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“Fin-de-siècle Elements in Flann O’Brien’s Novel *The Third Policeman*”

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Declaration

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, 8th August 2014

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Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

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Introduction

This work addresses the affinity of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* to major works of fin-de-siècle literature as well as to some essential aspects of this period, which “designates a European-wide extended farewell to the nineteenth century,”¹ in general. In spite of the novel's primary focus on satirising science and building a metafictional vision of hell, the presence of a great number of fin-de-siècle motifs or even strategies in its narrative is irrefutable; they are entwined, played with and ironised. Although numerous fin-de-siècle strands could be touched upon in connection with the novel, the major dialogue is with two of them: decadence and early avant-garde. Since the former is more frequent it is given more space in this work.

As the umbrella term fin de siècle reminds us, what is currently called “fin-de-siècle decadence” came into being in France. Due to an increasing industrialization and expanding capitalism, the feeling that civilisation was falling into decline started to seep in, inciting both anxiety and curiosity. Théophile Gautier (re-)introduced the term long before the actual turn of the century in the preface to Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers*

¹ Patrick McGuinness, “Introduction,” *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives*, ed. Patrick McGuinness (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000) 9.

of *Evil*; the seemingly ongoing decline reminded him of the Silver Poets from Classical Rome for whom people had lost their enthusiasm and a sense of purpose yet instead of expressing discontent, they accepted it and relished in it.² Apart from embracing decline, the fin-de-siècle decadence simultaneously absorbed a great deal from the co-existing movements such as aestheticism, symbolism or even naturalism. However, all this began to take shape only in the course of time; during the 1890s, “decadence” was a derogatory term for virtually *any* innovative movement.

The difficulty of critics to settle on one summarizing and yet accurate definition of “decadence” is by some regarded a facet of this movement itself: as David Weir puts it, “the paradoxical nature of decadence and its resistance to definition are among the most important elements of its meaning.”³ Concerning features that have been mostly regarded decadent, Max Beerbohm stresses “paradox and marivaudage, lassitude, a love of horror and all unusual things, a love of argot and archaism and the mysteries of style” and artifice.⁴ An unnamed journalist from the 19th-century draws attention to the preference of “a cripple to a well-built man, a dissolute wench to a domestic woman”, “the full blown, fading flowers, the over-ripe fruit” and morbid fascination with crime.⁵ A well-known 20th-century critic Holbrook Jackson includes also egoism and curiosity.⁶ Others add love of “the perverse, the sordid, the artificial, (...) beauty to be found in the unnatural, (...) representation of the cleanliness in unclean things; (...) a contempt for social conventions such as truth and marriage”⁷ or “pessimism, antiquarianism and ‘the *paradis artificiels*’ of the dream and drug induced hallucination.”⁸

Viewing decadence as a set of features might prove useful since manifestations of decadence occur in plenty of works irrespective of their main genre. Conversely, purely decadent works are scarce; not even Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *Against Nature* or Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be classified thus. There are many of these features to be found in *The Third Policeman* and what is more, they are not

² Martin Travers, *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice* (London: Continuum, 2001) 127.

³ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995) 2.

⁴ Max Beerbohm, “A Letter to the Editor,” *The Yellow Book* July 1894: 284.

⁵ “Notes on the Fin de Siècle Movement in Parisian Art and Literature,” *The Art Critic* November 1893: 5.

⁶ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Richards, 1922) 64.

⁷ Russell M. Goldfarb, “Late Victorian Decadence,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* summer 1962: 373.

⁸ Weir 8.

neutralized by O'Brien's satirical stance; rather, they enhance the novel's unusualness and thus contribute a great deal to its originality.

Although Flann O'Brien scholarship is growing and focusing increasingly on *The Third Policeman*, not so much attention is paid to the second half of the 19th century with respect to the novel and even less to the actual fin de siècle. And yet it is known that Flann O'Brien was familiar with Huysmans' *Against Nature*, one of the landmarks of decadence – as mentioned and/or discussed by critics such as Anne Clissman or Keith Hopper.⁹ Besides, his library comprised also English authors who in one way or another influenced decadence and fin de siècle in general, such as Walter Pater (*The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, Marius the Epicurean, Appreciations, With an Essay on Style*) or John Ruskin (*Sesame and Lilies*).¹⁰ Additionally, numerous references to the end of the 19th century are present in "Cruiskeen Lawn," Brian O'Nolan's satirical column that he wrote under another pen-name, Myles na gCopaleen. There, mockery of this period takes turns with a subtle homage. There are mentions of Oscar Wilde¹¹ and echoes of his views, such as a work of art competing with rather than imitating a natural object.¹² Besides, Myles makes ironic comments on luxury editions of books that were so typical of fin-de-siècle fashion¹³ or on the "awful little blue-nosed schoolboy"¹⁴ Ruskin.

