CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Measuring Joycean influences on Flann O'Brien
Authors	O'Sullivan, James;Bazarnik, Katarzyna;Eder, Maciej;Rybicki, Jan
Publication date	2018-03-27
Original Citation	O'Sullivan, J., Bazarnik, K., Eder, M. and Rybicki, J. (2018) 'Measuring Joycean Influences on Flann O'Brien', Digital Studies/ Le champ numérique, 8(1), 6 (25pp). doi:10.16995/dscn.288
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.16995/dscn.288
Rights	© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/. - http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
Download date	2026-10-13 12:45:35
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5708

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Open Library of Humanities

Part of the Ubiquity Partner Network

Digital Studies / Le champ numérique

Research

How to Cite: O'Sullivan, James, et al. 2018. "Measuring Joycean Influences on Flann O'Brien." *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique* 8(1): 6, pp. 1–25, DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.288

Published: 27 March 2018

Peer Review:

This is a peer-reviewed article in *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique*, a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Open Access:

Digital Studies/Le champ numérique is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

Digital Studies / Le champ numérique

O'Sullivan, James, et al. 2018. "Measuring Joycean Influences on Flann O'Brien." *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique* 8(1): 6, pp. 1–25, DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.288

RESEARCH

Measuring Joycean Influences on Flann O'Brien

James O'Sullivan[1], Katarzyna Bazarnik[2], Maciej Eder[3] and Jan Rybicki[2]

[1] University College Cork, IE

[2] Jagiellonian University, PL

[3] Pedagogical University of Kraków, PL

Corresponding author: James O'Sullivan (james.osullivan@ucc.ie)

This paper examines the stylometric similarities between James Joyce and Flann O'Brien, demonstrating which works from the latter's oeuvre are stylistically the most Joycean. We will outline the results of a series of quantitative enquiries focused specifically on Joyce and O'Brien, before offering a number of literary interpretations. It has long been argued that Brian O'Nolan, operating under the pseudonym of Flann O'Brien, is a disciple of James Joyce. This relationship remains a concern for scholars, and so our purpose here is to contribute some computational evidence to the discussion. We pinpoint those exact moments where O'Brien's style is quantitatively similar to that of Joyce, using our results to re-engage existing arguments with renewed statistical precision.

Keywords: Stylometry; James Joyce; Flann O'Brien

1 Two Irish Birds

O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*, despite considerable critical acclaim, was initially ill-received because of its "Joycean undertones", with commentators "tend[ing] to condemn the work as inferior imitation" (Hopper 1995, 46). Seán Ó Faoláin remarks that the novel has "a general odour of spilt Joyce all over it", while the *New Statesman* brands it as "dull" on account of its "long passages in imitation of the Joycean parody" (Hopper 1995, 46). Asbee (1991), while critical of *The Hard Life*, accepts that some comparisons can be drawn between the comic novel and Joyce's collection of short stories, *Dubliners*. Hopper (1995) argues that "O'Brien is usually lumped in with Joyce" as a result of "their historical and cultural proximity",

but that this is "an assumption which is unfair to both writers" (14). Stylistically, O'Brien's novels are littered with parodic tributes to Joyce (O'Grady 1989). Indeed, while O'Brien demonstrated "repeated efforts to escape his influence" (Dotterer 2004, 59), "*At Swim* had everything in the world to do with James Joyce" (Taaffe 2004, 253). Some critics maintain that the "omnipresence of Joyce … was to be expected" on account of O'Brien's shared affiliation with University College Dublin (Taaffe 2004, 249). While Joyce may have been a "talismanic figure" at UCD, O'Brien's Joycean parodies are not always interpreted as positive. Taaffe (2004) suggests that O'Brien's "attitude towards the elder writer … is equivocal, at the very least" (253); Anspaugh (2004) traces his "profound ambivalence toward Joyce – an almost constant vacillation between admiration and denigration, devotion and denial, love and hate" suggesting that its quality is Oedipal (3), while McMullen (1993) argues that "*At Swim-Two-Birds* enters into dialogue not with James Joyce alone" (63). As summarized by Dotterer (2004):

> Critical comparison with Joyce has been frequent, as have analytical comparisons of their fiction, but less often has an awareness of this link to Joyce been seen as central and persistent in Brian O'Nolan's formation of his own work. This link with James Joyce was one O'Nolan embraced, at times begrudgingly or unwillingly, but always out of some inner artistic and psychic necessity. (54)

By offering a fresh appraisal based on quantitative methods, this paper identifies the specific points at which O'Brien's Joycean parodies are most prominent, so that literary interpretations can be focused, with computational precision, on the relevant passages. In using such methods, this paper does not offer any advances in the techniques of this field, but rather, uses computer-assisted criticism to shed new light on a pre-existing concern. This essay is far from the first to suggest that there are stylistic affinities between O'Brien and Joyce—it is, however, the first to use quantitative methods as a means of pinpointing, with statistical precision, where such affinities are most pronounced.

2 Methodology and Results

Stylometry, also referred to as computational stylistics, is usually aimed at analysing authorial style, e.g. unique authorial stylistic features, using statistical methods. Unlike traditional approaches to style, computational stylistics assumes that the usage of bare function words—such as "the", "of", "in" etc.—is as equally important as the distribution of meaningful content words when one is seeking to measure fundamental stylistic affinities. Moreover, being very frequent, function words exhibit properties suitable for statistical inference. Stylometry, then, tries to measure stylistic profiles of the most common function word frequencies in order to identify meaningful similarities between (groups of) texts. While conceptually straightforward, stylometry is rather advanced when it comes to its mathematical background; simultaneously comparing several frequencies of function words requires techniques which are referred to as multivariate, or multidimensional, because they involve multidimensional geometry to compute similarities between texts.

A number of multivariate stylometric methods are used in this study. Cluster analysis provides a preliminary insight into the dataset, identifying main groupings. As cluster analysis is very sensitive to the number of features—or most frequent words—analyzed, we measure the 100 most frequent words, expanding this range from 100 to 1000 in intervals of 100 in order to produce a number of virtual dendrograms combined into one consensus plot. The distance measure in each of our tests is derived from Burrows' Delta (Burrows 2002; Hoover 2004), which performs clustering on the basis of authorial fingerprints derived from the most frequent words in a text. Finally, to identify possible peculiarities in sequential development of the analyzed texts, we use Rolling Delta (Rybicki, Hoover and Kestemont 2014), which forms an authorial signature based on one set of texts, and then applies that fingerprint to another text. Authorial signatures are plotted over the text in question, with stylistic similarity indicated through proximity to the baseline. The aforementioned methods were applied using the R package, "stylo" (Eder, Rybicki and Kestemont 2016). Delta-based approaches to stylistics "builds on the subtle differences in high-frequency phenomena" (Herrmann, van Dalen-Oskam and Schöch

2015, 47). The emergence of the Digital Humanities has given rise to definitions of style which are "broader and more abstract than most of the earlier definitions" (Herrmann, van Dalen-Oskam and Schöch 2015, 45), but has been demonstrated in foundational works (Burrows 2002; Craig 1999, 2004; Jockers 2013); and indeed, in the great many works of literary criticism that have applied such methods since first formulated, this form of evidence is empirically valid, and valuable to interpretation. As discussed by Hermann, van Dalen-Oskam and Schöch (2015), definitions of style have been broadened to include those which might be considered quantitative, and such constructions of style provide evidence beneficial to the critical process. As with any critical technique, computer-assisted or otherwise, there are limitations—the loss of context, for example, should be accounted for across all manner of distant reading. However, our macroanalytical approach is such that we are using the Delta analysis to identify those areas where quantitatively distinct stylistic similarities exist, using such as preliminary evidence for a more nuanced qualitative interpretation.

