

described seems much more to Eliot's discredit than to Sweeney's, as it does not appear to emanate from the character preoccupied with his shaving.

Two stanzas later, Sweeney "Tests the razor on his leg / waiting until the shriek subsides," (26) and then he simply recedes from the poem, leaving "the ladies of the corridor" to deplore the scene. Only one character, Doris, acts to succor the woman on the bed, entering "towelled from the bath" and "padding on broad feet" (26) to bring smelling salts and brandy. If the woman truly suffers from epilepsy, and not simply hysteria as Mrs. Turner intimates, these remedies are unlikely to be of much use, but this simple act of human kindness inclines the reader favorably toward Doris and redeems, to some extent, the superciliousness of the other inmates of the house. Sweeney's inaction in the face of his bedmate's distress, on the other hand, has been judged harshly by many readers of the poem. Marie Baldridge finds that Sweeney is "burly and gross and sexually predatory, he is cruel," (48) Nancy Hargrove thinks he embodies "the worst of humanity," (156) while Grover Smith's more balanced assessment judges him merely "callous and slightly malevolent" (48). There certainly is an element of callousness and condescension in the narrator's observation that Sweeney "knows the female temperament," but far more apparent in the poem than any overt act of cruelty on Sweeney's part is his distance from his companion. The theme of abandonment generated by the epigraph and opening stanzas, the allusion to the mismatched Nausicaa and Polypheme¹³, the sharp contrast in the descriptions of the couple, Sweeney's departure from the bed in the third stanza, and his disappearance from the poem halfway through the eighth stanza contribute to an overwhelming impression of separation and escape. As Charles Peake suggests, "Sweeney is as far above the emotions which might

trouble an ordinary man in his circumstances as he is above the complaints and moral disapproval of the women in the corridor” (53). A figure of flight, he escapes his sordid circumstances, first through maintaining emotional distance, and then it seems by absenting himself from Mrs. Turner’s house. His uncaring stance is partially mitigated by his symbolic connection with Doris, who like Sweeney has just completed her morning ablutions and whose “broad” feet recall the description of his bottom. DeGraaff may overemphasize the strength of their association in asserting that “Sweeney and Doris, earthy but not unkind, become the humanized pair in the poem and stand in opposition to the over-refined or pseudo-refined ladies,” (221) but the connection does imply that Sweeney’s response to the epileptic is more pragmatic than cruel. His continued presence would likely have further offended Mrs. Turner’s moral scruples while providing little more succor than Doris’ homey remedies.

In his abandonment of the epileptic woman, Sweeney recalls the tales of Ariadne and Aspatia that opened the poem, casting himself in an unsympathetic role and, perhaps, inviting unfavorable comparison with the heroes of earlier times. Further, the connection to these famous examples of deserted women prejudices our reading of the poem, generating the impression that the otherwise unexplained epileptic fit is the result of Sweeney’s departure from the bed – an abandonment far less epic in scope. As Matthiessen has argued, however, by evoking a contrast with the literary past Eliot “is not confining himself to voicing anything so essentially limited and shallow as the inferiority of the present to the past” (34). Rather, these allusions suggest a more complex intermingling of multiple time frames¹⁴, demonstrating that the failure of love, the tragic inability of human beings to connect, and the possibility of desertion by the beloved have

been a part of life in all times and in all places, among the common as well as the exalted. Theseus may be a great hero and Aspatia's departed lover a nobleman, but despite their high status their actions are no less sordid, their betrayals no less painful, than Sweeney's. Further, to wallow voluptuously in grief, as Aspatia does, aestheticizes and sentimentalizes personal misfortune, thereby overlooking harsh reality in favor of an artificial air of nobility in suffering, epitomized by the self-consciously "poetical" opening stanzas of "Sweeney Erect." Aspatia makes herself a spectacle ("Look, look, wench!") in a manner not entirely different from the shrieking of the epileptic abandoned by Sweeney in her bed. To decline the gambit and escape from such a situation is not an altogether blameworthy act. In this light, the poem represents a revision, albeit from a smugly masculine perspective that purports to "know the female temperament," of the paradigmatic scenario of the lover's desertion, recasting it as an escape.

The second poem featuring Sweeney, "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," opens with an epigraph that is both loaded with prejudicial subtext and deeply suspicious of organized religion: "Look, look, master, here comes two religious caterpillars," from Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. In this scene, Barabas and Ithamore, having recently poisoned a convent of nuns, mock the arrival of two monks who, like the nuns, are suspected of indulging in the pleasures of the flesh in violation of their vows of celibacy. The first stanza continues the themes implied by the epigraph:

Polyphiloprogenitive
The sapient sutlers of the Lord
Drift across the window-panes.

In the beginning was the Word. (33)

As Anselm Atkins has noticed, “polyphiloprogenitive” stands in the poem as “verbosity incarnate,” (31) in stark contrast to the simple statement of Christ’s incarnation as Word that is to be found in the Gospel of John. It also carries over the theme of excessive fleshly indulgence, love of generation instead of spirituality, from the epigraph, but suggests that for the “sapient sutlers,” themselves a breed of religious caterpillar, this fertility instead takes the form of meaningless (“drifting”) intellectual excess. “Enervate Origen,” the notably productive early theologian who reputedly castrated himself in an excess of faith, comes to stand as the epitome of this type of scholar. The proper balance of flesh and spirit, an implicit problem in all of the quatrain poems, emerges quite explicitly here, with the “religious caterpillars” of the epigraph and the “sapient sutlers,” or Church theologians, of the first two stanzas pursuing different, yet related, unbalanced paths that lead only to sterility.

In the third stanza, the poet’s eye turns from the theologians who “drift across the window-panes,” presumably depicted on the stained glass windows of a church, to an Umbrian painting portraying Christ’s baptism. The background is a “cracked and browned” wilderness that anticipates the sere landscape of *The Waste Land* and seems to continue the sterile imagery that has thus far prevailed in the poem, but stanza four provides the contrast that Eliot’s use of the quatrain form demands:

But through the water pale and thin
 Still shine the unoffending feet
 And there above the painter set
 The Father and the Paraclete. (34)

This baptism represents a successful merger of body and spirit; Christ's feet are undeniably flesh, part of the world of things, and yet they shine without offence, uncorrupted by their physicality. Turning his attention away from religious artwork and toward the priests and his fellow churchgoers, the poet finds no such positive image. The "sable presbyters," whose darkness contrasts with the Word's light, are all too eager to collect "piaculative [expiatory] pence" from their "red and pustular" young parishioners, whose blemished skin betrays their excessive immersion in a corrupted world of the flesh. Even the "souls of the devout / Burn invisible and dim," (34) suggesting again enervation, a diminishment in the vitality and strength of a faith that once gave light and life¹⁵, as promised in the Gospel of John: "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men" (1.4).

