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**Maciej Ruczaj**

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**Maciej Ruczaj**

# (Post)Modern *Inferno*: Flann O Brien's *The Third Policeman* between Modern and Medieval Netherworlds

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**Vedoucí diplomové práce**: Ondřej Pilný, PhD

**Zpracoval:** Maciej Ruczaj

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## Prohlášení

**Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracoval samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.**

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**Permisson**


I have no objections to the diploma thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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# I. Introduction

"Skim over *Through Hell with the Papes* (mostly boys)
by the divine comic Denti Alligator"
*Finnegans Wake* (440, 6)

"Death is a full stop" – says the narrator of Flann O'Brien's first novel, *At Swim Two Birds*.[1] In the context of this "proto-postmodernist" [2] text, death is the only possible way to stop the ceaseless process of the multiplication of discourses which constantly undermine themselves. In this respect, the novel also seems to follow the ancient *topos* of narration as "the evasion of death".[3] Nevertheless, O'Brien second fiction, *The Third Policeman* crosses this ontological boundary, and enters the unimaginable and indescribable zone of the afterlife. In Brian McHale's words, it thus constitutes a typically postmodern endeavor to "project the discourse beyond the grave".[4] Nevertheless, contrary to the disembodied "posthumous voices" speaking "out of the void" in texts such as Beckett's *Unnamable*, O'Brien's novel stages an adventurous journey undertaken by a nameless first-person narrator through the netherworld, described by the author in a letter to William Saroyan as "a sort of hell" – the first of Christian eschatological realms – which the narrator has "earned" for his crimes.[5] Originally, O'Brien intended to entitle the novel *Hell Goes Round and Round*, asserting the centrality of the motif of inferno and thus, arguably, inscribing it in the generic tradition of the classical and Christian *catabasis* – a descent or visionary journey to the eternal dwellings of the souls – which culminates in Dante's *Commedia.*

In this essay, I would like to examine the potential of the analogy with the first canticle of Dante's poem for the interpretation of *The Third Policeman*. *The Commedia* serves here as a summa and a climactic literary representation of the Christian eschatological imagery and a poetic rendering of the theology of the "last things of man". I will attempt to point out the complex interplay of subversion and affirmation of this Dantean and Christian

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[1] Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, (London: Macgibbon & Kee 1966), 314.

[2] Inclusion of O'Brien's poetics into the critical discourse of postmodernism has been recently conducted especially by Keith Hopper. Hopper interprets *At Swim Two Birds* as a "transitionary text" on the verge "of an exciting new aesthetics" of post-modernism. *The Third Policeman* is then analyzed especially in the context of theoretical concept of metafiction, demonstrating various uses of the metaleptic and defamiliarizing devices in the narrative as well as its character of "intertextual matrix" that makes him – along with *Finnegans Wake* – "the first great masterpiece of … post-modernism". (Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien : A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist*, [Cork: Cork University Press 1995], 4-20).

[3] One of the best known examples of what Todorov calls "*les homes-récits*" is of course Scheherazade, "whose existence, inside as well as outside the fictional world, depends upon her continuing to tell stories". Sterne's Tristram Shandy in a similar mode (this time in an explicitly metafictional comment) declares "as long as I live or write (which in my case means the same thing)" (Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fictions*, (New York: Routledge 1987] 228-9).

[4] McHale, 230.

[5] O'Brien's letter to William Saroyan from 14th February 1940. Published as a part of "Publisher's Note" in all editions of the novel. Here: Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, (London: Flamingo 1993), 207.

reading of the universe in O'Brien's novel, realized by means of the underworld descent, however, in a specific *sub specie temporis nostri* form. The analysis will concentrate on the meeting points between Dante's narrative and the modernist (or proto-postmodernist) strategies of the novel. The *Inferno* participates in this reading both as a paradigmatic ethical point of reference, and as an alternative, pre-modern, source of the subversive techniques of an "epistemological comedy" which discloses human - and authorial - limitations and fallibility in a profound satire of Western Cartesian rationalism.

Admittedly, the relation between O'Brien's novel and Dante's poem is by no means unproblematic. Hugh Kenner, in his pioneering analysis of *The Third Policeman,* claims: "The book is a black joke, a comic turn; it is not a *Divina Commedia,* and never dreamed of being one".[6] Dante is rarely invoked in the discussion of O'Brien's novel[7], and Kenner's comment seems to voice the general critical opinion that dismisses the connection between the essentially parodic and "heteroglossic" (to use Bakhtin's term) poetics of *The Third Policeman* and the closed, "monological" cosmos of the *Commedia*. In establishing such a relation we cannot count on any extra-literary signposts either. "Keep whole Dantesque analogy out of sight" – wrote young Samuel Beckett in his *Whoroscope* notebook.[8] In O'Brien's *oeuvre* – on the contrary - neither an explicit nor a concealed presence of Dante's poem can be detected.

Contrary to Dante the pilgrim, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* is not a visitor but an "inhabitant" of the netherworld. He speaks literally "from beyond the grave".[9] He is narrating a story of his crime – the murder of a rich neighbor, old Mathers, undertaken in order to gain funds necessary to publish his *opus magnum* – a "definite commentary" on the works of an extravagant scientist de Selby (15-16).[10] A search for Mathers' "black cashbox" hidden by his comrade-in-crime, John Divney, triggers a series of most unusual adventures. When walking into old Mathers' house, the narrator experiences an ineffable "awful alteration in everything" (25), and afterwards is confronted with his very victim – seemingly

[6] Hugh Kenner: "The Fourth Policeman", Anne Clune and T. Hurson, eds. *Conjuring Complexities. Essays on Flann O'Brien*, (Belfast: Queen's University Belfast Press 1997), 69.

[7] Eva Wappling speaks about the novel's stress on the physical suffering "that gives this novel a likeness to Dante's *Inferno*, although starting out as a comedy" (Eva Wappling: *Four Legendary Figures in At Swim Two Birds. A Study of Flann O'Brien's use of Finn, Suibhne, the Pooka and the Good Fairy*, [Uppsala: Almquist and Wiksell 1984], 57). D. E. Morse claims that the novel "has its roots deep in Dante's Inferno and catholic theology." (Donald E. Morse, "Making the Familiar Unfamiliar: The Fantastic in Four Twentieth-Century Irish Novelists", Bruce Stewart, ed. *That Other World. The Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts*. Volume Two, [Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1998], 278). Some allusions to the potential of the Dantean reading of O'Brien's texts given by M.K. Booker are referred to later in this essay.

[8] quoted in: Dirk Van Hulle, *Joyce & Beckett. Discovering Dante*, (Dublin: The National Library of Ireland 2004), 27.

[9] McHale, 230

[10] Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, (London: Flamingo 1993), 15-6. All quotations from *The Third Policeman* are to this edition. References to *The Third Policeman* are given in the brackets within the text.

quite alive - who gives him the first intimations of the peculiar environs he has entered. The pursuit of the black box leads the narrator to a strange "Parish" controlled by a trio of policemen, a world in which the commonsensical rules of reality and physical laws are inverted and denied. Crucially, whereas the narrative of the *Commedia* moves consciously from the world of the living to the realm of the dead, *The Third Policeman* manages to conceal the actual setting until the very end. Only then both the narrator and the reader realize that what appeared as a distorted and nightmarish, yet still earthly, setting, in fact proves to be "a sort of hell" which the narrator – killed by a bomb planted in Mathers' house by Divney - earned as a punishment for his crime. What becomes a crucial shattering revelation for the reader, quickly disappears from the memory of the nameless narrator. He again approaches the same police barracks without the slightest signs of *déjà vu* feeling; this time accompanied by John Divney. The circle is closed: "again the beginning of the unfinished, the re-discovery of the familiar, the re-experience of the already suffered..."[11]

What alienates the novel most decisively from any Dantean associations is, however, its overall tone of black comedy bordering on the macabre and the virtual absence of any ethical questions on the surface of the text. If it is a modern *Inferno* - then a strange *Inferno* without a sense of sin and guilt, without even the slightest acknowledgment of the notion of damnation; and finally - without either the devils or the intimations of the Divine Justice at work.[12] At the first sight it seems completely disparate with any Christian concept of the afterlife, of which the *Commedia* is considered the most elaborate artistic representation. After all, it also seems miles away from the most notorious "hell" of the Irish modernism, Father Arnall's "fire and brimstone" sermon of *A Portrait of the Artist.*

Nonetheless, I would like to suggest that the omission of the Christian motifs and imagery in the texture of the novel is a significant speaking absence. The poetics of parody and inversion which form an inherent part of O'Brien's intertextual strategies are also a double-edged sword, not only diminishing the authority of the past texts, but often affirming them via negation and ridicule. They can be, in fact, inscribed into the wider frame of the modernist ambiguous reception of Dante.

Dante and his *opus magnum* is a presence hovering over the poetics of Anglo-American modernism. "He is my spiritual food, the rest is ballast"[13] – claimed Joyce positing the author of the Commedia as one of the few acknowledged masters. It remained a paradox that the author of a precise poetic topography of the tripartite eschatological realm, who managed to

[11] "Letter to William Saroyan", *The Third Policeman*, 207.
[12] Cf. for example Concetta Mazullo, "Flann O'Brien's Hellish Otherworld: From Buile Suibhne to The Third Policeman" *Irish University Review,* 25/2, (Autumn/Winter 1995), 325; Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye. The Modern Irish Writers*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press 1989), 324.
[13] Quoted in: Howard Helsinger, "Joyce and Dante", *ELH*, 35/4 (Dec. 1968), 592.

marry his irreducible poetic individuality to the dogmatic Christian, God-centered vision of the universe, emerged as a major influence in an age where any sense of such topography seemed to have been lost and where "the centre cannot hold". Samuel Beckett in one of his reviews declares: "...who wants to love Dante? We want to READ Dante"[14] – the notion of "reading" rather than "loving" suggests a displacement of imitative veneration for a more dynamic, thus potentially "irreverent", appropriation and distortion. Dante's poem in the hands of the modernist writers becomes inevitably the *Commedia* of many faces; or - as Blake Leland comments - the modernists attempted "to make Dante an ally in their own projects"[15]. The opposite poles of this alliance can be defined by reference to the two authors probably most intensely engaged with Dante: Beckett, for whom the *Commedia* formed arguably an existential paradigm he repeatedly attempted to *revert*, "collapsing *Paradiso* into *Inferno*"[16]; and T. S. Eliot's for whom, on the contrary, Dante's poem became a force behind his *analogical* ascent from the infernal landscape of *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*, through the "refining fire" of *Ariel Poems* towards the "beatific vision" hinted at in the closing lines of *Little Gidding*. Beckett explores Dante as a weapon against the legacies of Cartesianism and the Enlightenment, yet at the same time subjects it to the workings of parody in the world that lost its ordered and meaningful structure.[17] On the contrary, Eliot (and to some extent Pound) views Dante as the last priest of the unified poetic sensibility as well as of the organic cultural unity - the object of a nostalgic longing, a personification of the lost Golden Age.

The Irish civil servant, novelist and columnist with at least a trinity of identities: Brian O'Nolan / Flann O'Brien / Myles na gCopaleen, seems, however, rather out of place in this cosmopolitan gathering. Though born in Dublin only three decades after Joyce, and being Beckett's contemporary - his life-choices separated him from direct connection with the cosmopolitan *ambiente* of Paris-based High Modernism. He is a writer who refused to choose between the Joycean antinomies of staying in Ireland and pursuing artistic freedom. Whereas his contemporaries (and in fact fellow-students), such as Denis Devlin, voted for exile or at least entered the Diplomatic Service in order "to get out of Ireland", O'Brien opted for the Department of Local Government: the contrast between the two institutions being quite symbolic. Among the great Irish modernists he is the one most firmly rooted in the "Palace

[14] Samuel Beckett, "Papini's Dante", Ruby Cohn, ed. *Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, (London: John Calder 1983), 81.
[15] Blake Leland, "'Siete Voi Qui, Ser Brunetto?' Dante's *Inferno* 15 as a Modernist Topic Place", *ELH*, 59/4, (Winter 1992), 965.
[16] Kelly Anspaugh, "Faith, Hope, and – What Was It? : Beckett Reading Joyce Reading Dante", *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 5/182 (1996), 31.
[17] According to Hopper, the study of Dante provides Beckett with a tool for confronting the philosophical "legacy of the Enlightenment." (Hopper, 264). The question of inscribing Beckett's works into modernism as a period in literary history is of course highly disputable, but his engagement with Dante as well as close association with Joyce and Paris modernist community in his early years justifies in this case a slight oversimplification.

Bar Dublin"[18] as well as in the native literary tradition to which he had acquired much better access thanks to his bilingualism and university education (he studied medieval Irish literature at University College Dublin).

With some degree of oversimplification we may say that there exist two basic strains in the interpretation of the theme of the netherworld in *The Third Policeman* derived from the overall critical reception of his work. Both provide severe obstacles for the inclusion of Dante and Christian motifs in the interpretational scheme.

First of the "critical schools" originates in - as Keith Hopper dubs it (a pun, I suppose, intended) - a "rogueish Mylesian myth"[19]. O'Brien remained for a long time a victim of a peculiar "biographical criticism". The very elusiveness of O'Brien's identity, divided into at least a trinity of personalities: Brian O'Nolan the public servant, Flann O'Brien - an experimental novel writer, and Myles na gCopaleen – a famous journalist-satirist; seems to contribute to a sense of a consciously staged farce surrounding the writer's career.[20] And during his lifetime he was most widely known under the third of his identities, as a witty and ironic columnist for the *Irish Times* and a legendary character of Dublin pub-life. Thus for a long time he was subjected to a kind of patronizing discourse of "the mad Irishry" (as Anthony Burgess calls it) that destined him to the role of the uncrowned king of Irish clowns and mockers, a stereotypical Irish writer who – in Kenner's words - never "addresses pen to paper with any intent save to produce a good yarn".[21] The notion was largely promoted also by his first biographer, Anthony Cronin who sums up: "he was a licensed satirist and jester whose aim was to deflate and to amuse".[22] Admittedly, this image was to a great extent supported by the writer's self-stylization.[23] In the above-mentioned letter to Saroyan he tellingly justifies his use of the netherworld motif in *The Third Policeman* by the fact that it provides "any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks". Finally, even the fact that O'Brien died on 1st of April, Feast of Fools, and – a year later – "published" posthumously a novel (*The Third Policeman*) that features a first person narrator speaking literally "from the grave" seems to crown this overall air of a "black joke". O'Brien's critical reception thus

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[18] J. C. C. Mays, "MacGreevy as Modernist?", Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davies, eds. *Modernism and Ireland. The Poetry of the 1930s'*, (Cork: Cork University Press 1995), 108.
[19] Hopper, 231.
[20] Even the choice of pennames seems significant in this context. Myles na gCopaleen is an allusion to the Stage Irishman figure of Dion Bouccicault play, and – as MacKillop notices – the name "Flann", rather rare in Old Irish literature – is most often linked to the IXth century artist Flann mac Lonain known as "the devil's son" for his biting satire (James MacKillop, *Fionn Mac Cumaill. Celtic Myth in English Literature*, [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press], 134).
[21] Quoted in: Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition. An Essay on Poetry and Politics in Ireland,* (Manchester: Carcanet Press 1995), 128.
[22] Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter. The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*, (London: Grafton Books 1990), 59.
[23] As Monique Gallagher points out, "for 25 years he had cultivated the role of a clownish jester". (M. Gallagher, "The Third Policeman: A Grave Yarn", Bruce Stewart, ed. *That Other World. The Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and its Contexts*. Volume Two, [Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1998], 196).

suffers from the exactly opposite "one-directionality" than Beckett's, even though – as for example M.K. Booker has demonstrated[24] – there are very close affinities between their works.[25] The apprehension of Beckett - exile from Ireland - was for a long time reduced to a reading that renders them into a literary representation of "the deep existential anguish" (Martin Esslin's summary[26]), *Angst* of modernity. This critical standpoint rendered a comparison with Dante's *Commedia* entirely justifiable, with the images from the *Inferno* providing fitting examples of the hopeless *conditio humana*. On the other hand, O'Brien – stuck within this kind of biographical (and partially auto-biographical) discourse – was unlikely to be associated with with Dante and any kind of serious analysis of the theme of hell in the novel may appear as either an absurd activity or an act of intellectual violence trying to impose on the "back chat and funny cracks" a suffocating strait-jacket of critical jargon.[27]

The second major strain in O'Brien criticism – in an utter opposition to the "insular" tradition – attempts to place the writer in the sphere of the radical literary avant-garde. When salvaged from the Irish buffoonery type of criticism O'Brien is revealed as the author on the verge "of exciting new aesthetics".[28] M. K. Booker – in contrast to O'Brien's biographical critics – states that "*The Third Policeman* is very much a novel of ideas".[29] Critical introductions to his works provided recently by Booker, Jose Lanterns[30] and Keith Hooper analyze *The Third Policeman* in the context of the Bakhtinian concept of the menippean satire (Booker, Lanterns) and as a "proto-postmodernist" metafictional novel (Hopper). In the first case, the motif of the netherworld obtains a functional significance as the appropriate setting for the text subversion and parody of earthly hierarchies, closed authoritative systems and monological readings of reality. In the context of metafiction, the notion of the netherworld enhances the basic postmodern theme of the ontological non-existence of the fictional world of the novel and its protagonist ("a work about death often

[24] M. K. Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 1995), 8-27.

[25] Adopting O'Brien's own comic mode of argumentation - it appears sometimes as if the critical reception of two greatest post-Joycean Irish novelists, O'Brien and Beckett, was guided by some mysterious numerology connected with the liminal dates of their lives. O'Brien's death on 1st of April made him for ever "an Irish clown". In case of Beckett the fact that he was born on Easter Friday and died shortly before Christmas seems to provide an additional symbolic affirmation of the canonical reading of Beckett as a voice of the "existential anguish" of humanity ("Birth was the death of him" – wasn't it?).

[26] Quoted in: Vivian Mercier, *Beckett / Beckett*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1977), 26.

[27] Actually, O'Brien himself warn against the danger of such an "over-seriousness" in interpretation (though in this case not referring to *The Third Policeman*) in one of his comments in the *Cruskeen Lawn* column of the *Irish Times*, ridiculing critics who: "…look for the overtones, undertones, subtones, grunts and 'philosophy'; they assume something very serious is afoot. It's disquieting for a writer who is only, for the moment, clowning" (quoted in: Doherty, 60).

[28] Hopper, 14.

[29] Booker, 48.

[30] Jose Lanterns, *Unauthorized Versions. Irish Menippean Satire, 1919-1952*, (Washington: University of America Press 1997), 206-234.

modulates readily, if eerily, into a work about literature" – as Walter Ong suggests[31]). Thus from this perspective, the infernal character of the novel's setting as well as the ontological and ethical status of the narrator receive more critical attention, nevertheless, they are treated as merely functional, technical devices in the overall system of the novel.

In his study of Beckett, Hugh Kenner defines the tradition of Irish "epistemological comedy"[32] represented by such authors as Swift, Sterne and Beckett – the mode of writing not dissimilar from Bakhtinian menippean satire. The epistemological comedy is juxtaposed in Kenner's view with an "ethical" one – being arguably an allusion to the *Commedia* of Dante – and consists in the radical deconstruction of all the intellectual systems that exposes the limitedness of perception and language. The "cosmopolitan school" of O'Brien's criticism seems to have adopted Kenner's classification.[33] A concomitant result of this adoption is, however, a rather negligent attitude to the dimension of moral satire and to the religious consciousness behind the subversive façade of the novel. Admittedly, most of the critics seem to acknowledge the presence of the "moral" layer of *The Third Policeman*, and speak about the potential for "Christian allegory" embedded in its texture. Yet the invasion of some absolute, stable "ideological" centre into such an exemplary "proto-postmodernist text" seemed highly disquieting. Mentioning the "conservative", "Catholic" dimension of the narrative - the story "of sin, crime and punishment" - has thus something of a commonplace in the current discourse on the novel, yet rarely does it lead to any in-depth discussion of the issue that would give full justice to its significance in the overall structure.[34]

The aim of this essay is not to introduce some inverted hierarchy of O'Brien's influences, but rather to suggest that the epistemological and ethical comedy do not necessarily form an antithetical, mutually exclusive pair. I would argue that juxtaposing *The Third Policeman* with the *Inferno*, reading it *from* the perspective of Dante's poem and *against* it, provides a valuable complementary dimension to the interpretation of the modern text and supplies significant insights often overlooked in critical investigation of the novel. I will suggest that the *Commedia* and the Christian tradition open space not only for the inclusion of the "ethical" level of the narrative but also serve as a complementary or alternative exegetical standpoint in respect to its most subversive strategies. Thus, by means of tracing the *analogies* between *The Third Policeman* and medieval narratives of the netherworld, I would like to disclose the workings of the novel as a complex *Inferno sub specie temporis nostri*.

[31] Quoted in: McHale, 231.
[32] Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study*, (New York: Grove Press 1961), 37.
[33] Kenner's categorization is explicitly mentioned in: Booker, 9.
[34] cf. Hopper, 238-240, 258-9; Booker, 27, 59-60; Ondřej Pilný: "Cycling Round the Bend", in: *Literaria Pragensia* 13/vol. 7 (1997), 41.

The scholarly acknowledged literary influences on O'Brien's construction of the netherworld are the medieval Irish "narratives of the otherworld". Therefore, I would start with an analysis of the general question of intertextuality in O'Brien's *oeuvre* and its precise mechanics in connection with the Celtic medieval sources in O'Brien's third novel, *An Beál Bocht*. The *strategies* of dealing with the medieval material provide a useful point of departure for tracing the *analogies* between *The Third Policeman* and the *Commedia*. In the second section of that chapter the theme of intertextuality is posited in its specifically modernist form of "the mythical method" defined in T. S .Eliot's review of *Ulysses*. O'Brien's novel is analyzed in the context of the inherent ambiguity of the mythical method that may suggest both the nostalgia for the lost order of myth as well as the subversive attempt to undermine its authority. Joyce's use of Homeric- and Beckett's use of Dantean motifs provide a comparative screen for a similar examination of the workings of *The Third Policeman*. "The poetics of inversion" established by means of this analysis will then (in Chapter III) be examined within the framework of Bakhtinian menippean satire – exposing, however, the limitations of this critical concept in relation to the novel. Referring to the Derridian opposition of "centre and play", I would like to disclose a similar tension in the works of O'Brien, first by means of a brief analysis of *At Swim Two Birds*, and then applying it to *The Third Policeman*. The search for an ethical "centre beyond play" in the novel, undertaken by means of a comparison with the *Commedia*, constitutes the main theme of the second part of the essay (chapters IV and V). It corresponds to the opposite pole of the interpretation of the mythical method – one of the satire of modernity based on the juxtaposition with the past. In those two chapters I will attempt to trace the elements of the morality tale of sin and punishment in the novel and to locate it within the paradigm of Christian netherworld of Dante. The final section will then examine the allegorical potential of O'Brien's text, juxtaposing and comparing it to the strategies of Dante's "allegory of conversion". If the opposite poles of the modernist appropriation of Dante are defined by Beckett's parodic inversion and Eliot's nostalgia for the stable order of the universe, *The Third Policeman,* analyzed from the perspective of the theme of the netherworld, will appear as a text hesitating between the two ends of the continuum.

## II. Inferno *sub specie temporis nostri*

'To do just the opposite is also a form of imitation, and
the definition of imitation ought by rights include
both."35
G. Ch. Lichtenberg

### II. 1. Flann O'Brien in the limbo of texts

"In Ireland" – declared young W. B. Yeats – "this world and the world we go after death are not far apart."36 The poet was primarily justifying his own occultist project of the "Celtic twilight" as well as drawing upon the Arnoldian discourse of racial and cultural "Celticism" – the vision of the liminal people of the misty zone beyond the rationalist West nurturing lost elsewhere notions of mysticism and transcendence. Yet at the same time - as Proinsias MacCana sums up - "the idea of an ever-present Otherworld and its relationship to the world of mortal men is one that pervades Irish tradition".37 Yeats is thus alluding to a long tradition of "the Irish otherworld literature", embedded in the pagan tradition of the *sidhe* – the fairy-folk from underworld dwellings. The border between the two worlds in this tradition seems extremely blur and fluid, with both the fairies invading frequently the realm of the mortals and human heroes entering the zone of the otherworld. In a Christianized form, this phenomenon gave medieval Europe some of the most prominent narratives of the netherworld – *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, *Fis Adamnáin* or *Visio Tungdali*. Each of them was a pinnacle of a different generic tradition: from the Celtic journey to the marvelous islands of the Western sea, through the genre of "dream visions" of the hagiographic literature to the typically medieval mixture of the dogmatic with the grotesque and comic versions of afterlife that provided one of the inspirations for Bakhtin's concept of the carnival. As Jacques LeGoff comments "southern Italy and Ireland" were "areas noted for otherworldly fantasy".38 The physical "nearness" of the otherworld Yeats is alluding to, found at that time its literal realization in the phenomenon of Saint Patrick's Purgatory of Lough Derg, considered throughout Europe to be one of the most famous sites of an actual topographical encounter between the two realms.39 In 12th century Gautier de Metz wrote:

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35 Quoted in: Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, (New York: Oxford University Press 1973), 31.
36 W. B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, (1902 edition, p. 165), accessed 1 Sept. 2007 http://www.celtic-twilight.com/ireland/yeats/celtic_twilight/index.htm.
37 Proinsias Mac Cana, "Old Irish Literature – Introduction", Seamus Deane, ed. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, vol. 1, (Derry: Field Day 1991), 3.
38 Jacques LeGoff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. A. Goldhammer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984), 181.
39 LeGoff calls the first written account of St. Patrick's Purgatory "one of the bestsellers of the Middle Ages" (LeGoff, 198)

> In Ireland there is a place from which day and night issues fire, it is called St. Patrick's Purgatory, and if any person enter it without having repented, they are immediately carried off, and no one can tell what has become of them.40

The Irish medieval literature provides thus an immediate and the most obvious literary environment in which the inspirations for the netherworld of *The Third Policeman* should be sought. In his other novels of the same period, O'Brien – himself a student of the old Irish literature – uses (or rather misuses) texts from this period extensively. In fact they formed – as J.C.C. Mays asserts – a single body of texts that the author of *At Swim* himself admitted as a literary influence on his writing.41

For O'Brien – despite his deep antipathy towards the revivalist poetics – the netherworld was also just "few miles down the road", set in the familiar landscape which for many critics seems reminiscent of the Irish Midlands.42 This geographical delineation seems meaningful in itself: the Irish Midlands form a clear antithesis to the mystic landscape of the Irish West which provided a setting for the transitional zones between the world in the discourses of the Revival. Thus, it signalizes its alienation from the sentimentalized otherworlds of the 'Celtic Twilight' school. "Flat and featureless" landscape of the surroundings of Tullamore where O'Brien spent some time as a child and which, according to Cronin, inspired *The Third Policeman*43 suggests by itself a very different mode of "otherworldliness" from that of the Yeatsian fairy-realm. It thus suggests the extensive use of the texts of the surrounding culture, yet at the same time in a highly subversive mode. In this chapter the appropriation of the Irish otherworldly literature is seen as illustrative from the point of view of O'Brien's overall intertextual practices. In the second section I would like to examine *The Third Policeman* from the perspective of a specific (though by no means unambiguous) modernist mode of intertextuality – the so-called "mythical method".

Medieval culture is to a great extent based on "quotation", with all the concomitant implications of the "authoritative source". However, as Bakhtin points out, this relation was by far more complex and ambiguous. Even the most sacred texts are often suffused by the carnivalesque spirit of the parodic misuse. The Scripture as the main referential text remains subjected to the whole caleidoscope of quotations and a similarly wide range of uses: "from reverence to parody".44 As Josipovici suggests, in this respect modernism signalizes a return to the medieval practices, obfuscated due to both the Classicist notion of *imitatio* and the

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40 Quoted in: Peggy O'Brien, *Writing Lough Derg. From William Carleton to Seamus Heaney*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press 2006), 73.
41 J. C. C. Mays, "Brian O'Nolan: Literalist of the Imagination, Timothy O'Keeffe, ed. *Myles. Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*, (London: Martin, Brian and O'Keeffe 1973), 84.
42 Cronin, 18; Kenner, "The Fourth Policeman", 64.
43 Cronin, 18.
44 Mikhail Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse", *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. C. Emerson, (Austin: University of Texas Press 1986), 69-70

Romantic ideal of the creative original genius. "Drawing from the funds of a long tradition", a writer does not need to follow it reverentially and accept the past voices as an infallible authority. On the contrary – he remains within this tradition also when he "inverts or distorts" them during the artistic process.45

Bakhtin's meditation on the centrality of quotation in the carnevalesque medieval culture provided an inspiration for the introduction of the term "intertextuality" into the critical discourse undertaken by Julia Kristeva. Intertextuality "opens the individual text to history, thus rescuing it from the self-blindness of a purely structural analysis".46 Contrary to the Bakhtinian *heteroglossia*, it puts emphasis also on a diachronic dimension. A "vertical status of the word" – as Kristeva calls it – presupposes its orientation not only "toward the synchronic" but also "toward the anterior literary corpus"47, or – in Roland Barthes' words – the inclination of every text toward the "redistribution" of "the texts of previous and surrounding culture" 48.

There seems to be a hidden tension between the strife for originality and the openness to the intertextual influences inherent in the O'Brien *oeuvre*. Discussing the value of the recently finished *Third Policeman,* he takes pride mainly in the concept of narrator "being dead all the time which – he claims – "is pretty new" and opens to the writer completely unexpected horizons.49 On the other hand, setting to the task of composing his "novel within the novel", the nameless student narrator of *At Swim* meditates on the literary strategies in the essentially intertextual terms:

> 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. (*At Swim*, 25)

His claims may be juxtaposed with one of the founding critical statements of the Anglo-American modernism, T.S.Eliot's famous definition from "Tradition and Individual Talent":

> ...the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within

45 Gabriel Josipovici, *The World and the Book. A Study of Modern Fiction*, (London: Macmillan 1979), 288-9.
46 Kevin J.H. Dettmar, *Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism. Reading against the grain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1996), 31.
47 Julia Kristeva, *Slovo, dialog a román. Texty o semiotice [Le mot, la dialogue et le roman]*, trans. Josef Fulka, (Praha: Sdružení pro humanitní výchovu a vzdělavání 1999), 8-9.
48 Rolland Barthes: *Theory of Text*, quoted in: B. P. Mai, "Bypassing Intertextuality", Heinrich F. Plett, ed. *Intertextuality*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 1991), 42-3.
49 A similar comment is – metafictionally - embedded in the texture of *At Swim Two Birds* – O'Brien's first published novel. Orlick Trellis speaks to his friends – all being the characters of a novel-within-novel - after the decision is made to kill their fictional "author" and to "free" themselves from his tyrannical rule: ""I only hope that nothing will happen to us. I don't think the like of this has been done before, you know". And actually this bold concept seems a perfect anticipation of the attempt of post-structuralist theory to announce "the death of the author" (*At Swim-Two-Birds,* 301).

it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.50

Instead of Eliot's "simultaneous order", O'Brien introduces a notion of tradition reduced to a kind of shadowy store-house or supermarket of literature. Nonetheless, its utmost importance for the status of individual writing is asserted. His student-narrator is thus anticipating a further development of literary theory, pointing towards Kristeva and her "mosaics of quotations" as well as Barthes who in "The Death of the Author" states:

> The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture (...) The author's only power is to mix his writings, to counter one with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.51

Intertextuality is thus posed as one of the central features in O'Brien's literary strategy right in the beginning of his career, and *At Swim* seems a perfect anticipation of Barthes' idea, forming an assemblage of the textual fragments from all strata of culture: from "Wild West" stories, through Dublin pub-talk to medieval nature poetry. Actually, the model for his subsequent works seems to be already contained in the definition of the youthful project of the "Great Irish Novel" he planned to compose with several other students of UCD, which assumes that "existed works would be plundered wholesale for material."52

There is a vast difference between the classical notion of *imitatio* and the modern intertextuality. As Charles Grivel comments, the appropriation of some prefabricated material involves "a perennial interplay between identity and difference", or – as Barthes calls it – the process of "deconstruction-reconstruction of "scraps of texts".53 According to Derrida, every code (i.e. mainly language) is caught in an impassable paradox: on the one hand, it is impossible without being "repeatable – iterable". At the same time, "a certain presence of inscription" i.e. the intention of the author and the context in which he is writing, invariably turns out to be lost in the process of repetition, engendering thus the inherent tension within the term "iterability" itself which Derrida characterizes as "repetition / alterity".54 His meditation deals with the issue of writing/reading as such, the problem, however, is much more obvious as far as the intertextual relations are concerned. It inexorably inclines towards "a subversive use" of any previous texts and traditions.55 In case of modernist and postmodernist discourses, as Linda Hutcheson suggests the dominance of parody as a "strategy of appropriating the past" makes this inclination even more prominent.

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50 T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent", *Selected Essays*, (London: Faber and Faber 1966), 14.
51 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1967), accessed 1 Sept. 2007, http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/wyrick/debclass/whatis.htm
52 Quoted in: Lanters, 221.
53 Quoted in: H. P. Plett, "Intertextualities", *Intertextuality*, 17; quoted in: Mai, 42-3.
54 Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", *Limited Inc*, trans. S. Weber & J. Mehlman, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1988), 7, 9.
55 Mai, 32-3.