Initially, we generated a cluster analysis using a selection of English-language Irish modernists. Using the 100 most frequent words, it is interesting that O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* clusters with Joyce's works. **Figure 1** shows a dendrogram, which represents stylistic similarity in terms of height. In other words, the less distance that has to be traversed between texts, the more similar their authorial fingerprint.

This prompted further exploration, so a bootstrap consensus tree, a more robust measure of style, was conducted. **Figure 2** also represents stylistic clusters, using tree-like branches to show stylistically-similar groupings. Interestingly, O'Brien's novels continue to cluster with Joyce, with *At Swim Two-Birds* clustering more closely with *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

With our cluster analysis and bootstrapping confirming the common belief that O'Brien's style was strongly influenced by Joyce, we adopted Rolling Delta as a means of pinpointing specific passages of interest within the relevant corpora. Rolling Delta analyses compare the style of one or multiple texts against that of one test text, broken into segments or windows. The closer each line is to the x-axis, the greater the stylistic affinity with that particular segment of the test text. There are a number of places in these texts where O'Brien's authorial signature is particularly clear. We can identify

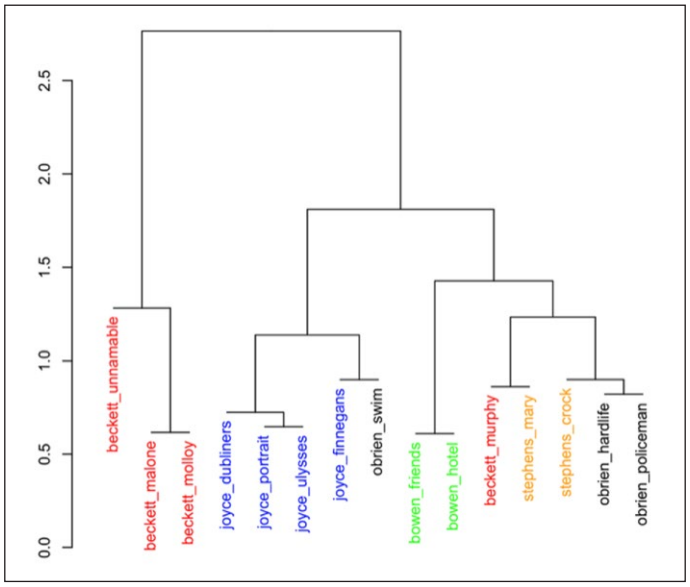

Figure 1: A dendrogram representing stylistic similarities between Irish modernist writers.

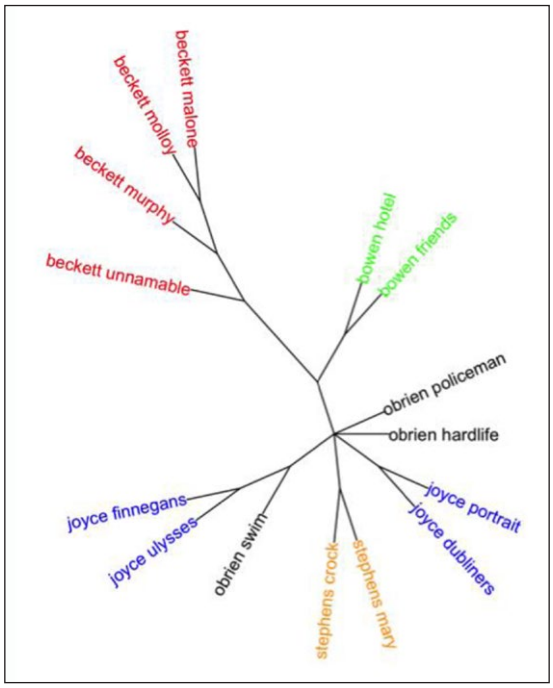

Figure 2: A further representation of stylistic clusters, using tree-like branches to show stylistically-similar groupings.

these sections as having a distinct crossover between the style of the two authors. O'Brien-like idiom of *At Swim-Two-Birds* emerges, quite strongly, in two sections of *Ulysses* (see **Figure 3**), and in several sections of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (see **Figure 4**). Interestingly, The Hard Life is stylometrically similar to *Dubliners* throughout, consistently more so than any of Joyce's own texts (see **Figure 5**).

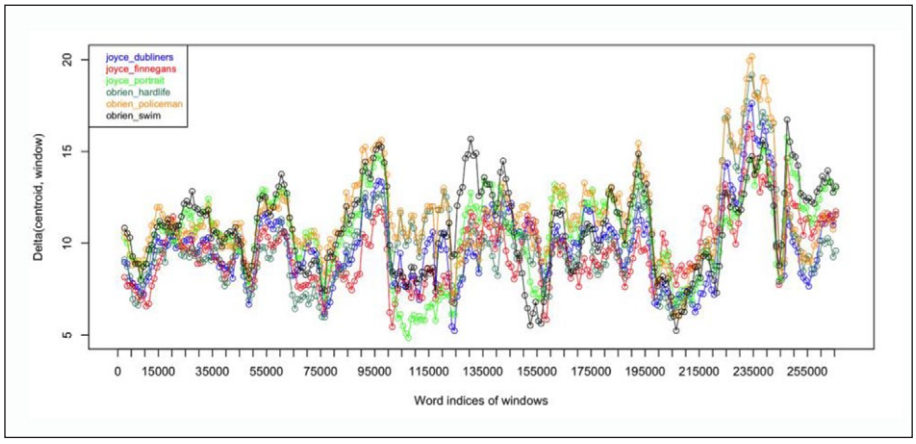

Figure 3: A Rolling Delta analysis of *Ulysses*.