The analogy between *The Third Policeman* and fin-de-siècle literature is justified also by the influence of this period on both modernism and postmodernism. Flann O'Brien wrote *The Third Policeman* between 1939 and 1940, yet the prevalent tendency is to read the novel through the lens of postmodernism. The reasons are several; it is the metafictionality pervading not only *The Third Policeman*, yet also his other works, *At-Swim-Two-Birds* in particular. Besides, one can perceive a distrust of totality and of the possibility of reaching it in the novel as well as the motif of language as a prison. Significantly, embryonic postmodernism existed in the fin de siècle side by side with emergent modernism and one of its tell-tale signs was the overpowering language; already the decadents and aesthetes simultaneously strengthened and fought

⁹ Anne Clissman, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 353.

¹⁰ Catherine Ahearn and Adam Winstanley, "An Inventory of Brian O'Nolan's Library at Boston College," *The Parish Review* fall 2013: 41.

¹¹ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from "Cruiskeen Lawn"* (London: Flamingo, 1993) 38-39.

¹² O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* 260.

¹³ O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* 91.

¹⁴ O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* 244.

its potential via unconventional approaches such as “hyperbole, incongruous imagery [or] startling neologisms.”¹⁵ The fragmentary nature of decadent literature is, in turn, what articulates reservations towards wholeness and completion. One example for all is George Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man*, which betrays a mixture of genres as well as an obvious intertextual relation with Huysmans’ *Against Nature*. The awareness of intertextuality is likewise very prominent in postmodernism; *The Third Policeman* contains quotes/borrowings from sources as diverse as old Irish legends, Shakespeare or Huysmans. Furthermore, postmodernism is characterized by powerful irony, which *The Third Policeman* well exemplifies. Irony was frequently the means by which decadent literature elevated itself over other movements (to quote Holbrook Jackson, “those who were most allied with its moods and whims were (...) in some cases capable of looking at themselves and laughing”¹⁶) while the early avant-garde was even more irreverent towards its predecessors.

Finally, O’Brien’s novel is conspicuously orientated against traditional aesthetics, which is also in compliance with postmodernism. In postmodernism, beauty is no longer relevant – everything is language, and one could argue that this goes against the aesthetic tendencies of most of the fin-de-siècle literature. On the other hand, any de-aestheticization is predicated on a certain relation to traditional aesthetics. Moreover, in many postmodern works, this categorical rejection of aesthetics becomes partially disrupted by their own metafictionality; *The Third Policeman* is not an exception in this respect. The narrator has a subconscious feeling that this world was created by somebody in order to look pleasing to the eye, perfect or even *beautiful*; at one point he recounts how “the trees and the tall hills and the fine views of bogland had been arranged by *wise* hands for the *pleasing* picture they made when looked at from the road.”¹⁷ It was precisely the fin-de-siècle period when the critique of the aesthetic stance typical of postmodernism started to emerge. Already the decadents were mildly anticipating the postmodern stance to aesthetics: by rejecting what was conventionally pleasing to the eye and by incessant discontent. As early as in Arthur Rimbaud’s *Season in Hell*, the narrator embraces the world of sin and crime *as a result of* being dissatisfied

¹⁵ Robert Ziegler, *Asymptote: An Approach to Decadent Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 10.

¹⁶ Jackson 19.

¹⁷ Flann O’Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007) 39. My emphases. Further references to this book appear in parentheses in the text.

with Beauty¹⁸ rather than the other way round. The milestone of decadence *Against Nature* ends on a note of resignation and even previously, the main protagonist experiences disillusionment with his dreamed-of life. Pericles Lewis hits the nail on the head when he acknowledges that “Huysmans himself took an ambivalent attitude toward his protagonist’s decadence, but [that] the sickly Des Esseintes became a hero to a generation of minor poets and one major one, Stéphane Mallarmé.”¹⁹

When Terry Eagleton professes that “it is in the fin de siècle, under the gigantic shadow of Friedrich Nietzsche, that post-modernism first germinates, even before modernism proper had got off the ground,”²⁰ he indirectly refers also to nascent avant-garde and the inherently unaesthetic nature (refusing beauty in favour of ordinariness or ugliness) of such literature. Its works, such as those of Jarry, started appearing already in the 1890s and therefore in what is most frequently considered the fin-de-siècle period. This thesis follows Richard Murphy’s approach to the early avant-garde, one which stresses 1) the avant-garde’s opposition to art institutions and to the discourses connected with them²¹ 2) the contrast within the avant-garde between “the desire to create a new form of art with a direct bearing upon life, and the need to retain for art a degree of autonomy in order to preserve a distance to reality and thus a vantage point from which art might formulate its social critique.”²²