At this point, the poet (we may as well call him "Mr. Eliot," as the title suggests) seems to lift his gaze, perhaps looking through an open window, and the seventh and eighth stanzas move beyond the confines of the church:

Along the garden-wall the bees

With hairy bellies pass between

The staminate and pistilate,

Blest office of the epicene.

Sweeney shifts from ham to ham

Stirring the water in his bath.

The masters of the subtle schools

Are controversial, polymath. (34)

The first two lines of each stanza present natural imagery, whether of bee or man, in clean, uncomplicated language that recalls the simplicity of the poem's description of Christ's baptism as well as the repeated citation of "In the beginning was the Word." In juxtaposition, the last two lines of each stanza feature the polysyllabic, obfuscating words that are associated throughout with infertile and excessively learned "sapient sutlers" such as Origen. The contrast is not as clear cut as it immediately appears, however, for the "epicene" worker bees, sterile females lacking fully developed ovaries, share Origen's infertility. In this, according to Anselm Atkins, "they resemble the Word of the Prologue [to John's Gospel], who, himself celibate, effected a spiritual reconciliation between God and man, a marriage of heaven and earth" (33). Surely, though, this formulation mistakes the import of the incarnation, in which "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1.14). Rather than simply intermediating between the earthy and the spiritual, as the bees pass between stamen and pistil, the Word takes on bodily form, however celibate, and embraces the life of the flesh. The "epicene" aspect of the otherwise positive, life-giving activities of the bees seems to suggest a certain discomfort with the sexual ramifications of the Incarnation, in which the Word is said to have inhabited an unambiguously male body, not a neutered or enervate one.

Another unabashedly male body is introduced in the final stanza, as Sweeney, presented naked to the reader's gaze, enjoys his Sunday morning bath. Although his appearance in the poem is brief, it is also striking, cutting with its simplicity through the bombast of "Mr. Eliot's" supercilious observations. As many critics have noted, the waters of the bath connect Sweeney with the earlier image of Christ's baptism, but interpretation of this generally accepted point varies widely. For Elizabeth Drew, "the

contrast of Sweeney wallowing in his bath with the figure of the Baptized God” serves as a “final degrading ‘offence’” (42). Atkins agrees that “the Word has become incarnate in Sweeney’s pink ham-flesh—as humiliating a comedown for the Word as His descent into the confines of Origen’s 5000 tomes” (33). Others have followed Grover Smith’s more positive suggestion that, through the figure of Sweeney, “the poem contrives, by means of the bath symbol, a kind of vindication of the brawny natural man, with his carnal appetites, against duplicity and asceticism” (45).

My reading of Sweeney’s significance in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” is much closer to Smith’s position, for several reasons. First, there is nothing overtly negative in the description of the man in his bath, while as noted above its simplicity contrasts pleasingly with the excessive verbosity of much of the poem. The conclusion that the image is humiliating, degrading, or offensive would seem to rely upon the prior assumption that Sweeney is a loutish or revolting character, not upon a reading of the poem itself. Even Hargrove, whose reactions to Sweeney tend to be violently negative, strains to find something demeaning in the way he is depicted in this poem, eventually concluding that “his physicality is stressed by the reference to his hams, a very heavy part of the body suggesting vulgarity in its sound as well as its meaning” (159). Each reader will bring her own ear and associations to the text, of course, but to me the solidity of “ham” (from Old English *hamm*) is quite appealing in this context, intensely physical, certainly, but not in any way vulgar.

Second, and clearly related, the poem’s exploration of the problematic relationship between the spirit and the flesh does not tend toward a condemnation of the physical nature that Sweeney exhibits. “Mr. Eliot” ponders a number of corrupted or

unbalanced attempts at integration, finding only one complete success in the painting of the incarnate Word. Sweeney, innocently stirring the waters of his bath, comes closest to the image of Christ's "unoffending feet," displaying neither the enervation of Origen nor the inflamed flesh of the congregants nor the sterility of the bees. Atkins cannot be right that the suggestion of incarnation in Sweeney's "pink ham-flesh" is "as humiliating a comedown for the Word as His descent into the confines of Origen's 5000 tomes," (33) for the point of the incarnation, as well as the basis of the Christian faith, is that the Word of God descended to the (possibly pink, if not ham-like) flesh of an infant. Sweeney certainly may be accused of inclining more toward the physical than the spiritual, but he emerges from the poem in a far more positive light than Origen and the rest of the "sapient sutlers." This impression is strengthened through comparison to "The Hippopotamus," also from Eliot's 1920 *Poems*, in which the "broad-backed hippopotamus," despite being like Sweeney "merely flesh and blood," (30) takes wing and ascends to heaven, while the Church remains below, "wrapt in the old miasmal mist" (31). In each poem, the bumbling (or bathing) exponent of the flesh comes much closer to a state of natural grace than does the primary target of the satire, the Church itself.

Third, the structure of the poem works to separate Sweeney from the other objects of "Mr. Eliot's" commentary. There is very little action in the whole of the text, except for the roving movement of the poet's eye. Instead, the substance of the poem, and the moral dilemma that underpins it, are established primarily through citation of and allusion to a variety sources including Marlowe, John's Gospel, Origen's works, and the Umbrian painting. Sweeney both refers to Eliot's other texts that feature him and acts as a figure of citation, in that his introduction in the final stanza forces a radical break in

context. As Ernest Schanzer has noticed, the shift to Sweeney in his bath destroys the poem's unity of setting, much to the detriment, Schanzer suggests, of its coherence (38). Everything else in the poem could conceivably be within "Mr. Eliot's" range of vision as he inattentively attends a church service, but it strains credulity to imagine that the open window affording a view of the garden would also allow a clear line of sight to Sweeney's bath¹⁶. In shattering the context that has henceforth ordered the poem, Sweeney offers the possibility of escape and even flight. On the literal level, the poet's gaze is lifted out of the confines of the churchyard, while symbolically Sweeney shifts the terms of the debate, not by resolving the spiritual dilemmas of the other characters but by embodying their irrelevance. At the same time, he engenders new contexts not possible within the limiting strictures of the Sunday morning service, including the possibility that the Word, so feverishly and emptily propagated by Origen and his ilk, might choose to take up residence instead in an unassuming bath of a Sunday morning.