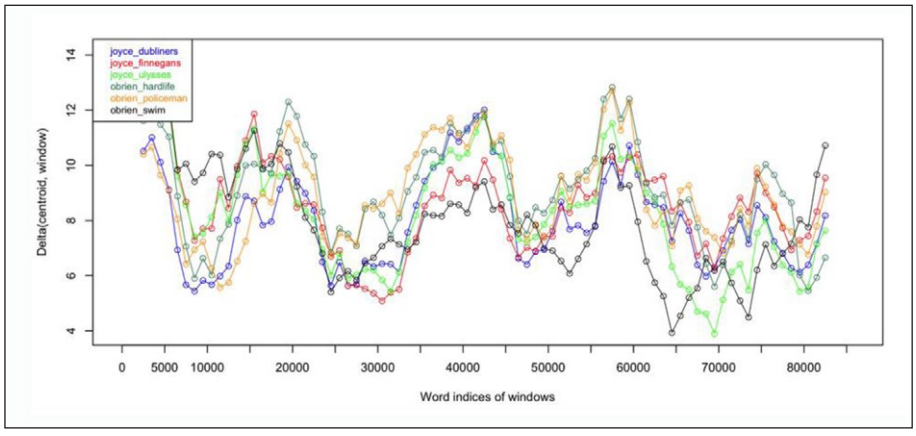

Figure 4: A Rolling Delta analysis of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

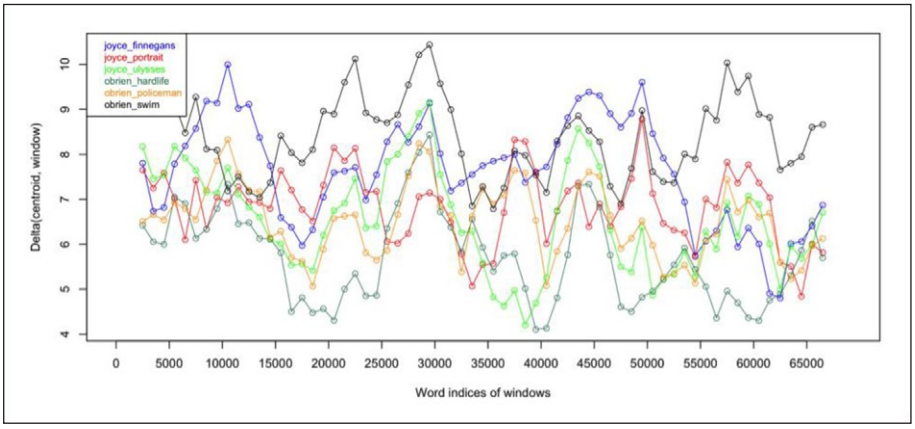

Figure 5: A Rolling Delta analysis of *Dubliners*.

3 Literary Interpretations

These results contribute significantly to scholarship surrounding Joyce and O'Brien in that they offer a clear picture of where the styles of both authors are most similar. Throughout this section, we offer literary interpretations based on these findings, giving specific focus to those correlations that we deem most significant. While we analyzed the entire oeuvre of both authors, it is clear that the greatest stylistic similarities exist between *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Ulysses*. This confirms much of the existing criticism which underlines the overtly Joycean nature of the style adopted by O'Brien in this particular novel. **Figure 6**, taking advantage of the consensus network method as an extended version of the above consensus trees (Eder 2017), simply rearticulates what is represented in the dendrogram (see **Figure 1**), though limited to a corpus comprised only of works by Joyce and O'Brien. The thicker the line between texts, the greater the stylistic similarity.

Our Rolling Delta analyses also produces significant results in relation to the similarities between *The Hard Life* and *Dubliners*, as well as *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. These are perhaps more easily explained than our findings relating to *Ulysses*, but they are nonetheless worth mentioning as they lend statistical evidence to existing scholarship.

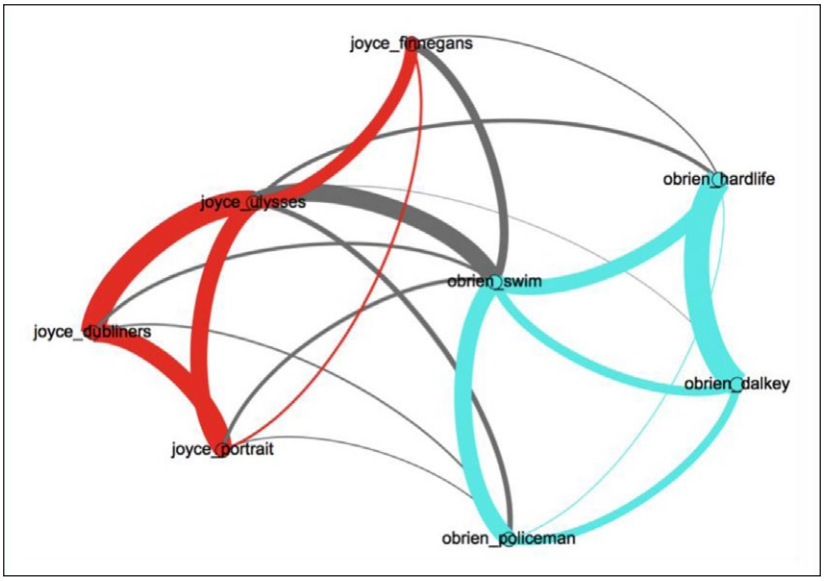

Figure 6: A further visualisation of the stylistic clusters represented in Figure 1.

3.1 Dialects and Protégés

O'Brien's tendency to present an archetypal Dublin dialect across many of his novels is one explanation for this proximity to Joyce's style. Clune (1986) argues that it is O'Brien's Ulster Irish that allows him to reproduce the Dublin dialect so convincingly. He himself claimed that Joyce had the edge on him in this, but there are those who disagree. They argue that only a non-Dubliner could have "caught" his Dubliners so precisely, pinning them down "phrase by phrase" (Clune 1986, 6). Indeed, "Dublin dialogue has a special relish for Brian O'Nolan", and he praises Joyce for his authorship's "supernatural skill" (Mays 1974, 246). It is perhaps unsurprising that both writers' affection for the Dublin dialect results in their styles being so similar. While most of O'Brien's novels are situated in Dublin, *The Hard Life* is the closest novel to *Dubliners*. Published forty-seven years after Joyce's collection, the proximity of O'Brien's style to that of *Dubliners* demonstrates that O'Brien, though not a Dubliner himself, mastered a style long dominated by Joyce. This counters much of the novel's criticism, which accuses O'Brien of being the overt protégé, too conscious in his attempts at achieving the ideal Joycean parody. Asbee (1991) finds comparisons between *The Hard Life* and Joyce's work to be "almost insulting" (91). Our

analysis illustrates (see **Figure 5**) that O'Brien's attempts to capture this style are far from insulting. Instead he has managed to replicate, perhaps not with "supernatural skill", but certainly with some measurable success, the style encountered in Joyce's collection.

Other comparisons are often drawn between Stephen Dedalus and O'Brien's unnamed protagonist from *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Our results present two interesting findings in this respect. In *Ulysses*, the sections most closely aligned with O'Brien's style are "Oxen of the Sun" and "Eumeaus" (see **Figure 3**). Incidentally, "Oxen of the Sun" and "Eumeaus" are among the few episodes in which Stephen and Bloom appear together (the other two are "Circe" and "Ithaca", which, however, clearly stand out stylistically, the former laid out as a drama, and the latter having the catechism-like form of questions and answers). One could put forward the hypothesis that the reason for this similarity is the presence of Stephen, the literary predecessor to O'Brien's student. We do not consider this a valid explanation: in both episodes, Bloom's consciousness seems more prominent, while the earlier episodes, where Stephen features more heavily, show little proximity to O'Brien's style. Furthermore, in "Eumeaus", Stephen is written with an ironic distance, featuring in passages that could not, over the course of the character's appearances, be considered as entirely representative of the style to which he is typically attached. We can conclude from this that connections between the young artists in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *Ulysses* are more symbolic than stylistic.