When it comes to the theme, *The Third Policeman* lays emphasis on science; a quest after beauty, typical for most fin-de-siècle works, is non-existent in the novel. Interestingly, science was one of the central concerns at the turn of the 20th century; many possibilities were being imagined and discussed although still unavailable. Michael Bell claims that “the true impact of the shift in scientific thinking arose from the last two decades of the nineteenth century”²³ and subsequently goes on to argue that these shifts coincided with the “most intense unease about realist form.”²⁴ Thus, he implies that the rebellious fin-de-siècle movements might have their origin precisely in

¹⁸ Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres complètes d’Arthur Rimbaud* (Paris: Éditions de La banderole, 1922) 5-6.

¹⁹ Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 47.

²⁰ Terry Eagleton, “The Flight to the Real,” *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 18.

²¹ Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 9.

²² Murphy 29.

²³ Michael Bell, “The Metaphysics of Modernism,” *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 11.

²⁴ Bell 11.

these changes in the scientific view of the world. Decadent writers did not omit science either in their oeuvres; Kate Rees notes that Des Esseintes “is himself more of an engineer and an architect than an artist (...) a technical genius who models his creations on literary ideals.”²⁵ Occasionally art and science coalesced, like in James A. Whistler’s alleged statement that “painting is (...) an exact science.”²⁶ The decadents’ attitude to science was not entirely negative. After all, one should be aware of the artificiality of every product of science and as artifice and artificiality were one of the worshipped aspects for the decadents, there is the constant presence of curiosity and revelry in what the less artistic people despise. In early avant-garde this ambivalent relationship towards science turns into admiration or at least into the belief in its potential.

Linking O’Brien’s novel to a literary period with which he is not commonly associated may provide a fresh outlook on his famous novel. This thesis likens *The Third Policeman* to three major works associated with fin-de-siècle literature: novels *Against Nature* by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1884) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde (1891) and a play *Ubu Rex* by Alfred Jarry (1896). *Against Nature* is by many considered a “manifesto” of fin-de-siècle decadence. Its relation to *The Third Policeman* has already been given attention by critics. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a world-famous decadent novel written already in the fin de siècle proper (i.e. in the 1890s) and expanding on *Against Nature*, while *Ubu Rex* can be said to epitomize the end of fin de siècle and the transition to the twentieth century.

Discussing the parallels with *The Third Policeman* from three distinct perspectives enables to make the comparison with fin de siècle more comprehensive. Yet before proceeding to do this, the first chapter attempts to explain and clarify the features that *The Third Policeman* shares with fin-de-siècle decadence in general and attempts to uncover its multifaceted reflections in the novel. It comments on the manifestations of unnaturalness such as artificiality, focus of the narrative on unusual sense experiences and even moral and physical decay or sexual extravagances. Only the second chapter offers a more concretized account, one concerning the similarities between *The Third Policeman* and Huysmans’ *Against Nature*. It endeavours to summarize the existing critical approaches to this topic and open new ones. Primarily it

²⁵ Kate Rees, *Flaubert: Transportation, Progression, Progress* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010)155.

²⁶ George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* (London: William Heinemann, 1917) 103.

centres on the absent presence of Huysmans' *Des Esseintes* in *The Third Policeman* while pointing out its multiple metamorphoses together with the resulting implications. The third chapter establishes a parallel between *The Third Policeman* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Quite logically, this chapter draws attention to the paradoxes relating to issues such as life/death, animate/inanimate, body/soul or moral/immoral in both novels and aims to at least partially explain the patently unresolvable tensions between them. The fourth and last chapter makes probably the most daring parallel of this thesis – one with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Rex*, a play which is not decadent yet belongs to the early avant-garde. The motifs as well as the presence of a fictional science called pataphysics are so distinct that they inevitably invite a comparison.

1. The Yellow World

“The place where he stood waved drowsily with strange flowers, heavy with perfume, dripping with odours. Gloomy and nameless weeds not to be found in Mentzelius. Huge moths, so richly winged that they must have banqueted upon tapestries and royal stuffs, slept on the pillars that flanked either side of the gateway...”

(Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill*)

One could argue that none of the decadent features leave much room for comedy, especially those such as the love of horror, the treatment of crime or the accent on perversity. Yet though *The Third Policeman* has many comic moments, these often culminate in puzzlement which only strengthens in the reader the impression of the unfamiliar nature of this hell-world and its laws. Monique Gallagher attests to the presence of “delirious extravaganza”¹ in *The Third Policeman* and continues that “despite hilarious passages, there is a perturbing overall atmosphere and a certain *malaise* subsists even after all the tricks of the fantastic genre have been recognised.”²

¹ Monique Gallagher, “*The Third Policeman: A Grave Yarn*” *That Other World: The Supernatural and the Fantastic in Irish Literature and Its Contexts. Volume Two*, ed. Bruce Stewart (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1998) 196.