If "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" ends on a relatively light note with Sweeney comfortable in his bath, "Sweeney among the Nightingales" quickly establishes a darker tone. Eliot's oft-quoted remark reported by F. O. Matthiessen, that "all he consciously set out to create in 'Sweeney among the Nightingales' was a sense of foreboding," (129) might be disingenuous (as numerous commentaries have illustrated, the poem does considerably more than establish a mood), but it nicely captures the effect of the opening stanzas. As we have seen in the previous two poems, the epigraph, in this case taken from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, is a vital piece of the symbolic structure of the work. The lord of the house of Atreus, stricken dead in his bath by his adulterous wife, cries out in his agony: *ὦμοι, πέπληγμαι καιρός πλῆγη ἔν εσω* (35). This is often

translated “Alas, I have been struck deep a deadly wound,” but as P. G. Mudford points out, the adverbial $\epsilon\sigma\omega$ at the end of the sentence emphasizes that the blow has been struck “from within” (76). Thus the epigraph casts a shadow on the bath that Sweeney has so recently enjoyed, suggesting not only the terrors of ignominious death, but also the complicity of the victim in his own fate. Further, the context of Agamemnon’s death establishes a background of betrayal rooted in familial relationships, for not only were both husband and wife guilty of adultery, but Clytemnestra struck down her husband largely to avenge the death of their daughter Iphigenia, coldly sacrificed by Agamemnon to speed the Greek ships on their way to Troy.

The epigraph places the poem, then, within a context of sexual and familial betrayal that immediately casts doubt on any romantic implications the title might suggest. The nightingales will not, one suspects, sing that “self-same song” that tempted Keats to contemplate “easeful Death” (281) in “Ode to a Nightingale,” but the question of their identity and significance is held in abeyance as the opening stanza focuses on Sweeney himself:

Apeneck Sweeney spreads his knees
 Letting his arms hang down to laugh,
 The zebra stripes along his jaw
 Swelling to maculate giraffe. (35)

This portrait is at once arresting and opaque; the words are memorable, but their description of Sweeney does not immediately produce a clear visual image. The eventual conclusion is that the stripes of stubble along his jaw shift to blotches as his face contorts in laughter, but for most readers this will not entirely dispel the initial impression that the

man is a confusing welter of exotic animal parts. Eliot manipulates rhythm skillfully, the trochees of the first line drawing attention forcibly to Sweeney's ape neck and then relaxing into the iambs of the second line as Sweeney too relaxes, while the spondee that opens the fourth line again arrests attention on the word "swelling." There is a strong impression of virility and animalism, but the easy identification of Sweeney as a natural man with simple, brutish instincts is complicated by the strange choice of zebra and giraffe rather than more familiar animal comparisons. This surreal aspect of the scene is intensified by the absence of sound, as his preparation for laughter is meticulously described in visual terms, but we never hear the guffaw. Finally, Sweeney's flesh is maculate, spotted, in contrast to Christ's immaculate conception that merged spirit and body. This emphasizes Sweeney's intense connection to the physical, fleshly world, but in this poem that world becomes a very unfamiliar place.

Having described his strange protagonist, the poet moves on to set the uncanny scene:

The circles of the stormy moon
 Slide westward toward the River Plate,
 Death and the Raven drift above
 And Sweeney guards the hornèd gate.

Gloomy Orion and the Dog
 Are veiled; and hushed the shrunken seas; (35)

Much critical attention has focused on the symbolism of these lines, which offer a rich harvest of allusion. For instance, D. E. S. Maxwell connects Orion and the Dog Star,

Sirius, to Egyptian fertility rituals (59), George Whiteside locates the setting in the town of Montevideo, Uruguay, on the north bank of the Rio Plata (63), and Knust emphasizes what he sees as Sweeney's close relationship to the moon goddess (204). In fact, these lines are so over-saturated with potentially symbolic content that their suggestiveness exceeds any single interpretation, instead sending the reader's mind soaring beyond the particulars of this shadowy setting to encompass a broad range of association. It is striking that the poem's setting is described in terms simultaneously natural (the moon, stars, river, and sea) and mythological, indicating that the physical world Sweeney inhabits is also the world of myth and magic, at once familiar and strange. The portents are gloomy, the seas strangely hushed, and Sweeney, guarding the legendary gate through which true dreams may pass, assumes an outsized significance, seeming almost to be one of the constellations drifting above. The image recalls the allusion in "Sweeney Erect," in which the gigantic shadow of Sweeney straddled in the sun blotted out Emerson's formulation of history, but what does it mean to guard the gates of horn? It may suggest that Sweeney has access to truths that others do not, although as yet there has been no evidence that this is the case. Some critics have taken the reference as a simple indication that Sweeney has fallen asleep and is dreaming¹⁷, but this seems a tepid reading of such a striking line, and is also at odds with his recent laughter.

Stanza three shifts dramatically in midcourse, turning from the expansive mythic landscape described above to the particularities of action in what seems to be a restaurant or café:

The person in the Spanish cape
Tries to sit on Sweeney's knees

Slips and pulls the table cloth
 Overturns a coffee-cup,
 Reorganized upon the floor
 She yawns and draws a stocking up; (35)

Here we meet the first of Sweeney's nightingales and find her both exotic (she wears a Spanish cape) and banal, as she attempts a lazy seduction. Although her actions are meticulously described, she is also curiously indistinct, her gender an open question until the last line. The enjambment between the third and fourth stanzas suggests a loosening of form consonant with the looseness of the action, but a solid spine of regular rhythm and masculine rhyme suggests an underlying pattern as well.

The cast of characters is further rounded out in stanzas five and six:

The silent man in mocha brown
 Sprawls at the window-sill and gapes;
 The waiter brings in oranges
 Bananas figs and hothouse grapes;

 The silent vertebrate in brown
 Contracts and concentrates, withdraws;
 Rachel *née* Rabinovitch
 Tears at the grapes with murderous paws; (35)

The curious hush that has thus far dominated the poem is emphasized by the adjective "silent" twice used to describe the brown-clad onlooker, whose description becomes

progressively more vague as he slides from “man” into the broader category of “vertebrate.”¹⁸ The hothouse fruits maintain the tension between naturalistic detail and exoticism, while the introduction of Rachel *née* Rabinovitch simultaneously offers a potent incitement to prejudice and illuminates the nature of Sweeney’s nightingales.

Christopher Ricks observes that the curious form in which Rachel’s name is given has prompted much speculation, as it highlights the fact that her Jewish maiden name has been changed by marriage. “Clearly,” Ricks suggests, “this invites or incites the possibility of a prejudiced disapproval of such marriages as cross the Christian/Jewish divide,” as well as “the further suspicion that one devious motive for, or aspect of, such a marriage is that in changing one’s name one will disguise one’s Jewishness” (30). As Ricks points out, this suspicion is not confirmed in the poem (her married name may be Jewish as well) and in any case it is unclear whether the form of the name is to be ascribed to Eliot or to a dramatization of Sweeney’s (possibly prejudiced) point of view (31). This later argument does not strike me as terribly convincing. There is no clear narrative persona, but the narration does not appear simply to follow Sweeney’s perspective, as he would have no way of seeing, for instance, the swelling of the zebra stripes along his jaw. Curiously, Ricks does not address what may be the more dangerously anti-Semitic aspect of this passage. Rachel “[t]ears at the grapes,” which through their connection to wine may be associated with Christ’s blood, “with murderous paws” (35), evoking the specter of the “blood libel” that has been used to justify countless persecutions of innocent Jews through many centuries and that, sadly, is not entirely dead today.