However, the same cannot be said of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where our results present an interesting correlation. The style of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is very similar to the final section of *A Portrait* (see **Figure 4**). This passage is dominated by a maturing, morally assured, Stephen Dedalus. Claims that O'Brien's character is a refiguring of Dedalus are supported, as the style of *At Swim-Two-Birds* is most closely aligned with the section concerning Stephen's career where he is also a student. Not only does this substantiate considerations of O'Brien's protagonist as a protégé, it is also a significant finding in terms of how we treat Stephen's progression from *A Portrait* to *Ulysses*. Our findings suggest that O'Brien's student has more in common with the Stephen, who is looking to "fly by those nets" (*P* 231), than with the Stephen

we encounter in Joyce's longer epic. If we take O'Brien's protagonist as the test- case, it would seem that his contemporary has written two Stephens, lending evidence to the hypothesis that Joyce consciously constructs his later Dedalus, returned from his travels, as being different from the young artist that we first encounter.

3.2 The Cracked Looking-glass

A close reading of the Joycean passages most similar to *At Swim-Two-Birds* reveals further complexity in intertextual relations. The greatest convergence points between the styles of *At Swim* and *A Portrait of the Artist* occur approximately 64,500 and 74,000 words into Joyce's novel (see **Figure 4**). The first of these is when Stephen discusses aesthetics and perceptions of beauty with the dean of studies, but, unexpectedly, their conversation swerves into the linguistic question "whether words are being used according to the literary tradition or according to the tradition of the marketplace" (Joyce 2007, 164). But, as Stephen feels, the difference does not lie only in generic and sociological contexts; it is also deeply entangled in history and politics. – It is in fact the question of dominance and "ownership" of language, which the Joycean hero expresses in such a poignant way:

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (Joyce 2007, 166)

We could easily imagine O'Brien repeating this confession, admitting that the language he writes is "Joyce's" before it is his. Perhaps it is "an acquired speech" for him, but he mastered it so well that the languages of the two authors tend to converge and become the closest at the point of Stephen's reflection. However, O'Brien's student-narrator does not share Dedalus' sense of alienation from "his" language— he recognizes the heteroglossic nature of literature, especially the novel (which anticipates Bakhtin's characterizations of discourse in this genre). Since nothing can

be done to revive the utopian dream of originality, consequently, he decides to make dialogism in the form of patchwork, pastiche, and parody the fundamental principle of his writing. As he explains to Brinsley:

> 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, thimble-riggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. (O'Brien 2001, 25)

He considers literary tradition not only a reservoir of characters, motifs, and topoi, but also a repository of styles from which writers can and should draw freely. As our analyses demonstrate, O'Brien not only preaches this through his hero, but also effectively puts this into practice.

At this point it is worth noting how the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* exploits references to his master, appropriating the words Stephen used in the above-mentioned quote to make them his own. While "Christ" occurs in O'Brien's novel only six times, and always in connection with Sweeny, usually in his verses, rather surprisingly, "God" features among the 100 most frequent words. This high frequency is probably connected with the exclamation "by God", used by many characters. This marks the language of O'Brien's novel as distinctly Irish (Camden cited in Walshe 2009, 129–30), and even more as "literary spoken Irish" (Walshe 2009, 130). The frequent use of "by God" may be O'Brien's (deliberate or unconscious) strategy for parodying the well-known cliché of Irish speech. But it may also be read as his "domesticating" response to the word so disquieting to Stephen by translating the doubly foreign "Christ"—because the name itself comes from Greek and because Stephen attributes it to the Englishman—into the more familiar name "God" (As

little Stephen reflects, "God's real name was God" [Joyce 2007, 27]). Moreover, the frequency of the word is close to the words "uncle" and "Trellis", whose names might be seen as "authority figures" attempting to control the undisciplined characters: the former the student-narrator, the latter a whole group of his literary creations: Furriskey, Pooka MacPhellimey, the Lamonts, Shanahan and Orlick. God is also a figure of ultimate authority, and the supreme creator. However, in O'Brien's novel, unlike Stephen's artist, the author does not, emphatically, remain "like the God of the creation [...] within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (Joyce 2007, 187). On the contrary, – God features overtly at all levels of narration, incarnated as the student, Trellis, Finn, Sweeny, and the implied author responsible for composition of the whole novel. We could perhaps read the exceptionally high frequency of "God" as a metafictional gesture hinting at the writer-creator's controlling presence in the text. However, the omnipresent authors in O'Brien's novel are hardly omnipotent, or able to control their creations, thus satirizing Stephen's ideal.

Poking fun at the writer as "master" is evident in O'Brien's usage of this word in his novel. It is one of the least often encountered lexemes in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, appearing in the text only ten times, excluding compounds such as 'master-printer" and "master-key" from the count. It is used four times by Trellis' maid in reference to her "master" (O'Brien 2001, 215–6), once when Trellis' characters use it when speaking about him (O'Brien 2001, 181), and in two more occurrences when they are in plural, referring to great Russian novelists, so most of them are in fact synonymous with "author." Two further instances might be interpreted as allusions to Joyce. The first one (and the first time the word appears in the novel) occurs in an excerpt from Christian Brother's *Literary Reader* describing alcohol as a "terrible and merciless master" (O'Brien 2001, 22); Joyce was known for his drinking problem, so it may (or may not) be associated with him. This may also prefigure the sleeping drugs with which Trellis' characters intoxicate their master in order to outwit him. However, the other case leaves no doubt as to its *Ulyssean* provenance. When the Pooka visits Trellis to torture him, the half-asleep writer mistakes him for a servant, but McPhellimey corrects him in rather lofty style, concluding with the statement:

"It is not false that a servant is a servant but truth is an odd number and one master is a great mistake. Myself I have two" (O'Brien 2001, 173–4). Puzzled and upset by the unwanted company, Trellis wishes to "re-enter the darkness of his sleep" (O'Brien 2001, 174) but is, nevertheless, attracted by "allogamy" and "arachnoid", two words unknown to him, and asks the Pooka for explanations. The interest in rare words may be seen as another of Trellis's Joycean traits.