Therefore, O'Brien's ventures into the realm of the literary texts and traditions can by no means be considered as searches for the voices of an authority. The tools are rather pseudo-translation, misquotation and parody. Daniela Caselli declares in connection with Beckett's literary practices that they contained rejection of "the notion of the source as explanation and restoration of full meaning"56 – and this notion can be easily applied to O'Brien as well.

O'Brien's first published literary efforts – the novels *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *An Beál Bocht* and a play *Faustus Kelly*, all written in a relatively short period in the late 1930s and early 1940s, manifest explicitly their intertextual nature. And in all the cases, the mode of such an engagement within "the universe of texts" is thoroughly subversive. *At Swim* and *Faustus Kelly* stress their intertextuality by their very titles, one being a literal translation of the place-name from medieval Irish *The Madness of Sweeney* (*Buile Suibhne*), the other obviously referring back to Marlow and Goethe. *At Swim* – apart from its overall "assemblage" form – is as a whole evolving around the translations (and pseudo-translations) from *Buile Suibhne* and, apart from that, seems permeated by O'Brien's anxious and ambiguous relation to Joyce.57 The Irish-language novel *An Beál Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth*) also displays its intertextual dimension right from the book-cover though not by means of a title but a cover-picture of the first edition which parodies the first edition of the Gaelic Revivalist "folk-epic" *An tOileánach* (*The Islandman*). The feast of parody continues within the book, with *The Islandman* and other texts of Gaelic Revival as points of reference/ridicule, as well as indispensable variations on the motifs from medieval Irish literature (*Immram Máile Dúin* is examined later in this chapter).

In both *At Swim Two Birds* and *An Beál Bocht* the echoes from the medieval Irish literature play a substantive role for the overall strategies of the novels. According to Maria Tymoczko, "translation, adaptation, and literary innovation are inextricably linked in 20th century Irish literature, with many writers using translation and adaptation as an 'alibi' to challenge and shift the English literary system."58 The writers of O'Brien's generation (following the example of Joyce) rejected the two poles of "reverential" appropriation of the past: the Victorian antiquarianism – that assimilated the texts of the Old Irish culture into the romanticized and polished pattern of the nineteenth century "medievalism"; as well as the Revivalist veneration of the past stimulated by the need to exalt the literary heritage of the nation, and provide an alternative cultural model to "Anglicization". Even when – as in *At Swim Two Birds* – O'Brien claims actually to "translate" from the old Irish, the mechanics of

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56 Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes. Intertextuality in Fiction and Criticism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2005), 1, 126.
57 *At Swim Two Birds* may be considered as a direct debate with Joyce or more precisely with Stephan Dedalus' concept of the author-God, "pairing his fingernails". The final literary "settling accounts" with Joyce takes place in *The Dalkey Archive* when the author of Dubliners occurs in person, as a pub-keeper in a little village near Dublin, writing pamphlets for Catholic Truth Society of Ireland and contemplating entering the Jesuit order.
58 Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in Postcolonial Context*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1999), 135.

"translation" in this context move away from the notion of an "exact" re-production of a text, but involve rather an inevitable transformation and distortion. As Paul de Man says: translations "kill the original".59

Their "misuse" was in fact modeled to a great extent on the dialectics of the Old Irish tradition itself. Vivian Mercier calls this specific aspect of that literary culture as "the Irish comic tradition" which can be defined by a special inclination towards a macabre and grotesque humor, a frequent employment of the fantastic and a prominence of parody and satire.60 The dynamic of the comic tradition led to a highly ambivalent representations in which even the greatest heroes of the tribe could be at some moment subjected to ridicule and laughter; scatology or grotesque could suddenly invade even the most heroic narrative; and even the most sacred issues could not be completely excluded from the scope of satire (Mercier mentions *Aislinge Mac Conglinne* – a parody on vision-literature which is quite unambiguously structured as a comic parallel of the story of Christ's Passion61). The comic tradition opposes thus both the conventional Victorian sense of decorum and morals and the concept of the linear, monological discourse.

O'Brien's Irish language novel *An Beál Bocht* provides some telling examples of the parodic appropriation of the otherworldly motifs of the Old Irish literature. There are two passages of the text which may be interpreted as allusions to the narratives of the otherworld, both suffused with an undisputable comic and subversive spirit. First of the "otherworlds" is the underwater cave where the poorest of the poor inhabitants of the Corcadorcha Gaeltacht, Sitric O'Sanassa, descends and finds himself in a timeless space completely cut off from the human world but on the other hand provided with food he was unable to gain "above". He remains there, joining a colony of seals – as the medieval Irish travelers were joining the fairy-folk of the Western islands of pleasures and plenty. With a small difference, however: whereas the medieval adventurers enter the otherworldly islands transcending to some extent their human nature upwards on the scale of being or at least enriching their humanity by the new experience, Sitric O'Sanassa chooses a paradise of regress towards animality, finding the otherworldly happiness in a life of a seal.62

The second passage of significance here is the story of Maeldoon O'Poenassa who in the times of Gaelic 'deluge' built a boat, gathered enormous wealth from the drifting property of his drowned fellowmen and was finally brought to the top of the highest mountain in the region – i.e. another otherworldly space beyond the reach of ordinary humans (none can reach it and return according to the local story). The "original" for O'Brien's episode is a medieval story *Immram Máile Dúin*, an account of the sea-voyage through the kaleidoscope

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59 Quoted in: Van Hulle, 22.
60 Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1962).
61 Mercier, 213.
62 Myles na gCopaleen, *The Poor Mouth [An Beal Bocht]*, trans. P. C. Powers, (London: Grafton 1973), 94-8.

of otherworldly landscapes. In *An Beál Bocht* the novel's protagonist sets up to climb the mountain and discover Maeldoon's wealth. His very motivation for the quest parodies the medieval heroic and religious narratives: it is "to be exceedingly rich, bellyful, frequently inebriated". This is however only a preliminary step towards the climactic description of the events at the top. The mountain is described in an indisputably "otherwordly" terms: we encounter "diabolical onrush", "infernal twilight", "mesh of bottomless dark-mouthed holes" and "unearthly mysterious humming" of water. As the narrator laconically sums up: "certainly the area did not have a normal appearance". Following the ominous light, he enters a "narrow and slender" cave-mouth described as "the mouth of perpetual eternity". The motif of the cave recalls the earlier adventures of poor Sitric the seal, but first of all invokes the "otherworldly" *topos* exploited in the Celtic *bruidhean* ("subterrrean otherworld") tales and later – in the Christian context – established in the legend of St. Patrick's Purgatory.

Inside the cave the narrator finds what seems to be a corpse of Maeldoon, his gold and – last but not least – a "stream of whiskey (...) coming from the rock". This brand new version of Irish otherworld enabled Maeldoon to escape the passing of time in a similar way as did the heroes of old: he lived there "for ages on the nourishment of whiskey (...) free from all want" - as Bran or Ossian survived for centuries by means of magical potions and food. "We consume everlasting feasts" – hears the hero of *Echtrae Chonnlai* from the Woman of the Island of Promise.63 The paradisal character of the scene is best emphasized by the description of the "stream of whiskey" as "unbought and undrunk" – the ultimate O'Brienesque vision of perfect incorruptibility, prelapsarian Adamic purity, that echoes the depiction from *Immram Brain*: "we are from the beginning of creation / without age, without decay of freshness".64

What follows is a sudden re-awakening of Maeldoon's corpse who starts narrating in a strangely mechanical way – as a cassette recorder. Moreover, that is a story we have heard already several times before in different places of the novel. "The age of mechanical reproduction" and modern repetitiveness of time diagnosed by Benjamin invades the realm of Gaelic folklore and medieval otherworldly tales. The medieval original, its subversive parody and an undoubtedly modern satiric motif are linked together in the texture of the passage.65

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63 Kim McCone, *Echtrae Chonnlai and the Beginnings of Vernacular Narrative Writing in Ireland*, (Maynooth: National University of Maynooth 2000).

64 *Immram Brain. Bran's Journey to the Land of the Women*, trans. Seamus Mac Mathuna, (Tubingen: Max Niemeyer 1985), 53.

65 Actually, the fragment bears several striking resemblances to *The Third Policeman*. Firstly, the fear-striken narrator relates that "his heart recovered" by means of "a little musical tune" he sings to himself. Similar motif of music as an instrument for surviving in the situation of utter mental or psychological distress appears at the several places in *The Third Policeman*. E.g. when confronted with the terrifying inventions of Policeman MacCruiskeen Noman comments: "In order to reassure myself … I whistled *The Corncrake Plays the Bagpipe*" (76). The second obvious link is provided by the description of the 'resurrected' Maeldoon's voice: "I heard a

Similar strategies of parodical exploitation of the medieval material are employed in *At Swim* and *Faustus Kelly*.66 *The Third Policeman* was published only posthumously in 1967, nevertheless, it was written in the same period as the two novels and the play discussed above and should be considered in relation to them. From the point of view of intertextuality, it provides a more "difficult piece of puzzledom" (to use Sergeant Pluck's – one of the novel's policemen - phrase). Whereas the other texts explicitly expose by different means their intertextual character, *The Third Policeman,* on the contrary, lacks such a direct "parasitical" form. The passage from the "limbo of literature", explored by the student-narrator of *At Swim,* to the ontological "limbo" of our novel, seems to influence also the literary method. As if a discourse from beyond the grave implied the rupture in the influx of literary influences. Hardly so, of course, as intertextuality remains a feature of every text and every author – according to Derrida's re-reading of Levi Strauss – is a *bricoleur*, arranging his text from the variety of means "at hand".67 As J.C.C. Mays, Jose Lanters or Keith Hopper prove, the novel contains within its texture a kaleidoscope of echoes to other texts, most prominent being – among others – Huysman's *A Rebours* or Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, along with the traces of the influence of W. Dunne popular-scientific treaties on the post-Newtonian physics.68 Nevertheless, little attention is given to a crucial fact that by invoking the theme of netherworld O'Brien inscribes himself into the wider European tradition of narratives of "afterlife", with Dante's *Commedia* as its most prominent representative. And as Bakhtin pointed out, a particular generic or thematic tradition may infect the individual text even in an almost unconscious way, "the author is ventriloquized by" the discourse within which he is writing.69

In order to examine this seemingly antithetical connection between the mythical texts of the netherworld and the inherently ironic and satirical modes of O'Brien's writing I would like to turn now to the most prominent and most complex dimension of modernist "intertextuality", described by T.S. Eliot as "the mythical method". The modernist strategies of dealing with such authoritative sources as Homer's and Dante's epic poetry outlined below

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sound coming from the corpse which resembled someone speaking from behind a heavy cloak, a sound that was hoarse and drowned and inhuman…" – a description that echoes the repeated motif of "dummies" in *The Third Policeman*, Old Mathers being the first of them with his eyes that gave impression of inhuman, lifeless mechanism and a voice "like the hoarse toll of an ancient rusty bell in an ivy-smothered tower" (28).

66 In *Faustus Kelly* the netherworld also makes itself present – in the figure of the devilish Stranger, Irish small-town version of Marlowe's Mephistopheles. Also in this case the ultimate effect is one of parody and farce. The hellish messenger, confronted with a real inferno of Irish local politics, instead of snatching the soul of the protagonist who sold it for the supernatural support during the parliamentary elections, explodes at the end: "Not for any favour… in heaven or earth or hell… would I take that Kelly and the others with me to where I live, to be in their company for ever. (…) I want nothing more of Irish public life!" (Myles na gCopaleen, "Faustus Kelly", *Stories and Plays* [London: Mac Gibbon 1973], 196-7).

67 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences", *Writing and Difference,* transl. Alan Bass, (London: Routledge 1978), 285.

68 The best analysis of Dunne's influence on the novel can be found in Mary O'Toole's article: "The Theory of Serialism in The Third Policeman", *Irish University Review*, 18/2 (Autumn 1988).

69 Quoted in: Dettmar, 36.

provide a useful parallel to the less obvious analogy between the netherworlds of the *Commedia* and *The Third Policeman*. O'Brien's novel seems to participate in the modernist obsessive "dialogue with the past", following also the unresolved tension between a subversive parody and a nostalgic desire embedded in the mythical method.

### II. 2. *The Third Policeman* and the mythical method(s)

Modernist literary practice is extensively 'mythopoeic'. In Gay Clifford's words it constantly aims at re-enacting "recurrent mythic and legendary patterns".70 The common critical perception of the modernist inclination towards myth can be summarized by Joseph Frank's statement:

> What has occurred... may be described as a transformation of the historical imagination into myth – an imagination for which historical time does not exist, and which sees the actions, and events of a particular time only as bodying forth of eternal prototypes.71

The term "mythical method" was coined by T. S. Eliot in his review of *Ulysses* in order to assert the revolutionary significance of Joyce's technique, equating in its importance "a scientific discovery". As Kevin J. Dettmar argues, this notion became "the most important modernist axiom for the reading of Ulysses", supported by Joyce's own declarations about the central role of Homeric epic for the construction of the book.72 "Yes, I created the epic for our era, and the ghost of Homer was always with me" – he states in one interview.73 And in a famous letter to Carlo Linati he is similarly explicit: "My intention is to transpose the myth *sub specie temporis nostri*."74 In the context of *Ulysses* the notion of the myth "*sub specie*" of the modern age turns out, however, to be a highly ambiguous instrument.

Northrop Frye exalted modernism as another "great mythopoeic age". In reality, however, it must be noticed, that the prevailing aspect of the modernist fascination with the mythical was its alienation, distance, impassable gap dividing the old and the new.75 Irony is thus inherently inscribed in the modernist fascination with the past, with such authors as Joyce, T.S. Eliot and Pound, literally "plundering" the whole literary tradition of Europe. At least in case of the latter two it springs from the consciousness of the incapability of the appropriation, of the impossibility of the return to the golden age, of the futility of hope for re-establishment of the lost unity.76 Irony and parody remain thus the central methods of

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70 Gay Clifford, *The Transformations of Allegory*, (London: Routledge & Kegan 1974), 106-7.
71 Quoted in: M. K. Booker, *Joyce, Bakhtin, and the literary tradition. Towards a comparative cultural poetics.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1995),18.
72 Dettmar, 143.
73 Naganowski, 89.
74 Umberto Eco, *Poetyki Joyce'a [Le poetiche di Joyce]*, trans. M. Kośnik, (Warszawa: KR 1998), 68.
75 Josipovici, 288-9.
76 Arent Van Nieukeren: *Ironiczny Konceptyzm. Nowoczesna polska poezja metafizyczna w kontekście anglosaskiego modernizmu*, (Kraków: Universitas 1998), 20-1.

modernist appropriation of the past signalizing an unresolved conflict between the desire to inscribe in the tradition and the inexorable distance that breeds alienation and frustration.77

In his review of *Ulysses,* Eliot speaks about Joyce's strategy of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity".78 M.K. Booker in a similar way defines it as a strategy in which "very particular contemporary events and characters (...) are placed in dialogic opposition to more universal mythic figures".79 "Dialogic opposition" points, of course, towards Bakhtin's theory, and the mythical method emerges from those two descriptions as a figure based essentially on relations of conflict and contrast. In Eliot's definition the outcome of this juxtaposition is quite clear. When asserting the novelty of Joyce's technique he adds: "No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before; *it has never before been necessary*"80 (emphasis mine).He assumes that Joyce pursued the new strategy in order to obtain the means of "controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history".81 Eliot's wording of the concept – as often in his writings – intertwines a literary critical comment with an essentially moral and political standpoint. He expresses a nostalgia for order and the lost foundations of culture, dissolved by the apocalyptic processes of modernity,82 with mythical method as a weapon directed against those processes. As Booker sums up, "Eliot suggests that Joyce uses the authority of Homer to stabilize and add structure to his text amidst the chaos of modern civilization."83 The myth provides the "fragments" that can be shored against the ruins.

According to Dettmar, Eliot's definition omits one crucial factor: Eliot speaks of the mythical method in terms of "discovery", implying thus the pre-existence of some inherent order of reality. On the other hand, it is similarly justifiable to consider Joycean strategy as an "invention", an arbitrary imposition of individual mind on the chaos of experience, rather than an uncovering of some objective substance.84 Homeric structure can be taken literally as nothing else than architectural devise, a borrowed tool of organizing the material yet bearing no further ethical or metaphysical consequences.85 Finally, there is a second inconsistency in Eliot's attitude, to which Booker's definition, quoted above, seems to allude. Any "dialogic opposition" (in Bakhtin's terminology) can be transformative in both directions, such an instrument may serve to the ironic assault on the mythical authority just

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77 Linda Hutcheon, "The Politics of Postmodern Parody", H. F. Plett,ed. *Intertextuality*, 226-9.
78 Eliot, 177.
79 Booker, *Joyce, Bakhtin...*, 128.
80 Eliot, 177
81 Eliot, 177
82 cf. Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism. Reading Modernism*, (London: Edward Arnold 1992), 77.
83 Booker, *Joyce, Bakhtin...*, 38.
84 Dettmar, 163-4.
85 Tymoczko argues that a similar notion guides Joyce's employment of Irish mythical patterns: they remained exclusively on the level of *fabula*, as an "architectural substratum", not entering in any way the surface of the text (Maria Tymoczko, *The Irish Ulysses*, [Berkeley: University of California Press 1994], 29).

as well as to the reverse intention of displaying the degradation of the present age. Even in the "paradigmatic" case of *Ulysses* another element is added to the inherent tension between the desire for identity and alienation present in Eliot's writings, leaving "the mythical method" stretched between the poles of conservative nostalgia and the subversive challenge to authority.

As Patricia Waugh suggests, Joyce to a great extent may be simply enjoying "'just gaming' himself" - "the mythic-frame can be read as ironic, parodic or mock-heroic: a substitute for that metaphysical ground which once supported the notion of a teleologically plotted world presided over by a Providential form".86 *Ulysses* may point to a precisely opposite solution than Eliot desires it to: to what C. G. Jung calls "a total destruction of the classical world-view."87 As Fritz Senn comments "Joyce sets up the relatively pure and homogenous style and language of Homer's epic as a starting point against which he can define his radically heterogenous text as the antithesis."88 The mythical method turns into a dialogic strategy that can challenge the authority of myth as well as accept it. We may agree with Levin who calls Joyce's text – quite in accordance to Joyce's own declarations - "an elusive and eclectic Summa of its age"89, yet with a necessary comment that this supposed "Summa" could be speaking about the impossibility of writing any Summa in the modern age.

This dual outcome of the confrontation between the past and the present inscribed in the dialectics of the mythical method may be applied to the other text central to modernist poetics - Dante's *Commedia*. It seems to present a similar crux of conflicting desires, this time of a direct significance for the interpretation of the infernal motif in *The Third Policeman*.

The sense of distance that engenders irony - inherent in the modernist relation to the texts of the past - remains as visible in this case. As Blake Leland points out: "Reading Eliot we feel that he deeply desires faith. Reading Dante we feel that faith is not in question…"90 It is a commonplace - yet highly significant fact - that among the Dantean landscapes only the hellish (and to some extent the purgatorial) appeared useful to the modern poets. Though Pound in *The Spirit of Romance* calls the *Inferno* only "a prelude", meaningless without the

86 Waugh, 152. "The Homeric myth, on the one level, is simply an ironic literary equivalent of the dream of a scientific unified field theory: a fantasy of total correspondence in a world where, if the technician and the scientist play God, then the artist too must be allowed divinity. If the tiny, moving points of Stephen, Bloom and Molly appear to correspond in some way to the vast and unchanging figures of Telemachus, Oddyseus and Penelope, then we are never allowed to forget that this correspondence is simply a metaphor, an arbitrary projection of mind upon random experience."
87 C. G. Jung, "Ulisses. Monolog", *Archetypy i symbole. Pisma wybrane*, trans. J. Prokopiuk, (Warszawa: Czytelnik 1981), 502-9,
88 Quoted in: Booker, *Joyce, Bakhtin…*, 22
89 Harry Levin, *James Joyce. A critical introduction*, (London: Faber & Faber 1960), 82.
90 Leland, 12-13

context of the two following canticles91; the prevailing mode of modern literature remains stuck within the circles of the *Inferno*. As David Pike notices, in modern times, only the *Inferno* remained "accessible to be rewritten". Macabre "realism" of this canticle survived the dissolution of faith in the transcendent absolute which rendered the two other parts of the poem incomprehensible and totally alienated from modern sensibility. On the contrary "hell is this life, imprisonment in the body". 92 Pike mentions Marx's use of Dante – highly significant in this context. Comparing workplace to hell, the author of *The Capital* postulates that it can be transformed into paradise solely by "re-functioning of oppressor's own tools".93 This reflects the transformation from what Eric Voegelin calls the transcendental to immanentist eschatology, the entrapment of hell and heaven within the earthly reality. And such a view - without the re-assuring foundation of some secular eschatology of Marxist type - leads to what Joseph Campbell calls the modernity's "contempt for comedy" (understood in a classical sense as a story of order restored). "Only tragedy is authentic ... It does not pretend, does not live some illusion of heaven or re-compensation. It is only pure darkness, the emptiness of unfulfillment".94

Those implications of the metaphysical shift of modernity are reflected also in O'Brien's novel. *The Third Policeman* stages the netherworld limited to hell, without any hint of ways of escape, nor any possibility of explaining such an entrapment by a reference to some cosmic normative frame – the "godless and devilless" inferno. The equation of reality with hell, devoid moreover of any notion of a transcendental punitive justice may suggest the existentialist view of *conditio humana* surfacing in the writings of Beckett or Sartre and summed up in the Calderon's aphorism quoted by Beckett in his essay on Proust: "*Pues el delito mayor del hombre es haber nacido*" ("Man's greatest crime is being born").95

The other perspective, however, which may be linked to Eliot's nostalgia embedded in the definition of the mythical method, deals with infernal quality of a specifically *modern* reality. The first canticle of Dante's poem becomes thus – similarly as Homeric epic – a means of disclosing "anarchy and futility", containing a strong element of satire and cultural criticism. In Eliot's explicit comment: his borrowings from Dante were dictated by the intention to "establish a relation between the medieval inferno and modern life".96 Irony thus remains a principal feature, yet it is the irony of the conservative ethicist invoking the past to castigate the present (dis)order. To return to *Ulysses* again (and its early criticism):

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91 Ezra Pound, *Duch romański [The Spirit of Romance]*, trans. L. Engelking, (Warszawa: Aletheia 1999), 185.
92 David L. Pike, *Passage Through Hell. Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1997), 114.
93 Pike, 72.
94 Joseph Campbell, *Tisíc tváří hrdiny. Archetyp hrdiny v proměnách věků [The Hero of Thousand Faces]*, (Praha: Portál 2000), 39.
95 *Beckett, "Proust", Wierność przegranej*, trans. A. Libera, (Kraków: Znak 1999), 69.
96 Michael D. Aeschliman, "The Heirs of Canto III of Dante's *Inferno*", accessed 1 Sept. 2007 http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/LD/numbers/02/aeschliman.html

W. T. Noon argues that: “the Oddysean parallels in *Ulysses* are ironic in the ethical sense, as though Joyce were telling the readers on every page that this is no golden Homeric age”.97 In Harry Levin’s words, “the Homeric overtones” introduced into “what might well be a trivial … tale” of “inconspicuous and pitiable” dwarfs renders the present “a travesty of the past, richness furnishes an ironic comment on reality.”98 And, employing Dante, Thomas MacGreevy claims that Joyce “sent his hero through the Inferno of modern subjectivity”.99

In the discourses of modernism, Dante – similarly to Homer - remains thus a subject of what H.F. Platt calls an “inverted intertextuality”. In contrast to the affirmative (*imitatio*) or negative (romantic) variety this mode of dialogue with the past texts may bring forth ambiguous results.100 Its strategy of “inversion” implies the distortion of the source and an assumed distance rather than an identification – it is “most conspicuously” present “in parody. On the other hand it may also engender “a reappraisal of values and hence participate both in affirmative and negative intertextuality.”101 Thus, there are two poles of the “mythical method” – one of a subversive irony challenging the past authority, and the other ultimately embracing the values of the past yet through the pose of Kierkegaardian “ironic ethicist”. Those two poles provide a critical space for the analysis of O’Brien’s treatment of the theme of inferno in the following paragraphs, but delineate also the interpretative field of this essay as a whole.

The poetics of inversion and distortion of the Dantean model may be attributed to both O’Brien’s literary “father” (with all the symptoms of the “anxiety of influence” syndrome) – Joyce; and his contemporary – Beckett. This mode of reception of the *Commedia* in the Irish context starts probably with Joyce’s story “Grace”, which re-enacts in a parodic way the tripartite progress of Dante’s story of conversion102: from Mr. Kernan’s drunken “fall” from the stairs into the pub’s lavatory, through the comic, yet “purgative”, debate with his friends on the subject of religious faith, towards the final achievement of the state of grace translated by means of Father Purdon’s sermon for “Christian businessmen” about “setting right one’s accounts” with God.103

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97 William T. Noon S.J., *Joyce and Aquinas*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1957), 89.
98 Levin, 69.
99 Thomas MacGreevy, “The Catholic Element in *Work in Progress*”, *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, (London: Faber & Faber 1961), 123.
100 In case of affirmative intertextuality “aesthetic quality of the text is defined by the degree to which it re-employs the structural rules and pre/texts of the classical canon”. Negative one “insists on the inalienable originality of texts, their separateness…” (Plett, 19).
101 Platt, 19.
102 Cf. Mary Reynolds, *Joyce and Dante. The Shaping Imagination*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1981), 162-3.
103 James Joyce, *Dubliners*, (London: Penguin Books 2000), 128-149.

Beckett's strategies in respect to the *Commedia* have been fittingly called "the poetics of perversion" –the ironic reversal of the Dantean "poetics of conversion".[104] In the story "Ding-Dong" from the collection *More Pricks than Kicks*[105] the protagonist with an undoubtedly Dantean name, Belacqua, is first described as "emerging … from the underground convenience in the maw of College Street" and meditating on the qualities of the twilight sky (41). "Underground" public toilet invokes ironically the motif of inferno - in fact in the following story, 'Wet Night', a similar event is delineated in even more unambiguous terms: "emerging happy body from the hot bowel's of McLoughlin's" (53). In 'Ding-Dong' Belacqua has "a vague impression that he had come from following the sunset up the Liffey" – potentially another allusion to the same closing lines of the *Inferno* where Dante and Vergil emerge safely ("happy body") out of hell up the "blind stream" to observe the stars on the night sky (in Beckett's story "the colour had been harried from the sky…"). The apparition of the old beggar-women trading with the extraordinary commodity – "seats in heaven" - brings into mind – as Daniela Caselli suggests - the appearance of Beatrice on the threshold of Earthly Paradise in the *Purgatorio*.[106] Mad woman's mantra is: "heaven goes round and round", which, however, brings us back to the opening scenes of the story where Belacqua observes the commercial advertisement – "the big Bovril sign … flaring beyond the Green" and comments: "itself it went nowhere, only round and round, like the spheres, but mutely." (42). Again – Dantean image, this time from the closing of *Paradiso* – is evoked, yet the movement of the spheres, guided by the Divine Love, is this time not only diminished by the transformation into the neon-sign but also shown as pointless and directionless. As Caselli assumes: "the frequent presence of circularity indicates stasis".[107] The coda to the strategy of perversion is given in the ultimate sentence, where Belacqua leaves the woman-Beatrice – a guardian of paradise - and crosses *back* the Liffey – Dublin's river Lethe – towards the "red-lights" district.

There are only a few years between *More Pricks than Kicks* and the creation of the MS of *The Third Policeman*. In "Ding-Dong" the mad-woman keeps repeating: "heaven go round and round and round and round" (48). O'Brien, though without any explicit Dantean allusions, intended to publish his second novel under the title "Hell Goes Round and Round". The two writers meet in those images of circular netherworlds – set in constant motion, yet suffused by the sense of illusoriness and meaninglessness of movement. Nevertheless, a significant difference consists in the fact that O'Brien instead of inscribing the *Commedia* into the modern reality, moves his narrative into the actual netherworld, molding it into the

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104 Cf. for example: Anspaugh, 31-2, Caselli, 2, 21.
105 Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks than Kicks*, (London: John Calder 1993). In this paragraph the numbers of pages in brackets refer to this edition.
106 Caselli, 65.
107 Caselli 64.

*Inferno sub specie tempora nostris* or – as it was claimed about Beckett – “putting Dante on his head”.108 I will now proceed to uncover several key-points of the novel on the basis of those dialogic poetics of inversion.

Firstly, I should remain in the sphere of theological astronomy, touched upon in the discussion of “Ding-Dong”. Dante’s pilgrimage culminates in both theological and cosmological vision of “L’Amor che move il sole et l’altre stelle” (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 145109). The spheres moved by the Divine power are the ultimate frame of the purposeful and meaningful teleological universe and the final confirmation of Dantean pilgrimage of conversion. O’Brien’s counterpart to this vision is also located in the crucial turning point of the narrative. When O’Brien’s nameless narrator (or “Noman” – as Hopper dubs him) enters the otherworld of the novel at the moment of his death – as we get to know only later - we are presented with an exactly opposite image. There is a sense of change, “indescribably subtle, yet momentous, ineffable” - “an awful alteration of everything” which “had held the universe standstill for an instant, suspending the planets in their course, halting the sun and holding in mid-air any falling thing the earth was pulling towards it” (24-25). Instead of Dante’s final recognition of the creating and controlling centre of the universe, the realm of *The Third Policeman* is introduced with an image of the universal order abandoned and its moving principle denied. Moreover, it poses the question of the role of the protagonist in relation to the structure of the universe: whereas in Dante the movement of the spheres is guaranteed by the transcendent power, here it seems dependent on Noman’s subjective experiencing of reality. The consequences of such a shift are to be addressed later, now I will turn to other ironical “parallels that never meet” which aim towards the antithesis of the Dantean vision.

The poetics of inversion can be, in fact, detected in the very opening sentence of the novel. Both the *Commedia* and *The Third Policeman* begin in first person singular: “Not everybody knows how I killed old Philip Mathers” (7) and: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura”. Both also invoke the moment of moral degradation of the narrator, though Dante - in an allegorical (“lost in a dark wood”), whereas O’Brien’s Noman - in a very literal way. What is crucial, however, the personal pronoun posed in the beginning of what seems a retrospective narrative creates an immediate expectation of a ‘happy ending’ of some kind. As John Freccero points out, “I” in the first line of the *Commedia* “assures the reader that he will come through his quest”.110 On the other hand, O’Brien’s “I” is only the first of the instruments of seduction. Though the narration of Noman’s early years which follows seems disconcertingly blur and hallucinatory (from the opening imprecise “I was born long time ago”), the power of the initial “I” deludes the reader

108 Anspaugh, 32.
109 All quotations from the original text of the *Commedia* are from: DanteOnline, http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR
110 John Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1998), 138.

rather successfully. Dante inscribes himself in the long generic tradition of visionary literature which consists in the motif of the descent of the living hero into the world of the dead; and the reader of *The Third Policeman* – despite the fantastic environs which the narrator enters in the second chapter, is pushed in a similar direction of interpretation of the text. Dante is both a pilgrim conducting his journey and a poet recalling it retrospectively. O'Brien's narrator assumes a similar role of a traveler, a visitor in "the unknown real", only to discover that he is in fact its victim and prisoner. I have already invoked the *topos* of "*les hommes recits*" whose existence depends on the continuation of the narrating.[111] In the Irish context, as James Carney notices, there is a particular concern with the question of how the story is preserved, especially vital issue in respect to the Otherworld narratives.[112] That is the reason for the repeated motif of the return from the "Land of Promise" to Ireland, with Bran or Ossian giving an account of their adventures – often from the boat anchored near the shore. O'Brien, however, locates himself within a different poetics which McHale characterizes as one of the features of postmodernist fiction: he "projects discourse into death".[113]

On his path through the underworld, Dante is led by Virgil – a character considered by most of the commentators as the allegory of Reason (as opposed to Dante's guides in the *Paradiso* – allegories of Faith). The relation between the pilgrim and his guide frequently resembles one between father and child – Dante's inability to comprehend what he sees and to act in the new environs makes him totally dependent on the "ghost" of the Roman poet. As Mandelstam describes: "Dante cannot behave himself, he does not know where to stand, what to say, how to bow (...) he is accompanied by the inner uncertainty and confused feeling of uneasiness."[114] Virgil is himself an inhabitant of the first circle of Inferno and therefore has the knowledge necessary for the journey; moreover he is acting as a representative of the Heavenly powers. If on the allegorical level the character of Virgil represents Reason; Noman's companion through hell is an allegory dematerialized. Joe the Soul emerges in Noman's narrative shortly after the moment of unacknowledged death and from the beginning assumes a Virgilian role of a guide and advisor of the disoriented narrator. In the moment of their "encounter", Noman's reactions resembles those of Dante: Florentine poet calls Virigil “"You are my mentor and my chosen author” (I, 85)[115] and later "You the leader, you the lord and master!" (II, 140), establishing a relation of authority and obedience as well as knowledge and ignorance. He repeatedly refers to Virgil as his "father" and – significantly

111 McHale, 228.
112 James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, (Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies 1979), 287.
113 McHale, 228-230.
114 Osip Mandelstam, *Rozprava o Dantovi [Razgovor o Dante]*, trans. Ludmila Dušková, (Praha: Lidové nakladatelství 1968), 16.
115 English translation of the *Commedia* used in this essay: Robert Hollander, *Comedy*, DanteOnline http://www.danteonline.it/italiano/opere.asp?idope=1&idlang=OR

– assumes that “e sai quel che si tace” (“You know what is left unspoken”- XIX, 39), i.e. Virgil can directly recognize his thoughts. Joe of course – as an internal though independent voice - also knows the thoughts of Noman, and at the beginning is described in similar terms: “I knew also that my soul was friendly, was my senior in years and was solely concerned for my own welfare.” Noman’s feeling echoes the reaction of Dante encountering the poet in the midst of distress and peril in “*silva oscura*”: “I felt a little reassured to know that I was not altogether alone. Joe was helping me” (26).