The justified furor over the anti-Semitic connotations of these lines has, however, overshadowed other significant aspects of the name Rachel *née* Rabinovitch. First, the format of the name continues the poem's tendency to give the appearance of precise detail, in this case by providing the woman's maiden name, while withholding crucial information, such as her legal name. More importantly, this specific omission has the force of emphasizing her status as a married woman, as "Rachel Rabinovitch" would not, but of emphasizing it only in the breach. She may or may not be a prostitute (the slang connotation of "nightingale" does not seem to me to be definitive here), but her behavior in this café is certainly not that of a faithful wife, as an attempt at a seduction does appear to be implied. The textual focus on her unwedded name ironically highlights, then, her disregard for her marriage vows, connecting Sweeney's nightingales to the themes of sexual infidelity and betrayal.

The next two stanzas introduce explicitly the suspicion of conspiracy that has been implicit throughout the poem:

She and the lady in the cape
 Are suspect, thought to be in league;
 Therefore the man with heavy eyes
 Declines the gambit, shows fatigue,

 Leaves the room and reappears
 Outside the window, leaning in,
 Branches of wistaria
 Circumscribe a golden grin; (36)

These lines offer a momentary release of tension, as the vague foreboding of the earlier stanzas coalesces into an overt scheme that may be detected and avoided. They create, however, a great deal of uncertainty. Who suspects the ladies? Of what are they suspected? And who is the man with “heavy eyes”? Grover Smith identifies him as identical to the “silent man in mocha brown,” (46) and a majority of critics seems to follow this reading, but others consider him a new character introduced in these stanzas, while a third camp believes that Sweeney is both the man in brown and the heavy-eyed man. James Davidson, for instance, has Sweeney departing the café and peering in through the window (84), while Roby makes much of the idea that “Sweeney declines the gambit, an indication of his escape, perhaps, from the fate of Agamemnon in the bloody wood” (17). Several critics have marshaled their energies to refute these later readings, including Hargrove, who argues that since Sweeney has a well-established name, Eliot would have used it if Sweeney were intended, instead, “by employing the phrase ‘the silent man in mocha brown,’ he clearly means another person” (160).

It is striking that as seemingly straightforward a matter as the number of characters in the poem has resisting nearly a century of exegesis and continues to produce multiple contradictory readings, each stated with utter conviction by its author. Rather than attempting to assign a fixed identity to the character or characters designated by “the silent man in mocha brown,” “the silent vertebrate in brown,” and “the man with heavy eyes,” it may be more profitable to consider that the text quite deliberately sows the ambiguity reflected in the divergent interpretations. We simply cannot establish with certainty, based on the information given, whether there are three male customers in the café, or two, or only one (Sweeney), although every reader of the poem will have her

own suspicions in the matter. It is generally assumed that Rachel *née* Rabinovitch attempts to seduce Sweeney, despite the fact that her only described action is the ravenous consumption of grapes; she is suspected of attempted seduction through her association with the lady in the Spanish cape. Similarly, through the poem's conspiratorial logic of suspicion and prejudice, Sweeney is associated with the man in brown's withdrawal and the heavy-eyed man's decline of the (suspected) gambit, and thus with their impetus toward escape, though it cannot be proved that he has performed these actions. Likewise, Sweeney is associated with Agamemnon through the epigraph, though he is certainly not identical to the mythical Greek king. The perspective from which such connections are made is deliberately shadowy, echoing the overcast and gloomy sky, as indicated by a narrative voice that observes that the ladies are "thought to be in league," without indicating who thinks so (Sweeney? the man in brown? the café's patrons in general?) or what they are suspected of. The resultant atmosphere, foreboding indeed, is one in which identity is shifting and tenuous, and guilt by association is conclusive.

In the final stanzas, what has been an exclusively visual poem explodes into song, as the nightingales of the title at last appear in their own shape:

The host with someone indistinct
 Converses at the door apart,
 The nightingales are singing near
 The Convent of the Sacred Heart,

 And sang within the bloody wood

When Agamemnon cried aloud,
 And let their liquid siftings fall
 To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud. (36)

Yeats remarked that only in these two stanzas did Eliot's early work "speak in the grand manner," (xxi) and while it is doubtful that Eliot strove for Yeats' idea of a poetic "grand manner," the effect of these lines is indeed remarkable. Within the compressed form of the short quatrain poem, Eliot generates an enormous range of emotion, allusion, and significance, all of which coalesce in the beautiful and disturbing nightingale imagery that closes the poem. Because identity has throughout the text been slippery and "indistinct," Sweeney merges with Agamemnon, the "bloody wood" of the Furies at Colonus blends with the bath where Agamemnon suffered his mortal blow (and thus also with Sweeney's bath in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service"), and the nightingales associate Rachel *née* Rabinovitch, the lady in the Spanish cape, and, mysteriously, the nuns of the Convent of the Sacred Heart, with Philomela's brutal violation and miraculous transformation. In his essay on Philip Massinger, Eliot asserts that the quality of a poet may be judged by how he or she borrows from other writers: "Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different" (*Selected Essays* 182). What lends Eliot's borrowing its force in this densely allusive poem is his recognition of what Derrida would later call the "absolutely illimitable" potential of citation to generate new contexts and unexpected resonances, coupled with his willingness to allow the poem's allusive content to stand on an equal footing, and therefore interact freely, with the surface narrative concerning Sweeney's night out at the café.