His words echo Stephen's witty conversation with Haines in the opening of *Ulysses*, in which Dedalus admits bitterly that he is "a servant of two masters [...] an English and an Italian", "[t]he imperial British state [...] and the holy Roman catholic and apostolic church", and perhaps even "a third" wanting him for odd jobs (Joyce 2008, 1: 638, 643–4, 641 respectively). By twisting Stephen's confession, the Pooka embraces the fact that he is "authored" by others, forced to speak and be spoken about in "their language", seemingly not minding this. However, on the narrative level the conversation leads directly to the climactic moment of violence when Trellis's imaginary characters turn vengefully against him, while the description of tortures inflicted on their master is communicated in the language of elaborate parody smacking of the Oxean, Cyclopic, and Eumaean style of *Ulysses*. Clearly, in O'Brien's literary universe, it is the "Liber Lord" (Joyce 2012, 250) who plays the role of oppressor. We can only wonder at how different these words are now on Stephen's lips and on the leaves of *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

"Ale" continues to contribute to this network of allusions. It occurs in Joyce's novel only once, and in O'Brien's book twice: first, in the phrase "a proprietary brand of ale" printed in large letters on the student's mirror in which he tries to get a glimpse of his face when shaving, and secondly, in a conversation about quality of beer, as an ironic example of a miracle in which spirit is turned into water (O'Brien 2001, 11, 46 respectively). The first use reminds us of Stephen's definition of Irish art as "the cracked looking glass of a servant" (Joyce 2008, 1: 146). Once we notice the presence of the Joycean "ale" in the passage, the seemingly naturalistic description of the mirror becomes symbolic of O'Brien's position in the literary tradition, supplied "gratis" by the compatriots of "Messrs Watkins, Jameson and Pim." Tellingly, it is on the washstand with the mirror where the student keeps his books, "generally

recognized as indispensable to all who aspire to an appreciation of the nature of contemporary literature [...] ranging from those of Mr. Joyce to the widely read books of Mr. A. Huxley, the eminent English writer" (O'Brien 2001, 11). For O'Brien, this tradition bears additionally an imprint of his gigantic predecessor, looming large over the whole territory of Irish letters, "between the words of which [he] had acquired considerable skill in inserting the reflection of [his] countenance" (O'Brien 2001, 11). He responds to this challenge with humour and irony so typical of him, first proposing his own theory of aesthetics of the novel grounded in non-originality, recycling, pastiche and parody, and then putting it masterly into practice.

3.3 The Style of Parody

As already noted, in *Ulysses*, our Rolling Delta analysis demonstrates significant similarities between the style of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and the "Oxen of the Sun" and "Eumaeus" episodes (see **Figure 3**). Our working hypothesis for explaining this proximity is parody, a dominant feature of these two episodes. Neil Corcoran (1997) has suggested that the basic structure of O'Brien's novel "is derived from the 'Cyclops' episode of *Ulysses*, whose technique (named 'gigantism' by Joyce) involves alterations of more-or-less realistic passages, which reproduce conversations of a Dublin pub with parodies, often very extensive, of various conventions and cliches of Irish writing" (22). While Corcoran's observation clues us to consider parody as an important source of the stylometric similarities of the two authors, our analyses show that it is not "Cyclops" but these other episodes that are closer to the style of O'Brien's novel (**Figure 3**). "Oxen of the Sun" is particularly parodic, as it presents a panorama of historical styles of the English language, starting from Old Anglo-Saxon chronicles and elegies, to modern slang contemporary to the author. Very much a Menippean satire, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is also intensely parodical, and like "Oxen of the Sun", draws upon a wide range of sources, from "high" modernist works, through translations of old Celtic legends, to a range of non-literary styles, including correspondence with a horse racing pundit. According to Leighton Pratt, O'Brien parodies as many as thirty-six different literary styles, and "produces forty-two extracts by way of pastiche" (62).[1]

[1] Our thanks to Barbara Szot for bringing our attention to this article.

Thus, stylistic similarities between this episode and O'Brien's novel may be due to their polyphonic—in the Bakhtinian sense—texture, rather than affinities between styles of particular heroes. In fact, the Russian scholar recognizes such a mosaic of different types and forms of language as constitutive of the novelistic genre *per se*. Interestingly, the high frequency of the word "said", the ninth item in the list of words in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, may be interpreted as the narratorial signal of languages of the others, laying bare the novel's heteroglossia. A comparison with word frequency lists for the British National Corpus (Leech, Rayson and Wilson 2001) and the American English (Davies 2014) suggests that it may be a specific feature of O'Brien's style, at least in this novel. The BNC-based frequency list includes "said" in 51st position (53rd for the written language), while the AE frequency list features it in 19th position, this being close to the 21st position of "said" in the frequency list for the whole *Ulysses*. This also indicates that *At-Swim-Two-Birds* contains much more directly reported dialogues than *Ulysses*. Predominance of dialogue may be an additional reason why their styles converge at the end of "Oxen" and in the beginning of "Eumaeus", where the style becomes distinctly conversational (see **Figures 7** and **8**).

While "Oxen of the Sun" places its emphasis on literary imitations, in "Eumeaus" attention is turned to the bourgeois. The aforementioned similarity with the ironic Dedalus the student, and the corresponding similarity with the equally ironic Dedalus the bourgeois, underlines O'Brien's treatment of the bourgeoisie as being utterly Joycean. *At Swim-Two-Birds* appears as a novel-length continuation of the satire started in the second half of *Ulysses*, and indeed in the final section of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Significantly then, our results support ironic readings, rather than autobiographical readings, of this text.

As regards "Eumaeus", another interpretive possibility is connected with W. B. Murphy, Skin-the-Goat Fitzharris and the anonymous narrator, the storytellers of this episode, weaving fantastic tales in a rambling style, have parallels in *At Swim-Two-Birds*. In both novels we come across very long, complex sentences beginning with participles or participle phrases. It may be sufficient to compare the opening sentences of both texts: "Having placed in my mouth sufficient bread for three minutes' chewing, I withdrew my powers of sensual perception and retired into

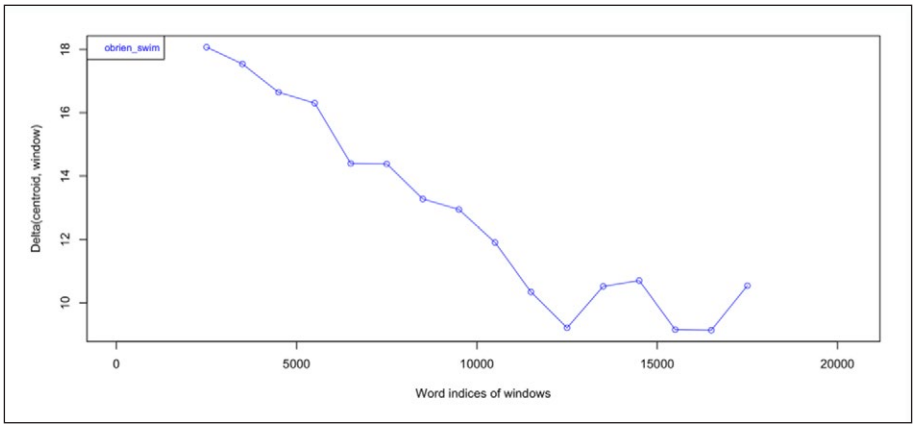

Figure 7: A Rolling Delta analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds* tested against "Oxen of the Sun".

