

## Review of *The Third Policeman* by Flann O'Brien

It is extremely difficult to write about *The Third Policeman* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2005) by Flann O'Brien without giving too much away. This is indeed the problem of the excellent introduction by Denis Donoghue and the excerpt from a letter O'Brien (one of the author's numerous names) wrote to American novelist William Saroyan that is repeated in the introduction and in a last-page afterword. The book would have been a lot better if the introduction and the afterword had not been included. As far as one can guess, these insertions would not have been author O'Brien's intention. Like any writer, no matter how narcissistic or alcoholic he was, he craved recognition and the money such recognition would bring. In this sense, *The Third Policeman* is a communication from the author to the reader and in a wider context to society at large. Since every reader is entitled to express his own responses, answers and rebuttals to O'Brien's conjuring, I herewith dispense with the preliminary and postliminary scholarly and incisive analyses. I know now that Donoghue and I share much the same opinion about *The Third Policeman*. His comes more from the scope of his reading and knowledge, and I from my immediate acquaintance with the novel as an artifact. Fortunately I, like Donoghue, have some ideas about the sources from which O'Brien got the plot, cast, and shape of his novel.

For me the chief sources were Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. I will not mention another more essential source for that would give the plot away. Let me only say that O'Brien received his elementary and primary education in Roman Catholic Schools, but religion, at least in its conventional and easily recognizable forms, is not part of the book. Unless I missed buried references there is not a priest or bishop anywhere. There is a fleeting reference to Parnell as a hero and "Home Rule" is mentioned, as a slip-of-the-tongue, but never comes to the forefront in the minds of people in the novel.

Another feature is the absence of female characters until the very end when, without giving anything away about the plot, a woman, as unattractive as a woman can be, puts in a wifely appearance. Nevertheless there is a feminine aura over the entire novel and this is due to bicycles. Not so long ago bicycles were advertised in the American (and I suppose in the European) media as erotic objects. Boys in saloons and in backrooms were aware of glamorous pictures of nude women straddling or floating gleefully on the top of obliging and polished bicycles. Later motorcycles became ultimate macho sex objects. But this is a novel about bicycles as they affected a small group of unusual people; unusual in the respect that the main characters are two policemen, an unsavory business partner of the nameless leading character, a contingent of one-legged men who appear up to no good but their own, a third policeman who is mostly invisible, asocial and so massive that he could be in the Guinness book of records for obesity, and the alluring bicycles whom readers are asked to accept as goddesses.

All the characters in the novel are inverted. Most have an overriding mission. On the ubiquitous narrator's part this mission is to get a black box from a man he has murdered

which he thinks will make him rich and which metamorphoses into a box that contains occult powers that will compel everyone to do his bidding. It is like a gold box that King Midas might have possessed, though the narrator does not go that far. Actually he does not get very far at all because *The Third Policeman* is a novel that is partially a dream that seems real in a realm of no time. Author O'Brien does not get into quantum physics where, on a popular level, there appears to be infinity of lower and lower elements until one reaches quarks and gluons and after that anti-matter (which, according to my rules of logic, would be no matter.) But O'Brien is intrigued with the idea of infinite progression shown at first by the endless receding eyes of Mathers who had been killed by the narrator. As with the stranger in Albert Camus' novel of that name, the narrator had no scruples about the murder. Subjective feelings, except for bicycles, are absent from the novel. It would be impertinent of me to say this detachment from monstrous deeds is an Irish characteristic, though John Synge made a scandal about *The Playboy of the Western World's* boastfulness about the death of his father.

While O'Brien is certainly entitled to make as much of infinite retrogressions and progressions as he wished, it is fair to say that this is not a new device. Mirrors that reflect mirrors and so on without stop are the stock-in-trade of horror movies and of some of Jean Cocteau's surrealistic movies. Receding views of boxes within boxes or of dolls within dolls (Russian style) would seem to reach a point of no return. This would be true in the everyday world. In the topsy-turvy world of *Alice in Wonderland* and of *Gulliver's Travels* limits are exceeded and boundaries are crossed. Being more of a metaphysician than a mathematician, like Lewis Carroll, O'Brien claims his lead characters are in the presence of eternity. A marvelous episode in the novel occurs when the narrator and his two meddling policemen, who are intent on hanging him though he has no name and hence does not exist, discover a map of the universe on the ceiling of a police cell and through some magic of metempsychosis or of levitation find themselves within it. Their discovery of eternity is not a big deal as they can leave it by means of a lift. The catch is they can not take the riches or the knowledge they found there back to earth.