In addition to the death of Agamemnon, the crucial reference in the poem is to Philomela, daughter of King Pandion of Athens. In Ovid's account, Philomela was raped by her brother-in-law, King Tereus of Thrace, who subsequently imprisoned her and had her tongue cut out so that she could not tell her sister, Procne, what Tereus had done. The brutalized Philomela nevertheless was able to alert her sister by weaving a tapestry that depicted what was done to her, and in revenge Procne killed Itys, her own son by Tereus, cooked him, and fed him to his father. When Tereus learned of the trick that had been played on him, he attempted to kill both sisters, but this horrifying family tale of betrayal, violent rape, and bitter revenge was brought to an end by the gods, who transformed all three into birds, Philomela becoming a nightingale, Procne a swallow, and Tereus a hoopoe¹⁹. In "Sweeney among the Nightingales," this tale merges with the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus as the nightingales sing "within the bloody wood," the sacred grove of the Furies who drove Orestes mad after he slew his mother Clytemnestra to avenge Agamemnon's death, and sing again when Agamemnon cries out in pain (Eliot 36). Thematic similarities between the two Greek tragedies are obvious: violent assault upon an innocent young woman (Iphigenia, Philomela), sexual compulsion (Agamemnon takes Cassandra as a concubine, Tereus rapes Philomela), silencing of a wronged woman (Cassandra's true prophecies are disregarded, Philomela's tongue is ripped out) parental murder of a child (Iphigenia, Itys), and betrayal of the bonds of marriage. In each tale, the human family is thoroughly perverted, as sexual, parental, and filial ties degenerate into horror and violence²⁰, but the image of the nightingale suggests the transcendence possible through art, which like the bird's song can find beauty in tragedy. The great works of Ovid, Aeschylus, and other classical writers who drew on these tales, and

indeed the Greek sense that tragedy was the highest form of art, confirm this possibility and suggest that much that is beautiful has its roots in suffering.

The challenge for Eliot's readers is to make sense of the relevance of this immensely suggestive backdrop of Greek tragedy to the lives and actions of Sweeney, Rachel *née* Rabinovitch, and the other contemporary characters. A crucial hint, and perhaps an unexpected note of sympathy for the women in the poem, is to be found in their congruence with the nightingales. Critics often deride these characters as whores, or at best loose and trivial women, which on one level they appear to be, but while the nightingale image suggests the perversion of sexuality and love, it also implies that the women, in Philomela's role, are victims of this degeneration. Lower-class women, availing themselves of the only means of power available to them, their sexuality, can hardly be blamed for a comprehensive societal malaise. In these poems, Sweeney is clearly not their victimizer, though he is no knight in shining armor either. Among the nightingales, he is largely passive, neither encouraging their advances nor rudely rejecting them. In "Sweeney Erect," he simply stands aside, leaving Mrs. Turner and the ladies of the hall to their hypocritical condemnation of the epileptic in the bed, while in "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service" he is again a man apart, untouched by the greed of the presbyters, the inflammation of the congregants, or the sterility of the "subtle schools"²¹. He cannot, however, escape entirely the tragic degeneration of love and sexual relationships that grips his culture. In this, he shares Agamemnon's fate, not on the literal level that has led many readers, following Matthiesson, to conclude that Sweeney is murdered at the end of "Sweeney among the Nightingales," but rather in the sense that he, like the Greek king, occupies a brutalized milieu in which marital and

familial relationships have been corrupted. The tragedy of the lives that Sweeney and Rachel lead may be less dramatic than the tales of Agamemnon and Philomela, but the poem strongly suggests that it is part of the same continuum of human sin and suffering.

In the Hogarth Press and *Ara Vos Prec* editions of the poem, “Sweeney among the Nightingales” bore a second epigraph from the anonymous Elizabeth drama *The Raigne of King Edward the Third*: “Why should I speak of the nightingale? The nightingale sings of adulterate wrong.” This citation confirms the poem’s concern with infidelity, but it was dropped in Eliot’s *Poems* (1920) and all subsequent editions. Eliot’s reasons for removing it are undocumented. Perhaps it simply struck too close to home, as from 1917 to 1919 Eliot was very much preoccupied with his wife Vivienne’s affair with Bertrand Russell, a double betrayal as Eliot had counted Russell a good friend (Gordon 127). Eliot may also have realized the essential dishonesty of the quote, which obscures the violence of Tereus’ assault on Philomela by reducing it to a case of adultery. By keeping the more brutal references to Philomela and to Agamemnon, Eliot emphasizes the seriousness of his concerns. As Mudford writes, the degeneration that “in the world of Greek tragedy meant the fall of a royal house had become by the end of the First World War a chimerical and pervasive darkness that menaced a man from within” (79). To Mudford’s observation, I would add that women are equally menaced, and that the pattern of reference within the poem places this modern darkness on the same tragic plane as Agamemnon’s fall.

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot continues his diagnosis of what he sees as the spiritually dry state of modern humanity, and Philomela and Sweeney each make brief appearances.

The nightingale appears in the second section, "A Game of Chess," imprisoned in the stifling confines of a wealthy woman's chamber:

Above the antique mantel was displayed
 As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
 "Jug Jug" to dirty ears.
 And other withered stumps of time
 Were told upon the walls; staring forms
 Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed." (40)

This passage both deepens and complicates Eliot's use of the myth of Philomela. It confirms the continuity of female suffering, as "still" the nightingale cries, and "still the world pursues," thus linking Philomela's fate to that of the contemporary women in Eliot's poetry, and it emphasizes the transformation of brutal violation into the "inviolable voice" of the nightingale's song, and thus of poetry. It also, however, casts doubt upon artistic reproductions of that voice. The nightingale's song, repeated in verse throughout the years, has been given the ugly conventional form "jug jug," the painting of the scene is trapped in a decaying room, just one among many "withered stumps of time," and, ironically for a depiction of a wronged woman finding her voice, the painting joins the other "staring forms" that hush "the room enclosed." A similar function is filled by the "liquid siftings" of "Sweeney among the Nightingales," which expose the poetic

conventions that would deny the sordid reality behind the nightingale's song. Eliot's texts insist that we cannot simply enjoy the "inviolable voice" of poetry while ignoring the suffering and violence from which it often springs. Further, any reproduction of that voice is inevitably contaminated by its derivative nature, just as Aspatia's complaint in the epigraph to "Sweeney Erect" represented a parasitical cooption of the tale of Ariadne's grief.

Here, the thematic similarities between *Buile Suibhne* and Eliot's Sweeney poems become useful. In each of the redactions of the Suibhne story that we have seen, the bird-king's poetry stems from his suffering and bespeaks an unnamed and pervasive guilt. In *Buile Suibhne*, that guilt seems related to a conflict within early Irish society, between pagan and oral culture on the one hand and the nascent written, Christian culture on the other, as well as to the king's role within this dynamic. Suibhne fails to prevent the construction of a church in his territory or to drown permanently Ronán's holy book; he fails also to lead his people in battle and to fulfill his patriarchal roles as husband, father, and king. His poetry, however, reckoned as a great gift to Ireland, would never have been composed had he continued in his wonted shape and role. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, guilt attaches more specifically to the act of writing, especially to the writer's inevitable tyranny over his characters and plagiarism of the words of previous authors, while for Seamus Heaney *Sweeney Astray* provides both an exploration of and an escape from the writer's guilty sense of responsibility to his community. In Eliot's Sweeney poems, guilt is primarily sexual, related to the degeneration of marriage and family, and general, shared by not only the members of modern society but also the figures of Greek tragedy. The nightingale sings of that guilt and pain, creating like Suibhne beauty out of suffering,

but like him also subject to the citational and thus derivative nature of art. While Sweeney, vigorous, assured, aloof, represents the fantasized possibility of escape in the early poems, by *The Waste Land* he has lost that role, appearing only briefly and with the inevitability of the seasons and time itself:

But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

Shortly thereafter, the nightingale's song reappears in fragmentary form:

Twit twit twit
Jug jug jug jug jug jug
So rudely forc'd.
Tereu (43)

While Sweeney in previous poems refused Tereus' part, leaving the bed in "Sweeney Erect" and declining the gambit in "Sweeney among the Nightingales," in *The Waste Land* he is entirely without agency, brought to Mrs. Porter for what the context implies are illicit sexual purposes. There is no reason to believe, however, that he will rape or brutalize Mrs. Porter. Rather, I take the nightingale's lament, reproduced here in its derivative, conventional (and unlovely) form, to be full of sorrow for Sweeney as well as Mrs. Porter, as each is "rudely forced" by a mechanistic and unfeeling society to enact a rude parody of the genuine love that is denied to them as inhabitants of Eliot's wasteland.

Interestingly, in Eliot's Sweeney poems the bird-king's role as the creator of poetry is given not to Sweeney but instead, through the crucial metaphor of the nightingale's song, to Philomela. This raises the tantalizing possibility that the distinctly

masculine Suibhne tradition might be open to a female poet as well—a possibility that the author of *Buile Suibhne*, and even more noticeably Flann O’Brien and Seamus Heaney, goes to some lengths to deny. In *Buile Suibhne*, the bird-king’s loss of his own shape, of the masculine accoutrements of war, and of his wife tend to feminize him, as does his removal from the male spheres of battlefield and kingly hall to the margins and interstices of their other, the natural world of the woods, which may be figured as maternal. This feminization is vigorously resisted through Suibhne’s testy encounters with women, such as the churchwoman whom he curses for gathering watercress, and especially with the “mill hag,” who emerges as a rival to his leaping ability and also, perhaps, his prophetic capacity, as she claims to speak only the truth, and therefore is not only killed but carried away to hell by a troop of demons. In Heaney’s version, the mill hag’s status as a potential poetic rival is made even clearer as their contest is cast in terms of poetry, but Sweeney’s supremacy is highlighted before the hag falls to her death: “We kept in step like words in rhyme. / I set the pace and led the dance” (72). Few women of any kind figure in O’Brien’s novel, but one who does assume some degree of importance, Sheila Lamont, is violently raped and then, before she can produce her own nightingale song, dies while giving birth to a son who emerges full-grown and gifted as a writer. The implication, clearly, is that while a woman may suffer, only a man can shape that suffering into art.

Resistance to the possibility of the female artist may well result from a fear of sexual contamination, and thus of feminization, which as we have seen is implicit in Suibhne’s tale. This fear emerges most explicitly in Eliot’s poems, which are also the most overtly misogynistic of the works under consideration, in the voracious sexuality of

Rachel *née* Rabinovitch and of the epileptic in “Sweeney Erect” and in the positive portrayal of Sweeney’s capacity for escape from female entanglement. It is surprising, then, that Eliot should also be the writer who comes closest to depicting a female poet in the Suibhne tradition, singing of her own pain and in her own voice. This internal tension may well contribute to the remarkable heightening of feeling present in the final two stanzas of “Sweeney among the Nightingales.”

The feminine aspect of poetry recedes as Eliot’s Sweeney attains the prophetic mantle and comes to speak for the poet in the two fragments that make up *Sweeney Agonistes*. The unfinished play’s relation to the Sweeney poems is emphasized by the first epigraph, from Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*: “ORESTES: You don’t see them, you don’t—but *I* see them: they are hunting me down, I must move on” (74). In this continuation of the trials of the house of Atreus, Orestes, having killed his mother to avenge his father Agamemnon’s death, pays the price in guilt and suffering for his role in the family tragedy. The implication is that Sweeney too suffers for his part in the degeneration of his modern society, shown through his visit to Mrs. Porter and his association with the nightingales. The second epigraph, from the writings of St. John of the Cross,²² suggests a penitential and ascetic path as the solution to this suffering: “Hence the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union, until it has divested itself of the love of created beings” (74). That Sweeney becomes the penitent in the fragmentary play has troubled many critics, among them Matthiessen who complains: “The hero is so different a character from the ‘apeneck Sweeney’ of the poems that Eliot might better have given him a different name” (159). And yet, Eliot clearly intended him to be the same person, having remarked to Virginia Woolf as early as 1920 that he planned to write

a play featuring the characters from his Sweeney poems (*A Moment's Liberty* 114), and the works are connected through the Aeschylus epigraph.

Initially, the form and tone of *Sweeney Agonistes* seem to confirm Matthiessen's sense of discontinuity with the poems. Abandoning the tight formal constraints of the quatrains, Eliot employs a freer verse heavily influenced by the cadences of jazz, the music hall, and burlesque. David Chinitz skillfully explores the structure of *Sweeney Agonistes*, arguing that Eliot's embrace of popular influences was intended to "forge a new crossover genre that would alter the relationship between the fine artist and the community" (107). While the attempt cannot be judged a success, it was productive of a distinctively hypnotic verse form unlike anything else in Eliot's work.²³ The play presents Sweeney once again in the company of his nightingales, in this case Doris and her friend and roommate Dusty, as well as four former soldiers in search of a party. In the first fragment, Doris and Dusty read inconclusively their tarot cards, gossip about the men of their acquaintance, including Sweeney, and eventually are joined in a trivial conversation by the ex-servicemen with the ludicrous names of Wauchope, Horsfall, Klipstein, and Krumpacker. Sweeney appears in the second fragment and immediately cuts through the insipid banter by declaring to Doris: "I'll carry you off / To a cannibal isle" (80). Doris plays along, promising to be a missionary, and Sweeney describes life on the cannibal isle, where he will convert her into "a stew / A nice little, white little, missionary stew" (80). It soon becomes clear that Sweeney speaks not only of this imaginary isle, but also of the life they all are living in contemporary London:

Birth, and copulation, and death.

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:

Birth, and copulation, and death.

I've been born, and once is enough.

You don't remember, but I remember,

Once is enough. (81)

Here, it is clear that Sweeney has been vouchsafed knowledge and awareness unavailable to the other characters, and we recall his position as the guardian of the horned gate through which true dreams pass in "Sweeney among the Nightingales." His true dream, though, is a nightmare, a realization that life as he and his friends have been living it is indistinguishable from death, and that even fertility is corrupted, the momentary ecstasies of copulation breeding only more death.