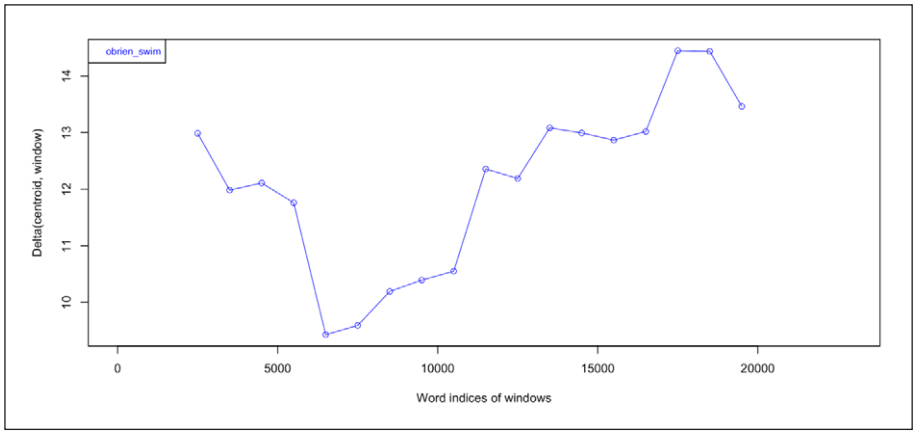

Figure 8: A Rolling Delta analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds* tested against "Eumaeus".

the privacy of my mind, my eyes and face assuming a vacant and preoccupied expression" (O'Brien 2001, 9), and "Preparatory to anything else Mr Bloom brushed off the greater bulk of the shavings and handed Stephen the hat and ashplant and bucked him up generally in orthodox Samaritan fashion which he very badly needed" (Joyce 2008, 16: 1–3). Then, the narratorial voice of "Eumaeus" engages in elaborate, extended, often convoluted and clichéd explanations, full of digressions and aside comments that span over a dozen lines. Similar elaborateness and length can be found in O'Brien's narrator-student when he gives accounts of his everyday activities, and in parodies of old Irish tales retold by Finn McCool about Sweeny. Such long,

complex sentences are built of enumerations connected with "and", prepositional phrases containing "in" "with", "for", "on" "to" (also used as part of the infinitive) and comparisons "as ... as" ("as" also functioning as a conjunction). Both authors have a tendency to use extended periphrastic expression abounding in the preposition "of" and the definite article "the"; for example: "an absence of movement on the part of the cerebral mechanism" (O'Brien 2001, 13) and "the harmless necessary animal of the feline persuasion" (Joyce 2008, 16: 870). All of these lexemes are found among the 30 most frequent words in both texts. Admittedly, they are nearly the same as the list of word frequencies for the British National Corpus, with the exception of "as", which appears as the 40th item in it (Leech, Rayson and Wilson 2001). So, from the perspective of close reading, it is the way in which both authors use the words, rather than their frequency, that accounts for the similarity of styles in this regard.

While length is not a complete measure of complexity, it does offer some indication of how O'Brien and Joyce structure their sentences, and the flow of discourse. Segmenting the texts into sentence sets, we find that in *At Swim-Two-Birds* and "Eumaeus", while the average is negligible, both authors oscillate from typical length to more complex extremes (see **Figures 9** and **11**). Arguably, this is typical of modernist aesthetics and the multi-fractal nature of the narrative modes that one encounters throughout these texts. The oscillation evident in the graphs indicates that colloquial speech interchanges with passages stylized as literary language – of exaggerated and parodied novelistic narration or stylized oral narration.

Regarding "Oxen of the Sun", the complexity of its sentences declines as the episode draws to conclusion (see **Figure 10**). This would account for the vernacular style that Joyce adopts at this point. What is noteworthy, however, is that a further Rolling Delta analysis (see **Figure 7**) reveals that, as "Oxen of the Sun" progresses, it gains proximity to the style of *At Swim-Two-Birds*, first approximately 125,000, and then 155,000, words into the novel. The first proximity point coincides with line 942 in "Oxen", where we find the switch to Edward Gibbon's style. It is interesting to note that the historian of the Roman empire also demonstrates a strong tendency towards periphrastic expressions with the possessive "of", rather than the Saxon genitive, and parallel noun phrases, which Joyce picks ups and imitates in this

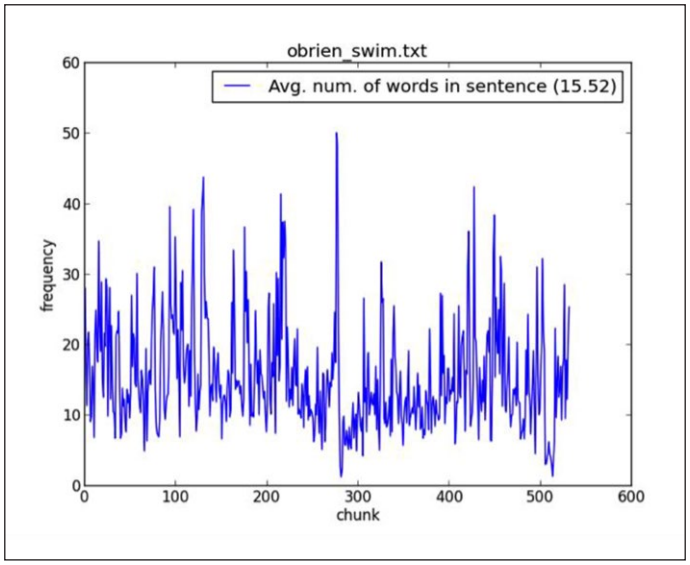

Figure 9: Average sentence length across *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

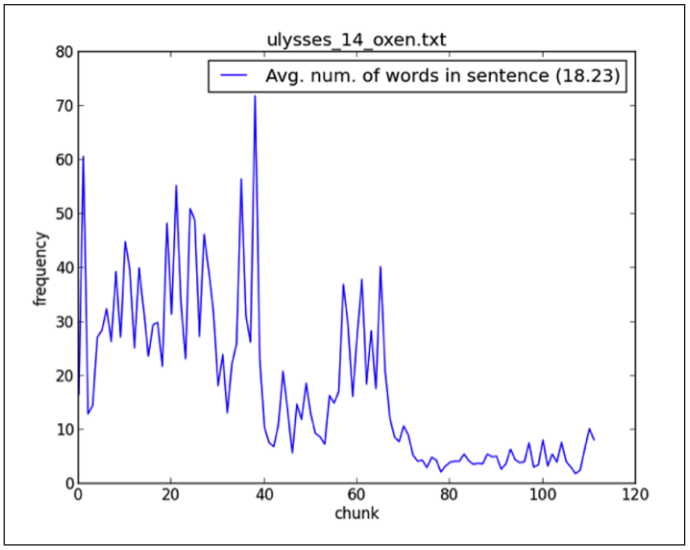

Figure 10: Average sentence length across "Oxen of the Sun".

passage (cf. McKenna and Antonia 1994, 85, who say this may be responsible for a higher frequency of "the" and "of" in Gibbon's passage in contrast to other authors Joyce emulates in "Oxen."). As we have already suggested, such parallelisms are also