As Dante, Noman remains passive for a considerable part of first “infernal” dialogues with old Mathers and a robber Martin Finnucane, repeating only what Joe advises him to say. Whereas in Dante, this was based on the relation between *persons*, on the authority which Virgil acquires from his poetical fame and the knowledge of infernal environs, here Noman is in fact put into the position of a Cartesian “body” – the mere instrument of the mind – in the first intimation of the anti-Cartesian satire of the novel to be discussed in the next chapter.[116] Joe is the first one to notice the main characteristic of Mathers’ speech: responding to every question “in the negative” (29). Thus, he displays to the narrator what would become a ruling principle of the strange Parish – the logic of inversion and negation.[117]

Nevertheless, on the whole, Joe occurs rather as an ironic perversion of Dante’s Virgil: first and most obvious absurdity being that he himself seems not to know the actual status of the narrator and the actual nature of the setting. At one point of the text he threatens to leave Noman declaring: “When I am gone you are dead” (123). He claims to be “an authority on the subject of eternity” (129-130); yet, in fact, his ideas about the netherworld follow the clichéd representations completely incompatible with the inverted world of the Parish. When confronted with Sergeant Pluck’s notion of “Eternity down the road” accessible by some kind of a lift, he comments ironically:

> I bar the lift. I know enough about the next world to be sure that you don’t get there and come back in a lift. Besides, we must be near the place now and I don’t see any elevator-shaft running up into the clouds. (130)

Joe’s mistake is twofold: not only there *is* a lift to Eternity hidden within the borders of the Parish, but it is also moving – against all the expectations and cultural images – downwards. And when Noman’s execution approaches – following his at once justified and unjust accusation of murder - he finally admits his utter ignorance: “I do not know, or do not remember what happens to the like of me in these circumstances”. In fact, he displays the same escapist hope as the narrator enjoying the thought of turning into “the wind” or “the spirit of the scenery in some beautiful place like the Lakes Killarney…” (167) – a soul

116 cf. Booker, *O’Brien, Bakhtin…*, 18.
117 Cf. Hopper, 242.

indulging in the set of images O'Brien would certainly detest as "Celtic twilightery".118 Joe claims to be "all your significance and importance... and wisdom and dignity" – in reality in his role of the spiritual and intellectual guide (Dantean Virgil - allegory of Reason), he ends up as Reason overthrown, blinded and misleading.119

The passage dealing with "the road to Eternity" is - arguably - the best example of O'Brien's poetics of inversion, embracing a subversive transformation *sub specie temporis nostri* of both the Christian Dantean tradition and the Celtic otherwordly motifs. The reversion of conventional directions (downward lift), which can be linked to one of the species of the Celtic otherworld – *bruidhean* tales were the hero is trapped in the underworld dwellings of the fairies – is only the first one of the series. The hidden road (131) is – according to Sergeant Pluck's accurate description "somewhere here ... or beside a place somewhere near the next place adjacent" – a comic reference to the liminal space on the borders between the parallel worlds, the "other" road ("altro vïaggio" – I, 91) invoked by Virgil. It leads through the hostile landscape which even Hugh Kenner seems obliged to refer to as the "silva selvaggia" of the opening canto of the *Inferno*120: Noman describes "the brutality of boughs" and "the sting of strained branches". At the end he relates: "I do not know how long we travelled or what the distance was but the air and the light got scarcer until I was sure that we were lost in the bowels of a great forest", echoing Dante's: "Ah how hard it is to tell what it was like, / How wild the forest was, how dense and rugged!" (I, 4-5). Noman's mood at this moment bears clear resemblance to Dante's state of mind: "I felt very ill and exhausted. I was about to shout to him that I was dying..." – the word "exhausted" and the intimation of the approaching death (similarly as the above quoted "lost") being all also the recurrent motifs of the first lines of the *Commedia*. The additional characteristic of the "hidden road": "There was a sultry smell and many flies of the gnat class were at home here" seems to contain a reference to another fragment of the *Inferno*, following shortly after the "silva oscura". Infernal "smells" are described often in the course of Dante's pilgrimage and in Canto III (the importance of that canto for the overall interpretation of *The Third Policeman* will be discussed later), Dante observes the damned who "repeatedly were bitten / By wasps and hornets swarming everywhere" (III, 65-6).

The "hidden road" leads towards the gate, not the Gates of the Inferno as in case of Dante and Virgil, but of "eternity" (132) – "an old brown door with ecclesiastical hinges and

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118 Cronin, 63. The theme of pantheism in this passage of the novel will be discussed in the Chapter V.
119 Theodolinda Barolini in her study of *Dante's Poets* demonstrates in fact how the text undertakes a gradual process of undermining Virgil's authority to prepare the reader for his final abandonment by the pilgrim at the gates of Earthly Paradise. As a pagan who entered the underworld before the redemptive death of Christ and his Harrowing of Hell he let himself in Canto XII to be cheated by the devils of Malebolge due to his ignorance of the topographical changes in hell following Christ's victorious descent and ascent (T. Barolini, *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy*, [Princeton: Princeton University Press 1984], 208-9). Joe's mistake is also "topographical", but in this case consists in a much serious incomprehension of the geography of netherworld.
120 Kenner, "The Fourth Policeman", 71

ornamental ironwork". The use of the word "ecclesiastical" - so improper that it must be deliberate - points to the popular concept of Christian Heaven with its gates guided by St. Peter ("the rock" upon which *Ecclesia* is built). Altogether – Noman comments - "the structure looked exactly like the porch of a small country church". This common set of associations is followed – as they enter the building - by an all-embracing darkness; the last step on the mystic's path towards God. Afterwards, however, a series of images emerge, disrupting and subverting totally the expectations and introducing a new eternity, entirely *sub specie tempora nostris*. The floor is not only undeniably material but also resembling "the floor of a steam-engine" or "the railed galleries that run around a great printing press".121 After the introductory atmosphere of mysticism and homely rural piety, enters one of technique and industrialism. Whereas the eternity of Dante's *Paradiso* is suffused with light and voices, here the narrator encounters a landscape of laboratory mixed with storehouse, with "rows of small-doors which looked like ovens" and "mass of wires or possibly pipes" (135). Instead of the beatific vision and the harmonious dancing of the planets and heavenly spheres – a labyrinth-like factory; instead of the rational Being governing the universe – a convoluted machinery. If for Zygmunt Bauman the Holocaust is the sign of modern "mass industrialization of death"; O"Brien seems here to industrialize the afterlife.122

The whole episode performs an ironical symphony on the motifs of Old Irish literature of the otherworld. As Tymoczko defines it, the Irish otherworld is a "space-time continuum … separate and parallel" to the world of the mortals and endowed with "own rules and properties".123 One of the features most stressed in the Irish narratives is the a-temporal aspect of the otherworld, or rather its "highly unpredictable" relation to the earthly time. Bran returns after a brief stay in the Land Of Youth only to realize that he has become a character from the mythical past: "It was a year that it seemed to them that they have been there. It really was many years."124 Policemen of O'Brien's novel define their "eternity" in similar "Tir na nOg" terms: "It is eternity (…) because you don't grow old here. When you leave you will be the same age as you were coming in and the same stature and latitude." Bran and Brendan can live hundreds of years on the single nourishment in the otherworldly Isles, and in Pluck's "eternity": "if you are fed you do not get hungry and if you are hungry you don't get hungrier". Those miraculous features are however treated with a very down-to-earth, business-like attitude: Policeman MacCruiskeen talks about "the convenience of it" and seems obsessed with one particular aspect: the fact that he does not need to shave…

121 The whole passage can be also read as a metafictional allusion to the writer's literary machine, as it was shown by Hopper.
122 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Holocaust.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2001).
123 Tymoczko, *The Irish Ulysses*, 180.
124 *Immram Brain*, 57.

Finally, the last feature of the Old Irish otherworlds, that comes into the ironic inversion in the passage, is the motif of "the land of plenty". As Gurievitch notices, the authors of the Irish *immrama* seem obsessed "with eating and drinking to satiety" which provides the main characteristic of their paradisal islands.125 In *The Third Policeman* this medieval notion of plenty is transformed according to the logic of the modern capitalist world: when Noman discovers that the "ovens" can produce "anything" he desires, he begins to take an immense interest in "the commercial possibilities of eternity" asking for an incongruous set of goods from gold to whiskey and bananas. As it is common in the otherworlds from any cultural environment, the problem arises in the moment when they are to be transported to the mortal world. Noman loses all his newly acquired possessions; instead on the lift back he is confronted with the last parody of the motif: the land of plenty is reduced to the discussion by the two policemen of "jelly-sweets", "Turkish delights" and "Carnival Mixture".126

The topography of this underground Eternity creates a similar uneasiness defying the pre-modern cultural expectations. On his pilgrimage, Dante passes through the wild kaleidoscope of settings, each circle of Inferno differentiated by its specific landscape. Celtic otherworlds – especially those belonging to *immrama* genre of sea-voyage – presents the reader with an infinite variety of fantastic settings as the travelers approach different islands beyond the verge of human world. Eternity of *The Third Policeman* gives quite an opposite impression: "It has no size at all" – explains Pluck "because there is no difference anywhere in it and we have no conception of the extent of its unchanging coequality" (138). Noman and the policemen pass through a series of "cabinets" which are, however, exactly identical, even the particular details - as a "brand new bicycle" Pluck earlier produced from the "oven" - are exactly reproduced. It is in fact, the same "cabinet", though entered as a new place, through the different door. In this respect O'Brien's vision approaches Walter Benjamin's definition of modernity that includes "the endless repetition of the same thing disguised by the illusion of its novelty", literally an "infernal repetition".127 Again, the netherworld of classical tradition is inverted, this time in the direction of the age of Benjamin's "mechanical reproduction". This last notion bears a crucial significance for the overall interpretation of the novel: it sums up a paradoxical connection between the motifs of infinity (mediated by means of science) and imprisonment that will return repeatedly in my argument. The world of the Parish seems, in fact, to parallel almost exactly Chesterton's critique of the scientific materialism:

> The size of this scientific universe gave one no novelty, no relief. (...) The grandeur of infinity added nothing to it. It was like telling a prisoner in Reading gaol that he would be glad to hear that the gaol now covered half the country half the country. The warder would have

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125 Aron Gurievitch, *Nebe, Peklo, Svět. Cesty k lidové kultuře středověku [Problemy strednovekoj narodnoj kultury]*, trans. J. Kolář, (Jinočany: H&H 1996), 276.
126 Cf. Francis Doherty, "Flann O'Brien's Existentialist Hell", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, XV/2 (December 1989), 63.
127 Pike, 208.

> nothing to show the man except more and more long corridors of stone lit by ghastly lights and empty of all that is human.128

The intertextual mode of ironic inversion - inherent in the modernist relation to the mythical narratives of the past – can be ascribed also to O'Brien's poetics. It is difficult to say on the basis of those poetics of inversion, on which part of the "dialogic opposition" of the old and the new the stress falls. Probably it should be left at this: in the fluctuating ambiguity of words and images. On the other hand, the *topoi* of medieval otherworlds transformed into the repetitive, industrialized and commercialized netherworld of modernity, the world turned into the endless mechanical prison, may suggest an amount of moral satire, a pose close to the Kierkegaardian "ironic ethicist". This novel's inclination towards a satirical morality tale would be examined in chapters 4 and 5 of this essay.

At the same time, the poetics of subversive Inferno *sub specie tempora nostris* invites also an interpretation based on the "alternative" Bakhtinian mythical method which stresses the phenomenon of parody - "as old as myth itself".129 The literary form that provides a "parodic double", an antithesis for any "high genre" and any closed, monological system is menippean satire.130

128 G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (London: John Lane 1943), 96.
129 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination…*, 21; Cf. Booker, *Joyce, Bakhtin…*, 26-7,
130 cf. Bakhtin, *Discourse…*, 53; Bakhtin, *Dostojevskij umělec. K poetice prozy*, transl. J. Hanzík, (Praha: Československý spisovatel 1971), 173-4

# III. Infernal ironies – the epistemological comedy of *The Third Policeman*

“an observer placed at the lower end of a
cylindrical vertical shaft 5000ft deep sunk from the surface
towards the centre of the earth”
*Ulysses*,
651131

## III. 1. Descartes in hell

The poetics of ironic inversion employed by the modernist writers in relation to the venerable texts of antiquity, as well as O’Brien’s own comic appropriation of the Old Irish tales of the otherworld, have been recently connected – in generic terms – to the concept of mennipean satire, re-introduced into the literary theory by Mikhail Bakhtin. *Mennipea* (or more generally the “seriocomical genres”) is among others defined on the basis of its relation to a legendary or mythic material: those literary renderings of “a carnival sense of the world” “do not rely on legend and do not sanctify themselves through it, they consciously rely on experience (...) and on free invention; their relationship to legend is in most cases, deeply critical, and at times almost resembles a cynical expose.”132. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin describes the dynamic attitude of the carnival to such texts: during carnival “the pleasure is caused by degrading high literature. All that is wearies in the long run. The more powerful and prolonged the domination of the high, the greater pleasures caused by its uncrowning.”133 *Mennipea* is a genre of a radical *heteroglossia*, exploding any attempt for linear and authoritative representation of reality in the play of de-hierarchization and topsy-turvydom. In this chapter I would like to examine *The Third Policeman* from the viewpoint of this generic concept – as the assault on the system of the Western Cartesian rationalism. Nevertheless, this analysis of the novel as a critique of the Cartesian discourse will lead to the introduction of Dante’s *Inferno* as a possible alternative model for such subversive strategies which bears, however, quite different conclusions for the overall reading of the novel.

At the same time, the sphere of *menippea* transcends pure parody or laughter-as-entertainment. Kristeva defines it as follows: “The laughter of the carnival is not simply parodic; it is no more comic than tragic; it is both at once, one might say it is *serious*”.134 This feature links *menippea* with Mercier’s “Irish comic tradition”. We need not accept

131 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Jeri Johnson, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998), 651.
132 Bakhtin, *Dostojevskij*…, 147.
133 Quoted in: Dettmar, 184.
134 Kristeva, 22; cf. Booker, *O’Brien, Bakhtin…*, 3.

Mercier's claim as to the existence of some kind of seamless continuation from the Old Irish texts to the present that consists in the specific "national" mixture of the heroic and the tragic with the comic and the grotesque, nevertheless, such an interplay of serious and humorous forms a persistent feature of many medieval texts as well as the works of such seminal modern figures as Swift, Joyce and Beckett. Myles na gCopaleen himself sums up this ambiguity at the heart of "Irish tradition" in his inimitable style: writing of Joyce in *Cruiskeen Lawn* he claims that he "was a great master of the banal in literature. By 'banal' I mean the fusion of uproarious comic stuff and deep tragedy".135 And again, in the famous "Bash in the Tunnel" essay he calls humor "the handmaid of sorrow and fear", contrasting Joyce with Rabelais who "is funny, but his stuff cloys. His stuff lacks tragedy".136 Rather than "unambiguous satire", a pure laughter at someone else's expense with which "O'Nolan is often associated", this "subtle compromise" embracing both poles without annihilating their identity seems a more promising ground for the further analysis.137

The Bakhtinian *menippea* cannot be explained without the reference to the medieval ludic tradition. It is a specifically medieval phenomenon of the carnival that gave the name to the whole theory. And in the medieval context, the carnival is also very closely connected to the theme of death and afterlife. The last things of man – despite, or rather because of the deeply ingrained anxiety connected to them – were subjected to such parodic transformations. As Bakhtin asserts, one of the oldest descriptions of what he calls the "carnival", *The Vision of Gauchelin*, features the procession of souls wandering through the underworld. He also points out to the fact that Irish literature contributed greatly to the gradual "carnivalization" of hell, with Latin *Visio Tungdali* as the climactic example of the whole tradition.138 Moving away from the dogmatic eschatological context, those ventures into the afterlife were suffused with a sense of the grotesque. Spiritual suffering of the souls was exchanged for the picturesque scenes of physical tortures permeated by macabre humor. The medieval infernos of this tradition staged the world turned upside-down, a topsy-turvy reality of upturned social hierarchies and perception distorted by constant breeches of physical laws.139 In those medieval stories of the underworld, the interconnection between

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135 "Cruiskeen Lawn", *Irish Times*, July 20, 1955. Quoted in: David Powell, "An Annotated Bibliography of Myles Na Gopaleen's (Flann O'Brien's) 'Cruiskeen Lawn' Commentaries on James Joyce", *James Joyce Quarterly*, 9/1 (Fall 1971), 55.

136 Myles na gCopaleen, "Bash in the Tunnel", *Stories and Plays…*, 208.

137 cf. Carol Taaffe, "'Tell Me This, Do You Ever Open a Book at All?' Portraits of the Reader in Brian O'Nolan's *At Swim Two Birds*", *Irish University Review*, 34/2 (Autumn/Winter 2004), 253.

138 M. Bakhtin, *Francois Rabelais a lidová kultura středověku a renesance*, trans. J. Kolář, (Praha: Odeon 1975), 302-4.

139 Bakhtin, *Rabelais…*, 298-302. In fact even one of the most famous features of the topsy-turvy netherworld of *The Third Policeman* - the Atomic Theory which involves the interchangeability of atoms between men and bicycles, can be traced back to the medieval carnivalesque motifs. In his study of Rabelais Bakhtin speaks about a "grotesque concept of the body" – closely connected with the images of infernal tortures - consisting in the notion of "radical instability of body", its "defiance of closure" and of "division from the outer world". (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 26-7)

the carnival and the elements of Mercier's "Irish Comic Tradition" is clearly discernible, as the gruesome eschatological themes merge with the macabre and grotesque humor.

As was mentioned above, the hell of *The Third Policeman* bears little affinity to the most famous inferno of Irish modernism – one described in the "fire and brimstone" sermon of Father Arnall in *A Portrait*. It is, however, to some extent, closely linked to another Joyce's text - the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses*. They share the nightmarish atmosphere, the constant fluidity and protean character of the represented reality. Significantly, it is this particular episode of Joyce's novel that is often invoked in the discussion of the carnivalesque quality of modernist poetics as well as described in explicitly "Dantean" terms: Ezra Pound writing about "Circe" claims that it is "a new Inferno in full sail. (...) A harrowing vision of hell ... in the medieval tradition of hell-representations, not at all the Hell of Milton or Blake".140 Pound's comment sets an opposition between the medieval and the romanticized renderings of infernal landscape, which seems of great significance here. Similarly, W. T. Noon calls "Circe" at once a "harrowing vision of hell" and "the most comical chapter" of *Ulysses* at the same time.141 Both comments point to the inevitable link between hell and carnival, laughter and gravity, permeating medieval literary tradition.

*Menippea* shares the double stress of the Irish Comic Tradition on the macabre and grotesque humor on the one hand and the fantastic on the other.142 The latter element seems, in fact, the central feature of the genre. According to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the experimenting with abnormal mental states and the introduction of "the boldest and most outrageous fantasy and adventure" employed with an implicit aim of "testing" the nature of reality, philosophical/scientific systems and "truths".143 Similarly, Northrop Frye who introduced the term into the western critical discourse independently on Bakhtin defines menippean "anatomy" as a mode that "presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern"144 – but only in order to mock that pattern and expose its essential deficiency and inherent – even if concealed – ambiguity and polysemy. As Bakhtin claims: "The fantastic here serves not for positive embodiment of the truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it..."145 One of the central *topoi* of the genre is a voyage to the underworld, functioning as a highly appropriate setting for such a "testing".146

140 Quoted in: Carol Slade, "The Dantean Journey Through Dublin", *Modern Language Studies* 6/1 (Spring 1976), 15.
141 Noon, 90.
142 Mercier, 11
143 M. Bakhtin, *Dostojevskij...*, 155.
144 Northorp Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays*, (London: Penguin Books 1990), 310.
145 *Dostojevskij...*, 158 . Similarly, according to Tzvetan Todorov, the use of the marvelous goes "beyond entertainment and beyond curiosity". The real goal of any "marvelous journey is the total exploration of universal reality." (Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. R. Howard, [Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1975], 57).
146 Bakhtin, *Dostojevskij...*, 158.

By now – after the more extended studies of Flann O'Brien's poetics provided by M. K. Booker, Keith Hopper and Jose Lanters – it is almost a truism to refer to the genre of *The Third Policeman* in terms of *mennipea*. Whereas Booker stresses the 'philosophical' dimension of O'Brien's satire as an assault on Western tradition of Cartesian rationalism, empiricist epistemology and modern science, Hooper points mainly to its attempt to subvert the concepts of linear narrative structure, representationality of literature and monological authorship. In fact those two critiques converge to a large extent, as the emergence of novel as a literary genre in the West is largely concomitant with the Cartesian revolution in philosophy. As Kenner sums up: Cartesian philosophy "which makes the whole of intelligible reality depend on the mental processes of a solitary man, came into being at about the same time as the curious literary form called the novel."147 Noman who enters the world of the Parish can be read as a perfect Cartesian who can be said to believe that

> the outer world does not contain a single trace of a relative un-intelligibility. It is perfectly transparent for a human glance, because it is nothing else than a geometric space entirely subdued to our mind.148

At the same time he can be viewed as a Bakhtinian 'monoglotic author' who "writes in a full confidence of the sufficiency of his language" and perceives it as "the sole and adequate tool for realizing the word's direct, objectivized meaning".149

Both those precepts come under a close and ironic scrutiny throughout the novel. As Frye points out, a constant theme of *menippea* is a ridicule of "maddened pedantry" symbolized by the image of "*philosophus gloriosus*" and his "disease of intellect".150 Thus probably the most perfect epitome of *menippea* is the extravagant savant de Selby, a direct descendant of the scientists of Laputa and Lagado. Even the first appearance of his 'treaties' in the text – highlighted by the narrator as a crucial moment of his life – is marked by a disconcerting humorous detail: "The book was a first edition of *Golden Hours* with *the two last pages missing*" (9 – emphasis mine). The final pages of any text conventionally bear a critical weight of the coda or conclusion, and, moreover, de Selby's treaties claim for themselves a status of the ultimate 'book of knowledge'. The passage thus inevitably introduces the element of a subversive satire pointing to the essential incompleteness and fragmentation of any intellectual system. Moreover, as Hooper notices, this apparently marginal remark obtains a special ironic weight when read in the context of the novel as a whole: it is on the few last pages of *The Third Policeman* when the crucial revelation of the

147 Kenner, *Samuel Beckett…*, 17.
148 Jacques Maritain, "Kartezjusz czyli wcielenie anioła", *Trzech reformatorów: Luter, Kartezjusz, Rousseau, [ Trois réformateurs: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau, avec six portraits]*, trans. K. Michalski, (Warszawa: Fronda 2005, 115-6.
149 Bakhtin, *Discourse…*, 61; Dettmar, 30.
150 Frye, 309.

ontological status of Noman (he is dead) and the Parish ("a kind of hell) is uncovered, completely changing the reader's understanding of the represented reality.151

De Selby's presence within the text triggers the carnival of de-thronizing the modern god of science. As Swiftian "projectors", he seems to posses "one eye (...) turned inward, and the other up to the zenith" - a perfect Cartesian contemplating only ego and mathematical ideas above, yet somehow by-passing the middle ground of earthly reality.152 At the same time the "de-selbian" mock-footnotes that at several points in the novel almost overwhelm in length the main narrative serve as a dehierarchizing device, disrupting the linearity of writing and reading. As Hopper notices, they are "a perfect vehicle" for "a condemnation of rationalist methodologies" by the employment of those very methodologies as a "satirical weapon".153

To provide an insight into the mechanics of O'Brien's *menippea,* I will start with two examples drawn from his ventures into the realm of Old Irish tradition. Noman invokes "a trick" of the ancient Celts known as "throwing a calculation upon a road" (taken from the heroic tales of the Ulster cycle) which enabled them, scrutinizing the tracks "with a certain eye" to discover the "dimension of a host" of their enemies (40). Later on in the narrative, when the troop of "one-leeged men" is expected to rescue Noman from the gallows, Policeman Fox submits a message: "Made a calculation on tracks and estimate number is seven" (162). "A certain eye" of the rationalist perceiver is, however, deluded: one-legged men "took off their wooden legs ... and tied themselves together in pairs"...

The second motif – appearing several times in the narrative – is one of an almost ritual questioning of a stranger in order to discover his name/vocation/intentions. Both in the case of Noman's dialogue with Martin Finnucane and Sergeant Pluck's attempts to reveal Noman's name, the questioning leads to directly opposite results. Instead of uncovering and enlightening, it brings about further confusion and sense of absurdity. It is strengthened by another feature of Old Irish "ritual of query and probing" in which a question/riddle is followed by an answer beginning with "that is easily told". As Tymoczko notices, that phrase is a typical feature of early Irish "catalogues of knowledge", signalizing the beginning of the explanatory narrative.154 In *The Third Policeman*, however, the rest of the response seems completely incomprehensible (159). Those two examples point to the two poles of O'Brien's *menippea*, delineated by Booker and Hooper – firstly, the critique of the Cartesian epistemological hubris, secondly – to the discrediting of the monological view of language and discourse.

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151 Hooper, 209.
152 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, (London: Penguin Books 1994), 171
153 Cf. Hooper, 196.
154 Tymoczko, *The Irish Ulysses*, 144-6.

O'Brien's satire of Cartesianism can be illuminated by means of the contemporary philosophical critique of Descartes undertaken by Jacques Maritain, a thinker relatively influential in O'Brien's Ireland. Describing the core of the Cartesian system, Maritain claims that it can be summed up under the term "angelism" – i.e. that the Cartesian view of the self and its epistemological powers is analogous to the older Thomistic delineation of the nature of angels. A Cartesian man believes that he – as Aquinas' "higher spirits" - has a perfect knowledge of himself and of objects in the outer world. The world is transparent to his sight which joins in a single act "seeing and interpreting" which enables him to grasp the objects immediately in their entirety. The all-embracing satirical frame of the novel consists, of course, in the fact that Noman, in reality, has no knowledge about himself and cannot derive the certainty of his existence from the act of "cogito". He is a kind of "godless Cartesian" (as Hopper calls him) yet, at the same time, (as Lanters suggests) his unquestionable "cogito" is in fact followed by "*non sum*".[155] As far as the epistemological powers are concerned, Noman repeatedly invokes his utmost trust in the comprehensive capabilities of his sight. After entering Old Mathers' house he claims "that the best thing to do was to believe what my eyes were looking at rather than to place my trust in a memory" (27); and later he dismisses one of de Selby's theories by "the testimony of human experience" (52). Nevertheless, when he enters the police barracks, his confidence is first shaken and then almost completely annihilated, as the various "inventions" of Policeman MacCruiskeen are presented to him. The process leads to the exposure of the fatal disparity between the testimony of the senses and the abilities of the intellect. The invisible point of MacCruiskeen spear really hurts Noman's hand, yet "you could spend half an hour trying to think about it and you could put no thought around it in the end." (71) Shortly he became "half afraid to think" as well as to look at things because then "they would have to be believed" (84).

A Cartesian observer is witnessing rather than interpreting reality, as "the world out there" (outside the ego) possesses a fully formed, inherent intelligibility of its own. At the same time, paradoxically, this perfect "*intelligibilitas*" is derived – as the whole of reality – from the mind itself, from the "cogito" which provides the only stable ground for speculation. The "criterium of clear concepts", based on the introspection, enables him to "divide what is dark from what is clear ... and to allow only that which is clear", in fact - to exclude everything "that cannot be reduced to the mathematical certainty".[156] On the contrary, in the inverted world of the Parish, Noman is repeatedly confronted with the objects and events that overcome his epistemological capacity and escape any attempt for such rationalist reduction. As Ihab Hassan says about Beckett's texts: in such a world "epistemology reveals only

155 Hopper, 265; Lanters, 212.
156 Maritain, 100, 104, 116.

ambiguity".[157] Sergeant Pluck explains the 'madness' of the third policeman, Fox, by the story of him seeing one of the cards fabricated by MacCruiskeen: "It was not one of the colours a man carries inside his head like nothing he ever looked at with his eyes. It was… different" (160). And during the trip to "Eternity" Noman has to face the sight of "things" that "lacked an essential property of known objects (…) their appearance, if even that word is not inadmissible, was not understood by the eye and was in any event indescribable" (139-40). The reality viewed as a derivative of the subject, centered round the meaning-giving ego, is exchanged for the notion of the inherently inscrutable nature of things. Both the human episteme ("not understood by the eye") and the expressive powers of language ("indescribable") are disclosed as essentially limited and fallible. In fact the description of the strange objects in 'Eternity" – "not square or rectangular or circular", "not white or black" or in any "intermediate colour" – bears the intimations of the apophatic theology of the Pseudo-Aeropagite and other medieval mystics who claimed that the supernatural reality defies a description by means of human words and can be approximated only via negation - by saying what the thing is *not*. In the discourse of *The Third Policeman,* this notion is transported onto the level of human perception in general, turning it into the epistemological comedy full fledged.[158]

Thus, the novel seems to perform the devastating critique of the modern scientific hubris and its confidence in the possibility of full knowledge and full description of reality. The concentration on the satire of Cartesianism, however, does not give full justice to the importance of hell as the setting and fictional frame of Noman's world. By using Maritain to highlight the satirical core of the text I tried to suggest that the post-modern assault of Western rationalism is not the only possible philosophical ground for the interpretation of O'Brien's poetics. O'Brien's remark suggests that *The Third Policeman* stages the carnivalesque mode of writing, yet it is specifically an *infernal* carnival. He is facing the failure of his perception and comprehension, the world that lays bare the insufficiency of human epistemological powers, yet in this epistemological comedy he is primarily "an observer" placed exactly – as the Joycean motto of this chapter describes – "at the lower end of a cylindrical vertical shaft 5000ft deep sunk from the surface towards the centre of the earth" – i.e. in the Dantean hell. Thus - one whose condition and perception are determined also by the situatedness in the larger cosmological system of the Christian tradition.

157 Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus. Toward a Postmodern Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1971), 219.

158 Thomas F. Shea sums up the apophatic principle of the novel (without mentioning the term): "We are often informed what the objects 'lack', are 'far from', or are 'anything but'." (Shea, *Flann O'Brien's Exorbitant Novels*, [Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press 1992], 131-2)

### III. 2. Infernal carnivals

Jorge Borges suggests that St. Paul's maxim about the human perception in this earthly existence: "Now we see as through the glass, darkly" (I Cor. 13.12) – implies not only an imperfect and blur but also a reversed (mirror) vision.[159] The "mainstream" of Western classical philosophical tradition, from Plato to St. Augustine, stresses the essential fallibility and insufficiency of human perception facing the reality. In Christian doctrine this motif was connected to the moral and ontological status of man as a fallen, corrupted being who, *per se*, is unable to attain full knowledge of reality, but needs the illuminating power of the Divine grace. Epistemology is by no means a central issue of Dante's *Commedia*; however it plays a prominent role in the poetics of its first canticle. The *Inferno* is a zone of corporeality and sense perception, which in the following eschatological realms are exchanged for the spiritual forms and super-rational modes of cognition.[160] As Wallace Fowlie notices, "occhio" ("an eye") is one the most frequently used words in this part of the *Commedia*.[161] The *Inferno* is the realm of the Borgesian mirrors reverting and deforming reality, of the human perception deposed from its throne of the interpreter of reality. If the human perception as such can be discredited as fallible, then in Inferno which, *ex definitione,* signifies the reification of this corrupted state, this time without the possibility of the redemptive illumination, the motif of the corrupted view must stand forward even more prominently. The theme of the disparity between the external world and he powers of comprehension is established, in fact, at the very entrance of Inferno, where Dante responds with confusion to the terrifying inscription on the Gates: "Maestro, il senso lor m'è duro" ("Master, for me their meaning is hard." – III, 13). As Martin Pokorný points out, the word "duro" ("hard") of this utterance echoes its homophone (meaning 'to last') in the text of the inscription: "Io etterno duro", creating thus a link between the incomprehension and the eternal duration of the punishment.[162]

On the most basic level, the theme of incomprehension is repeatedly invoked throughout the poem by references to the difficulty of seeing and to the "low illumination" which turns the canticle into "the litany of gloom".[163] The underworld is described in terms of "l'aura grossa e scura" (XXXI, 37) which has to be pierced through by the pilgrim's gaze or

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159 *J. Borges: Antologia osobista*, transl. E. Stachura, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1979), 189.
160 Cf. Edward G. Miller, *Sense perception in Dante's* Commedia*. Studies in Medieval Literature*, vol. 15, (Lampter, Dyfed: The Edwin Mellen Press 1996), 93, 127. Freccero contrasts this 'material' aspect of the *Inferno* with the *Purgatorio* described as "the drama of the mind", and the *Paradiso* characterized as "the imageless vision" (Freccero, 94)
161 Wallace Fowlie, *A Reading of Dante's* Inferno, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1981), 38.
162 Martin Pokorný, *Sounding and Shapes. An Inquiry into the Intertextual Effects of Joyce's Ulysses*, unpublished dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania (2005), chapter 3, p. 16.
163 Miller, 65, 68

“l’aere perso” (“black air” – V, 69). On the very threshold of the first circle, after crossing the Acheron Dante establishes the problem of the fundamental obstacles to clear perception:

> It was full of vapor, dark and deep.
> Straining my eyes toward the bottom,
>
> I could see nothing. (IV, 10-12)

Shortly before he speaks about one of the first infernal sights stressing, however, the essential incompleteness of his vision and the possibility of delusion: he ends his description with “com'i' discerno per lo fioco lume” (“or so it seems in this dim light” – III, 75). His perception must be salvaged by the illumination received from Vergil, who is described as a “sun that heals all troubled sight,” (XI.91). The theme of sensual perception is, moreover, allegorically linked to the low capacity of human understanding.164 Dante is the pilgrim on the way to conversion, who lost his “straight way” and – as Freccero sums up – his spatial disorientation is bound to represent the disorder of the soul.165 The situation of the damned is more clear-cut as their distorted vision/reasoning is eternally incurable. In a striking metaphor that merges together the sense perception, the cognitive powers and the ethical dimension Virgil describes the damned as having “squinted minds” during their lifetime and reified in this sensual/intellectual/moral handicap in Hell (VII, 40) – a fitting summary for the mechanics of Dante’s representation of the underworld.