The others fail to grasp Sweeney's point, and he abandons his analogy of the cannibal isle, trying instead to convey his idea that "Life is death" (82) through the story of a man who "once did a girl in" and then preserved her in Lysol in his bath (82). This death in a bathtub recalls the slaying of Agamemnon, once again reinforcing the play's connection to the sexually fraught themes of violence and betrayal that dominated "Sweeney among the Nightingales." That Sweeney's voice, rather than that of the nightingale, has become the poet's is emphasized by his repeated frustration at the difficulty of conveying his message: "But I've gotta use words when I talk to you" (84). This assertion of male control over the tools of articulation is highlighted by the murder of a woman, coupled with Sweeney's contention that any man might commit this crime:

Any man might do a girl in

Any man has to, needs to, wants to

Once in a lifetime, do a girl in. (83)

Sweeney's insistence on this point, so soon after his own assumption of the poetic role, suggests that what he is contemplating here is the slaying of the female poet and the silencing of the female voice that threatened to dominate the earlier poems. This implies, then, the forceful reassertion of male control over the poetic tradition indicated also in the deaths of the mill hag and Sheila Lamont.

Recourse to the figure of Suibhne can also help us to understand how and why Eliot's Sweeney progresses from the uncomplicated "natural man" of the poems to the prophetic penitent of the play. The bird-king's punishment is to live alone in nature, apart from society, shorn of the clothing that indicated his kingly role, and bereft of the company of women. The life of Eliot's Sweeney in the early poems may be seen as a modern analog. The city is the natural habitat of modern man, and Sweeney lives in his concrete jungle much as Suibhne does his woods, holding himself aloof from society, living by his own instinctive code, fleeing from women, and frequently appearing unclothed. Sweeney's rejection of the questionable mores of ladies like Mrs. Turner, his disinterest in the arid theology of an ineffectual church, and his refusal of meaningless sexual entanglements may represent his first steps toward the self-awareness and deeper knowledge that he attains in *Sweeney Agonistes*. With that knowledge comes also suffering, and here again the Sweeney of Eliot's play joins the other Suibhne figures in their torment and guilt. The second fragment of *Sweeney Agonistes* concludes with an ominous chorus singing of a nightmarish pursuit by a pack of "hoo-ha's," (84) antagonists reminiscent not only to the Furies of the first epigraph but also to the dog- and goat-headed demons that drive Suibhne back into madness in *Buile Suibhne*. Suibhne at the last achieves only a partial reconciliation, dying at the threshold of the

church, and Eliot's Sweeney, while he may not be attached to the "love of created beings" seems far from achieving "the divine union" promised in the citation of St. John of the Cross. If guilt and suffering are fundamental to the condition of the artist, as the Suibhne tradition suggests, such a union may not be accessible to the poet-figure, or if it is attained, he may cease to be a poet. Perhaps for this reason, Eliot abandoned *Sweeney Agonistes* after the title character's assumption of the poetic/prophetic role, and he wrote no more of Sweeney.

As we have seen, Eliot's Sweeney texts have confounded many critics, in part because they present a welter of contradictory impulses and images. The brutal misogyny of "Sweeney Erect" contrasts with the unexpected sympathy for women implicit in the nightingale imagery; the instinctive, animal-like Sweeney of the poems becomes the conscious man of the play; and the beauty of Aspatia's tapestry and of the nightingale's lament are rebuked by the derivative, citational aspects of their artistry. The liminal nature of the character Sweeney and of the symbolic structure that surrounds him ensures that these opposed pairs never resolve themselves on one side or the other, but rather hang suspended between possibilities. As Christopher Ricks reminds us, the Sweeney texts suggest far more than they state, and conclusive determinations usually rest on incitements to prejudice that readers would do well to resist. Sweeney's oscillation between conflicting alternatives is characteristic of all of the Suibhne figures that we have seen. In *Buile Suibhne*, the bird-king's shifting and unstable shape, sometimes birdlike, at other times clearly human, figures the volatility of his role as he wavers between ascetic penitence and poetic richness and sufficiency. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, O'Brien's Sweeney serves at once as a model of artistic inspiration and a bleeding,

suffering reminder of the guilt inherent in the act of writing. Finally, in *Sweeney Astray*, the figure of Sweeney affords Seamus Heaney the prospect of escape from the writer's bonds of communal and historical responsibility, while also inevitably demanding that he engage with the past.

The doubled roles that these Suibhne figures so frequently play are related to their explicit engagement with the practices of citation and repetition. *Buile Suibhne* presents itself as Moling's written record of the stories and verse of the mad oral poet, while the three modern works are all deeply engaged in webs of literary reference that encompass a multitude of written works in addition to *Buile Suibhne* itself. Citation is only the most explicit form of the structural iterability that Derrida reminds us is characteristic of all language, creating both infinite possibilities and the troubling certainty that nothing we say or write can ever be truly "original." Likewise, human suffering, and the cycles of violence and betrayal from which it often springs, is never anything new, but rather the latest iteration of an ancient tragedy. In the Suibhne legend, as in the citation of "Leda and the Swan" with which I began this study, suffering is the necessary precondition for artistic creation. Born of pain, the nightingale's lament resounds through the centuries, and its beauty still has the power to astound, though it has also become conventional, reduced to "jug jug" for "dirty ears." When her wordless song is rendered as language, it acquires the "structural possibility of being weaned from the referent or from the signified," which, Derrida suggests, makes of "every mark, including those which are oral, a grapheme in general; which is to say, as we have seen, the nonpresent *remainder* of a differential mark cut off from its putative 'production' or origin" ("Signature Event Context" 10). The same might be said of Suibhne. Cut off already in the twelfth-century

text from his presumed origin in seventh-century events, the figure of the bird-man poet is a remainder or revenant of a lost tradition, never fully present, but nevertheless available through citation to modern writers themselves in search of the endlessly iterable myth of artistic originality.

Notes to Chapter Four

¹ For an explication of the first reaction see Jonathan Morse, “Sweeney, the Sties of the Irish, and *The Waste Land*”; for the second see Robert DeGraaff’s “The Evolution of Sweeney in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot.” Herbert Knust hears both, arguing in “Sweeney among the Birds and Brutes” that Sweeney’s split identity, deriving from a war between his soul and his body, is represented through contrasting swan and swine imagery (206).

² Of course, there is also no evidence that he did not know *Buile Suibhne*, as the documentary record is silent on this point.

³ Interestingly, Hargrove opens her piece by noting that there are conflicting interpretations of Sweeney’s character, some entirely negative and others more positive, and suggesting that as “Sweeney is a complex symbol with multiple meanings,” (147) both interpretations need to be taken into account. “Apeneck Sweeney” evokes strong feelings of disgust in many readers, though, and in Hargrove’s case these emotions seem to overwhelm her initial attempt to be even-handed, for her analysis of the character is relentlessly negative.