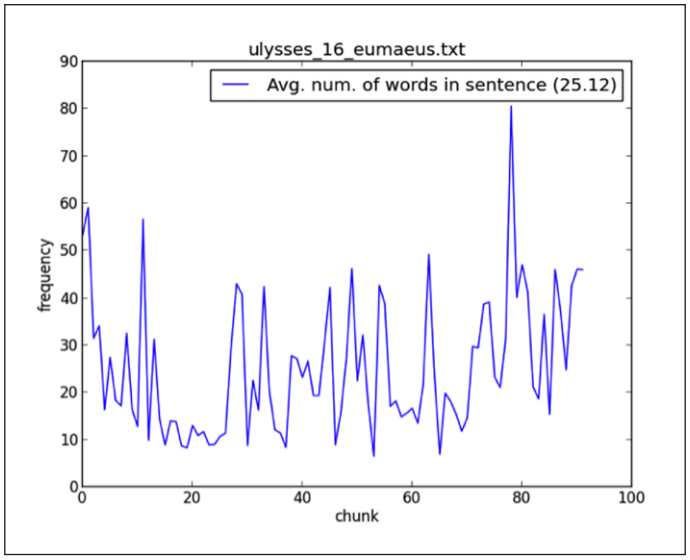

Figure 11: Average sentence length across "Eumaeus".

a prominent feature of O'Brien's student narrator, which may explain why *At-Swim-Two-Birds* gets so close to the style of "Oxen of the Sun" at this point. The 155,000-word threshold coincides with a switch in style, initiated by the paragraph parodying John Henry Cardinal Newman (Joyce 2008, 14: 1344), succeeded by imitations of John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, before the episode concludes with the contemporary slang, full of highly colloquial, short, idiomatic sentences and phrases, which Joyce himself describes as "a frightful jumble of pidgin English, nigger English, cockney, Irish, Bowery slang and broken doggerel" (Joyce 1957, 1: 138–9, 13 March 1920; cf. Gifford and Seidman 1989, 441). However, we need to note that the style of *At Swim-Two-Birds* diverges from the slang concluding the episode (see **Figure 7**). This is understandable because nowhere in O'Brien's novel could we find its obvious stylistic counterpart. Yet, the fact that the stylometric proximity of these texts increases at a steady rate is testament to the manner in which Joyce chronologically parodies the Western literary canon and popular literature of his day. As the episode continues, the style becomes increasingly closer to that which his contemporaries would seek to mimic. Taking both findings into account (see **Figures 7** and **10**), and remembering our discussion of dialect, we can conclude that O'Brien's imitation of Joyce is most

successful when centred on his predecessor's use of more contemporary, and often vernacular, style.

In "Eumaeus", the moment of greatest stylometric proximity occurs between 6,500 and 8,500 words (i.e. roughly between 16: 570 and 16: 760, see **Figure 8**), when Murphy, "the doughty narrator", begins to brag about travels, which his listeners clearly doubt. It is the excerpt in which the sailor's voice is heard most directly, and the style becomes most conversational. Dialogues are interspersed with extensive paragraphs in the narrator's voice, containing such extremely extended sentences as the one quoted above, while the length of sentences oscillates between very short and extremely long ones (see **Figure 11**). A similar oscillation is also observable in *At-Swim-Two-Birds* over longer stretches of text, especially when Finn weaves his tale about Sweeny and is interrupted by Furriskey, Shanahan and Lamont's conversations (see **Figure 9**). The moment of the stylistic convergence between "Eumaeus" and *At Swim-Two-Birds* may again be marked by a subtle intertextual connection. The poet John Casey and his "most trying declamation piece", "a bit of perfect poetry in its own small way" (Joyce 2008, 16: 427–8), whom Bloom recalls when Murphy launches into his tales, reminds us of the poet Jem Casey, described by Shanahan as "Poet of the Pick, [...] [a] labouring man, [...] but as sweet a singer in his own way as you'll find in the bloody trees there of a spring day, and that's a fact" (O'Brien 2001, 74–5).

3.4 Nature of Similarity: Catechistic Style

The proximity to "Eumaeus" is open to alternative interpretation, in that it may not only be "Eumaeus" that our analyses are detecting, but also the beginning of "Ithaca", with this penultimate episode beginning after 218,700 words, and our Rolling Delta indicating the similarity at approximately the 215,000 mark (see **Figures 3** and **12**). It is evident that in *At Swim-Two-Birds,* O'Brien parodies the catechistic style of "Ithaca" with short, verbless phrases functioning as questions, and definition-like answers suggestive of the style of the penultimate episode in *Ulysses*. As evidenced (see **Figure 12**), it is the beginning of "Ithaca" that is stylometrically the closest to *At Swim-Two-Birds*, the point of convergence marking another scene in which language is in focus. The Rolling Delta indicates that it is approximately at 7,500

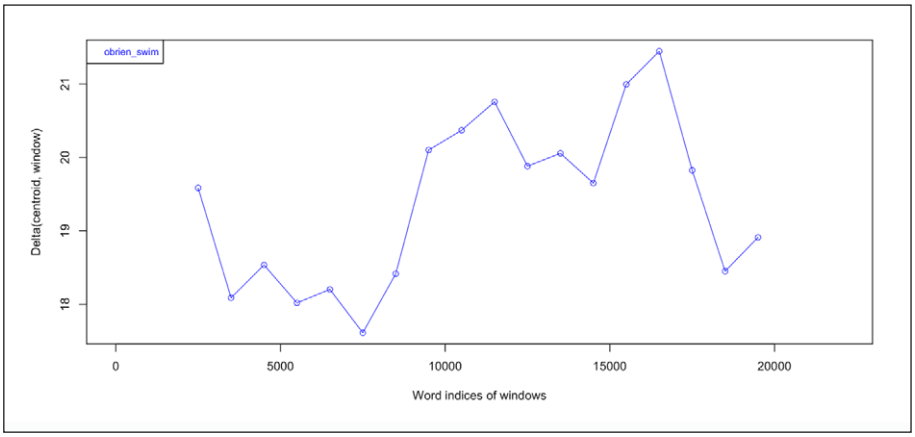

Figure 12: A Rolling Delta analysis of *At Swim-Two-Birds* tested against "Ithaca".

words, or line 750 in the episode – the moment when Bloom and Stephen discuss linguistic and historical contacts between ancient Hebrew and Irish – enumerate similarities between them, and quote whatever scraps of Hebrew and Irish texts they remember. It can be argued that their discussion is concerned with intertextuality entailed in "their archaeological, genealogical, hagiographical, exegetical, homiletic, toponomastic, historical and religious literatures comprising the works of rabbis and culdees, Torah, Talmud (Mischna and Ghemara), Massor, Pentateuch, Book of the Dun Cow, Book of Ballymote, Garland of Howth, Book of Kells" (Joyce 2008, 17: 751–5). By mentioning such books as the Bible and the Book of Dun Cow, both exemplary repositories of different genres and styles (As explained in *Annotations to 'Ulysses'*, the Book of the Dun Cow, the oldest transcription of Irish literature, contains as many as "sixty-five different pieces: romantic tales in prose, an elegy on St. Columcille, a copy of the Voyage of Maeldun, etc." [Gifford and Seidman 1989, 578]), this passage directs the reader's attention to the fundamentally polyphonic and heterogenous nature of literature, which both writers explore in their novels. This part of Bloom's and Dedalus' conversation concludes with another intertextual interpolation, an anti-Semitic ballad "Little Harry Hughes" (Joyce 2008, 17: 724–830), chanted by Stephen. Incidentally, this may offer an additional explanation as to why O'Brien's novel, containing several ballads and verses, approximates Joyce's text at this point.