In the *Commedia,* Dante approaches the imagery of the carnival most vividly in Canto XXI and XXII when the pilgrims are convoyed by the devilish squad. In those passages, the wild macabre humor mixes with the excremental imagery – the whole journey is accompanied by the music of a devil’s “asshole” turned into “a trumpet” (XXI, 140). Also the stress on the corporeality of the infernal scene seems particularly strong – e.g. one of the devils is depicted when ripping “out a hunk of flesh” of what in reality is a sinner’s *soul* (XXII, 73). But the spirit of the carnival in the *Inferno* exceeds this particular fragment and suffuses the narrative as a whole.

The most basic delineation of the carnival is spatial – it is “the world upside-down”, the topsy-turvy reality.166 The notion of the carnival is embedded in the recurrent hints at the dissolution and up-turning of the earthly hierarchies and its repeated invectives directed at the political and religious powers that be. Dante the poet – in the earthly conditions a defeated politician and exile - casts himself in the role of the ultimate judge of humanity,

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164 cf. Miller, 63-9.
165 Freccero, 182.
166 Bakhtin, *Dostojevskij…*, 182.

ridiculing and castigating kings and popes.167 The very system of the *contrapasso* – the punishment that corresponds the crime – in the poetic rendering often involves the notion of the topsy-turvy inversion in the most literal sense: those who attempted to prophesize the future (look forward) are now destined to walk with their heads turned backwards. A priest who valued material wealth above the spiritual (direct their gaze to earth rather than heaven) is stuck with his head downwards in the hellish hole, he "'l di sù tien di sotto" – "has his up down" (XIX, 46). As Barolini points out, the zone of "lower Hell" is filled with a series of perverted religious motifs: the mock crucifixion of the Jewish high priest Caiphas (XXIII, 110-118) or the cannibalistic Eucharist of count Ugolino who bits "as bread" the scull of his eternal enemy.168 The heretic Farninata performs a mock resurrection, rising on the voice of the pilgrim from his fiery tomb. In Canto XXV Florentine thieves are depicted during a horrifying metamorphosis when they are "fused together" as "molten wax" (62-3) with the poisonous snakes. This image – "l'image perversa" - provides an infernal counterpart to the doctrine of Christ's twofold nature. Christ is "two in one", man and God in the single being, the damned form on the contrary a creature that is "neither two nor one" (69). This juxtaposition is signalized also on the verbal level by the contrast between "mutare" that suggests the infernal "negative metamorphosis" repeating itself ceaselessly and leading nowhere; and "trasmutare" – the transformation onto a higher ontological level. At the very bottom of the infernal kingdom, Lucifer himself with his three faces is just a perverse image of Trinitarian God.169 Finally, the whole topography of Hell – a cone narrowing from the surface of earth towards the centre – is simply an "inverted mountain" of Purgatory with Lucifer instead of Eden at its top (bottom).

The insufficiency of perception is paralleled by a similar handicap of the human language. Dante repeatedly refers to the deficiency of his descriptive powers:

> Ogne lingua per certo verria meno
> per lo nostro sermone e per la mente
> c' hanno a tanto comprender poco seno. (XXVIII, 4-6)170

The poetics of the *Inferno* go, however, even further than a mere negation of the poetic capacity facing the problem of rendering into the mortal speech the vision of the eternal realms. According to Barolini: "the mimesis of the first canticle is dedicated to reproducing the instances of textual distortion. Textually, the governing principle of Inferno is misuse,

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167 Bakhtin describing the outlines of the carnivalesque genres quotes the tale of Epistemon about his journey to the otherworld where he encounters "Alexander the Great mending old pants (...) Xerxes selling custard on the street and Romulus making his living selling salt." (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*..., 298-9)
168 Barolini, 223
169 Barolini, 223-224.
170 "Who, even in words not bound by meter, / and having told the tale many times over, / could tell the blood and wounds that I saw now? // Surely every tongue would fail, / for neither thought nor speech / has the capacity to hold so much."

which is objectified in a series of misquotations."[171] The language here manifests the moral content of the infernal vision: only misuse is possible in the zone inhabited by those who misused God's gift of life. The inevitability of textual distortion is just another effect of the irremediable "squintedness" of the minds. Also in terms of Dante's own story of conversion, the canticle represents the descent amidst the scenes of his own guilt and weakness – suggesting also the imperfection of language that cannot as yet reach the fullness of truth. The recurrent motif of misquotation surfaces, for example, in Francesca's mystification of the Arthurian legend, or in the scene from the ultimate canto where the ancient hymn by Fortunatus, used in the liturgy for the ceremony of the unveiling of the Cross, is transformed into the signal for the appearance of Lucifer: "Vexilla regis prodeunt… inferi" (XXXIV, 1). And shortly afterwards, Lucifer is actually represented as an inverted, perverse parody of the Cross.

The *Inferno* – as Freccero comments – is not only a pilgrimage among the "human and architectural ruins" (on the literal level of imagery and on the moral plain) – the realm of torn and dismembered bodies, landslides and destroyed edifices – but also a journey through "a linguistic graveyard". [172] In Canto VII, those guilty of the sin of *acedia* are presented with their faces immersed in the mud. They constantly speak yet their utterances can be deciphered only from the "scraps and bubbles" on the surface of the bog, which necessarily allows only a distorted and incomplete comprehension. Their utterance is a performance of the "non-meaning" inherent in human language; the mud – an emblem of their sin – at once "permits the passing on of the murmuring and hinders it".[173] The hellish language of the *Inferno* is most vividly represented in the nonsensical utterances of Pluto and Nimrod (Canto VII and XXXI). On the most literal level they provide a parallel for the language of *The Third Policeman*, ruled by "malapropisms and solecisms" which – extensively used by the keepers of the Parish (the policeman – who in fact plays the same role as Pluto and Nimrod in the *Inferno*) – quickly infects also the utterances of Noman.[174]

Virgil speaks of the giant Nimrod, guilty (as Noman is) of the sin of pride, as he attempted to build the tower that would reach heaven:

> Let us leave him and not waste our speech,
> for every language is to him as his
> to others, and his is understood by none. (XXXI, 80-1)

171 Barolini, 4.
172 Freccero, 107.
173 Caselli, 155-6.
174 Cf. Hopper, 123; Werner Huber: "Flann O'Brien and the Language of the Grotesque", *Anglo-Irish and Irish Literature. Aspects of Language and Culture*. Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature, vol. II, B. Bramsback, M. Croghan, eds. (Uppsala: Almquist & Wiksell 1988), 125-127.

It is the vision of the discourse deformed so completely by the fallen state of the speaker that it lacks any trace of communicability. Significantly, it is also one of the inspirations behind the most profound "carnivalesque" idiom in modern literature – Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.175 Nimrod is, in fact, described as a perfect Cartesian solipsist, or rather the outcome product of the Cartesian system in the world whose certitudes where destroyed. The belief in the existence of a reality unambiguous and rationally graspable by the cogito in its entirety ends in the solipsist hallucination of the mind that attempted to derive the world from itself, to rape the reality in order to force it into the subjective frame.176 The status of the failed Cartesian ego in this respect can be equaled with the status of Dante's damned. As Gabriel Josipovici sums up, the sinners in Hell are "prisoners of their own ego ... They experience everything merely as extensions of themselves". In such a realm there is "not too great a step from Francesca's lyrical outbursts to the meaningless cries of the giant Nimrod" – both are "simple articulations of one's subjective feelings" that "soon degenerate into animal screams and yelps".177 Noman, the godless Cartesian, and godless inhabitants of the circles of the *Inferno,* shares the same reality.

## III.3. Centre and play of the infernal realm

As Osip Mandelstam comments: the author of the Commedia became a victim of "the cult of Dantean mysticism", re-appearing as a "mysterious Dante from French drawings, nothing but the dark cloak and eagle-nose, a thoughtful recluse among the black rocks."178 Yet when read through the optics of the carnival, the *Inferno* reveals striking parallels to the *menippea* of *The Third Policeman* – both perform the vision of the world in the grasp of incomprehension and faulty perception, both stage the discourse based on the distortion and inversion of meaning. As Madelstam sums up: "Dante does nothing else but shakes the conventional meaning and disrupts the wholeness of the image".179

Nevertheless, as Robert Curtius or Freccero point out, there is a huge gap between the *Commedia* and the earlier tradition of "the bizarre travel literature" of Middle Ages concerned with adventurous exploration of the netherworld180 that influenced Bakhtin's theory of the carnival. The Celtic otherworldly literature – intertwining comic and fantastic elements with the didactic and the heroic - seems much closer to the literary sphere of the

175 Reynolds, 203-6.
176 Maritain, 116. Hopper describes Noman in similar terms as "an incorrigible solipsist whose external world has been fabricated by the subjective perceptions of his limited consciousness". (Hopper, 205)
177 Josipovici, 38-9.
178 Mandelstam, 22.
179 Mandelstam, 28.
180 Freccero, 70; Ernst Robert Curtius, *Literatura europejska i łacińskie średniowiecze [Europaische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter]*, trans. A. Borowski, (Kraków: Universitas 1997), 372.

*menippea* than the *Commedia* – a poetic allegorical rendering of the scholastic universe, "the sacred poem" of the unified culture of medieval *Christianitas,* a "fresco with a universal scope"181. The *Commedia*, admittedly, is not a didactic vision of eschatological realms, but also bears a little affinity to an adventurous guide through the grotesque hell such as *Visio Tungdali*. The ambiguity and instability of reality and language is gradually overcome by the purgatorial ascent and the vision becomes cleared. As M.K. Booker notices, all the inversions and ironies of the *Commedia* are ultimately resolved and contained within the monological discourse in which the order of things, as well as the final meaningfulness of language, are guaranteed by the presence of the transcendent God, "the ultimate image of unity and self-identity".182 There is a contrast between the souls of the damned eternally frozen in the grasp of their incomprehension and the gradual evolution of the pilgrim himself towards the better, not distorted vision. The faulty conclusions drawn from the perception may be straightened and illuminated by the reference to the stable frame, to the Divine Light which finally dissolves the hellish mists and gloom. The pilgrim only passes through the realm of chaos; escapes in the end its infernal circularity. Bakhtin's carnival – on the contrary - seems to reject such an enclosure, engendering potentially infinite "contexts without any centre or absolute anchorage".183 In *Rabelais and His World,* he comments of the nature of Rabelais' novel, an example of menippea *par excellance*:

> no dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook.184

Thus the tension between the representation of the fallen humanity immersed in the realm of Platonic *doxa*, and the possibility of development towards *episteme* guaranteed by the existence of the all-embracing stable order underlines the problematic relation between the *Commedia* and the notion of the carnival.

According to Czesław Miłosz, man's way of thinking and perceiving depends largely on how he "structures the space" within which he exists185 – the construction of a literary text is thus inherently connected with the construction of the universe. Dante's work displays within the text – "the medieval wholeness and roundness of the world"186, both – we may

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181 Jorge Borges, *Dziewięć esejów dantejskich [Nueve Ensayos Dantescos]*, trans. J. Partyka, (Warszawa: Prószyński 2005), 5.

182 "The texts of both Joyce and Dante have a dynamic character as different scenes and motifs constantly reappear in new contexts that revise and update their meaning. However, in Dante this process is not endless. At the end of the poem, all contradictions and ironies are resolved, as the pilgrim reaches God, the ultimate image of unity and self-identity." (Booker, *Joyce, Bakhtin…*, 103-8)

183 Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", 12.

184 Dettmar, 35.

185 Paweł Lisicki: „Dziedzictwo Dantego", *Powrót z obcego świata*, (Kraków: Arcana 2006), 226.

186 Bakhtin: "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel", *Discourse…*, 205.

say - the Ptolemaic earth-centered astronomy and the Christian God-centered history.187 The Celtic otherworld and visionary literature shares the features which Bakhtin ascribes to "chivalric romance" – the subjective "violations of elementary temporal relationships and perspectives"188 and the "corresponding subjective playing with space". Tymoczko comments on the "general fluidity and ambivalence of this metamorphic realm", and thus renders the tradition acceptable within the Bakhtinian frame; as well as a potential inspiration for O'Brien's poetics. On the contrary, Dante's epic poem acquires in Bakhtin's terminology the label of a scholastic "synthesis", vision aiming at the representation of the totality of universe in an atemporal frame, based on a metatextual, dogmatic interpretation of reality.189 To return to astronomical and cosmological terminology: according to Bakhtin the novel emerges as a dialogic genre because of the shift in "the perception of language" concomitant with the shift from the Ptolemaic towards the Galilean structuring of space, with its denial of earth's centrality and the view of "the plurality of worlds".190 The two 'astronomical' images from Canto IV of the Purgatorio and the beginning of Noman's adventures in the Parish can be used to display the disparate workings of both texts. From the slopes of Mt. Purgatory Dante observes the sun setting in the east:

> First I gazed upon the shore below,
> then raised my eyes up to the sun and was amazed
> to see its rays were striking from the left." (*Purg*. IV, 55-8)

- in an obvious reversal of the physical rules of his world. Noman views from the window of old Mathers' house a similar scene:

> Coming into the room I had noticed that the window was to the east and that the sun was rising in that quarter ... Now it was setting with the last glimmers of feeble red in exactly the same place (37).

There is a crucial difference between the two scenes: in the *Commedia* the inverted physical phenomenon is quickly explained by Virgil by the reference to the Ptolemaic concept of cosmos with flat and immobile earth in its center. The inversion is immediately inscribed into the closed system, it is meaningful. On the other hand, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* shows a peculiar indifference to the phenomenon: he passes swiftly to a simple assertion: "Night had come" – as if unable to give the full credit to its surreal quality. Moreover, the sun of the *Purgatorio* is setting in the east merely due to the change in the perspective as the

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187 As Borges sums up: "Dante's universe is defined by the Ptolemaic astronomy and Christian theology" (Borges, 9).
188 Tymoczko says in relation to this aspect of the Otherworld: 'Temporal relations between the two worlds are, however, highly unpredictable: a mortal may enter the otherworld and pass a considerable time there, only to return to the human world at exactly the same time he or she entered; … conversely, mortals may seek to return to return to their world after an apparently short lapse of time only to discover that hundreds of years have passed in human time." (*The Irish* Ulysses, 181). In *The Third Policeman* this aspect is most obviously realized in the final scene when Noman realizes that 3 days in the Parish equaled in fact to 20 years of earthly time.
189 Cf. Bakhtin, *Discourse…*, 154-156.
190 Quoted in: Mc Hale, 166.

pilgrims have crossed to the southern hemisphere, in absolute terms it follows its preordained course. On the contrary, the sun of *The Third Policeman* is depicted as follows: "It had risen a bit, stopped, and then gone back". The shift is thus presented in terms of the order reversed and disrupted. It points to Noman's location within a completely new reality with its own rules which are mere parody of the known world.

In fact, in O'Brien's case we can take Bakhtin's astronomical metaphors even further – several critics (most prominently Charles Kemmnitz) pointed to the prominent position which is played in the texture of the novel by the echoes of Einstein's theory of relativity and quantum mechanics[191] – the most famous being the scene of the changing spatial qualities of the police station as perceived by the approaching narrator[192]. According to Kemmnitz *The Third Policeman* is structured as an allegory of the shift from the Newtonian to the Einsteinian universe – to the world ruled by the concept of parallax and the notion of infinite regress. "Nothing stays fixed to be looked at. Everything is in a state of flux."[193] Even if Kemnitz's interpretation – as Hopper or Mary O'Toole have demonstrated – is just another attempt to force the eclectic and protean poetics of the novel into the frame of a single system – it makes Noman's universe "even more horrible (...) more incomprehensible and erratic".[194] The stress on the relativity of time and space, the absurd version of atomic theory presented by Sergeant Pluck and the recurrent images of infinite regress that permeates the narrative foster the vision of the world denying any kind of linearity and ontological stability. By means of analogy, it also further destabilizes the realm of linguistic expression and moral norms, introducing instead the reality that defies any semantic or epistemological certitude.

The world of the novel thus moves even further from the ordered universe of the *Commedia*. It is a tension between a world which resolves its ambiguities and "sliding significances" within a stable frame, and one that seems to deny the existence of such a frame. For critics such as Kristeva, the notion of *menippea* transcends the sphere of mere parody or satire *per se* – i.e. the exposure of the fallibility or limitations of some intellectual system - but rather molds it into a political and philosophical program, "a different imperative"[195] which is "anti-Christian and anti-rationalistic", devoted to "murder, revolution, dialectic transformation".[196] On the linguistic plain it consists in the rejection of any boundary to the "protean discourse", and the acceptance of the perpetual play of breaking significances that does not know any "substance, cause or identity".

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191 Cf. Hopper, 230, O'Toole, 215-6.
192 Cf. Pilný, 46-7.
193 W. T. Dunne, quoted in Hopper, 232
194 O'Toole, 216.
195 Kristeva, 14.
196 Kristeva, 21-5.

On the other hand, the critical readings of *The Third Policeman* often allude to the presence of some – textual or at least intentional – counterforce, that seems to check the centrifugal energies of *menippea*. That is the quality of *The Third Policeman* that Hooper refers to cryptically as "the Catholic conscience at the deep core of this novel."197 J.C.C. Mays already in one of the first analyses of O'Brien *oeuvre* stresses this inherent tension: on the one hand "he indulges in the directionless, self-negating tumult of his wit", he is endowed with "a gift for fantasy, for sheer untrammeled inventiveness and wordplay, for mimicry of style and juggling the planes of illusion" 198 This description may serve quite well as the delineation of O'Brien – the author from the zone of *menippea*. On the other hand – Mays suggests – there is as strong and as innate "consciousness of moral perspectives" and the pose of "the moralist communicating his distaste".199 There is a hint of "the moral satire", one which we confronted already in the discussion of O'Brien's subversive "mythical method."200

In order to disclose this internal tension in the text I would like to return briefly to O'Brien's first novel, *At SwimTwo Birds,* and examine it from the point of view of Derrida's concept of "center and play".

According to Derrida, the central occurrence in the modern history of European culture is one of "dislocation" defined by the "loss of the centre".201 Modernism as a tendency in the history of literature can be seen as a force dismantling the notion of linear and monological perception of the text, opening it to the notion of play, asserting the instability of language and problematizing its relation to reality. As Patricia Waugh states, "modernism was to initiate an ongoing aesthetic exploration" of how human reason is "confined to limited perspectives".202 On the other hand, it did not shed entirely the "concept of centred structure", that is "the concept of freeplay based on a fundamental ground, a freeplay which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of the freeplay".203 The poetics of modernism, while opening itself to the potential of freeplay, strives to remain on such a fundamental ground "beyond play". In Derrida's words "the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form."204

197 Hoopper, 192.
198 Mays, *Brian O'Nolan…*, 81, Mays, *Is Mac Greevy…*, 109.
199 Mays, *Brian O'Nolan…*, 81
200 Hopper, 239-40.
201 Jacques Derrida: "Structure, Sign and Play…", 278.
202 Waugh, 77.
203 Derrida, 279.
204 Derrida, 279. In Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus* a similar argument is situated at the heart of modernist strategies: "…the most resolutely fragmented work can also be presented as the Total Work or Magnum Opus. (…) The abortionists of unity are indeed angel makers, doctores angelici, because they affirm a properly, angelic and superior unity. Joyce's words, accurately described as having 'multiple roots' shatter the linear unity of the world, even of language, only to posit a cyclic unity of the sentence, text or knowledge".

In case of such a modernist text *par exellance* as Eliot's *Waste Land* it can be said that the loss of faith in human reason and powers of perception and the consciousness of fragmentation, does not prevent the hope to "shore my fragments against the ruins", the hope for a discovery of some comprehensive moral order.205

*At Swim-Two-Brids* seems to Hooper a "transistory text" between modernist and postmodernist poetics, "on the brink of an exciting new aesthetic" that inexorably "undermines all tendencies towards system-making."206 A playful assemblage of ATSB includes among others the lengthy quotations from the Middle Irish tale *Buile Suibhne* (*The Madness of Sweeney*). Nevertheless, the narrative of Sweeney is only one among the multiple discourses drawn – to evoke Barthes again – "from innumerable centres of culture". Moreover, in the later stages of the novel it is exposed to parody and ridicule of the characters from other – modern – discourses; nature poetry - central to the poetics of the tale - is appropriated by the authors of "plain people" doggerels; and Sweeney himself is forced to partake in the actions of other characters. The authoritative metanarrative of the past seems degraded and subjected to the inevitable fragmentation and distortions. It is merged into the element of O'Brien's "radical new type of fiction" project the aim of which can be described in Derridian terms as a "field" rather than "structure", rejecting the stable centre which would set limits to the play.207 Yet on the other hand, the tale of Sweeney is by far the most substantial of O'Brien's quotations and the one least fragmented, most vociferously resisting the appropriation for the "irresponsible" freeplay of this "radical fiction". Eva Wappling claims that the Middle Irish tale provides a thematic core around which the "chaosmos" of the novel is structured.208 Thus for many critics, *Buile Suibhne* provides a literary as well as ethical counterpoint to the contemporary realm of void talk and vulgar meaninglessness parodied in the novel. Cronin for example speaks of the "juxtaposition of myth with sordid contemporary reality" as the principal device of the novel.209 The poem is, however, by no means an unambiguous instrument of castigating satire. Rather – it brings forth the central feature of the book, which Booker describes as its "radical undecidability".210

King Sweeney was condemned – for slaying a cleric – to the miserable wonderings through Ireland in a bird-like shape. In the medieval original it is a story of crime, punishment, repentance and reconciliation. The focal moment of the whole story is Sweeney's arrival at Snamh-dha-Én:

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(Deleuze, Guattari: *Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* transl. Brian Massumi, [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1987], 6).

205 Waugh, 58.

206 Hooper, 14, 18.

207 Derrida, 279.

208 Wappling, 101.

209 Cronin, 90.

210 Quoted in: Denell Downum: "Citation and Spectrality in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*", *Irish University Review*, 36/2 (Autumn/Winter 2006), 305.

> So Suibhne fared forth until he reached the church at Snamh dha Én on the Shannon, which is now called Cluain Boirenn; he arrived there on Friday to speak precisely. The clerics of the church were there fulfilling the office of nones; women were beating flax, and one was giving birth to a child.211

This scene of stability and panoptic view of life makes him utter a lay where for the first time he asks Christ's forgiveness. As James MacKillop suggests, though no memorable event happens at Snamh dha Én, afterwards Sweeney is profoundly changed: "more gentle, pious and humble."212 That is the turning point of the poem. In O'Brien's rendering the text is changed slightly, yet the difference is significant:

> …here the clerics were engaged in the observation of their nones, flax was being beaten and here and there a woman was giving a birth to a child.213

For Declan Kiberd, this fragment imposes upon O'Brien's "ever-turning narrative" a "still centre" of "Gaelic tradition".214 Similarly, J.C.C. Mays calls the passage – and the medieval Irish sensibility connected to it – "a centre of the positive values in the book".215 However, when compared with O'Keeffe's scholarly translation, the text by no means achieves a univocal significance. By the introduction of "here and there" the whole image is suffused with a sense of parody. It seems as if Mercier's comment on Swift – a mediator between the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish comic tradition – fits well also in the case of O'Brien: "he can hardly write anything, particularly in prose, without verging on parody".216 Moreover, the lay uttered by Sweeney at Snamh-dha-Én – focal for the medieval text - is entirely excluded from ASTB. As if O'Brien stops half-way through: on the one hand he lets the intertext speak, establishes it as a kind of moral centre that foregrounds the carnival of forms and voices of the novel. On the other - in this gesture of corrupting the intertext's climactic moment – he seems to reject the dream of "full presence, the reassuring foundation" and escape from what Barthes calls "a trap of impatient 'pastoral' thought."217 Nevertheless, from the point of view of the novel as a whole, this intertextual centre of the novel is asserted by a probably most powerful force available to the author. Snamh-dha-Én can be literally translated as "Swim-Two-Birds" – the seemingly nonsensical title of the book.

Though a tale about escape and uncertainty; *Buile Suibhne* has a clear development of a story of sin and repentance, grounded in a stable view of the *conditio humana*. And it seems that although "every sign can be cited"218 – it is also true that (paraphrasing slightly

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211 *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Suibhne). Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt*, trans. James G. O'Keeffe, accessed 2 Sept. 2007 http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T302018/
212 MacKillop, 136.
213 *At Swim*, 95.
214 Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, (London: Granta Books 2000), 509-510
215 Mays, *Brian O'Nolan…*, 89.
216 Mercier, 190.
217 Barthes: "The Utopia of Language", quoted in: Frank Sewell: *A New Alhambra. Modern Irish Poetry*, (Cork: Cork University Press), 57.
218 Derrida, "Signature Event Context", 7-9, cf. Downum, 317-8.

Derrida's suggestion from "Specters of Marx"): every borrowing speaks *back*.219 Thus the tension between the post-modern desire for exposing the groundlessness of the discourse and the nostalgia for a stable centre is neither suspended nor resolved in the novel. The text remains undecided between the vision of Sweeney's acceptance of the world and repentance that re-asserts the shaken normative system and the tendency to destine Sweeney to ceaseless wondering through the air and ever-changing landscape. And on the level of poetics – between a "freeplay" without limit, and a play balanced by the presence of a fundamental ground. The subversive forces of mistranslation and misquotation are checked by the opposite influence of a stabilizing core derived from the same intertextual source. Probably, again in Derrida's words – we must learn "to live simultaneously those absolutely irreconcilable views".220 At least – as Cathal O Hainle suggests - O'Brien seems in such moments "perfectly capable of holding both opinions."221

Arguably, the "radical undecidability" of At Swim may be linked to the inherent feature of the menippean discourse: Julia Kristeva juxtaposes the monological logic of causality and determination with the carnivalesque "logic of analogy and *non-exclusive opposition*" (emphasis mine).222 Returning to *The Third Policeman*: in the already quoted letter to Saroyan O'Brien, arguably, asserts the essential connection between the representation of the netherworld and the subversive, "carnivalesque" character of his novel:

> When you are writing about the world of the dead – and the damned – where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks. (207)

The statement may be read as a confirmation of the placement within the context of *menippea*. The motif of the netherworld – O'Brien suggests - is merely an instrument for subversion of the conventional view of reality and heightening the sense of comedy.

The fragment of the quoted letter is published alongside the text of *The Third Policeman* in all editions of the novel creating thus a striking example of the tension between the autonomy of the text and the attempt to confirm the writer's authority. It thus seems to play a role not dissimilar from T.S. Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*: it seems to be incorporated as an inherent part of the novel, and at the same time remains an extratextual attempt to impose some interpretative frame on the instable and multivocal text. Nonetheless, the letter itself stages the tension embedded in O'Brien's text, which I tried to expose in the analysis of *At Swim Two Birds*. This tension which transcends, in my opinion,

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219 Quoted in: Downum, 318.
220 Quoted in: Sewell, 55
221 Cathal Ó Hainle, "Fionn and Suibhne in At Swim Two Birds", *Conjuring Complexities…*, 29, 36.
222 Kristeva, 15

the generic boundaries of the *menippea*, or to be more precise – establishes boundaries and "fundamental ground" for its otherwise infinite process of subversion and negation.

In Kristeva's interpretation of the carnival, the revolutionary intimations connected with this genre seem to be exalted to the highest possible degree. As it was said above, the rejection of *monoglossia* inherent in the Bakhtinian definition is brought towards the total denial of any "substance, cause or identity". The *menippea*, "this disquieting and protean genre", causes words to lose their 'normal' value and by the dissolution of normativity ceases "*to distinguish between sin and virtue*" (emphasis mine).223 On the other hand, in O'Brien's statement there emerges a new notion apart from a pure undermining satire. The setting is characterized as "the world of the dead – and the *damned*" (emphasis mine). The latter part of the phrase seems no mere apposition, but rather it classifies further the nature of the represented reality. O'Brien's exploration of the motif of hell is thus by no means a technical device only which would engender the possibilities of the topsy-turvy linguistic play– as in the case of Joyce's "dream-method" of *Finnegans Wake*. It introduces a specific set of images and cultural contexts embedded in the concept of hell. From such a point of view it is definitely not a method of total rejection of ethical discernment for the sake of the permanent discursive revolution heralded by Kristeva. The notion of "damnation" inevitably introduces a moral dimension of the artistic enterprise – shifting the attention from the merely "geographical" notion of the netherworld (the *place* where the soul *goes* after death) to the "ethical" one (an afterlife *state* of enjoying the reward or suffering the punishment). As St. Augustine appearing on the pages of O'Brien's later novel, *The Dalkey Archive* states: "The dead do not have whereness. They have condition".224 Explicitly theological terminology invades the interpretation. It maybe said that the netherworld of O'Brien is devoid of the notion of transcendence, "godless and devilless". And that it thus opens the space for a play of "sliding significations" in the infinitely instable world. On the other hand, those centrifugal tendencies are checked, as in case of *At Swim Two Birds*, by a presence of this – if not theological than at least ethical – center.

The motif of infinite regress – as Hopper points out – is the central metaleptic strategy of the novel, bearing a crucial significance for its overall structure.225 The world haunted by the "spectre of infinity", with its concomitant denial of "origins and ends"226 provides the most fitting metaphor of O'Brien's text. Moreover one which justifies its inclusion within the generic frame of menippea and its categorization as the example of early post-modernist

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223 Kristeva, 21-25.
224 Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*, (Illinois: The Dalkey Archive Press 1997), 40.
225 Hopper, 232-3, 255-7
226 Susan Stewart, *Nonsense. Aspects of Intertextuality and Folklore in Literature*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press 1979), quoted in: Hopper, 255

poetics. On the other hand, I would argue that in this very motif the strategies of the epistemological comedy are enveloped by the normative frame of the Christian ethics.

After being sentenced to death, Noman has a disconcerting dream about the bodily form of Joe the Soul, ending in a vision of "body with another body inside it in turn, thousands of such bodies within each other like the skins of the onion ... Who or what was the core and what monster in what world was the final uncontained colossus? God? Nothing?" According to Booker, this "infinite perspective" suggests the impossibility of the existence of "the ultimate Truth" and the existence of the transcendent frame as "a stopping place for such regressions".227 In fact, the fragment seems as an explicit contradiction of St. Augustine's meditation on God "contains all things" and is "not contained by any".228

As Booker admits, the absence of the transcendent frame in *The Third Policeman* may be ascribed "to the fact that the action occurs in a sort of hell". As Joyce notices, in the *Inferno* "venerable names such as God's or Beatrice's are not mentioned"229 – a comment may provide the explanation for the absence of any intimations of the transcendent Divine power in the world of the Parish. On the other hand, the workings of the *menippea* suggest rather that the motif of infinite regress underlies the defiance of any ultimate closure. Joe's answer to Noman's deliberations seems to follow the same set of images of infinity and presence: "Past humanity is not only implicit in each new man born but is contained in him ... All humanity from its beginning to its end is already present" (123). Nevertheless, a telling parallel occurs between this passage and a fragment of St. Paul's *Epistle to Romans*. In St. Paul's metaphor the humanity is contained within a single body - united by a single overarching force,. This symbolic body is the one of Adam – "in quo omnes peccaverunt" i.e. "in whom we all have sinned" (Romans, 5, 12). Sin is thus presented as a "supra-individual quality, uniting people from the first man to ourselves".230 St. Thomas Aquinas states this even more poignantly: "all men born of Adam may be considered as one man, inasmuch as they have one common nature, which they receive from their first parents; even as in civil matters". Thus "the multitude of men born of Adam, are as so many members of one body."231 As Dante sums up: we are all "similemente il mal seme d'Adam" – "inheriting the evil seed of Adam" (*Inf.* III, 115).