⁴ James Davidson is among those who see Sweeney as the heavy-eyed man who declines the prostitutes’ gambit (84); Nancy Hargrove asserts that “there is no evidence that they are one and the same,” insisting that Eliot “clearly means another person” (160).

⁵ “Birds,” of course, is a slightly crass slang term for women in general, while “nightingales” referred more specifically to prostitutes in Eliot’s day.

⁶ Knust’s knowledge of *Buile Suibhne* seems tenuous. He mistakes Mongan’s name for his wife’s, Muirghil, and suggests that Suibhne in his bird stage has transformed into a swan, which seems unlikely given the bird-king’s penchant for roosting in trees (not a characteristic of swans). Nevertheless, many of the basic similarities that he indicates are sound.

⁷ Grover Smith, for instance, finds that in the poems written between 1910 and 1919, “Eliot was exploiting—abusing—the trick of literary allusion,” (54) with the result that “his verse in quatrains is largely an exhibition of functional plagiarism, a triumph of mystification” (39).

⁸ This point is elucidated in Nagy’s introduction to the 1996 edition of *Buile Suibhne*.

⁹ Ricks cites Grover Smith: “And the women meanwhile are talking, no doubt tediously and ignorantly, of Michelangelo,” Helen Gardner: “The absurdity of discussing his giant art, in high-pitched feminine voices, drifting through a drawing-room, adds merely extra irony to the underlying sense of the lines,” John Crowe Ransom: “How could they have had any inkling of that glory which Michelangelo had put into his marbles and his paintings?” and Hugh Kenner: “The closed and open o’s, the assonances of *room*, *women*, and *come*, the pointed caesura before the polysyllabic burst of ‘Michelangelo’,”

weave a context of grandeur within which our feeling about these trivial women determines itself” (Ricks 13).

¹⁰ The question is, however, by no means settled among Eliot scholars. For a recent outbreak of the controversy, see the January 2003 issue of *Modernism/modernity* (Volume 10, Number 1), which features a lively exchange of letters in a special section entitled “Eliot and Anti-Semitism: The Ongoing Debate.”

¹¹ Thus suggestion is picked up at greater length, and with much greater force, in Anthony Julius’ *T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and Literary Form* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹² I am using the sequence of poems as they appeared in the Knopf edition of Eliot’s *Poems* (1920), which is also the order in which Eliot later collected them, although this volume differs somewhat in order and content from the Hogarth Press *Poems by T.S. Eliot* (1919) and Ovid Press *Ara Vos Prec* (1920). All page numbers cited for Eliot’s poetry refer to *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962).

¹³ While most readers of the poem have asserted the contrast between the epileptic woman and Nausicaa, greatly to the modern woman’s disfavor, many suggest a likeness to Polypheme in order to damn Sweeney, citing, for instance, the Cyclops’ “crudity, size, and uncivilized nature” (Hargrove 156). I’m not sure, though, that one can have it both ways, reading the Nausicaa reference in a purely ironic manner but taking the Polypheme comparison straight. There is certainly nothing in Sweeney’s pink and broadbottomed description to suggest a monster; a contrast, and not a likeness, seems implied here as well.

¹⁴ The parenthetical reference in stanza seven to Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” compounds the historical complexity of the poem. Eliot’s relationship to Emerson and his critique of Emerson’s theory of history have been dealt with extensively elsewhere, notably in Charles Peake’s essay “‘Sweeney Erect’ and the Emersonian Hero” (Roby 49-55). The image of “the silhouette / Of Sweeney straddled in the sun” (26) strikes me as more to the discredit of a theory that has not reckoned with so obvious a sight than to the natural man, legs spread, enjoying the sunshine, but an ominous portent may also be detected in this ambiguous image.

¹⁵ The sixth stanza, which features the “souls of the devout,” is perhaps the most obscure in this difficult poem. It consists of a sentence fragment, making this the only grammatically incomplete stanza in a poem in which metrical and grammatical structure are carefully aligned. This structural oddity contributes to an uncertainty as to what exactly is being described. The devout may be read as members of the congregation, or as especially faithful congregants who have been buried within the church, or perhaps as souls depicted in another religious painting suffering the penitential fires of Purgatory. While I prefer the second of these options, I am not entirely confident in this reading.

Irrespective of the precise identity of these devout souls, however, the crux of the passage seems to me to be that they “burn invisible and dim,” echoing only feebly the bright shining of Christ’s feet.

¹⁶ One way to restore unity of setting would be to have “Mr. Eliot” in Sweeney’s bathroom the whole time, watching the church across the street through the window and concluding with a comment on his immediate environs. This creates more problems than it solves, however, among them the fact that Sweeney certainly does not seem like a man aware that he has an audience.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Whiteside’s analysis of the poem as Sweeney’s dream (Roby 63-67).

¹⁸ Some critics have suggested that this character is wormlike or spineless; most amusingly, John Ower refers to him as a “fecal creature” characterized by “the slowness and shapelessness of an amoeba” (73). Of course, “vertebrate” means quite the opposite, as it refers to the class of animals possessing spinal columns. Devolution, then, is not necessarily implied, but rather generalization, which is in keeping with the curiously precise yet unilluminating descriptions of character and setting in this poem.

¹⁹ This is the tale as it appears in Ovid, *Metamorphosis VI*, 424-674. In some other versions the shape-change of the sisters is reversed, with Philomela becoming the swallow and Procne the nightingale. Eliot seems to follow Ovid’s account, as in *The Waste Land* Philomela is clearly connected with the nightingale. The hoopoe, significantly, is one of very few species of bird that will foul its own nest. This makes Tereus’ transformation quite appropriate, as he destroyed his own family through his foul actions, and may have provided the hint that led Eliot to focus on the nightingales’ droppings in the final stanza of his poem.

²⁰ Interestingly, sisterhood is the only bond that remains intact, as Procne’s devotion to her sister and Philomela’s certainty that Procne will rescue and avenge her are unwavering. This devotion overrides all other ties, as Procne sacrifices even her own son in her desire to avenge the wrongs done to Philomela.

²¹ Significantly, “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” is the only Sweeney poem in which he is not surrounded by women. The absence of any females, with the exception of the infertile worker bees, emphasizes the sterility of the church, and perhaps also heightens Sweeney’s aloofness in this poem.

²² St. John of the Cross is also cited at length in Heaney’s *Station Island*, where a translation of one of the saint’s devotional poems makes up the bulk of part X.

²³ The jazz influence on *Sweeney Agonistes* has been of great interest in several recent critiques. In addition to Chinitz’s *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*, an intriguing exploration of the subject can be found in Carol Smith’s essay “Sweeney and the Jazz Age” (Roby 87-99).

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