Bloom's and Dedalus' impressions when they listen to each other's languages can be extrapolated on Joyce and O'Brien to define their ambivalent relation. While the younger one "heard in a profound ancient male unfamiliar melody the accumulation of the past", the elder saw in "a quick young male familiar form the predestination of a future" (Joyce 2008, 17: 777–80). In other words, the author of *At Swim-Two-Birds* heard in *Ulysses* the language simultaneously "so familiar and so foreign" and by listening to it learned from its author how to accumulate voices and styles of the present and the past in his own polyphonic novel. The latter recognized in his younger compatriot an apt disciple eager to outwit and beat his master, and appreciated a true comic spirit worthy of his praise. But the sinister tone of the song emerging at a seemingly friendly moment of the conversation prefigures O'Brien's troubled attitude to his literary forefather. As we could see in Trellis even a fictional beating can be a painful case.

Acknowledgements

Previous iterations of this research were presented at the *Thirteenth International Conference on English and American Literature and Language*, Krakow, April 13th, 2014, and *Digital Humanities*, Lausanne, July 9th, 2014. The authors would like to thank Dr. Laura Pomeroy for giving this paper a final proofread.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Author Contributions

- Conceptualization: K.B.; M.E.; J.O.; J.R.
- Methodology: M.E.; J.O.; J.R.
- Software: M.E.; Mike Kestemont; J.R.
- Writing – Original Draft Preparation: K.B.; M.E.; J.O.; J.R.
- Writing – Review & Editing: K.B.; M.E.; J.O.; Laura Pomeroy; J.R.

References

Anspaugh, Kelly. 2004. "Agonizing with Joyce: At Swim-Two-Birds as Thanatography." In *At Swim-Two-Birds by Flann O'Brien: A Casebook*, edited by Thomas C. Foster, 1–28. Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press. http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/OBrien_AtSwim_Casebook/anspaugh.pdf.

Asbee, Sue. 1991. *Flann O'Brien*. Boston: Twayne Publishers.

Burrows, John. 2002. "'Delta': A Measure of Stylistic Difference and a Guide to Likely Authorship." *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 17(3): 267–287. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/17.3.267

Clune, Anne. 1986. "Flann O'Brien: Twenty Years On." *The Linen Hall Review* 3(3): 4–7.

Corcoran, Neil. 1997. *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Craig, Hugh. 1999. "Authorial Attribution and Computational Stylistics: If You Can Tell Authors Apart, Have You Learned Anything about Them?" *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 14(1): 103–13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/14.1.103

Craig, Hugh. 2004. "Stylistic Analysis and Authorship Studies." In *A Companion to Digital Humanities*, edited by Susan Schreibman, Ray Siemens, and John Unsworth, 273–88. Blackwell. http://www.digitalhumanities.org/companion/. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999875.ch20

Davies, Mark. 2014. "Word Frequency Data. Corpus of Contemporary American English." Brigham Young University. http://www.wordfrequency.info/.

Dotterer, Ronald L. 2004. "Flann O'Brien, James Joyce, and The Dalkey Archive." *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 8(2): 54–63. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2004.0040

Eder, Maciej. 2017. "Visualization in Stylometry: Cluster Analysis Using Networks." *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* 32(1): 50–64. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqv061

Eder, Maciej, Jan Rybicki and **Mike Kestemont.** 2016. "Stylometry with R: A Package for Computational Text Analysis." *The R Journal* 8(1): 107–21.

Gifford, Don and **Robert J. Seidman.** 1989. *Ulysses Annotated. Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*. Revised and expanded 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Herrmann, Berenike J., Karina van Dalen-Oskam and **Christof Schöch.** 2015. "Revisiting Style, a Key Concept in Literary Studies." *Journal of Literary Theory* 9(1): 25–52. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/jlt-2015-0003

Hoover, David. 2004. "Testing Burrows's Delta." *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 19(4): 453–475. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/19.4.453

Hopper, Keith. 1995. *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist*. Cork: Cork University Press.

Jockers, Matthew L. 2013. *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*. University of Illinois Press.

Joyce, James. (1939) 2012. *Finnegans Wake*. Edited by Finn Fordham. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Joyce, James. 1957. *Letters of James Joyce*. Edited by Stuart Gilbert, 1. New York & London: Viking Press & Faber.

Joyce, James. 2007. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Joyce, James. 2008. *Ulysses*. London: The Bodley Head.

Leech, Geoffrey, Paul Rayson and **Andrew Wilson.** 2001. "Frequency Lists." *Companion Website for Word Frequencies in Written and Spoken English: Based on the British National Corpus*. http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/bncfreq/.

Leighton, Pratt. 1981. "The Nature of Comedy in the Novels of Flann O'Brien." *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellonskiego. Prace Historycznoliterackie* 42: 57–68.

Mays, J. C. C. 1974. "Brian O'Nolan and Joyce on Art and on Life." *James Joyce Quarterly* 11(3): 238–56.

McKenna, Wayne and **Alexis Antonia.** 1994. "Intertextuality and Joyce's 'Oxen of the Sun' Episode in Ulysses: The Relation between Literary and Computational Evidence." *Revue Informatique et Statistique Dans Les Sciences Humaines* 30(1): 75–90.

McMullen, Kim. 1993. "Culture as Colloquy: Flann O'Brien's Postmodern Dialogue with Irish Tradition." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27(1): 62–84. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/1345981

O'Brien, Flann. 2001. *At Swim-Two-Birds*. London: Penguin.

O'Grady, Thomas B. 1989. "High Anxiety: Flann O'Brien's Portrait of the Artist." *Studies in the Novel* 21(2): 200–8.

Rybicki, Jan, David Hoover and **Mike Kestemont.** 2014. "Collaborative Authorship: Conrad, Ford and Rolling Delta." *Literary and Linguistic Computing* 29(3): 422–431. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/llc/fqu016

Taaffe, Carol. 2004. "'Tell Me This, Do You Ever Open a Book at All?': Portraits of the Reader in Brain O'Nolan's 'At Swim-Two-Birds.'" *Rish University Review* 34(2): 247–60.

Walshe, Shane. 2009. *Irish English as Represented in Film*. Bamberg Studies in Linguistics 53. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

How to cite this article: O'Sullivan, James, Katarzyna Bazarnik, Maciej Eder and Jan Rybicki. 2018. "Measuring Joycean Influences on Flann O'Brien." *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique* 8(1): 6, pp. 1–25, DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.288

Submitted: 04 November 2017 **Accepted:** 25 February 2018 **Published:** 27 March 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Digital Studies/Le champ numérique is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities. **OPEN ACCESS**