Inferno is *ex definitione* the "Godless" realm, but it is the world defined and contained within the reality of sin. The seemingly impassable gap between the Ptolemaic and the

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227 Booker, 60. Jorge Borges in *Labyrinths* describes the subversive power of infinity as follows: "There is a concept which corrupts and upsets all others. I refer not to evil, whose limited realm is that of ethics, I refer to the infinite." (quoted in Booker, 58)
228 *Confessions of St. Augustine*, I, 3, trans. J. G. Pilkington, accessed 2 Sept. 2007, http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/
229 Quoted in: Van Hulle, 2
230 Paul Ricoeur, "O významu pojmu prvotní hřích", *Život, pravda, symbol*, trans. M. Rejchrt, (Praha: Oikoymenh 1993), 138.
231 *Summa Theologica* 1-2, 81.1, accessed 2 Sept. 2007, http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2.htm

Newtonian / Einsteinian universe that underlined the disparity of Dante's and O'Brien's netherworld may be bracketed by this reference to the ultimate unchangeable fact of the human existence. As the theologian Paweł Lisicki suggests, the sense of alienation that permeates our encounter with the *Commedia* is caused not so much by the alienation of the medieval "finite universe" but rather by the defiance of its ethical foundation, i.e. of the fact that the consequence of the act of free will may be eternal damnation and punishment.[232]

232 Lisicki, 232.

## IV. Crime and punishment

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."
Romans 12, 19

"He can find no trace of hell in ancient Irish myth, Haines said, amid the cheerful cups. The moral idea seems lacking, the sense of destiny, of retribution..."233 This statement from *Ulysses* provides an accurate picture of the most common view about the specificity of the Celtic attitude to afterlife. As I have mentioned earlier, the notion of the otherworld pervades the whole Irish literary tradition. On the other hand, it is sometimes assumed that some innate Irish "sensibility" inclined towards pagan – or only superficially Christian "happy otherworlds" of Bran and Ossian rather than the infernal visions of medieval Christianity. Shane Leslie234 claims that for the Irish

> the first idea of Hell was a cold, wintry place. Later the comfortable doctrine of Purgatory, while inherent in the Church, was especially developed by the Celts, to whom pity and forgiveness were second nature."235

In *The Dalkey Archive*, Hackett, one of the main characters (playing in fact the role of the "treacherous friend" modeled on Cranley from *A Portrait*) carries this relativization of eternal punishment even further. He is particularly concerned with the ideas of the highly unorthodox ancient theologian Pelagius (supposedly of Irish origin), who believed man to be capable of redeeming himself without the Divine grace.

> I believe Pelagius was a grand man and a sound theologian.... He believed Adam's lapse (and personally i wouldn't take the slightest notice of such fooling) harmed only himself. The guilt was his alone and this yarn about everybody being born in original sin is all bloody bull."236

On the other hand, writing about Joyce, O'Brien's refers to "the sense of doom that is the heritage of the Irish Catholic" and which is generated by "the fear of those who have belief and who genuinely think that they will be in hell or in heaven shortly, and possibly very shortly."237 He posits the acute consciousness of the last things of man against the romanticized notions of the Celticists.

The viewpoint of Joyce's Haines is, of course, untenable when texts such as *Visio Tungdali* or *Fis Adamnáin* are considered - all profoundly interested in the anatomies of the "places of damnation". The language both mentioned texts speak is the legal idiom of reward and punishment: "Noble and wonderful is the Lord of the Elements (...) for upon the blessed He bestows the hidden treasures and the manifold wages of Heaven, while He inflicts a

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233 *Ulysses*, 239
234 Irish writer and the last owner of the Station Island on Lough Derg where St. Patrick's Purgatory is located,
235 quoted in: Peggy O'Brien, 84
236 *The Dalkey Archive*, 52
237 "Bash in the Tunnel", 203.

diversity of torments, of many kinds, upon the sons of death.”238 The interest of the Irish “geographers of the otherworld” seems directed especially at those “torments of many kinds”, with precise differentiations between the various types of sinners and the indulgence in the visual descriptions of the working of Divine Justice. In *The Third Policeman* we can discern a similar attraction towards the convoluted “punishing devices”, though shifting the balance towards the psychological dimension of punishment. Nevertheless, the narrative shares – with Dante rather than morbid “adventure literature of the afterlife” – a concern for Haines’s “moral idea”, the re-translation of the visual allegories of the medieval texts back into the basic moral story of man. In this chapter I would like to highlight the dialectics of sin and punishment in *The Third Policeman* that in my opinion create a frame of the morality tale within the texture of the novel.

In Canto XIV of the *Inferno,* Virgil engages in a long speech explaining “a hydraulic system” of hell. He describes the gigantic monument in Crete – a symbol of the corruption of the human history – whose tears “force a passage through that cavern / taking their course from rock to rock into this depth”. Out of this stream the hellish rivers are formed and the water descends down to the frozen lake of Cocytus. (XIV, 94-120). As Dante-the pilgrim points out: the rivers of the inferno “si diriva così dal nostro mondo” – “flows from *our* world”. By means of the allegorical image, the essence of hell is poignantly expressed: hell is not a place where anything can be formed, originated, created; the whole inventory of Inferno “starts and feeds themselves outside”, by man’s own doings.239 Hell is not its own place, it is simply the state of sin of each individual eternally frozen in changelessness. In this light, Sergeant Pluck’s delineation of the underground Eternity acquires a terrifying undertone: “if you are fed you do not get hungry and if you are hungry you don’t get hungrier” (137). O’Brien’s ‘Eternity’, as Dante’s hell, perpetuates the state of being which was chosen in the mortal world.

About the damned of the *Commedia* it can be said that “the torments and punishments of Hell are images of what they have elected”.240 The world of the Parish seems to posses a specific nightmarish atmosphere which some of the critics attempted to describe in terms of the Freudian “world of nameless fears, sinister undertones, strange obsessions”.241 But as Francis Doherty point out, the actual reason for this “dream-like” quality of the novel is the fact that the Parish contains nothing else than projections of Noman’s mind materialized in the infernal setting, “everything being generated by himself,

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238 *Fis Adamnáin. (The Vision of Adamnan)*, trans. C. S. Boswell, accessed 2 Sept. 2007 www.yorku.ca/inpar/adamnain_**boswell**.pdf

239 Cf. Robert M. Durling, “Decit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell”, S. J. Greenblatt, ed. *Allegory and Representation. Selected Papers from the English Institute 1979-1980*, (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press 1981), 84.

240 James Collins, *Pilgrim in Love. An Introduction to Dante and His Spirituality*, (Chicago: Loyola University Press 1984), 80.

241 Comment by Neill Sheridan, quoted in: Gallagher, 201

from dreams, fantasies, fictions".242 We can, however, go even further and claim that the world of the Parish is to a great extent reduced to the participants in the story of Noman's crime, the murder of Old Mathers. As David Pike notices, each of the Dantean *figurae* "reveals the truth of his life as a fixed, emblematic moment of sin."243 In *The Third Policeman* Noman's Hell is peopled with killers and robbers like himself (e.g. Finnucane), and by policemen he invokes implicitly just after the killing when fear of "the gallows" overwhelms him. The first person he encounters on the other side is his victim, and Old Mathers in fact returns to haunt him at the end in the form of Policeman Fox: "The great fat body in the uniform did not remind me of anybody that I knew but the face on the top of it belonged to old Mathers" (189). Concetta Mazullo suggests that even the prominence of bicycles in the Parish can be explained by a reference to the moment of crime: after all it was on bicycles Noman and Divney arrived at the place of murder, and it was with "a special bicycle-pump" that the first blow was distributed (7).244 Finally, the crime was committed under the auspices of the 'scientific' project connected with de Selby and in the infernal reality, the nonsensical concepts of the savant come into being to provide a frame for Noman's new surroundings (this aspect will be discussed later in this chapter).245

The anatomy of the Parish is thus a derivative from the scene of Noman's crime - the act which determined his earthly and otherworldly destiny. The recurrent echoes of that central generative event pervade the text, as if repeatedly emphasizing the moral foundations of the narrative situation, though in a highly ironical mode. He is sentenced to death on the basis of the fact that "a man called Mathers was found in the crotch of a ditch ... with his belly opened up with a knife..." (99). The murder happens in the world of the Parish, after Noman's re-encounter with Old Mathers and – according to the narrator – he has nothing to do with the deed. It is nevertheless, the same Mathers he killed three years before – in the 'pre-Parish' era of his existence. Another example may be given by reference to the scene of "stretching the light" performed by MacCruiskeen. The policeman's experiment consisted in "mangling the light" into sound – a loud shout, "which could not have come from a human throat". As Noman was meditating on the contents of the voice "several phrases sprang into" his head: "They bore an eerie resemblance to commonplace shouts I had often heard, such as *Change for Tinahely and Shillelagh! Two to one on the field! Mind the step! Finish him off!*" (111). In this case, after three truly "commonplace shouts", we hear the echo of Divney's cry ordering Noman to "finish off" old Mathers with a spade in the first chapter of the novel (17). Yet another textual echo, again suffused with an irony of a highly moralistic tint, concerns

242 Doherty, 58
243 Pike, 208
244 Mazzulo, 325.
245 Cf. e.g. Pilny 44; Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien. A Critical Introduction to His Writings*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1975), 156.

Noman's anxious thoughts at the moment of his being sentenced to death: he feels the intensity of life "bubbling at the end of [his] fingers", and declines "to leave it all without good reason and to smash the little empire into small fragments..." (106). As Anne Clissmann suggests, the word "smash" sends us back to the opening sentence of the narrative, when Noman confesses how he "killed old Philip Mathers smashing his jaw in with my spade..." (7)246 The rivers of hell all flow from earthly springs.

In Canto XIV of the *Commedia* the pilgrims encounter the blasphemer Campaneus who claims with hopeless pride: "Qual io fui vivo, tal son morto" (Inf. XIV, 51) – "what I was alive, such am I dead". As Pike suggests, this statement provides a summary of the infernal condition of the damned: "the reification of the souls into an eternal present that merely reflects the absolute past of their failed lives." Hell "eternally freezes the poses of the damned into the essence of what they were".247 The motif of the "reification" of the sinner's soul within the "emblematic moment of sin", his entrapment in his deed, is best signalized in O'Brien's novel in the first scene that follows Noman's entering old Mathers' house (i.e. dying by the explosion plotted by Divney). "Perhaps the murder by the roadside was a bad dream" (27) is the inevitable reaction to the encounter with his dead victim inexplicably returning back to life. Joe the Soul, however, thwarts mercilessly those escapist tendencies: "There is nothing dreamy about your stiff shoulders". It refers back to the moment when Noman notices the resurrected Mathers and feels "a stiffness" spreading "across my own shoulders ... from my exertions with the spade" (26), which in turn sends the reader to the only possible instance – the scene of murder and burying of Mathers' corpse, both actions being conducted by means of a 'spade'. Only after a while do we realize that the narrative is deliberately discontinuous here, violating the mimetic temporal relations. After all, the murder and Noman's "visit" to Mathers' house are divided in the world of the narrative by a period of three years, in which the black box remains hidden by Divney in some "safe place", causing distrust and anxiety in the narrator. Three years afterwards, the alleged old Mathers still has his "body bandaged", and the shoulders of the narrator are still exhausted due to the "exertions with the spade". The moral dimension of the text thus seems to invade and overwhelm the mimetic level of the narrative, introducing a meaningful discontinuity instead of a chaotic linearity. In such moments, the gradual reification of Noman and his environs into an "emblem of his sin" occurs most prominently.

246 Clissman, 171.
247 Pike, 103.

Are we thus entitled to read *The Third Policeman* as “a very untraditional representation of a very traditional moral tale of divine retribution and eternal damnation and punishment”?248 As Paul Ricoeur suggests, the prevailing Western interpretation of the theme of sin aimed towards the legal diction, transforming the metaphysical into an almost judicial problem. The quotation from *Fis Adamnáin* given at the beginning of this chapter – balancing the “diversity of torments” and the wage of a “hidden treasure” - corresponds with this statement. Dante’s Virgil describes hell as “carcere cieco” – “blind prison” (X, 58-9), and as Borges notices, contrary to the infernos of modern literature, the Dantean Hell resembles prison “more than a nightmare”.249 Moreover, Noman’s sin (a theological term) is also a serious “crime” in legal terms, and in fact the mechanics of his damnation are operated by a trio of policemen rather than demons. This convergence between the moral and legal punishment can provide a useful standpoint for the analysis of the nature of Noman’s “damnation”.

In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault argues that the major shift between the modern and pre-modern ideas of the penitentiary system consists in the Enlightenment’s rejection of torture and corporal punishments. It was a change towards “less direct physical punishment (…) the play of much more subtle sufferings, deprived of their visual grandiosity”.250 The body – a target of repression of the pre-modern society – vanished from the scene exchanged for the system which prefers to punish the “soul”, resulting from the reversion of the Platonic and Christian concept: for the modern justice it is the soul that serves as “the prison of the body”.251 The moral unacceptability of torture is one of the main reasons fostering in the modern reader of the *Inferno* the sense of alienation and otherness.252

In *At Swim Two Birds,* O’Brien demonstrates a rather opposite pre-modern inclination towards stressing the physical suffering. It surfaces in the quotations from *Buile Suibhne* and even more prominently in its counterpart on the “third level” of the narrative – the story of torturing of the tyrannical author Dermot Trellis by his characters. As Eve Wappling notices, whereas *Buile Suibhne* in its original version balances the motifs of physical sufferings and repentance, O’Brien shifts the stress, overemphasizing the element of torture.253 Contrary to that, the netherworld of *The Third Policeman* seems to follow the Foucaultian precept: the essence of Noman’s punishment consists in the torture of the mind rather than the body. Some of Dante’s damned are burnt to ashes, some others torn to pieces by demons; in case of Noman it is his perception and his consciousness that come under

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248 Morse, 278.
249 Borges, *Dziewięć esejów…*, 16.
250 *Michel Foucault: Dohlížet a trestat*, transl. Č. Pelikán, (Praha: Dauphin 2000), 39-63.
251 Foucault, 49-50.
252 Cf. Freccero, 106.
253 Wappling, 64-5.

attack. As mentioned above in connection with the epistemological comedy of the novel, the core of the subversive strategy reveals itself in the complete violation of the cooperation between the mind and the senses. The "awful alteration of everything" renders the connection and agreement between the two faculties impossible.254 The mind is suddenly unable to grasp and comprehend the data delivered by the senses, leaving the narrator completely disoriented in the new environs. First it simply causes surprise and confusion:

> I fastened my fingers around my jaw and started to think with great concentration, calling into play parts of my brain that I rarely used. Nevertheless I made no progress at all as regards the question of the points. (71)

Shortly afterwards, however, the accumulation of such disturbing facts leads to the feelings of fear and bewilderment ending almost in physical torture:

> What he was doing was no longer wonderful but terrible. I shut my eyes and prayed that he would stop while still doing things that were at least possible for a man to do (...) I felt the muscles around my heart tightening painfully as I took the instrument. (76)

Foucault suggests that the exchange of the physical for the more subtle mental punishments cannot be identified with reducing the graveness of the implementation of justice. Contrary to that – the pressure over "the soul" may result in a suffering of a different yet even more drastic type.255 The language of descriptions of Noman's mental anxieties, with its recurrent refrains of "chill and terror", "disarranged senses" and "fathomless inscrutability", borders, in fact, quite often on Gothic fiction.256 His tortures are of strictly 'non-physical' mode, he is simply confronted with a world that completely defies his attempts for interpretation, that totally disrupts his innate believes as to the nature of reality. Yet, bombarded by a series of inexplicable images, Noman in fact starts longing to relieve his mind by turning the intellectual strife into some kind of physical effort. Joe's remark that: "there is no limit. Anything can be said in this place and it will be true", makes him dream of "...being working this minute on a steamer in the middle of the sea, I said, coiling ropes and doing the hard manual job. I would like to be far away from here." (88)

On the other hand, though the rules of O'Brien's hell reflect the shift of stress between the medieval and the modern sensibility, they seem still to preserve the basic principle of the eternal Justice – *contrapasso* i.e. the idea that the punishment should correspond to the committed sin. The sufferings of each category of sinners in the *Inferno* are not chosen not by means of some physiology of pain.257 Actually, it is a rather dubious exercise to compare whether being eternally exposed to flames (the heretics of Canto X) is less "painful" than being frozen in the lake of Cocytus (as is the case with the traitors in the

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254 Cf. e.g. Pilný, 47.
255 Foucault, 64-65.
256 Terence Brown, "Two Post-Modernist Novelists: Beckett and O'Brien", *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, J. W. Foster, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 218.
257 cf. Freccero, 105.

ultimate circle). The *contrapasso* seems, at the end, rather an aesthetic principle of distribution of punishments, the poetic vision of the Divine Justice. The sorcerers (i.e. those who tried to predict the future) of the eighth circle are described as follows:

> Their faces were reversed upon their shoulders
> so that they came on walking backward,
> since seeing forward was denied them (Inf. XX, 14-16)

For their desire to "see forward" they are now condemned to look perpetually behind rather than ahead ("arsy-versy" as Beckett's pun has it258). In Canto XXVIII, Bertram de Born, whose sin consisted in bringing divisions into his country and family, is doomed to suffer with the dismemberment of his body. Thus there is a sense of irony pervading the mechanics of the infernal justice; *contrapasso* in itself provides the best example of the poetics of reversion, firmly embedded, however, in the overarching order of the infernal disorder. O'Brien's Noman – in what seems to be a metafictional hint from the Author himself – states at the beginning: "Perhaps it is important in the story I am going to tell to remember that it was for de Selby that I committed my first serious sin. It was for him that I committed my greatest sin." (9) And according to the principle of *contrapasso* his punishment bears a peculiarly "deSelbian" air, abounding with queer pseudo-scientific theories coming into life and the overwhelming atmosphere of "life as hallucination".

The notion of "human existence" as "hallucination" appears right in the deSelbian motto of the novel. According to de Selby there is a very slight and negligible difference between "the permanent hallucination known conventionally as 'life" and "the supreme hallucination known as death". And actually the transfer from life to death in case of Noman happens unnoticed by the narrator and at the first was signalized only by a slight, ineffable alteration of reality.259

The workings of this "applied deSelbianism" can be best demonstrated on the theme of movement, one of the issues that keep surfacing throughout the narrative to provide in the end its final frame. At first sight, the poetics of *The Third Policeman* seems to go contrary to Dante in this respect. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics,* Hegel argues that the damned in the *Inferno* exists *"in einem wechsellosen Dasein"* – "in the state of changeless there-being".260 The sentence given by Divine Justice is eternal and unalterable: they vainly ask – as Virgil comments – for "a second death" (*Inferno* I, 117); they are doomed, however, to suffer the same torture interminably. A similar notion is displayed in Beckett's essay on *Work in Progress* where he identifies the *Inferno* with "the static lifelessness of unrelieved viciousness", just as Paradise is "the static lifelessness of unrelieved immaculation."261 The

258 Samuel Beckett, "All That Fall", *Collected Shorter Plays*, (London: Faber & Faber 1990), 31.
259 Cf. Pilny, 44.
260 *Hegel: Wykłady o estetyce,* transl. A. Landman, (Warszawa: PWN 1966), 221-222.
261 Beckett: "Dante…Bruno.Vico..Joyce", in: *Our Exagmination…*, 22.

movement of those two canticles of Dante's poem depends on an intrusion from the outside – the pilgrim from the realm of time passes through the changeless spectacle where all individual histories are reified in – to use Bakhtin's words – an "atemporal and motionless vertical axis"262. The only zone of the otherworld where progress exists – Beckett continues - is the *Purgatory*. Actually, the later literary production of the author of *Endgame* can be interpreted in such "purgatorial" terms; it is, however, an inverted Purgatory of gradual degradation rather than gradual refinement, and many characters from late Beckett seem to reach finally as far as the static state of damnation of the deepest circles of the *Inferno*. "What a curse, mobility" – says Winny from *Happy Days*. Contrary to those Beckett's plays, *The Third Policeman* seems filled with movement – it is sufficient to mention the significance of bicycles for the life of the Parish and the central motif of quest – the search for the black box. On the other hand, one of de Selby's most prominent concepts concerns the illusory character of movement. "A journey is an hallucination" – he states authoritatively, and further quotations follow, assuring the basically "static" character of existence and denying "the reality or truth of any progression or serialism in life" along with the demolishment of the notion of time in the "accepted sense" (52).263 Later he adds meditations on the one-directionality of human movement on the sausage-shaped Earth arguing that: "human beings are continually moving in only one known direction (though convinced that they move in any direction)" (97).

Contemplating de Selby's concept of journey, the narrator – he is just *walking* towards the police barracks - opposes its evident absurdity by "the testimony of human experience" and claims it to be "at variance with everything I have learnt myself on many a country walk" (52). Nevertheless, the foundations of Noman's damnation are laid in the very violation of the convictions he held and cherished. The workings of the infernal justice result in a commonsensical opinion ending in an illusion, and the apparent freedom ("multi-directionality") being overwhelmed by actual pre-determination (one-directional movement). De Selby is right: Noman's pilgrimage as a whole adjusts to the notion of the illusory movement and one-directionality.

In Canto VII of the *Inferno* Virgil and Dante observe the behavior of the avaricious and the spendthrifts of the forth circle. The poet describes their movement ironically as dancing, around the object of their earthly vice – wealth. In fact the damned - pushing forward great stones - form two groups which move against each other and clash; then turn back and crawl in the opposite direction. Hell, however, has a spherical shape and thus they escape just to meet the other group at the opposite point of the circle:

Così tornavan per lo cerchio tetro

262 Bakhtin, *Discourse…*, 157-158.

263 DeSelby echoes here the paradoxes of Zeno (infinite divisibility of time and space) and anticipates the motif of "invisible heap" of Beckett's *Endgame*.

da ogne mano a l'opposito punto,
gridandosi anche loro ontoso metro;

poi si volgea ciascun, quand'era giunto,
per lo suo mezzo cerchio a l'altra giostra (VII, 31-35)264

They seem to have freedom to move; and they do move all the time. Nevertheless, their motion follows a single, circular path, eternally repeating itself and lacking progress. As Robert Hollander notices, "their activities in hell (as was true in the world above) mount up to exactly zero. This nullity is reflected in their nameless and unidentifiable condition."265 In a striking analogy to Noman, none of the sinners participating in the "infernal dance" is named – contrary to the usual Dantean practice.

The development of *The Third Policeman* appropriates the same pattern, from the "is-it-about-the-bicycle" scene at the beginning, to its almost verbatim repetition on the last page of the book. The circularity of *The Third Policeman* is thus different from the circular movement of its more famous contemporary, *Finnegans Wake*. In Joyce, the final and opening lines are *linked*, performing the perpetual story of death and renewal, their circularity is a circularity of a life-cycle, such as that of the seasons. In *The Third Policeman,* there is a repetition rather than link between the two ends of the text, the deathly repetitiveness which despite its illusion of movement implies only a total futility and an eternal stasis: "Hell goes round and round" – wrote O'Brien. "In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive and very nearly unbearable."

The final stage of this "anatomy of punishment" represented in *The Third Policeman* concerns directly the theme of the novel's satire on Cartesianism discussed in the preceding chapter. The analysis shows how O'Brien's text, again, inscribes itself into this satirical mode, yet at the same time – read through the *Commedia* – links the theme of perception and Cartesian rationalism with specific moral issues.

In *De Doctrina Christiana* St. Augustine speaks about the relation of sign to signification that is parallel to that of desire and fulfillment. As Freccero comments, there is no possibility for such a movement within the infernal realm.266 The "angry incomprehension" remains the perennial state of the damned. And - in T.S. Eliot's words - the essence of infernal punishment consists in the fact that we "experience desires that we can no longer gratify".267 Similarly, Theodolinda Barolini, referring to Francesca's story,

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264 "Thus they proceeded in their dismal round / on both sides toward the opposite point, / taunting each other with the same refrain. // Once at that point, each group turned back / along its semi-circle to the next encounter."
265 Robert Hollander, "The *Inferno*. Commentary", Dartmouth Dante Project, accessed 2 Sept. 2007 http://dante.dartmouth.edu/biblio.php?comm_id=20005
266 Freccero, 100-1.
267 Eliot, "Dante", *The Sacred Wood. Essays in Poetry and Criticism*, http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw14.html

states that in the *Inferno* “the fulfillment of desire is a narcissistic illusion”268 – the very consciousness of the total futility of hope connected with the inability to abandon such a desire is the worst of possible tortures.269 Noman, “the godless Cartesian” longs for the world which conforms to his mind, reality as a derivative of his cogito, completely graspable and decipherable by his perception. He desires – to invoke Maritain’s argument – the “angelic” sight that perceives and comprehends at the same time and thus endows him with the absolute control over the reality. Or – in the metafictional terms – he longs for the position of the monological writer, freely molding and defining the worlds of discourse.

Noman’s desire is materialized in the quest for the black box. As Hopper notices, there is an explicit connection between the black box and Noman’s ontological status: “Where is the black box which was under the floor a moment ago” – Noman asks old Mathers. His victim answers, however, with a question: “What is your name?” The narrator views the response as rather illogical: “I was surprised at this question. It had no bearing on my own conversation” (32). Nevertheless, in this very moment he realizes that he cannot answer as he has truly forgotten his name. The black box – the object of Noman’s desire and sin is thus explicitly linked to his ontological “erasure”.270 Later it is revealed that the box contains actually the “omnium”, a mysterious substance that enables to control and manipulate the reality – “the essential inherent interior essence” (113). It is also “the business-end of everything”: for example “if you could find the right wave that results in a tree you could make a small fortune out of timber for export” (114). Thus, omnium seems to respond to both of the innermost desires of the narrator: his greed and his drive towards the “definitive index” of knowledge, Faustian omniscience and omnipotence.271

The theme of omnium surfaces most prominently in the final part of the novel, resulting from the encounter with the third policeman, the mysterious Fox who “had been (…) presiding at four ounces of this inutterable substance”. Fox is described “calmly making ribbons of the natural order, inventing intricate and unheard of machinery (…) interfering drastically with time” (195). He is a perfect realization of the Cartesian “angelic” dream: as Maritain points out, angels can be “rulers and owners of nature, they can - changing at will the movement of atoms – play the strings of nature as the harp.”272 He is also the reflection of Noman’s desire:

> Formless speculations crowded in upon me, fantastic fears and hopes, inexpressible fancies, intoxicating foreshadowing of creations, changes, annihilations and god-like interferences. Sitting at home with my box of omnium I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my imagination. (195)

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268 Barolini, 33.
269 Cf. Lisicki, 234.
270 cf. Hopper, 116.
271 Cf, Hopper, 149.
272 Maritain, 95

Omnium turns into an instrument of cogito for installing itself in the proper position: independent of external objects which are fully transparent to its gaze, deriving the whole world from itself and thus limited only by the powers of the mind.273

Significantly, this ultimate narcissistic attempt for the realization of the desire which is at the same time the cause of one's fall, engenders a vision that disrupts the modern mode of O'Brien's inferno and sets it back into the more concrete Dantean imagery. From the point of view of Foucault's argument, the more subtle, more "humanitarian" variety of torture in *The Third Policeman* seems appropriate for the modern equivalent of *Inferno*, where no sins of carnal passions but rather those of intellectual hubris are punished. Nevertheless, as Zygmunt Bauman suggests, the modern trust in progress and infallibility of perception and science is concomitant also with the repeated eruptions of barbarism and cruelties committed in the name of those ideals.274 *The Third Policeman* as a subversive critique of the modern Western rationalism and scientific thought performs such a pattern in its specific infernal terms. When the narrator meditates over his potential almightiness, he develops a vision where commercial interest mingles with Faustian and Promethean humanitarian inclinations. At one point, however, there is a decisive turn of imagery, which from this modern dream of progress shifts towards a distinctly "Dantean" infernal vision:

> But MacCruiskeen and Pluck were in a different class. It would probably be possible for me to save time and trouble by adapting the underground machinery to give both of them enough trouble, danger, trepidation, work and inconvenience to make them rue the day they first threatened me. Each of the cabinets could be altered to contain (...) putrescent offals, insupportable smells, unbeholdable corruptions containing tangles of gleaming slimy vipers each of them deadly and foul of breath, millions of the diseased and decayed monsters (...) rats with horns walking upside down along the ceiling pipes trailing their leprous tails on the policemen's heads... (197)

The inherent energy of destruction and cruelty lurks behind the fallen man's strivings, no matter how "humanitarian" and "scientific" its justification may sound. The angelic cogito reveals its monstrous face. But those intimations of the harrowing potential of the ego-centered universe are immediately obfuscated by the realization of the actual ontological status of Noman.

Among the terms employed most often to depict the 'atmosphere' of the textual reality of *The Third Policeman* the words such as "claustrophobia" and "entrapment" play a prominent role. The narrator is cast into a world whose rules he cannot comprehend and anxiously reacts to the feeling that he is being manipulated and controlled by some unknown hidden force. This is the essence of the damnation of the "godless Cartesian", the exact hideous opposite of the position he believes to hold in the universal order. The cogito that

273 cf. Maritain, 93-95.
274 I feel obliged to add that Zygmunt Bauman's own biography conforms to that pattern.

desires to structure the world around itself and from itself must necessarily take everything that limits it from outside as a “threat, violence and aggression”.275 The confrontation with its actual confinement within the alien world results in a mixture of fear and fury not dissimilar from that experienced by the damned souls in the *Inferno*. And in this moment of the brief painful insight into his real status, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* finds himself in the landscape that for the first time actually resembles one of Dante’s “citta dolente”:

> Black angry clouds were pilling in the west, bulging and glutted, ready to vomit down their corruption and drown the dreary world in it. (…) The trees by the road were rank and stunted and moved their stark leafless branches very dismally in the wind. The grasses at hand were coarse and foul. Waterlogged bog and healthless marsh stretched endlessly to left and right. The pallor of the sky was terrible to look upon (203-4)

Noman is neither a pelagian capable of self-salvation nor Bran of Irish otherworld tales, enjoying the pre-lapsarian sensual happiness. On the contrary – as the damned of the medieval visions – he is subjected to the convoluted machinery of the Divine Justice. His hell – invoked in the Dantean terms in the last passages of the novel – is only “nearly unbearable” due to the fact that the revelation is immediately followed by the erasure of the narrator’s memory. Nevertheless, also this aspect – decisively at variance with Dante’s notion of the eternal punishment – plays a crucial role in the anatomy of O’Brien’s inferno. It points to its crucial *sub specie temporis nostri* aspect – the dissolution of the human personality defined in Christian terms by the exercise of free will. In this chapter I attempted to disclose the structure of *The Third Policeman* as a text re-enacting the pattern of the morality tale of the Divine punitive justice. Now I shall turn to the analysis of the root of Noman’s personal inferno – to the anatomy of his sin from which the structure of the novel’s netherworld is derived.

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275 Maritain, 17-19

# V. “Astonishing parade of nullity” – the ethics of *The Third Policeman*

> “Ah, Margaret, it’s all poor human nature. Poor, sinful broken-down human nature. Bad as it is at the best of times, it goes to hell altogether when there’s an election in the air.”
>
> Myles na gCopaleen: *Faustus Kelly*

## V. 1. *Pecco ergo sum*? Noman’s confessions

One of the recurring motifs of *Finnegans Wake* is summarized in the phrase “O Phoenix culpa” – an ironic travesty of St. Augustine’s “felix culpa” – fortunate guilt. Transformation of “felix” into the mythical immortal “phoenix” points to the diagnosis of human nature defined by the reality of Fall, which in the labyrinth of the *Wake* is performed by a story of Earwicker’s “crime and punishment”. Harry Levin goes even so far as to ascribe to Joyce’s text (applying Dantean classification of different strata of exegesis) a “moral level” concerned with the archetypal question of original sin.[276] Nevertheless – as Beckett claims in his essay on *Work in Progress* – this “phoenix culpa”, the ineradicable element of sin, is the underlining principle of the *Wakean* architecture: it provides an impediment for Dante-like conical movement toward the climactic beatific vision and finality of the closed, meaningful universe, but “it is a condition of movement round the sphere”, of “a flood of movement and vitality” in “the vicious circle of humanity” which knows “neither prize nor penalty”.[277] *The Third Policeman* seems to follow – though by different means - the same thematic orientation towards the anatomy of fallen humanity, yet the aspect of circularity – as it was mentioned above – brings about rather an opposite notion than the Joycean “flood of vitality”. In the previous section, I dealt with the “external” order of Noman’s Inferno. Now I would like to attempt at a “moral portrait” of the narrator again using the Dantean and Christian material as a mirror for this thematic dimension of the novel. The argument concentrates on the theme of escapism and “moral nullity” that makes Noman on the one hand an epitome of the specifically modernist representation of *conditio humana*, yet on the other – a figure fixed in the Christian and medieval ethical frame.