There is a strong element of satire in *The Third Policemen* which occurs at the bottoms of pages in footnotes when they do not take over entire pages. These are about the narrator's absorption with the works and life of De Selby and of his critics and defenders. This is an obvious takeoff on the Academy of Lagado in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, though, I would not be surprised if some of the medieval schoolmen, say Thomas Aquinas or Dun Scotus, were also being mocked. To me the satire was like going through a series of gags, put-downs and turn-about in the manner of vaudeville shows. It was hard to take it seriously as everybody concerned is a fake.

Now for the conundrum: what American's would call the "whole enchilada" or what O'Brien would call the "pancake." This is: Is the novel worth reading without knowing the denouement? Definitely, for all the meanderings and lucubrations lead up to a grand surprise which one thinks shamefacedly they should that thought of all along. Second, is the novel worth reading after knowing the metaphysical and moral reasons for its existence? My answer is Yes, not only because Henry James said the plot is the least

important part of a novel which in this case is not altogether appropriate as other features such as characters are one-dimensional and the setting is minimal and exact.

The novel is worth reading for its peculiarities and for its differences from traditional realistic novels in which scenes and people are described in customary and trite language. Like *Gulliver's Travels* each and every character is a grotesque and, as such, a projection from inside the narrator. They are fantastical. Sleep itself occupies a prominent place in the novel and the inference is that sleep is better than awakening because living has lost its tang. This conclusion is difficult to swallow but these are eerie people who embody ideas that it is hard to imagine most people would embrace, even those who frequent Irish pubs where the reader is given to understand O'Brien was a regular customer. Once more, without giving the plot away, *The Third Policemen* reads like an attenuated version of De Quincey's "Confessions of an English Opium Eater."

Lastly, what I most enjoyed about the book, and why I would recommend it for reading, if not for the writing of college theses, is O'Brien's enlivening and, to me, altogether new use of the English Language. The poet Ezra Pound said, "make it new." And this O'Brien did with virtuoso twists, inversion and sleights-of-tongue. Sometimes in Shakespeare readers get a similar impression of a master practitioner in the jugglery of words, especially in the incorrigible Hotspur in *Henry IV, Part I*, who could not close his mouth, .and the irresistible Falstaff of *Henry IV, Part II*. I give herewith a few examples of O'Brien's linguistic talent. I recommend enjoying the book to the point where all the bon mots, malapropisms, speech rhythms, *non sequiturs*, jokes, and paradoxes have been committed to memory. Let this be the final verdict: *The Third Policeman* is a novel that excels in paradoxes.

De Selby in *The Golden Hours: Human existence, being an hallucination, containing in itself the secondary hallucinations of day and night (the latter an insanitary condition of the atmosphere due to accretions of black air) it ill becomes any man of sense to be concerned at the illusory approach of the supreme hallucination known as death.*

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Martin Finnican: "*Is it life? Many a man has spent a hundred years trying to get the dimensions of it and when he understands it at last and entertains the certain pattern of it in his head, by the hokey he takes to his bed and dies? He dies like a poisoned sheepdog. There is nothing so dangerous, you can't smoke it, nobody will give you tuppence-halfpenny for the half of it and it kills you in the wind-up. It is a queer contraption, very dangerous, a certain death-trap. Life?*"

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Sergeant Pluck: "*He was a true family husband. The last time I interviewed him it was about a missing pump and he had a wife and ten sonnes and at that time he*

*had the wife again in a very advanced state of sexuality.” (Presumably the Irish find the word “pregnancy” too shocking to utter.)*

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*“There was a man in this room a fortnight ago,” he said, “telling me that he was at the loss of his mother, a lady of eighty-two. When I asked him for a description --- just to fill up the blanks in the official form we get for half-nothing from the Stationary Office --- he said she had rust on her rims and that her back brakes were subject to the jerks.”*

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*Policeman MacCruiskeen: “Six years ago they [the wooden chests] began to get invisible, glass or no glass. Nobody has ever seen the last five I made because no glass is strong enough to make them big enough to be regarded truly as the smallest things ever made. Nobody can see me making them because my little tools are invisible into the same bargain. The one I am making now is nearly as small as nothing. Number One would hold a million of them at the same time and there would be room left for a pair of women’s horse-breeches if they were rolled up. The dear knows where it will stop and terminate.”*

And so on and on.

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