In *At Swim Two Birds,* the “angelic” Good Fairy and the “devilish” Pooka debate on the subject of the advantages and demerits of bodily and corporeal existence respectively. At one point – surrounded by the typical air of ‘O’Brienish’ parody – the ‘bodiless’ Good Fairy

276 Levin, 133-4.
277 Beckett, “Dante… Bruno..Vico..Joyce”…, 22.

disclaims the idea of his having a sexual relation with the Pooka's (undoubtedly corporeal) wife on the basis of the conclusion that a potential offspring of such a union "would be severely handicapped by being half flesh and half spirit, a very baffling and neutralizing assortment of fractions since the two elements are forever at variance" (149). According to Booker this might be a parody of the concept of Christ's conception,278 however, it may be interpreted simply as an ironic comment on the human nature as such. For Aquinas and the Christian doctrine, man occupies a specific "liminal" position in the hierarchy of beings, participating both in the spirituality of angels and corporeality of lower creatures. He is characterized – as Leo Strauss puts it –by the decisive "in-betweenness".279 In the harmonious and ordered universe of St. Thomas, this is primarily a sign of the exaltation of man. Nevertheless, in a more tragic rendering of Augustianian tradition, with its Manichaean and Neo-Platonic leanings, it is the root of the essential conflict and unbalance within man, the cause of the eternal internal war. There is, however, a crucial distinction between Augustine and his pagan predecessors. They viewed this human tragedy much in the spirit of the Good Fairy - as the result of the tragic mixture of the antithetical qualities of soul and body, one belonging entirely to the evil world of matter, the other – striving for independence and a return to the world of pure ideas. Augustine – on the contrary - transfers the burden from the Creator of the reality to man himself. Man "should have been spiritual even in his flesh", yet now - due to the Fall - "became fleshly even in his spirit", in perpetual quarrel and dissatisfaction "with himself, in a hard and miserable bondage."280

The tension between Mani and Augustine is directly represented in O'Brien's late text, *The Dalkey Archive*, being a re-writing of the allegedly lost manuscript of *The Third Policeman*. St. Augustine occurs there in person in the underwater cave to announce in the Dublin accent that he would like to have "Mani skinned alive and crucified" (43). In *The Third Policeman* those presences are indubitably less explicit, yet undeniable.281

According to Paul Ricoeur "a tragic view of human condition" in relation to the theme of evil - with its Gnostic and Manichaean undertones – remained one of the two forming impulses for the Christian doctrine. Man is not the author of evil, but rather its victim, a spiritual being thrown into the essentially evil material world.282 O"Brien's text discloses quite considerable inclinations towards the Manichaean vision of reality, best summarized in Martin Finnucane's equation of "life" with "a certain death-trap" (47). Another allusion to the Manichaean symbolism is embedded in the image of Policeman MacCruiskeen's operation of

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278 Booker, 40.
279 Leo Strauss, *Natural Rights and History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999), 152.
280 St. Augustine, *The City of God [De Civitate Dei]*, XIV.15
281 Cronin is probably the first critic to stress O'Brien's "Manichaean leanings" (Cronin, 114). An interesting account of the theme is given by Jeffrey Matthewes, "The Manichaean Body in The Third Policeman or Why Joe's Skin Is Scaly?", accessed 2 Sept 2007 www.themodernword.com/scriptorium/obrien_mathewes.pdf
282 Ricoeur, 135.

"stretching the light". The light he produces is described as "merely devoid of darkness" (110) – an ironic inversion of St. Augustine's doctrine of "darkness as lack of light and evil as mere lack of good".283 Yet the distinct "Manichaean" atmosphere – with its stress on the essentially evil character of reality - seems to pervade the whole world of the Parish, ruled by some "unspeakably inhuman and diabolical" force and reducing all human relationship to (in Kenner's words) "defraudment and persecution".284 On the other hand, the Manichaean interpretation of the novel seems plausible only as long as the illusion of the 'earthly reality' is maintained. In the light of the final revelation of the book, the question of the Manichaean character of reality is rendered meaningless.

St. Augustine's doctrine provides a counterpoint to Manichaeanism in stressing an essentially ethical view of evil, ascribing it to the human will rather than some pre-determined and superhuman forces of destiny. The position of man is defined by the basic "either/or" choice which – in Augustine's phrase – "potestatem indicet non naturam", i.e. indicates a volition rather than natural tendency towards sin. Noman, both as a character and a highly unreliable narrator of the story, performs in this respect a play of evasion and subterfuge, attempting to erase the Augustinian notion by means of escapism and an assumed stance of moral unconsciousness.

The mode assumed by both textual 'Nomans' (the character and the narrator) is one of an almost complete unawareness of any ethical code. One of the most disconcerting features of the whole narration is an almost complete lack of attention to the moral dimension of Noman's acts. It is repeatedly exaggerated to the furthest extremes, beginning with an account of his gradual acceptance of Divney's murderous plan. The deplorable quality of his acts is in fact levied by the constant presence of the absurd macabre humor, resulting from this matter-of-fact, 'commonplace' mode of narration, as when the dying Mathers after receiving "a blow in the back of the neck" collapses "full-length" and yet instead of "crying out" is heard to "say something softly in a conversational tone – something like "I do not care for the celery' or 'I left my glasses in the scullery'" (16). It is most visible in the mechanical, disengaged report concerning Mathers' death: "I felt and almost heard the fabric of his skull crumple up crisply like an empty eggshell. I do not know how often I struck him after that but I did not stop until I was tired" (17). The killing is followed by the account of the narrator's experiences immediately afterwards, which betrays neither guilt nor repentance, but a solely animal fear of being caught and punished: "A chill of fright ran right through me. If anybody should come, nothing in the world would save me from the gallows" (17).

Actually, Noman uses the word "sin" - i.e. the term implying some sense of moral self-consciousness - quite early in the narrative. When describing the theft of de Selby's book

283 cf. *Etienne Gilson, Wprowadzenie do nauki św. Augustyna*, trans. Z. Jakimiak, (Warszawa: Pax 1953), 189-199.
284 Kenner, "The Fourth Policeman", 65; Matthewes, "Manichaean Body…"

from the school library he sums up: “it was for de Selby that I committed my first serious *sin*” (emphasis mine). In the passage, however, a crucial statement is made: the descriptive sentence “I packed it in my bag without a qualm” is expanded with a comment “and would probably do the same if I had my time again”. This comment may be read here in its disconcerting literality as one of the most explicit metafictional hints to the actual “ontological” status of the narrator telling his story “from the grave”285. It also points to the basic principle of – to quote the *Wake* again – “phoenix culpa” – the comment on the fallen human nature whose inclination to sin cannot be eradicated and which inevitably repeats the archetype of the fall again and again. At the same time, it reveals Noman’s confusion about the essence of his acts and their consequences. This confusion obtains a puzzling admixture if we realize, that the a-moral Noman in fact quite explicitly invokes from time to time a conventional ethical code (in the European context derived from the Decalogue). Significantly, it happens always in the situation when his benefit is threatened. He is accusing Divney: “I knew that he was sufficiently *dishonest* to steal *my* share of Mathers’ money…” (19, emphasis mine). When he is confronted with the actual workings of the ethical system of the Parish, not without connection to his own code of behavior, the response is sheer indignation. Sergeant Pluck’s second rule of wisdom is “turn everything to your own advantage” and after the scene of Noman’s arrest for the “second” murder of Mathers – this time one Noman did not commit - he explains that “it was your personal misfortune to be present adjacently at the time [when an inspector came announcing the murder and calling for investigation] but it was likewise my personal good fortune and good luck.” (101) The answer is an appeal made by the terrified Noman: “That is most unfair … it is unjust… rotten… fiendish.” (102) Terms he employs refer to the moral code he remains ignorant of - or deliberately indifferent to - throughout the novel. Especially the closing “fiendish” in the context of the actual localization of the Parish in the “theological geography” sounds extremely amusing. On the other hand, every time when his perplexity is calmed down and self-confidence arises again, the vices of pride and greed return in a staggering speed, blinding him to the obvious particulars of his existential state:

> My heart was happy and full of zest for high adventure. I did not know my name or where I had come from but the black box was practically in my grasp. Ten thousand pounds’ worth of negotiable securities would be a conservative estimate of what was in it. (39)

Ricoeur speaks about “the rituals of confession” as the inevitable part of any “articulation of evil” in any religion.286 Writing about Dante, Freccero points to the fact, that the *Commedia*

285 Hopper, 210.
286 Ricouer, “Hermeneutyka symboli i refleksja filozoficzna - I”, *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka. Rozprawy o metodzie*, trans. E. Bieńkowska, (Warszawa: Pax 1995), 78.

is structured according to a Christian "phenomenology of confession"287. Dante's poem develops as a retrospective story of conversion which demands the inevitable consciousness of guilt and of the basic "either/or" choice man has to face. Dante's poetics of conversion find in this respect its obvious model in St. Augustine's *Confessiones*:

> I will now call to mind my past foulness, and the carnal corruptions of my soul, not because I love them, but that I may love Thee, O my God. For love of Thy love do I it, recalling, in the very bitterness of my remembrance, my most vicious ways, that Thou mayest grow sweet to me,—Thou sweetness without deception! Thou sweetness happy and assured!—and re-collecting myself out of that my dissipation, in which I was torn to pieces, while, turned away from Thee the One, I lost myself among many vanities.288

The obvious modern counterpart of such a narrative can be found in Beckett's *Not I* where a similar, undoubtedly confessional, mode is undermined by the Mouth's denial to assume individual identity (represented by the pronoun "I") and thus also the responsibility concomitant with the admittance of one's own subjectivity. This issue seems to be solved right in the opening sentence of *The Third Policeman*: "Not everybody knows how *I* killed…" The assumption of responsibility for the clearly delineated deed (murder), intrinsically present in the personal pronoun, goes contrary to the mechanism of Beckett's futile "purgatorial confession"289. Nevertheless, *The Third Policeman* stands somewhere between those modern and Christian narrative modes. After the first revelatory sentence, the narration immediately shifts towards the pole of escapism290:

> …it was he [Divney] who first knocked old Mathers down … He was personally responsible for the whole idea … He was the one who gave the orders … and also the explanations when they were called for. (7)

In Beckett, the motif of "the Mouth" refusing to assume its identity refers to the scene from the last circle of the *Inferno*, where one of the sinners (called Bocca, i.e. "Mouth") most vehemently refuses to provide Dante with his name. The opening of *The Third Policeman* seems to echo a much more ancient story:

> 'Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?'
> And the man said, 'The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.' And the LORD God said unto the woman, 'What is this that thou hast done?' And the woman said, 'The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat' (Gen 3, 11-13).

When Augustine describes the mechanics of Adam and Eve's sin he speaks about "pride" more damnable than the sin itself which - though the transgression is manifest - attempts for "evasions and subterfuge" ("suffugium excusationis inquiritur").

287 Freccero, 120.
288 *Confessions of St. Augustine*, II, 1.
289 *Not I* in terms of "purgatorial confession" is analyzed by Helen Baldwin, *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*, (The Pennsylvania State University Press 1981), 142.
290 Cf. Pilný, 41-2.

> Here there is no word of begging pardon, no word of entreaty for healing. For though they do not, like Cain, deny that they have perpetrated the deed, yet their pride seeks to refer its wickedness to another...291

The first parents, as Noman, admit their guilt ("I did eat") yet immediately start shifting the burden of responsibility to others ("the woman gave me", "the serpent beguiled me"). *The Third Policeman* thus inscribes itself in the opening paragraph into the biblical story of humanity. In fact from the point of view of the Augustinian "theology of sin", it goes even a step further. The sin is the reversed side of the basic quality of the human being that constitutes its dignity and conditions its position above the material world: the freedom to receive or refuse Divine grace. Noman – as Adam - attempts to ascribe the main part of the guilt to his friend, but he also explicitly admits his almost total passivity, denying himself this basic feature of humanity – the exercise of free will.

The second element of Noman's imperfect "confession" is connected to de Selby. The allegorical interpretation of this motif will be discussed later in this chapter; now it is sufficient to say that "a first edition of *Golden Hours*", the first book by de Selby's the narrator comes across, constitutes a kind of an ironic echo of the famous Francesca di Rimini episode of the *Commedia*. Francesca gives a touching description of her fall connected with the question of reading: "Noi leggiavamo un giorno per diletto" ("'One day, to pass the time in pleasure, we read'" – V, 128), starts her account, leading to the final "Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse" ("'A Galeotto was the book and he that wrote it'" – V, 138) – the book and its author performed the same role as Galeotto of the Arthurian legend, a mediator between two lovers. As Verdicchio sums up, the scene lays stress on the "mystification of literature and its mimetic power that seduce the reader into imitation."292 In Noman's story, there exists a similar sense of simultaneity or even causality between the *book* and the *sin*: "I knew that the book was valuable and that in keeping it I was stealing it. Nevertheless, I packed it in my bag without a qualm (...) it was for de Selby that I committed my first serious sin" (9). He claims this day to be "the most important" in his life, and in the logic of Hell as the individual's "frozen" moment of sin it seems a very appropriate statement. The second aspect of the de Selby motif in this context connects the event again to the story of the Fall. The argument Divney uses to convince Noman to cooperate in his murderous plan is again a disguised variation on the motif of the sin of Lucifer as well as that of Adam and Eve. As Augustine states: "what is the origin of our evil will but pride? For pride is the beginning of sin." Divney, referring to Noman's "definitive *De Selby Index*, claims that "it might make your name in the world and your golden fortune in copyrights" (14) and ends by pointing to "the

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291 *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, XIV, 14, trans. A. Dodds, accessed 2 Sept 2007 http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/

292 Massimo Verdicchio, *Of Dissimulation: Allegory and Irony in Dante's* Commedia, (Warszawa: Energeia 1997), 95.

serious responsibility of any person who declined by the reason of personal whim to give the *Index* to the world" (16). "What is pride but the craving for undue exaltation?" (CD, XIV, 13) – continues St. Augustine and such a "craving" – inherently present in Noman – is easily triggered by Divney's appeal.

"It was not us – it was the book" – seems to suggest Francesca's account in the *Commedia*. This mode of escapism and denial is embedded in the texture of *The Third Policeman* even on the level of grammar. Old Mathers is referred to as a man who "had been killed" – the use of the passive voice signalizing the same tactic as the stress on the third person singular in Beckett's *Not I*. Later on, Noman comments: "I had got to like him and thought it was a pity he had been murdered" (38). Noman's unconscious attempts to transform the Augustinian volitional notion of evil into the tragic view of "evil as destiny" surfaces most prominently in the first "afterlife" encounter with Mathers: he wants to inquire him "about the black box which was *responsible*, *if anything could be*, for each of us being the way we were" (emphasis mine, 27) – an amazing reversal of the relations between the murderer, his victim and the purpose of the crime. Only almost at the very end, a significant parallel to the opening sentence: the "killing of Mathers" appears along with the pronoun "I". But it is immediately cleared away by the rising tide of confusion and hallucinatory processes that ends in the erasure of the narrator's memory (180).

The final instance of the moral escapism underlying Noman's story takes a more sophisticated form of the pantheistic longings that invade the narrator's mind as he is expecting his own execution. An unusually long and disturbingly solemn passage starts with Noman's meditation:

> Down into the earth I would go soon and maybe come out of it again in some healthy, free and innocent of all human perplexity. I would perhaps be the chill of an April wind, an essential part of some indomitable river... (164)

Standing on the gallows, Noman engages in an internal dialogue with Joe who betrays very similar longings: "I do not know, or do not remember, what happens to the like of me in these circumstances. Sometimes I think perhaps I might become part of... the world, if you understand me?" (167). According to Hopper, in this fragment "O'Brien resists the temptation to be mocking", and – as Clissmann claims – this "evocation of nature" stresses "what is best in man".293 In reality, however, the inevitable undertones of O'Brien's parody suffuse finally also this lofty fragment. At the end Joe explains his desire to become "the spirit of the scenery in some beautiful place like the Lakes of Killarney, the inside meaning of it..." (167). "The Lakes of Killarney" signals here one of the clichés of romanticized idealism of the

293 Hopper, 245; Clissmann, 180; Mazullo, 325.

Revival, or rather "celtic twilightery" O'Brien despised so strongly.294 In the Revivalist discourse the landscape of the West provided a space when the "filthy modern" and rationalist world dissolves and is exchanged for one of natural mysticism, a perfect union with Nature. In Synge's diaries we encounter a call for the exaltation of nature as a substitute of religion in the modern age: "Our pilgrimages are not to Canterbury or Jerusalem, but to *Killarney* and Cumberland and the Alps." (emphasis mine)295 Killarney is thus an Irish parallel for the sites connected with the High Romantic poets. But as in the case of Wordsworth country, Synge's personal spiritual quest is followed by a popular vogue for the "mystical landscape" of the West which turns it into an emblem of the "romantic tourism". And it is this notion of the sentimental mysticism for urban middle-classes that seems to expose the futility of Noman's hopes.

Those fragments more than anything else in the novel recall the 'Sweeney passages' of *At Swim*, with its moving depictions of the natural beauty and the sense of some mystical union between man and the natural landscape.296 Nevertheless, Sweeney's poems – composed from the undoubtedly Christian viewpoint and in most aspects translated faithfully by O'Brien – disclose a desire for an intimate communion with nature, together with a humble acceptance of its otherness. Noman, however, enters the narrative as a "godless Cartesian" whose attitude to the sphere outside the self is a desire to "devour and conquer". Confronted with the reality that has shaken and destroyed his sense of certainty, he solely reverses the vectors of his thought, longing to be "devoured" by nature instead. As Kenner rightly observes – Noman's and Joe's "pantheistic yearnings" consist in the desire to "be a person no more". It is again the same longing for escape from the personal responsibility, even if this time it is clothed in poetic language. In reality, however, Noman is stuck in a very traditional Christian inferno which punishes the individual soul for its individual, voluntary transgressions.

## V. 2. Noman in the infernal vestibule

"An astonishing parade of nullity" – Sergeant Pluck comments when attempting vainly to disclose Noman's name. This phrase can be chosen as a motto for the whole novel, suggesting both the 'ontological' status of the narrator (he is dead, thus not a person) and – from the point of view of Hopper's interpretation of *The Third Policeman* as a metafictional text -its fictional aspect (he is not a person, because a literary character). I would argue that Sergeant's aphorism points also to the overall moral dimension of the novel - discernible

294 Cronin, 63.
295 J. M. Synge: *Collected Works II: Prose*, (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1982), 351.
296 Mazullo, 325.

already from the above discussion of the escapist undertone on the thematic level of the text - and represented here in terms of Christian moral theology.

Noman's inferno is one *sub specie temporis nostri* and thus it is useful to return for a moment to Foucault's argument from *Discipline and Punish* and our equation of the penitentiary system with the workings of Divine retributive justice. When describing the radical metamorphosis of the modern modes of punishment, Foucault emphasizes two principles emerging simultaneously to herald this revolution. Firstly, the introduction of new "devices" (mainly guillotine) which according to its inventors would function "faultlessly" (contrary to "traditional" beheading) with mechanical precision and causing "no upheaval", in fact, "hardly noticed".297 This aspect finds its parallel in the novel in the scene of preparation for Noman's execution when Sergeant Pluck is described as "*patiently* and *politely* arranging the *mechanics* of my death" (166, emphasis mine). Yet the crucial revolutionary change was the stress on the application of the law on the "legal entity", an abstract "holder of rights" rather than specific individual. This idea was reflected in the practice of concealing the face of the executed under the veil to suggest that he possesses neither a face nor individual personality.298

The world of Dante displays exactly opposite notions. As I have mentioned earlier, instead of the discrete mechanical devices of modernity, the whole terrifying grandeur of the medieval imagery of pain-infliction is applied. Secondly, and most significantly, stress is put not only on the abstract categories of sinners but on the concrete souls of specific people. One of the most frequent "rituals" of the infernal pilgrimage is – the sometimes even violent – process of discovering names of the damned who consequently reveal their story to the poet. There is an inevitable link between the name and the punishment just as between the name and redemption. Christian afterlife is personalized and individualized due to its basic dependence on the phenomenon of free will.  On the contrary, the narrator of *The Third Policeman* appears on the scene nameless and remains so throughout the novel: the two antithetical concepts of punishment thus present other poles of interpretation of the ethical dimension of O'Brien's novel.

In *Contra Secundium* Augustine defines evil as a "privation of good", a kind of existential absence resulting from the inclination of "something which has more being toward something that has being in a lesser degree" (Deficere autem non iam nihil est, sed ad nihilum tendere. Cum enim ea quae magis sunt, declinant ad ea quae minus sunt). This inclination towards nothingness is described as "defectivus motus" – "the movement of privation/waning".299 In *The Third Policeman*, when Noman describes the process of

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297 Foucault, 45.
298 Foucault, 46.
299 *Contra Secundium manichaeum liber unus*, 2.11, accessed 2 Sept 2007 http://www.augustinus.it/latino/contro_secondino/index.htm ; cf. Ricoeur, 136.

undressing after the first day spent at the police barracks he comments: "When all my clothes were laid on the floor they were much more numerous than I had expected and my body was surprisingly white and thin." (119) The gradual dissolution towards nothingness, inherently connected to sin, is thus "visually" represented. Interestingly, this intimation of the decrease of materiality is preceded by another Noman's presumption connected to his body that seems to go contrary to the notion of "deficere":

> I had a curious feeling about my left leg. I thought that it was, so to speak, spreading – that its woodenness was slowly extending throughout my whole body, a dry timber poison killing me inch by inch. Soon my brain would be changed to wood completely and I would then be dead. (119)

In the following chapter I will discuss the allegorical potential of Noman's "wooden leg" – which seems to me a parallel to Dantean bodily allegories of the weak, corrupted will. Now I would claim that the juxtaposition within the single passage of the notion of dissolution of the body and its "woodenness" (i.e. at least superficially strengthening its material solidity) performs the same function as the complex dialectics of body and spirit in the representation of the damned in the *Inferno*. From a theological point of view, the damned (before the Last Judgment, i.e. the resurrection of the body) are inevitably pure spirits. On the other hand, "the vision represented in the *Inferno* is clearly corporeal; the souls of sinners are to be seen and even touched by the pilgrim."300 The *Inferno* thus goes contrary to the "physics" of the *Purgatory* where the pilgrim's delusion as to the material status of the spirits is stressed on several occasions (he repeatedly attempts to "hug" the encountered souls – e.g. *Purg*. II, 76-81). Freccero points to this paradox as one of the central "infernal ironies" of Dante. All the tortures which the souls have to suffer are, in fact, only metaphors, spiritual truths made manifest by means of poetic representation.301 "*Poena damni*" (suffering of the spirit) and "*poena sensu*" (physical suffering of the body) are not a binary opposition: rather, their relations seems to be structured on a figurative principle.302

According to Freccero, Dante's system of representation is structured on the basis of St. Paul's dualism of the letter and the spirit (the letter that kills and the spirit that gives life – 2 Cor 3.6) transposed analogically into the dualism of body and soul. The letter and the spirit are a sign and signification, and the dissolution of their union is death. "When I leave you I take with me all that has made you what you are – I take all your significance and importance..." – threatens Joe (123-4). In reality, however, the infernal irony here consists in

300 Freccero, 94.
301 Freccero, 103-7
302 Alan of Lille in *Anticlaudianus* comments: "the essential suffering of the damned is the los sof God – poena damni; the pain endured by the senses – poena sensus is secondary" (quoted in: Miller, 86)

the fact that those liberated (or rather crippled) 'significations' are turned again into "signs from which they originated" by the mechanics of the cruel mimicry that rules the *Inferno*.303

Nevertheless, both Dante and O'Brien use similar strategies to delude the reader into accepting this elusive mimicry as reality. In the *Inferno,* Dante can 'physically' assault the sinners' souls in order to force their confession, he can pull their hair and feel their smell. Mandelstam speaks in fact about the obsessive concentration on matter, on the "physics of solid bodies".304 This is the irony that creates the illusion of 'earthliness' of the underworld and thus enables the illusion of tragedy within the "*citta dolente*". As Freccero points out, such a reading is possible only if we neutralize the inherent irony simply by forgetting about one of its poles.305

In the case of *The Third Policeman,* the same ironic strategy is devised mainly to stress the paradox of the narrative position. As Sue Asbee notices, the "use of tactile physical images also encourages us to fail to question [the narrator's] state".306 There is a recurrent emphasis on the bodily presence of Noman and his bodily sensations in the service of the central narrative secret, that of the actual 'ontological status' of the narrator:

> The life that was bubbling at the end of my fingers was real and nearly painful in intensity and so was the beauty of my warm face and the loose humanity of my limbs and the racy health of my red rich blood. (106)

Whereas the damned of the *Inferno* cry for "*seconda morte*" – the annihilation of the soul which would follow the annihilation of the body, one of the central features of Noman is his obsessive fear of losing "the little empire" of his ego. At the end, however, the actual status of his being is summarized by Sergeant Pluck is meditating upon Noman's namelessness:

> It is true (...) that you cannot commit a crime (...) Anything you do is a lie and nothing that happens to you is true (...) For that reason alone (...) we can take you and hang the life out of you and you are not hanged at all and there is no entry to be made in the death papers. The particular death you die is not even a death (...) only an insanitary abstraction in the backyard, a piece of negative nullity neutralized and rendered void (105)

The nullity at the core of Noman's existence – once more at all its strata of interpretation (i.e. metafictional, 'ontological' and moral) – is again disclosed. There is no essential difference between his feeling of "woodenness" and "waning", and his intimations of his bodily vitality - they are only the poles of the same ironic situation.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault makes a comment on the shift from the public execution of a specific individual to the mechanical elimination of the faceless "legal entity": "The tragedy

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303 Freccero 100-2
304 Mandelstam, 63.
305 Freccero, 104.
306 quoted in: Matthewes, "Manichaean body…"

ends, and here begins the comedy with the silhouettes of shadows, voices without faces…"307 In *The Third Policeman* we are confronted with such a nameless "silhouette of shadow". The fact of the narrator's loss of name inevitably suggests an allegorical reading that follows the model of 'Everyman' of the medieval morality stories.308 The narrator is, however, as Hooper's coinage fittingly stresses, a 'Noman' rather than 'Everyman' The narrator seems thus an 'Everyman' of the age of Foucaultian punishments of nameless "nullities" rather than individuals, a character devoid of the essential qualities of a human person.

In the letter to Can Grande, Dante gives a basic theme of his *Commedia* in the allegorical terms:

> Si vero accipiatur opus allegorice, subiectum est homo, prout merendo et demerendo per arbitrii libertatem iustitiae praemiandi et puniendi obnoxius est."309
> ("Whereas if work is to be taken allegorically: the subject is man who through the exercise of his freedom of choice is subjected to the rewarding or punishing justice.")

The basis of human existence and its post-mortal continuation is therefore defined by the freedom of will to choose between good and evil: "there are no stones, no trees, no animals in Inferno, only people and demons, because only they were able to choose".310 On those grounds Auerbach (and other critics) views several inhabitants of the *Inferno* such as Farinata, Ugolino or Francesca as substantially human, with their earthly feelings and concerns, retaining even in the midst of eternal punishment much of their individual dignity.311 Their sin is in fact a direct outcome of that dignity, the result of the exercise of free will. Their sin presupposes the consciousness of evil and thus consciousness of personal guilt, even if not followed by the repentance.312 That is the reason why the fate of the damned can still awake feelings of mercy or admiration in the pilgrim, though he acknowledges a justified connection between guilt and the punishment. According to Bakhtin, their individual stories create a tension between the overall vertical and atemporal structure of the poem and the individual narratives – immersed with time and horizontal human perspective.313 In such a reading, tragedy – or at least its remote intimation - can occur even in the *Inferno*. In the modern netherworld, however, this dignity is entirely lost. As Mays suggests, the disconcerting fact about the infernal aspect of *The Third Policeman* is

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307 Foucault, 50.
308 As Roy Hunt sums up: "denying the protagonist a name (…) invites the reader to identify with him; it encourages the reader to see the narrator as the archetypal Everyman – lack of identity, in a sense universalizes him" (Roy Hunt, "Hell Goes Round and Round: Flann O'Brien", *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, vol. 14/2 (January 1989), 64.
309 *Epistle to Can Grande*, trans. J. Merchand, accessed 3 Sept 2007 http://www.english.udel.edu/dean/cangrand.html
310 Lisicki, 236
311 *Erich Auerbach,: Mimesis. Zobrazování skutečnosti v západoevropských literaturách*, transl. R. Preisner, Praha: MF 1998), 150-172.
312 Lisicki, 223.
313 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination...*, 159.

that the reader does not feel the narrator "to be wicked" and "wholly bad."[314] I would argue that this attitude is based not on a sense of sympathy or admiration for tragic greatness similar to the emotion that overcomes Dante the pilgrim at several points on his journey. Its cause is rather the very fact of Noman's "nullity", his lack of the characteristics of will and personal responsibility that makes him appear more as a victim than a criminal. He seemingly deserves to be excluded from the Dantean dialectics of "the rewarding and punishing justice" because there is scarcely a trace of "the exercise of his freedom of choice" conveyed in the text. Before entering the netherworld, he attempts to present himself as a mere puppet manipulated at will by Divney, relegating his freedom to his friend in the escape from personal responsibility. His conscience seems another empty zone, undisturbed completely by the committed crime and incapable of acknowledging its guilt. Rather than the gigantic figures of Farinata or Ugolino – which inspired the poets of Romanticism as much as they gave rise to the Miltonic Satan – he resembles the shadows of Eliot's early poems or characters of Beckett:

> Shape without form, shade without colour,
> Paralysed force, gesture without motion;[315]

Thus, the underworld of *The Third Policeman* in the end seems very close to the modernist readings of the *Inferno*, to Eliot's "unreal city" swarming with lifeless crowds or Baudelaire's "*formilante cite*".[316] Those modernist underworlds seem, however, to be modeled not on the "Inferno proper" but its threshold – the hellish vestibule or Antehell.

There are only two places on the map of Dante's pilgrimage through the underworld where the encounter with a specific class of the damned does not lead to the disclosure of the names and life-stories of some of the souls. Both passages seem of extreme importance for the analysis of *The Third Policeman*. One of them was already mentioned in connection with the theme of the circular structure of the novel – the avaricious and spendthrifts of the fourth circle. The second spot of namelessness in the *Commedia* emerges even earlier, in the Antehell which pilgrims pass in Canto III. The passage conveys the aural, cognitive and spatial confusion suffusing the whole place:

> Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation
> resounded through the starless air,
> so that I too began to weep.
>
> Unfamiliar tongues, horrendous accents,
> words of suffering, cries of rage, voices

314 Mays, *Brian O'Nolan…*, 93
315 Eliot, "The Hollow Men", *Poems*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie 1978), 90.
316 Cf. Fowlie, 34.

loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands—

all these made a tumult, always whirling
in that black and timeless air,
as sand is swirled in a whirlwind (III, 23-31)

As Virgil explains, this is the site of suffering of those "who lived / without disgrace yet without praise" (36-7) and who were "hateful alike to God and to His foes" (III. 64). He finishes his description on an unexpected – in the context of the whole canticle devised for the 'education' of Dante - note: "Let us not speak of them—look and pass by" (III. 52). In his contempt resounds an echo of the *Revelation of St. John*:

> I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth (Rev. 3, 15-16)

As Freccero comments: "sin implies a capacity for love, no matter how perverted, and the coldness of blasphemy is closer to belief that the tepidity of indifference". Even if evil is solely an "existential absence", sin represents at least a positive act, despite its being based on this preceding negation - "the incarnation, so to speak, of nothingness".317 In contrast to that, the souls of the vestibule lack both love and its opposites - hatred and treachery. First commentators of the *Commedia* referred to them as "*ignavi*", the term implying "indolence, cowardice, sloth".318 But a more precise description arises from Dante's delineation of the basic moral allegory of the poem quoted above: posited before the "either/or" choice of good and evil "the neutrals" refused to exercise their free will i.e. to live and act as human beings. They are "these wretches, who never were alive," (III. 65). Their example gives Dante an opportunity to sketch one of the paradoxes within the closed system of the *Commedia* - the possibility of not becoming a *person*.319

Virgil describes the inhabitants of the infernal vestibule as the souls of "indolent" men as well as those angels who remained "neutral" during the rebellion of Lucifer:

Questo misero modo
tegnon l'anime triste di coloro
che visser sanza 'nfamia e sanza lodo.

317 Freccero, 112.
318 Fowlie, 33.
319 Cf. Collins, 81.

Mischiate sono a quel cattivo coro
de li angeli che non furon ribelli
né fur fedeli a Dio, ma per sé fuoro (III, 34-39)320

Freccero points to the crucial role of the phrase "*per se fuoro*" for the interpretation of this passage. It is most accurately translated as "they were for themselves only" – they neither remained faithful to their Creator nor followed the rebellious Angel into the depths of hell. Such a standpoint provides, however, grave difficulty for the overall theological construction of the netherworld, as it escapes the inevitable duality of "either/or". According to Augustine the dualism of human existence is structured around the eternal conflict between *amor sui* and *amor Dei*, or *caritas* (the love of God) and *cupiditas* (perverse love of created things, including one's self). "Being for themselves only" may suggest "*amor sui*", yet this finds its realization rather in Lucifer's sin of pride. The 'neutral angels" share – to use Augustinian categories again – Lucifer's "*defectus*" – the inclination towards oneself rather than God - yet does not follow him into "*actus*", into the active implementation of this desire equated with rebellion and sin. Rather, they "remained within themselves" - which was sufficient to earn them damnation, yet in a separated shadowy zone on the borders of the worlds. According to Freccero, the notion of being only "for themselves" implies thus primarily an isolation, exclusion: they are "outside hell and heaven, excluded at once from the region whose apex is encircled by the seraphic odour of charity, and from that whose dead center is locked in the ice of treachery."321 They are – to some extent - standing aside of the closed tripartite structure of the *Commedia* as well as of the dualism of human nature. Their own space extends in the vague vestibule, within the infernal gate, yet on the other side of the Acheron than 'Inferno proper'.

As already stated, one of Noman's central features is his total indifference to - or ignorance of - any conventional ethical code. Nonetheless, in the passage discussed in the first part of this chapter he speaks about the theft of the book explicitly as "sin" - using this definitely theological term - and claiming that "it was for de Selby" that he committed it. As J.C.C. Mays first noticed, the very name "de Selby" suggests a possibility of allegorical reading, which seems extremely revealing especially in this context. De Selby can be etymologically traced back to the German "*der Selbe*" that is "the self".322 Noman's sin and all his actions are centered on de Selby, both in the pre-Parish period and during his journey through the netherworld. "My thoughts were never far from de Selby" – he claims. And if "for de Selby" is translated as "for myself", the parallel between him and the "neutrals" of the infernal vestibule - who "were only for themselves" - becomes inevitable. The elusive savant

320 "This miserable state is borne / by the wretched souls of those who lived / without disgrace yet without praise. // They intermingle with that wicked band / of angels, not rebellious and not faithful / to God, who held themselves apart"
321 Freccero, 110-112.
322 Mays 91; Hooper, 209.

de Selby is inevitably connected with the theme of Noman's fall – his book seduces him towards the first sin, endows him with the desire for ultimate knowledge and worldly fame and finally leads him to his crime.

In Beckett's story "Draff" from *More Pricks than Kicks,* Belaqua's meditation echoes the procession of three Theological Virtues from the *Purgatorio*: "Faith, Hope and – what was it? – Love, Eden missed, every ebb derided, all the tides form the shingle of Ego Maximus, little me."323 The final sarcastic juxtaposition of "ego maximus" and "little me" points to the crucial stage of the development of the Cartesian cogito which attempted to anchor the whole universe in the stable fact of its own impeachable reality, only to end as the little trembling "me". The triad of virtues is substituted in "Wet Night" by a trio of "Doubt, Despair and Scrounging"324 (being also on another intertextual plain an allusion to Stephan Dedalus' proud declaration from *A Portrait*). In *The Third Policeman*, de Selby read as "the self" implies the basic mechanism of the first sin of "ego maximus": "the excessive inclination towards one's own being"325, Augustinian *amor sui*. Noman remains thus "locked tightly in the self"326 and seems to follow the most "devastating" of de Selby's discoveries that all the "saliencies of existence" including "love, sin, death" simply "are all unnecessary" (96-7). The seemingly paradoxical pairing of 'love' with 'death' and 'sin' suggests a world where neither morality nor immorality is possible due to the annihilation of the subjectivity of man as a subject materialized in his exercise of free will.327 The reality of the Parish – built upon de Selbian pseudo-rationalism – renders both the position of Farinata and that of Beatrice impossible. In this respect O'Brien does touch upon one of the central *topoi* of the modernist poetics. It is certainly with this fragment of the *Inferno* in mind that Eliot wrote in his essay on Baudelaire:

> So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good we are human, and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist. It is true to say that the glory of man is his capacity for salvation; it is also true to say that his glory is his capacity for damnation. The worst that can be said of most of our malefactors, from statesman to thieves, is that they are not man enough to be damned.328

And as Beckett says in an early poem "Text", explicitly invoking the image of Antehell, this is the place of those:

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323 Beckett, *More Pricks…*, 42; A through discussion of this fragment and its Dantean echoes is provided by Kelly Anspaugh (1996).
324 Beckett, *More Pricks…*, 53.
325 Gilson, 194.
326 Freccero, 118.
327 As Eliot comments, explicitly juxtaposing the Dantean ethics of damnation and blessedness with the "nullity" of the modern life (in his essay on Baudelaire): 'The recognition of the reality of Sin is a New Life; and the possibility of damnation is so immense a relief in a world of electoral reform, plebiscites, sex reform and dress reform, that damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation – of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living." (Eliot, 427).
328 Eliot, 'Baudelaire", *Selected Essays…*, 429.

who shall not scour in swift joy
the bright hill's girdle
nor tremble with the dark pride of torture
and the bitter dignity of an ingenious damnation."[329]

In Beckett's rendering, however, the motif turns into a subversive parody of Dante, as those verses are preceded by the declaration of the damned spirits of the infernal vestibule: "We are proud of our pain / our life was not blind." They seem to choose deliberately the incertitude and indefinite nature of existence concomitant with the isolated position of Antehell in the order of the Dantean universe. Noman's fate seems to follow Dante's model more faithfully, he is neither proud nor able to see. His "ego" - directed to itself only - turns into an "admirable parade of nullity", echoing Dante's depiction of "those wretches who never were alive" (III, 65) who are – as Freccero comments – "as close to nothing as creatures can be", "an irreducible negation".[330] What unites, however, the deliberate choice of Beckett's damned with Noman's narrative is the fact that such a mental and moral landscape cannot engender another epic vision; the only response is disgust mixed with a bitter laugh, the comedy of the absurd.[331]

329 Beckett, *Text*,
330 Freccero 118.
331 As Ihab Hassan argues: "comedy restores that art to the realm of possibility. The comedy is clownish, cruel, absurd" (Hassan, 220). Francis Doherty in this respect connects *The Third Policeman* with the existentialist philosophy and the drama of the absurd, as the novel also stages 'a pilgrim who, placed in an alien world, strives desperately to relate the absurdities he undergoes to his limited sense of order and logic." (Doherty, 52)

## VI. Allegories fulfilled and decapitated

“Pascal’s terror in the face of le silence eternel de ces espaces infinis has never entered Dante’s mind. He resembles a man guided through an immense cathedral rather than someone lost on an infinite sea.”
C. S. Lewis

In the preceding chapters I attempted to suggest that the epistemological comedy of *The Third Policeman* – when read through and against Dante’s *Inferno* – reveals a strong tendency towards the morality tale in which the seemingly unbound play of parody and menippean satire is balanced by the presence of an ethical core of the narrative derived from the Christian moral theology and concepts of the afterlife. The analogy to the *Commedia* can be, however, brought even further – towards the very structural principle of Dante’s poem which is built around the trope of allegory.

In the opening canto of the *Inferno* Dante the pilgrim sets for a journey up the slopes of the mysterious mountain – later revealed to be the Mount Purgatory - completely alone in the desolate bleak countryside. Subsequently, he makes a surprising comment referring to the mechanics of his walking: he moves upwards “se che ‘l pie fermo sempre era ‘l piu basso” (I, 28-30) i.e. “so that my firm foot was always in the lower position”. According to Freccero, in medieval anatomical terminology “the firm foot” was a synonym for the left, which – contrary to the right foot which is said to be crucial for movement – has a main function of “supporting the body”. The image of climbing the mountain “with the left foot always lower” bears of course rather confusing physical implications, moreover, Dante’s stress on this anatomical detail seems strangely out of place in the course of the narration which at this stage concentrates on his spiritual and mental distress. Thus the image invites an allegorical reading. Freccero suggests that this is to be found in the Augustinian metaphor of “pedes animarum” – “feet of the soul” – enabling it to move towards salvation. The image implies a vision of the fallen man, lacking firm will and a moral “backbone”, limping on his way through life.[332] In this way, it fits the overall strategy of the passage which invokes topographical imagery of the lost “straight path” or “dark wood” to refer to the spiritual state of the protagonist. The motif of limping appears prominently also in *The Third Policeman*. The narrator, in fact, suffers from the same imperfection as Dante the pilgrim at the beginning of his journey. His *left* leg is made of wood. In both texts the motif is bound with the state of moral corruption: in Dante, it appears in the opening passage when the pilgrim looses his way in the dark forest, in *The Third Policeman,* the description of how Noman

[332] Freccero, 34-38.

broke his leg and finally acquired a new, wooden, one, follows almost immediately after the word “sin” occurs for the first and only time in the texture of the novel, accompanying the narrator’s fatal encounter with the works of de Selby – i.e. “the self”, the root of his fall. And it is after the return from the hospital when he is entirely convinced that “if my name is to be remembered, it would be remembered with de Selby’s” (10). Moreover, the accident happens when – after the end of his education – Noman is “broadening [his] mind” in “other places” – thus the wooden limb is again connected with the theme of intellectual and scientific hubris that underlines the whole novel. A direct link with the Dantean motif is most probably purely accidental; nevertheless, this analogy suggests a presence of a similar framework in O’Brien’s novel. In fact, the motif of the wooden leg is later expanded, again along the lines that suggest an allegorical reading.

Approaching the medieval literary culture it is necessary – as for instance T.S. Eliot warns us – to get used to “the type of mind which by nature and practice tended to express itself in allegory.”[333] This provides an obstacle to the modern sensibility brought up in the detestation of allegory as an essentially “un-artistic” trope, sufficient only for didactic purposes. As Gadamer sums up, allegory “as soon as its meaning is reached, has run its full course.”[334] It plays with substitution and absence yet that play happens within a strictly defined field of reference and analogy. It springs from the conviction of the meaningfully arranged reality: “the Divine Architect has designed the universe analogically, relating the physical, moral and spiritual realms by an elaborate system of correspondences.”[335] Benjamin, describing the process of the creation of an “allegorical object”, links allegory with death, mortification and “breaking out of the continuity of time”. Only by such reification something “becomes legible as allegory.”[336]

Despite this seemingly inexorable connection to the stable normative systems the question of allegory achieved a considerable attention in 20th century literary theory and practice. Allegory was made – to paraphrase Eliot – possible for modern art. Linda Hutcheon speaks even about the inherent “allegorical impulse” of modernism and postmodernism.[337] As McHale notices, “the romantic prejudice against allegory has been lifted”, mainly due to the influence of such critics as Paul de Man.[338] De Man, however, achieves his “rehabilitation” of allegory by means of a critical shift in the definition: whereas “in traditional allegory the function of the concrete image was to make the meaning stand out more vividly”, in modern

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[333] T. S. Eliot, *Dante*, (London: Faber & Faber 1929), 22.
[334] Quoted in: Paul De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1983), 189-90.
[335] de Man, 195.
[336] Pike, 103.
[337] Hutcheon, “The Politics of Postmodern…”, 226
[338] McHale, 140.

poetics, "the concrete image no longer leads to a clearer vision", pointing rather to the equation between the "allegorical" and the "nonrepresentational". Contrary to the symbol, whose primacy was asserted by the Romantic poetics – allegory does not follow the desire for identity, for full communion, but rather "designates primarily a distance", "renounces the nostalgia to coincide".[339] Allegory becomes thus a model for all figural relations, and in fact the model of the discontinued process of signification itself. Joel Fineman claims:

> The structurality of the text holds out the promise of a meaning that it will also perpetually defer ... It is also the formal destiny of every allegory ... Distanced at the beginning from its source, allegory will set out on an increasingly futile search for a signifier with which to recuperate the fracture at its source.[340]

Fineman's statement points in a figurative way to the inherent "narrative drive" of the allegory. De Man describes allegory as an essentially diachronic structure, mirroring "the tendency of language toward narrative."[341] Gay Clifford speaks about "kinesis of allegory" which consists in the "investigation in form of journey, search", basically "some form of controlled and directed process".[342] O'Brien's novel reflects that basic allegorical structure: on the mimetic level the narrative is built around Noman's journey through the Parish, defined by the most basic allegorical motif – the quest. The black box, allegedly containing old Mathers' money, becomes a kind of a "Holy Grail" to which all Noman's hope seems directed, which motivates his subsequent steps through the topsy-turvy world of the Parish.

There exists a long tradition of extensive application of medieval exegetical categories to radical modernist texts, most prominently to make use in this context of Dante's famous distinction made in the *Epistle to Can Grande*:

> ...sciendum est quod istius operis non est simplex sensus, immo dici potest polysemos, hoc est plurium sensuum; nam primus sensus est qui habetur per literam, alius est qui habetur per significata per literam. Et primus dicitur literalis, secundus vero allegoricus, sive moralis, sive anagogicus.[343]

The *Commedia* is characterized as an essentially "polysemous" work, with four different levels of exegesis. Later on, however, Dante reduces this relation to the basic dualism of "per literam" and "allegoricus":

[339] De Man, 206-7.
[340] Joel Fineman, "The Structure of Allegorical Desire", Greenblatt, ed. *Allegory and Representation*, 44-5
[341] De Man, 225.
[342] Clifford, 14-5.
[343] "…you must know that the sense of this work is not simple, rather it may be called polysemantic, that is, of many senses; the first sense is that which comes from the letter, the second is that of that which is signified by the letter. And the first is called the literal, the second allegorical or moral or anagogical." ("Epistle to Can Grande").

> Et quamquam isti sensus mystici variis appellentur nominibus, generaliter omnes dici possunt allegorici, quum sint a literali sive historiali diversi. Nam allegoria dicitur ab alleon graece, quod in latinum dicitur alienum, sive diversum.[344]

The allegorical - designated as "the other" of the literal - forms a foundation of the *Commedia*. In 1931 Louis Gillet, writing on Joyce's *Work in Progress,* claimed:

> The text has to be read like Dante's, according to several superimposed levels of meaning. There is a literal meaning, an allegorical meaning, and perhaps several others – almost as many as the skins of an onion.[345]

Harry Levin gave an even more systematic application of the Dantean principles on the "chaosmos" of *Finnegans Wake*, distinguishing all the levels of meaning, from the literal to anagogical.[346] And a similar inclination towards the "multi-layered" interpretation seems to exist within the critical discourse on *The Third Policeman*.

*The Third Policeman* – with its obsession with the images of infinite regress, layers and repetitions – seems also to support the view of the text as "the skins of an onion". In fact the image itself appears in the novel in Noman's dreamy vision: "A body within another body inside it in turn, thousands of such bodies within each other like the skins of an onion, receding to some unimaginable ultimum" (123). Keith Hooper proposed – and convincingly demonstrated – the possibility of metafictional level as the "second dimension" of the whole narrative, posed above the literal dimension of the fantastic "whodunit" story. Others perceive the texts' inclination towards an allegorical critique on Cartesian epistemology (Lanters, Booker), or even an allegorical rendering of the post-Einsteinian universe (Kemnitz). Nevertheless, Hopper claims in the end that any attempt to impose a definite allegorical reading would be "a crude and provisional gesture". Instead he coins a term 'parabolic' as a designation of the thematic level of the story which "strives towards parable" yet in the end results only in "an indeterminate allegory of a relative world; an open network of irony and paradox that invites the reader to participate, but which absolutely resists any absolute interpretation".[347]

Dante's exegesis invites polysemantic interpretation, yet on the other hand that "polysemy" is strictly limited. As C. S. Lewis asserts, he resembles a traveler "guided through" a cathedral which is "immense", yet finished, and – crucially – meaningful in every detail and as a whole.[348] On the contrary, theoretical concepts such as metafiction or menippean satire imply rather infinite multiplications of meanings, permeated with the irresolvable sense of ambiguity, "atoms and ifs (...) "destined to be odds without ends" – as we read in *Work in*

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[344] "And though these mystical senses are called by various names, in general all can be called allegorical, because they are different from the literal or the historical. Now, allegory comes from Greek alleon, which in Latin means *other* or *different*." ("Epistle to Can Grande")
[345] Van Hulle, 11
[346] Levin, 133-4.
[347] Hooper, 226-8.
[348] C. S. Lewis, *A Discarded Image*,

*Progress*. The “skins of an onion” in Noman’s vision are “receding to some unimaginable ultimum”, Dantean “onion” is a finite system enveloped in the infinity of the Absolute. Allegorical reading in a classical (i.e. also Dantean) sense – invoking a stable interpretative pattern and a shared normative system – would thus be a violent imposition on such a text. On the other hand, the modern re-definition of allegory delineated above may provide a useful ground for the interpretation of the text.

Keith Hopper has convincingly demonstrated how O’Brien’s textual strategies seduce the reader towards the rejection of literal reading. From the beginning, there seem to be “surpluses of signification” that make us doubtful about the mimetic narrative. “The language is structured like a riddle which ceaselessly shuffles the boundaries of potential meaning”.[349] Allegory creates “half-familiar worlds”, combining “elusiveness and familiarity”, forming a seemingly self-contained narrative which, however, by its mode forces the reader to doubt its “truth”.[350] According to Clifford, “allegory makes the reader take every detail as ‘significant’”[351], creates a feeling of uneasiness with the mimetic level of the narrative and expectations for something hidden beneath. O’Brien plays with those expectations quite ruthlessly. One of the most poignant examples may be the motif of the “graph” included to elucidate the motif of “readings” policemen conduct in order to control the underground machinery of the Parish.[352] In reality, the graph contains a set of rather obscure and probably accidental numbers revealing nothing of the expected “secret” of this wired reality (106). A similar strategy may be demonstrated in the already discussed account of Mathers’ death when the scene of pulsating violence is interrupted by old man’s last words “something like ‘I do not care for celery’ or ‘I left my glasses in the scullery” (16). The *topos* of the “last words” conveys a notion of some crucial message; here it is invested with the contrary sense of the absurd. The author-God behind the text of the novel first awakens the expectations of the reader concerning the message encoded in the final utterance; only to laugh at his/her expense…

Dealing with the issue of “modern allegory”, Brian McHale provides a fitting example of Kafka’s texts which

> seem to promise allegorical meaning … yet withholding any indication of *specific* allegorical content. Everything is *potentially* allegorical, but nothing is *actually* an allegory; the trope seems to lack a specific literal level or frame of reference.[353]

The individual textual appearances bear a specific allegorical ‘air’ – create a feeling of something withheld from the mimetic level of the narrative, but deny the satisfaction of

[349] Hopper, 204-5
[350] Clifford, 2-3; Hopper, 204.
[351] Clifford, 84
[352] cf. Hopper, 171-5.
[353] McHale, 141

uncovering this “hidden” layer. Allegory creates “a world within the trope”, which is, however, necessarily multi-directional, dissolving in the spirals of ambiguities. “These are overdetermined allegories, they have *too many* interpretations.”[354] Texts such as *The Third Policeman* seem thus rather a kind of a “parody of allegory”, allegories exposing their own impossibility.[355]

Yet can this inclusion of O’Brien’s novel into the postmodern mode of “failed allegory” be taken as definitive? By analyzing selected motifs of the text I would like to argue that even if scrutinized by means of the Dantean “classical” allegory, the novel performs functions which cannot be described as other than “allegorical”. *The Third Policeman* may thus be viewed as a text negotiating its way between the classical and modern understanding of allegory. Between the representation of the nonrepresentational within a self-contained normative system and the representation of the nonrepresentational in the system that constantly undermines itself.

The structure and intent of allegory are in a state of paradoxical conflict. On the one hand it is a trope spreading into the narrative, on the other – “the topic of its narration is not necessarily temporal at all”. In fact, the inherent tendency of allegory is often towards “something that cannot be represented”.[356] And O’Brien’s transference of the discourse beyond the grave, to the netherworld is, *ex definitione* a discourse of the non-representable and a-temporal. As Fineman argues: “allegory is always a hierarchicizing mode, indicative of timeless order, however subversive its intended contents might be.”[357] The narrative of *The Third Policeman* is repeatedly invaded by such intimations of the non-representable order that provide a counterpoint to the texts inherent instability and plurality.

It seems useful to return now to the opening interrogation into the meaning of Noman’s “wooden leg”. Booker makes an interesting comparison: whereas the wooden limb is a feature that unites Noman with several characters of Beckett’s fiction and drama, there is a considerable difference as far as the function of this motif is concerned. Beckett’s heroes are actually presented as physically handicapped, their bodies are in a state of constant de-composition and degradation which serves as a crucial defining element of their status as such. On the other hand, on the mimetic level, Noman’s wooden leg seems “to offer little hindrance to [his] physical capabilities”. He remains quite a skillful cyclist and Booker mentions specifically the scene of Mathers murder, where Noman is able to transport and bury the corpse almost by himself. The explanation may be, however, quite straightforward:

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[354] McHale, 141-2.
[355] McHale, 144-5. Todorov speaks about Kafka’s texts in a similar vein: “one might certainly suggest several allegorical interpretations of the text, but the text itself offers no explicit indication which would confirm any of them” (Todorov, 172).
[356] de Man “Pascal’s Allegory of Persuasion“, Greenblatt, ed. *Allegory…,* 1.
[357] Fineman, 32

the wooden leg should not be read as a unit on the literal level, but rather one invested with allegorical significance. Wooden leg as a sign of sinfulness or corrupted will makes no obstacles for the murderous deed.

I have discussed earlier Noman's hallucinatory experience of "woodenness" spreading across his whole body - "a dry timber poison killing me" (119). It provides another stage in the consistently allegorical construction of the motif. Noman's moment of enlightenment, the possibility of the discovery of an allegorical meaning, is of course immediately distorted by the fact that Noman *is* already dead and – if his dwelling-place is hell – there is no possibility of further degradation, he is all "wood" by now. "Woodenness" he correctly associates with death, yet as always he misses the point as it is primarily a "spiritual" death that is signalized here.

As Freccero comments, Dante's journey through hell is among other things the negation of his own "anterior self" visualized in the infernal forms: "many of his encounters are with his own cherished opinions."[358] In the famous passage in Canto XXXII Dante arrives at the frozen lake of Cocytus and meditates over the sight of the sinners buried to their heads in the ice. One of them addresses him with a strangely disconcerting question: "*Perché cotanto in noi ti specchi*?" (XXXII, 54) which can be translated as "Why do you reflect yourself so long in us?" or even "Why are you staring at us as if into the mirror?"[359] There is a possibility that the damned soul takes Dante as another "fellow-sufferer", newly arrived to his circle of punishment. His stare would thus acquire an inverted quality: in the damned souls of Cocytus he would perceive his future fate as well as his past sin which led him to this place. This notion is reinforced by the description of the lake "so frozen that it seemed more *glass* than water." (XXXII, 25 – emphasis mine) In *The Third Policeman* the mirror of Cocytus is re-created in an ironically inverted landscape, suffused with sunlight and buzzing with life (44-5). The first character Noman encounters after leaving the 'resurrected' old Mathers is one Martin Finnucane. "I am a killer" – Finnucane announces – "Every time I rob a man I knock him dead because I have no respect for life, not a little" (48). Finnucane expresses explicitly what is implicitly embedded in the narrative from the very opening sentence, which, however, the narrator never utters loudly. Finnucane speaks as much about himself as about Noman, who murdered old Mathers' as part of a robbery. In fact, this feature of Noman's 'psychology' is referred to – allegorically – in the first description of Finnucane:

> His eyes were tricky, probably from watching policemen ... There was no palpable divergence in their alignment but they seemed to be incapable of giving a direct glance at anything that was straight, whether or not their curious incompatibility was suitable for looking at crooked things. (45)

[358] Freccero, 109.
[359] This motif was later embedded into Beckett's *Not I*.

Noman cannot look "straight" at his own deed; throughout the narrative he remains curiously unconscious of his own moral status (see chapter 5). The final revelation concerning the relation between Noman and the "black murderer" Finnucane is, however, postponed until the end of the scene, a coda overarching the allegorical structure: what unites them is the *left* leg made of wood. "That is a funny coincidence" – Noman says; but it is not.

The wooden left leg of Noman seems to be one of the elements inserted in a wider pattern of a "right-left" dualism pervading the whole text. It is for the first time presented to the attention of the reader in Sergeant Pluck's "rules of wisdom" which sways between the manual of safe cycling and the (im)moral 'Pentalogue' ("If you follow them, … you will save your soul and you will never get a fall on a slippy road" – says the Sergeant). The fourth 'commandment' is: "take left turns as much as possible" (63). Why left? Such a dualism invokes the most basic 'topographical' aspect of history of salvation, inscribed in the Christian iconography mostly on the basis of a sermon from St. Matthew:

> When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (…)Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25. 31-34, 41).

If we trace the dialectics of right and left throughout Noman's narrative, such telling coincidences seem to increase. A most obvious moment when this motif verges on the edge of an explicit allegorical discourse is Pluck's description of the "crazy as bedamned" third policeman, Fox.

> I think he has an opinion that there is a turn to the right down the road and likely that is what he is after, he thinks the best way to find it is to die and get all the leftness out of his blood. (158)

The dualism of left and right seems thus as a counterpart to the at the first sight similarly absurd dualism of "odd" and "even" numbers that pervades *At Swim Two Birds*, personified in the characters of the Pooka and the Good Fairy. And as it was the case in *At Swim*, the seemingly grave ethical import is immediately relativized and parodied in Pluck's explanation of the primacy of "left" over "right": "Did you ever in your life … mount a bicycle from the right?" Nevertheless, throughout the novel, "right" and "left" seems to be invested with an additional meaning that transcends mere "directionality". In this respect *The Third Policeman* bears a clear analogy to the similar allegories of movement in the *Commedia*. Christian medieval art repeatedly "affirms the unity of moral and cosmological order", of the

absolute allegorical meaning of landscape concealed beyond its "local significance".[360] As Freccero points out, there is a striking frequency in Dante's references to the direction of the poets movement in terms of "a destra" and "a sinistra". Virgil explains in the *Inferno*:

> You know this place is round,
> and though you have come far,
> *descending toward the bottom on the left*,
> you have not come full circle. (*Inf*. XIV, 124-127 – emphasis mine)

On the contrary, the purgatorial ascent is repeatedly referred to in connection with the "right hand" (e.g. *Purg*. XIX, 79-81), in fact the first "directional" element in this canticle appears in the very first canto when Dante says: "I mi volsi alla man destra" (1,22).[361] This emphasis is especially disturbing if we realize that they travel down the circles of hell and up the slopes of Mount Purgatory, thus in a circular trajectory or more precisely - gyrations. From the point of view of physical reality in such case, the terms "right' and 'left' are rendered quite meaningless. Dante, however, seems to refer to the "absolute right and left", i.e. invested with an allegorical significance. It enacts a similar conflict between the seemingly absurd notion and its actual concealed meaning.

In fact, if we trace the motif of "left" backwards in O'Brien's narrative, the pattern can be enriched by other instances of topography invested with the intimations of the allegorical meaning. The reference to Fox's belief in the "right turn" is of course an allusion to the locus of underground terrifying eternity of wires and endless corridors, which is repeatedly and with striking consequences described as situated by the left turn of the road. Regressing further, we realize that the police barracks are framed with the topography of "leftness" as well: Noman approaching discerns the extraordinary edifice in the moment when "the road before me was turning gently to the left" and the barracks itself are located "about a hundred yards away on the left-hand side" (54-5). Finally, a step further back: Noman is marching through the unknown countryside delineated in a way that again may invite "looking beyond the letter":

> To the left was brown bogland scarred with dark cuttings and strewn with rugged clumps of bushes, white streaks of boulder and here and there a small house half-hiding in an assembly of the trees. Far beyond was another region sheltering in the haze, purple and mysterious. The right-hand side was a greener country with the small turbulent river accompanying the road. (54-5)

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[360] Paul Piehler, *The Visionary Landscape. A Study in Medieval Allegory*, (London: Edward Arnold 1971), 60; Clifford, 85-7. M. H. Abrams sums the classical view of "allegorical topography" as follows: "The Divine Architect has designed the universe analogically, relating the physical, moral and spiritual realms by an elaborate system of correspondences" (quoted in: De Man, *Blidness…*, 195-6).

[361] Caselli shows how this dualism affects several of Beckett's texts. For example in *The Lost Ones* we read: "For one entering this zone head-on the nearest queue is on the right and if it does not please it is only by going right that a more pleasing can be found" (Caselli, 192).

The picture seems disturbingly unnatural: it is hard to imagine a road leading through two such landscapes endowed with so diverse characteristics. Moreover, the juxtaposition of "brown and rugged" with "greener" can hardly escape the eye. And the "far region" hidden in "purple haze" reminds of the mysterious glimpses of the distant hell on some of the medieval triptychs (where it is located – inevitably – on the far left of the painting). It is after all (another backward step), a road which "runs away westwards" – in the direction associated both in the Irish and the continental medieval imagery with death and damnation (the left side, opposite to Jerusalem). And moreover, "it was possibly one of the oldest roads in the world" (39). In fact the oldest, because eternal – "io etterno duro" (Inf. III, 8) is inscribed at the gate at its end.

The dialectics of right and left in the course of the narrative find, however, a subversive resolution, that should remind us of the essential disparity between Dante's and O'Brien's universes. Noman, after his narrow escape from the gallows, decides to leave the Parish for good and attempt at a return to the place he used to inhabit with Divney before his curious adventures. Setting on his journey he meditates:

> It was on the left the Sergeant had gone with MacCruiskeen, to that quarter the next world lay and it was *leftwards* that all my troubles were. I led the bicycle to the middle of the road, turned her wheel resolutely to the *right* and swung myself into the centre of her saddle (179, emphasis mine)

When read allegorically, this fragment may convey a possibility of Noman's salvation, his decision to reject "the left" for the sake of the new "rightwards" path. After all – as the souls Dante encounters in the Purgatory testify repeatedly – very little is needed to escape from the claws of the devil. The atmosphere of this fragment of O'Brien's novel may recall the imagery of Dante's passage through the frontiers between the two netherworld kingdoms. Dante leaves hell along the "blind stream" which cannot be

> ... find by sight,
> but by the sound of a narrow stream that trickles
> through a channel it has cut into the rock (XXXIV, 130-2)

- and at the end of the narrow passage is confronted with the sight of the starlit sky. Noman in a similar manner follows "water by the roadside, always over-shouted in the roistering day" yet now performing "audibly in its hidings" (179). And above, he "could see the dim tracery of the stars struggling out here and there between the clouds" (180). The whole journey happens in an almost complete darkness, just as the passage of the poets to the foot of the Mount Purgatory. Dante's "cieco flume" is described by Pike as "a truly liminal region", mysteriously connecting the deepest circle of hell with the Purgatory though not belonging to

any of them.[362] Noman's journey through the dark landcape, discernible by sounds and touch rather than sight, parallels this motif, leading finally to another "liminal" zone – the police station of the Policeman Fox, situated "inside the walls" of Mathers' house.

Significantly, the omnipresent "leftness" is exchanged in this final pages of the novel for the "right": old Mathers' dwelling is located on the "right-hand" side, similarly as other reassuringly familiar places (e.g. "Courahan's house", 200). In fact, leaving Policeman Fox, Noman moves on in the mode that resembles not only the closing lines of the *Inferno*, but also the opening of the *Purgatorio*:

> We made our way across the lonely plain,
> like one returning to a lost pathway,
> who, till he finds it, seems to move in vain (*Purg*. I, 118-120)

Noman follows a well known, re-discovered path, indulges in imagining his "old friend Divney" and finally sees his own house "exactly in the point I knew it stood". He is overwhelmed by the sense of happiness and fulfillment which – as in case of Dante - renders the experience of inferno only a distant memory (200-1).

At this point, however, the illusion of the liberation from the reality of the infernal Parish is displayed. Noman is confronted with the fact of his death and damnation. The seeming parallel with Dante's passage through the frontier between the two kingdoms turns into a bitter travesty. The duality of right and left is rendered obsolete in the light of this new revelation. The landscape through which he now staggers is on the one hand the same region he walked through at the beginning of the narrative (the path to the police barracks), this time, however, the spatial dualism seems superceded by the all-embracing "leftness": "The grasses at hand were coarse and foul. Waterlogged bog and healthless marsh *stretched endlessly to left and right*." (204, emphasis mine).

In the opening canto of the *Purgatorio* the re-gained hope of the pilgrim is paralleled by the breath-taking imagery of dawn:

> Daybreak was vanquishing the dark's last hour,
> which fled before it; in the distance, I
> could recognize the trembling of the sea. (*Purg*. I, 115-7)

In the final passages of *The Third Policeman* "the night had passed away and the dawn had come" yet "with a bitter searing wind", brining "black angry clouds" rather than light. The sunrise of the *Purgatorio* is a promise of the continuation of progress, the intimation of hope in the upward movement, the sign of transfer from the realm of darkness and a decisive change. In Noman's narrative, it signals only the deathly *repetition* of the infernal punishment.

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[362] Pike, 132.

In a similar manner, on the threshold of the *Paradiso*, Dante is ordered to immerse himself in the Lethe – the river of forgetfulness – that cleans him from the last recollections of his earthly sins. He is made lighter to be able to ascend to Heaven (*Purg*. XXXI). In *The Third Policeman,* this motif finds another cruel inversion: Noman also goes through the Lethean experience: "my mind became quite empty, light and felt as if it were very white in colour" (203). Nevertheless, the Lethe of O'Brien's novel again implies repetition rather than progression. The linear structure of the *Commedia* determines the fact, that the Dante of the *Paradiso* is different from the Dante of the opening of the *Inferno*, it conditions a necessary development.[363] On the other hand, the circular movement of *The Third Policeman* implies stasis, the entrapment in the infinite repetitiveness.

Freccero – dealing with the foundational generic characteristic of the *Commedia* – speaks of the form of "Christian allegory" which "is identical with the phenomenology of confession, for both involve a comprehension of the self in history within a retrospective literary structure".[364] The roots of this genre must be traced back to Augustine's *Confessiones*, to his declaration from the introduction to the 2nd Book about calling "to mind my past foulness" and "the very bitter remembrance" in order that "Thou mayest grow sweet to me" (quoted at length in the 4th chapter of this essay). Augustine delineates in this fragment the basic dialectic of past sin and present repentance based on the spiritual enlightenment - the poetics of conversion.

*The Third Policeman* begins in a mode that can easily be classified as 'confessional' – "Not everybody knows how I killed…" – a retrospective account of life centered around the moment of moral fall. In the case of the *Commedia* this structure provides the deepest conflict within the narrative: that between Dante "who exists but does not know" and Dante "who knows but does not yet exist", between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet.[365] *The Third Policeman* turns this inner and meaningful tension into an utter paradox, which frames the whole narrative and exposes the text's "impossibility".[366] In the ideally circular and seemingly endlessly iterative structure which the novel operates in – from one "is it about bicycle?" to another, there is no possibility for the position of the voice "outside", outside of the circle. Secondly, the "phenomenology of confession" depends – as mentioned above - on change, development, on the fact that there is a substantial difference between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet. No such change can occur within the circular structure of the Parish, which eases its infinite repetitiveness only by means of an infernal Lethe of forgetfulness. The voice of Dante the poet sounds often clear among the infernal dismay,

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[363] Miller, 99-100.
[364] Freccero, 120
[365] Freccero, 120, Pike, 84.
[366] Cf. Lanters, 209; Hunt, 65.

directing the readers towards particular moments of his poetic allegory. Such a voice seems to surface quite often also on the pages of *The Third Policeman*; it seems, however, hopelessly inadequate and blind to the actual workings of the infernal reality of the Parish. Meditating over the strategy of inquiry for Mathers' black box in the police-barracks Noman decides:

> I would be crafty. In the morning I would go to the barracks and report the theft of my American gold watch. Perhaps it was this lie which was responsible for the bad things that happen to me afterwards. I had no American gold watch. (38)

The last two sentences are spoken by "Noman who knows", an equivalent of Dante-poet. They reveal, however, his utter unreliability as a narrator and his sheer confusion. The narrative standpoint of the *Commedia* is one of final union between "being" and "knowledge"; *The Third Policeman* ends with the revelation of "non-being" and "ignorance".

Thus O'Brien's novel presents itself as a merely infernal rather than Dante's Christian allegory, an allegory decapitated, lacking the necessary component of progression, the upward movement. It follows – as I attempted to prove – a similar path as the *Inferno*, playing on the one hand with the infernal poetics of distortion, parodic inversion and dissolution of stable meaning; and on the other – trying to anchor this instability to the moral reality, i.e. the necessary limitations and imperfection of the fallen human reason and perception. It represents the mode of epistemological comedy linking it, however, to the ethical as well. The crucial difference emerges only on the verges of both texts. As Ezra Pound suggests – the *Inferno* must be read only as a prelude to the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*.[367] The dawn of the first canto of the *Purgatory* is concomitant also with the cleansing of the pilgrim's vision and gradual re-establishment of proper relations between words and things. *The Third Policeman* leaves no space for such an upward continuation. Therefore, it cannot provide a complete all-explaining system of the kind the *Commedia* as a whole presents. It stays within the infernal zone of fragmentation, "angry incomprehension" and irony. It remains horizontal rather than vertical, it moves in circles, rather than – as the pilgrims-poets do – in the gyre.

[367] Pound, 185.

# VIII. Conclusion

"Have we really lost faith in that other space?
Have they vanished forever, both Heaven and Hell?"
Czesław Miłosz

In St. Augustine's *Confessiones* there occurs a notion not dissimilar from the maxim that ends *At Swim Two Birds*, equating "death" with "a full stop". The bishop of Hippo makes a parallel between human life and the recitation of a song (*canticum*): it is only the silence following the utterance ("a full stop") that provides a fulfillment and completeness of meaning. Similarly, "death is no more than the syntactic silence necessary for meaning to emerge" – the meaning revealed in the state of blessedness or damnation.[368] The dignity of human life is realized in the fact that death forms a coda in which our will is definitively identified, merged forever with our choice of good or evil.[369]

In the modern inferno of *The Third Policeman*, however, this ultimate meaning is realized by means of meaninglessness. The damnation in the *Commedia* is inevitably linked with the acknowledgment of the Divine Justice and the consciousness of individual sinfulness. It participates in the objective order which molds even hell into the manifestation of God's universal plan. Every soul arriving before Minos, the infernal judge confesses their sins:

> ... when the ill-begotten soul
> stands there before him it confesses all,
> and that accomplished judge of sins
> decides what place in Hell is fit for it,
> then coils his tail around himself to count
> how many circles down the soul must go (V, 9-15)

The act of confession is followed by the inscription of the sinner into the infernal topography, his *localization* within the Divine plan. On the other hand, in the chaosmos of modernity, such a certainty of order and sense of situatedness is denied in the "godless and devilless" underworld. The narrator of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* expresses the anxiety and incertitude that distinguish the modern and the Dantean experience:

> I was they say they say in Purgatory, in Hell too, admirable singulars, admirable assurance. Plunged in ice up to the nostrils, the eylids caked with frozen tears, to fight all your battles

[368] *Confessions*, IV. 10, XI. 28; Freccero, 270-1.
[369] Lisicki, 240.

> o'er again, what tranquility, and know there are no more emotions in store, no, I can't have heard aright.[370]

In the world where only parody and the comedy of the absurd remain as the proper means of expression of the *conditio humana*, a new mode of damnation is uncovered. The semantic and ontological stability that envelopes the meaninglessness of the *Inferno* and assigns to it its place in the universal structure, is obliterated as the Divine centre guaranteeing the ultimate meaning fades into oblivion. In *The Third Policeman* this incertitude takes a form of the erasure of the narrator's memory. To quote O'Brien's letter to Saroyan again: the essence of Noman's hell consists in "the re-discovery of the familiar, the re-experience of the already suffered, the fresh-forgetting of the un-remembered". The final realization of his status - being dead and damned - engenders for the first time in the novel a truly infernal mental and external landscape of fear, helplessness and bleakness (203-204); nevertheless it is followed by another alteration: "My mind was completely void. I did not recall who I was, where I was, or what my business was upon earth." (204) Afterwards, when his consciousness returns, he experiences the very same feelings of surprise and disorientation when confronted with the very same appearances of the police station and its curious inhabitants. Both Noman and the damned of the *Inferno* remain reified in "their changeless there-being", however, the modern hell of O'Brien offers for its inhabitant no re-assuring knowledge of the finality of his state.

Dante's journey starts on the morning of the Good Friday, the time when the whole creation suffers the anxiety and chaos resulting from the capture, humiliation and later - death of its Ruler. The pilgrim travels through hell within the space of three days between the death and the night of resurrection of Christ - the period of the triumph of death over the world. O'Brien's Noman also spends three days in the netherworld of the Parish. Nevertheless, this temporal zone between the death and the resurrection seems here extended and multiplied into infinity. Dante's journey is linear as is the Christian view of history, thus it implies progress and culmination. After the Good Friday there is always the Easter Sunday. On the other hand, Noman's time is frozen within those three days of darkness - in a kind of flowing, repetitive yet static eternity: "vast enough for search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain".[371] Within this temporal/spatial zone the Divine centre is truly denied and lacking (death of Christ) engendering thus the centrifugal movement of chaos and meaninglessness.

I commenced the introduction to this essay with the comparison between O'Brien and his more famous contemporary, Samuel Beckett. This comparison seems useful also for the conclusive remarks on the subject of their 'netherworlds', revealing in two brief comments

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[370] Beckett, "Texts for Nothing", *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. Gontarski, (New York: Grove Press 1995), 124-5.
[371] Beckett, "The Lost Ones", *The Complete Short Prose…*, 203.

the essential "in-betwenness" of *The Third Policeman* in relation to the infernos of the modern and the Christian age.

According to Antoni Libera, Beckett's *Not I* – revolving ceaselessly around the motif of "that April morning" when "all gone out", yet which gives a constant, though never realized hope that "she will be purged...back in the field...morning sun" – is enclosed within the same symbolic time of Christ's death and burial.[372] There is, however, a crucial difference between the repetitive eternity of Beckett and O'Brien. The heroine of *Not I* is punished for nothing else than the eternal sin of "being born" – a representation of the absurd human tragedy. On the other hand, despite his escapist and pantheistic leanings, the protagonist of *The Third Policeman* is subjected to the evaluation on the basis of the individualized ethical code for a specific individual transgression.

Similarly, as Van Hulle argues, Beckett's are the "purgatorial poetics" set in the liminal "no man's land" "between two lit refuges" – as the opusculum *neither* describes them This space is set apart, situated between the "admirable singulars" of hell and paradise to which the door are shut, in the constant "to and fro in shadow".[373] O'Brien's netherworld also finds its proper analogy in the most vague, liminal spaces of the *Commedia* – the infernal vestibule – with its cruel comedy of namelessness, moral nullity and issueless movement. On the other hand, it still remains a zone *within* the walls of Inferno, and subjected to the same punitive Justice.

In this essay I attempted to uncover the tension between O'Brien's inherently subversive poetics that tends towards the modes of parody and inversion and the probably more cryptic inclination of the narrative towards the closed and resolved systems of the Christian morality tale and the allegory of fallen humanity. A reading of O'Brien's novel centered on the theme of the netherworld and realized by means of the analogy with Dante's *Commedia* renders possible a resolution of the inherent paradox between the heteroglossic poetics of the novel and the dimension of "moral satire" at "the heart" of the text. The vision of "a relative world" which denies the ontological stability and exposes the essential insufficiency of man's epistemological tools (senses and language) may imply the inclusion of the novel into the critical context of post-modernism (as it is most common in the current discourse). Nevertheless, such an exegetical standpoint seems, arguably, to tend towards a reductionist reading that obliterates the Christian dimension of the text. The analysis of *The Third Policeman* through the mirror of Dante's *Inferno* enables an "excavation" of those strata of meaning, pointing to the possibility of the inter-relation between the "proto-postmodernist" epistemological - and the Dantean "ethical" - comedy and displaying the undeniable tendency of the text towards a morality tale or even an "infernal allegory".

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[372] Beckett, „Not I", *Collected Shorter Plays*, (London: Faber and Faber 1990), 213-223; A. Libera, "Wstęp do Dramatów Becketta", *Samuel Beckett: Dramaty*, ed. & trans. A. Libera, (Wrocław: PIW 1995), 286-7.
[373] Beckett, "neither", *The Complete Short Prose…*, 258; Van Hulle, 35-7.

It is not to say that the Dantean reading of the novel provides an ultimate, all-embracing solution. On the contrary, I attempted to highlight the essential “undecidability” of the text hesitating on the frontier between the two conceptual frames - the meaningful ordered netherworlds of the medieval literature and the meaningless hell of modernity. The former is balanced by the sense of incertitude and fluidity that dissolves the assurances of Christian eschatology in the mode parallel to Dante’s treatment of the Ante-hell motif. At the same time, the latter model is checked by the presence of a stable ethical core which bounds even the novel’s most subversive devices within the frame of the specifically infernal setting thus turning the linguistic and epistemological ambiguities into the emblems of man’s fallen nature. At the end, however, as Keith Hopper notices it is the story of sin and punishment that “constitutes the thematic dominant” of the text, binding together its multi-vocal disorder and offering “an alternative vision”: “The dominant is the same as the structure of bones in an organic body: it contains the theme of the whole, supports the whole, enters into relation with it”.[374]

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[374] Hopper, 258.

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# Resumé

## (Post)moderní *Inferno* : *Třetí strážník* Flanna O'Briena a středověké a moderní vize zásvětí

Tématem této diplomové práce je interpretace románu irského spisovatele Flanna O'Briena *The Third Policeman* (v českém překladu Ondřeje Pilného *Třetí strážník*). Analýza se zaměřuje na motiv zásvětí / pekla, do něhož je uvržen vypravěč a zároveň protagonista tohoto textu. Tato práce se soustřeďuje na analogie mezi O'Brienovym dílem a nejznámějším „průvodcem zásvětím" v literární historii, tedy Dantovou Komedií. Cílem práce je ukázat, jakým způsobem O'Brienův román vstupuje do složitého „dialogu" s křesťanskou eschatologickou doktrínou, v němž se konstantně střídají polohy parodie a afirmace, jejíchž výslednicí je pak komplexní reprezentace Pekla „*sub specie temporis nostri*".

*At Swim Two Birds*, první O Brienův román, končí deklarací: „Smrt je tečka". Z hlediska vypravěčské strategie tohoto textu je toto ztotožnění „smrti" a „konce diskurzu" zcela oprávněné – jedná se o jediný způsob, jakým lze přerušit nekonečný proces zmnožování a narušování celistvostí jednotlivých hlasů a stylů, které vytváří polyfonickou strukturu tohoto pozdně modernistického / raně postmoderního textu. O Brienův druhý román, *Třetí strážník* (ukončen v roce 1940, avšak publikován až po autorově smrti v roce 1967) tuto ontologickou hranici překračuje a zaměřuje se na představení „světa po smrti". Odhalení pravé podstaty představené reality je však odsunuto až na poslední stránky románu, kde se dozvídáme, že groteskní a snová „skutečnost" je „určitým druhem pekla", v němž se protagonista nachází kvůli spáchanému zločinu.

Většina kritiků si všímá existence tohoto „křesťanského jádra" románu. *Třetí strážník* je v tomto kontextu popisován jako příběh „zločinu a trestu". Hlavní hrdina zavraždí svého bohatého souseda, aby tak získal prostředky pro publikaci svého „definitivního komentáře" k dílům extravagantního vědce de Selbyho a následně je sám zabit svým kumpánem. „Trest" je v jeho případě realizován v kategoriích uvržení do podivného světa řízeného trojici policistů (strážníků), kam ho zavede hledání „černé skřínky" obsahující ukradené peníze. V této nové realitě se známá každodenní skutečnost mísí s nepravděpodobnými jevy, fyzikální zákony jsou neustále

porušovány a vypravěč je opakovaně konfrontován se situacemi, které není schopen popsat ani pochopit. Nakonec, když se pokusí o útěk a návrat domu, čtenář odhaluje pravdu o jeho ontologickým statutu – naopak pro vypravěče tento okamžik poznání trvá pouze chvíli, neboť součástí jeho trestu je i opakované „mazání pamětí“, kvůli kterému nové setkání se třemi policisty ho naplňuje stejným údivem a nejistotou jako to první.

Jak je zřejmé, děj *Třetího strážníka* nenese – kromě samé lokalizace v prostoru pekla – žádnou přímou spojitost s Dantovou básni. Analogie mezi *Třetím strážníkem* a Dantem není otázkou prokazatelného vlivu, a byla v dosavadní kritické recepci O‘Brienova díla spíše přehlížena. V první řadě tomu bránila autorova pověst „irského šaška“, který většinu svého života byl známý především jako tvůrce satirických fejetonů v dublinském tisku a legendární postava dublinského hospodského života. Tato legenda dala vzniknout specifické „biografické kritice“, která pojímala O‘Brienovy spisy především z hlediska jejich humoristické složky, jejíž predominance z principu vylučovala přítomnost „vážných“ témat, tedy i souvislost s Dantovým *Peklem*.

Druhá hlavní „kritická škola“ zabývající se dílem irského spisovatele docenila jeho roli jako postavy na pomezí poetiky modernismu a postmodernismu. O‘Brienův román je dáván do souvislosti především s 1) žánrem menippské satiry (jak ho definoval Michail Bachtin) a 2) s koncepcí „meta-románu“. Z hlediska prvního přístupu je *Třetí strážník* interpretován jako satirický útok na tradici západní karteziánské epistemologie a osvícenského racionalismu (např. M. K. Booker). V rámci diskurzu „meta-románu“ je *Třetí strážník* definován jako auto-reflexivní dílo, který narušuje celistvost textu, odhaluje jeho fiktivní ontologicky status a demaskuje základní nedostatečnost a ambivalenci jazyka (Keith Hopper). Oba tyto přístupy zdůrazňují „proti-autoritářský“ charakter díla, zaměřen proti monologickým systémům, které se pokouší vyčerpávajícím a úplným způsobem popsat a vysvětlit realitu. I z tohoto hlediska je tedy Dantovo dílo – považováno za básnickou reprezentaci celistvé a hierarchické kosmologie středověké *Christianitas* – poměrně nepravděpodobným referenčním bodem pro interpretací *Strážníka*.

Kritické interpretace O‘Brienova románu jsou tedy poznamenány vnitřním paradoxem: na jedné straně si všímají „mravní dimenze“ textu, na druhé – přítomnost takového „stabilního středu“ rozhodně nezapadá do celkové struktury tohoto mnohoznačného a parodického textu, považovaného za exemplární případ

raně postmoderní poetiky. Román se pak jeví jako prostor, v němž se uskutečňuje něco na způsob derridovského střetu mezi „středem a hrou“ (*centre and play*). Tato diplomová práce se pokouší o překlenutí onoho inherentního paradoxu právě skrze čtení *Třetího strážníka* na pozadí Dantova eposu a křesťanské doktríny. První zpěv Dantova díla, *Peklo*, představuje zde prostředek k odhalení „etické“ dimenze O Brienova románu, ale také alternativní zdroj pro jeho subverzivní strategie zaměřené na zpochybnění schopnosti lidské episteme a zdůraznění nedostatku vědeckého racionalismu post-osvícenského světa.

Záměr této analýzy by se dal osvětlit pomocí pojmu vypůjčeného od Hugha Kennera, který ve své studií o Beckettovi píše o irském sklonu k „epistemologické, spíše než etické komedii“ (*epistemological commedy*). „Etická“ je samozřejmě *Commedia* Dantova, zatímco Swift či Beckett se zaměřují spíše na odhalení základní omezenosti lidské percepce, lidského intelektu a lidského jazyka, na zdůraznění - v ironické formě - nepoznatelné, mnohoznačné a neurčité podstaty reality. V této práci – aniž bych zpochybňoval Kennerovu definici, chtěl bych poukázat na to, že epistemologická a etická komedie nemusí nutně vytvářet protikladnou dvojici. Naopak, na základě „dantovského“ čtení motivu pekla v *Třetím strážníkovi* bych chtěl dokázat, že obě koncepce – v případě této knihy – vytváří navzájem se doplňující jednotu. Omezenost lidského poznání a podivná, realita obrácena vzhůru nohama jsou pak fakta obsahující i eticky význam.

Jak jíž bylo řečeno, na základě biografických údajů, které o O‘Brienovy máme, nelze doložit, že by se při tvorbě *Třetího strážníka* Dantem přímo inspiroval. Můžeme naopak jednoznačně říci, že jeho zdrojem při vytváření „moderního Inferna“ byla irská středověká vyprávění o cestách do zásvětí. O‘Brien studoval středověkou irskou literaturu na University College Dublin a z těchto zdrojů často čerpal i ve svých jiných románech (především *At Swim* a *An Beál Bocht* – Řečí pro pláč). Ve druhé kapitole této práce se proto zabývám tématem intertextuality v O‘Brienově díle, s důrazem právě na použití středověkých textů o zásvětí.

Vypráveč v románu *At Swim Two Birds* se explicitně přiklání k názoru, že „s literaturou by se mělo zacházet jako s pekelnou hlubinou“ (*limbo*) se které si spisovatel libovolně vytahuje postavy a motivy pro své vlastní text.  I ostatní jeho díla se otevřeně přiklánějí k intertextuální podstatě literární tvorby. *Třetí strážník* se naopak doslova odehrává v „pekelné hlubině“, čímž - podle Bachtinovy teorie – se

kniha stává automaticky hlasem určitého diskurzu, v tomto případě tradice „putování do zásvětí". Zároveň však je intertextualita v moderním kritickém diskurzu považována za princip vnitřně „rozvratný", který nutně zahrnuje prvek deformace originálního textu. V této kapitole se snažím demonstrovat - především na základě fragmentů Řečí pro pláč – jakým způsobem O'Brien zachází s tématem zásvětí a s irským středověkými texty této tradice. Z analýzy vyplývá, že by se O'Brienovo dílo dalo shrnout pod teoretický pojem „převrácené, invertní intertextuality" (*inverted intertextuality*), který se nejčastěji projevuje v parodii a satiře.

Motiv pekla a použití mýtických vyprávění pro moderní text nutně spojuje *Třetího strážníka* s kritickým kontextem modernismu, v němž mezi hlavní formy „textuálního dialogu s minulostí" patří tzv. „mýtická metoda", kterou poprvé definoval T. S. Eliot v souvislosti s Joycovým *Odysseem*. Druhá část této kapitoly se pak pokouší analyzovat román právě v tomto teoretickým kontextu. V obecným úvodu je dokazováno, že modernistická „mýtická metoda" je ve skutečnosti princip vnitřně ambivalentní. Zatímco pro Eliota se jedná o prostředek nastolení klasické disciplíny v anarchickém světě modernity, tedy o princip satirický a konzervativní (mýtus versus současnost), v případě Joycova použití Homéra nebo Beckettova čerpání motivů z Danta se ukazuje, že mýtická metoda může působit i opačným směrem – tedy narušovat celistvost a autoritu mýtu v moderních podmínkách relativity a nestálostí významu. Tento mechanismus by se dal charakterizovat jako „poetika naruby obracející" (*poetics of inversion*), jako v případě Beckettova „stavění Danta na hlavu" - tedy otočení směru pohybu ze vzestupu (od Pekla k Ráji) na sestup směrem ke dnu Pekla. Tato teoretická analýza je následně aplikována na text *Třetího strážníka* a jeho vztah k tradičním, křesťanským představám záhrobí (na základě analogií k Dantovu *Infernu*). Textový rozbor dokazuje, že i v tomto případě se jedná o velmi nejednoznačný přístup k meta-vyprávěním minulostí: na jedné straně dochází (jako v případě irských středověkých textů) k neustalému parodování a „obrácení vzhůru nohama" klasických motivů, na straně druhé však tato poetika otevírá pole také pro mravní satiru namířenou na konkrétní moderní realitu juxtaponovanou s klasickým obrazem světa a zásvětí. O'Brienova výstavba Pekla *sub specie temporis nostri* tak potvrzuje základní napětí v rámci „invertní intertextuality", která podle H. P. Pletta může sloužit jak jako prostředek negace tak afirmace hodnot.

Toto napětí se odráží v další struktuře práce. Třetí kapitola se zaměřuje na analýzu románu z hlediska Bachtinovy koncepce „menippské satiry", tedy žánru,

který radikálním způsobem utočí na všechny „monologické“ systémy a narušuje autoritu mýtu. Naopak kapitoly 4. a 5. se soustřeďují na přítomnost elementu „etické komedie“, který text naopak spojuje s Dantem a s křesťanským normativním řádem.

Menippská satira je žánrový koncept často používaný v interpretacích *Třetího strážníka*. Podle většiny kritiků je román především satirou na západní post-karteziánský racionalismus, víru v objektivní uchopitelnost reality pomocí smyslů a intelektu a v individuální „cogito“ jako neotřesitelný základ a záruku této reality. Ve třetí kapitole demonstruji mechanismy této satiry, s odvoláním na filosofickou „dekonstrukci“ Descartova systému, kterou několik let před vznikem *Třetího strážníka* provedl – z tomistických pozic - Jacques Maritain. Pro nejdůležitější O Brienovy interprety (Keith Hopper, M. K. Booker) je kritika kartesianismu opřena o v zásadě „postmoderní“ vidění světa, tedy popření stability vnější reality, zpochybnění stabilního „já“ a dekonstrukci všech absolutních myšlenkových „systémů“. Naopak tato diplomová práce - skrze aplikaci Maritaina – se snaží poukázat na možné „křesťanské“ základy O‘Brienovy satiry, které tímto umožňují uvedení Dantova *Pekla* jako alternativního modelu pro poetiku zkoumaného textu.

Ve druhé části této kapitoly se zabývám Dantovým *Infernem* jako „epistemologickou komedií“, tedy poukazují na souvislost mezi Bachtinovým konceptem menippské satiry a středověkým kontextem zobrazování záhrobí. *Peklo* je také založeno na principu „obrácení vzhůru nohama“, textové deformace a nedokonalé percepce. Na druhé straně, zatímco Bachtinova menippea (vycházející s koncepce „karnevalu“) předpokládá totální zavržení autority a řádu, Dantova báseň umisťuje chaos Inferna do celistvého, stabilního kosmu. Modus „světa naruby“ je prezentován pouze jako obraz padlého lidstva, skrze které Poutník postupuje výš, k očištění svých smyslů a jazyka, k dokonalé Pravdě.

V jádru *Třetího strážníka* je tak obsažen nerozřešitelný paradox. Na jedné straně máme „revoluční mechanismus“ menippské satiry, která podle Kristevy „neuznává uzavřené systémy“ a „nerozlišuje mezi hříchem a ctností“, na straně druhé „mravní vědomí“ vyjadřené v motivu pekla a zavržení. Tento paradoxní charakter O‘Brienova díla se pokouším demonstrovat na základě analýzy ústředního motivu jeho prvního románu *At Swim Two Birds*, tedy dlouhé citace se středověkého vyprávění *Šílenství krále Sweenyho* (*Buile Suibhne*). Interpretace je zde postavena na derridovském dualismu „středu“ a „hry“. O‘Brienův text je vystavěn právě na základě

svobodné „hry“ různých diskurzů, zbavených hierarchie a hodnotového zakotvení, které prochází procesem konstantní parodické dekonstrukce. Na druhé straně staroirský text je situován jako určitý „střed“, který tento princip „hry“ omezuje, působí jako dostředivá síla.

Tímto způsobem se dostáváme k další částí analýzy, soustředěné už nikoli na „rozvratné“ strategie O‘Brienova textu, ale spíše na jejich situování do etického kontextu vyznačeného pro potřeby interpretace Dantovou vizí zásvětí. V kapitole 4. se jedná o téma „zločinu“ (či spíše „hříchu“) a trestu, který poskytuje „hlubinný“ rámec celého vyprávění a tlačí ho směrem k alegorickým „parabolickým příběhům“ středověku. O‘Brienovo peklo je na první pohled vystavěno na zcela opačných principech než *Inferno* Danta. Jelikož peklo je u Danta srovnáno s „vězením“ a definováno v kategoriích zločinu a trestu, používám ve svém rozboru Foucaultovy reflexe ohledně proměny vězeňského systému v době osvícenství, abych demonstroval rozdílné pojetí trestu u obou autoru. V případě *Třetího strážníka* se jedná o „moderní“ peklo zaměřené na trestání mysli spíše než těla. Na druhé straně, navzdory této „povrchové“ odlišnosti platí v O‘Brienově záhrobí osvědčené dantovské principy „*contrapasso*“ (odplaty), které předurčují formu zavržení hlavního hrdiny na základě jeho hříchu a vyvozují podobu pekla z jeho vlastní *psyche*. V případě hlavního hrdiny se jedná o záhrobí odvozeno z absurdních vědeckých teorii De Selbyho a z jeho karteziánské víry v plnou smyslovou a myšlenkovou uchopitelnost reality.

5. kapitola se pak zabývá etickou dimenzí díla, tedy pohledem na vypravěčův hřích a jeho podstatu. Opět se jedná o analýzu, která ukazuje *Třetího strážníka* jako text, jenž na jedné straně představuje „moderní verzi“ motivu věčného zavržení, na druhé – účastní se klasické křesťanské vize člověka a jeho „posledních věcí“. Jestliže Dantova setkání s dušemi zavržených se opírají o princip zpovědi – vyznání hříchu a vědomí zla, vypravěč *Třetího strážníka* čtenáři předává nedokonalou zpověď, která se vyznačuje snahou o útěk před osobní zodpovědností a téměř naprostým vytěsněním mravního smyslu. V jeho vyprávění se střetává manichejský pohled na hřích jako výsledek vnějšího působení reality, a dantovský / křesťanský přístup, který člověka definuje skrze svobodnou vůli vybrat zlo nebo dobro, a problém zla a zodpovědnosti za činy individualizuje. Protagonista se pokouší o útěk před tímto pojetím osoby do pólu pantheistického „rozpuštění se“ v přírodě, avšak je na druhé straně

konfrontován s nevyhnutelnou logikou jednoznačně „dantovského“ pekla, které trestá konkrétní individuum za konkrétní osobní provinění.

Ve druhé částí této kapitoly je tento přístup opět projektován na komparativní plán Dantovy *Komedie*. Vypravěčova snaha o zrušení vlastní subjektivity (v etickém smyslu) je v románu zobrazená skrze skutečnost, že se jedná doopravdy o bezejmennou postavu, o „ztělesnění nulovosti“. Z této vlastnosti pramení i to, že se vypravěč – navzdory svým činům – nejeví čtenáři jako „zcela zkažený“. Chybí v něm totiž vědomý příklon k zlu, chybí právě onen moment rozhodnutí, který determinuje činy. V *Infernu* je takováto „nulovost“ údělem zavržených z „Předpeklí“, těch, kteří se nepřipojili ani k Luciferově vzpouře proti Bohu ani nevybrali dobro. Jsou tak v jistém smyslu vyloučení ze základní struktury eschatologických království a vržení do neurčitého hraničního prostoru na okrají pekla. Tento prostor – charakterizován anonymitou, bezcílným pohybem a nepřítomností teologické jistoty, která je údělem zavržených a spasených – patří mezi nejčastější topická místa modernistické literatury. O Brien se tak vpisuje do stejné tradice jako např. T. S. Eliot, jehož vize modernity se opakovaně vracejí k Dantovu motivu Předpeklí – vize zavržení, které však postrádá určitou dávku osobní integrity a důstojnosti vycházející s uplatnění svobodné vůle, jež projevují některé velkolepé postavy *Inferna* jako Farinata či Ugolino. Toto moderní peklo už ze sebe nemůže generovat vizi podobnou Dantově, ale pouze absurdní komedii bezejmenných stínů postrádajících zakotvení v kosmickém řádu.

Hřích těchto „neutrálních“ duší Dante charakterizuje jako „bytí pro sebe“, totální uzavření se do vlastního já. Příznačné je, že hlavní příčina vypravěčova hříchu ve *Třetím strážníkovi*, vědec De Selby, by se dal etymologicky odvodit od německého „*der Selbe*“. Hlavní hrdina se tak v tomto čtění jeví jako přímý nástupce zavržených z Předpeklí, někdo kdo existoval (a zhřešil) „sám pro sebe“. Toto uchopení motivu šíleného vědce poukazuje i na možnost alegorické interpretace románu jako celku. Touto otázkou se zabývá poslední, šestá kapitola.

Pojem alegorie prošel v posledních desetiletích zásadní proměnou, hlavně vlivem textů Paula De Mana. V teoretickém úvodu 6. kapitoly nastiňuji toto „postmoderní“ pojetí alegorie založené na základním principu „diskontinuity“ mezi dvěma složkami tohoto tropu a nemožnosti dosažení jejich plné „identifikace“. *Třetí strážník* do velké míry splňuje tuto definici textu, který neustále nabízí prostor pro alegorické čtení,

konfrontuje čtenáře s „nadbytky významu“, jež svádí k hledání skryté roviny textu. Zároveň tuto možnost následně nerealizuje a namísto vše vysvětlující skryté alegorické roviny představuje neurčitou alegorii věčně proměnlivé a nestabilní reality. Na druhé straně jsou v textu obsaženy prvky, které poukazují na možnost interpretace na základě klasické, dantovské alegorie.

Alegorie, jako základní strukturní prvek *Komedie*, předpokládá existenci stálého referenčního rámce, stabilního a hierarchizovaného kosmu. Z tohoto důvodu je tento princip považován za nepoužitelný pro moderní literaturu, v níž zakotvení v takovémto pevném hodnotovém rámci schází. V *Třetím strážníkovi* najdeme však několik motivů, které takovou interpretaci umožňují. V této kapitole se zabývám především motivem dualismu „levé“ a „pravé“ strany, jenž prostupuje celým vyprávěním a – zdá se – obsahuje výraznou „mravní“ dimenzi. Poskytuje také prostor pro srovnání s podobnými topograficko-etickými motivy v Dantově *Pekle*. Základní rozdíl mezi oběma texty se vyskytuje až ve způsobu, jakým jsou tyto alegorie završeny. Na posledních stránkách *Třetího strážníka*, když se vypravěč pokouší o útěk ze svého „zásvětí“, je dualismus „levé“ a „pravé“ strany popřen, naopak Dante po přechodu z Inferna do Očistce mění směr svého pohybu z „levotočivého“ na „pravotočivý“. V tomto rozdílu se projevuje zásadní a konečný rozdíl mezi středověkou a moderní reprezentací pekla. Dantova alegorie je příběhem „konverze, obrácení“ - zahrnuje přechod od hříchu a nevědomosti (epistemologická a etická komedie), skrze očištění, k hříchem nezkalenému vidění reality a úplnosti spásy. Pohyb poutníků probíhá po spirále a předpokládá pokrok a kulminaci. Naopak *Třetí strážník* se pohybuje v kruhu – na konci románu se setkáváme s přesným opakováním scény, která vypravěče do jeho zásvětí uvedla. Místo vertikálního vzestupu máme zde horizontální věčné opakování, které vylučuje únik ze zóny chaosu, deformovaného vidění a uvažování. *Třetí strážník* je tak dantovskou alegorii, která je však „zamrzlá“, zbavená svého vyvrcholení, uzavřená v pekelném vězeni.

Závěrem lze tedy říci, že O’Brienův román je svého druhu mezním textem váhajícím mezi uzavřeným a završeným zásvětím středověkého poematu a otevřeným, neurčitým peklem modernity. Je prodchnutý stejným duchem, který proniká Beckettovy „monology ze záhrobí“ – pocitem nejistoty, nezacílenosti a věčné proměnlivosti věcí a významů. Na druhé straně akceptuje etický systém křesťanské teologie, který definuje podstatu infernální reality a poskytuje její vysvětlení.