² Gallagher 196.

Carol Taaffe aptly calls the novel a “perverse pastoral.”³ “Delirious”, “malaise”, and “perverse” are expressions more than fitting for fin-de-siècle decadence and their recurrence in critical essays about *The Third Policeman* speaks for itself. Importantly, most of the decadent features enumerated in the introduction, be it “paradox,” “a love of unusual things”, “artifice”, “a contempt for social conventions” or “hallucinations,” are linked, in one way or another, to unnaturalness. For Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes*, “Nature has had her day; she has finally exhausted, through the nauseating uniformity of her landscapes and her skies, the sedulous patience of men of refined taste.”⁴ Decadence not only dealt with unnaturalness, it *took delight* in dealing with it. And so seems to do, at least occasionally, O’Brien’s nameless narrator; his narrative ceaselessly returns to this theme. In the decadent works, it is the curiosity combined with awe vis-a-vis human invention and creativity from which stems the ubiquitous worship of artifice (and as a result also artificiality and unnaturalness). In *The Third Policeman*, constant curiosity is responsible for (not only⁵) the narrator’s positive and anxious experiences. Alongside other things, it causes that the narrator takes a right turn in the end, meets Fox and eventually is compelled to repeat his journey. Everybody in the novel seems to suffer from a desire to know more even if it suspends the achievement of one’s goal.

One of the manifestations of curiosity is the vision of a different world as a fascinating and ideal destination. De Selby theorizes that by discovering a way along the “barrel” of the sausage-shaped Earth, “a world of entirely new sensation and experience will be open to humanity.” (98) Such a vision was not uncommon in the fin-de-siècle period. Huysmans’ *Des Esseintes* experiences “impulses towards an ideal, towards an *unknown universe*, towards a far-off blessedness as desirable as that which we are promised by the Holy Scripture.”⁶ The human spirit and imagination are better than nature, they can improve upon it or even supersede it. Similarly, in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, which is set partly at the end of the 19th century and well captures the spirit of the period, the nameless narrator likens encountering Vinteuil’s musical originality with a stay on another planet. He says that “a pair of wings, a different respiratory system, which enabled us to travel through space, would in no way help us,

³Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008) 78.

⁴Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998) 20.

⁵Other characters struggle with “inquisitive curiosity” (113) as well in the novel; for instance, the narrator is told that it was the “unbearable curiosity that drove Fox mad.” (159)

⁶Huysmans 66. My emphasis.

for if we visited Mars or Venus while keeping the same senses, they would clothe everything we could see in the same aspect as things of Earth.”⁷ In Huysmans’ case, the imaginary world is presented as an alternative to heaven and thus links decadence with symbolism⁸ while Proust’s passage speaks of this “otherworld” as exclusively pertaining to a work of art.

De Selby’s “sausage theory” implying an existence of an ideal parallel world sounds ludicrous when described. Nevertheless, the imaginary world of *The Third Policeman* is not limited to theory as the novel is a self-conscious work of art – what is mentioned by Proust’s narrator and proposed by de Selby becomes reality in O’Brien’s novel. After reaching the state of death (for de Selby, the presence of death is nearly always a certainty before such an adventure can be lived through [98]), he unwittingly discovers the “new direction” propounded by de Selby. As the narrative proceeds, a substantial emphasis is put on the difficulties the narrator experiences while vainly attempting to grasp not merely the policemen’s subjective indulgence in their own inventions, yet also his environment. Recalling the fantasy of Proust’s nameless narrator, the narrator is in a world where his earthbound senses are unable to perceive its oddities. Ironically, he himself assumes that it is the other way round, claiming that after the minute change in Mathers’ house (which, as one learns at the end, is death) it was his senses that became “disarranged” (24). Putting the self-referential aspects of the novel aside, the sardonic outcome seems to be that one has to commit a crime and find himself in hell in order to experience something incomparable with ordinary reality: imagination no longer suffices.

⁷ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff et. al. (New York, NY: The Modern Library, 2012) 1674.

⁸ The presence of symbolism in *The Third Policeman* has been discussed in one of the few essays touching on *The Third Policeman* in connection with the fin de siècle: Mary Power’s essay “The Figure of the Magician in ‘The Third Policeman’ and ‘The Hard Life’”. It deals with esotericism and occultism which was a firm part of what is considered to be the end of the 19th century. Mary Power’s argument is that Mathers in *The Third Policeman* was modelled on MacGregor Mathers (1854-1918), a magician and member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, an occult society founded in 1888. Power sees de Selby’s *Golden Hours* as an echo of Golden Dawn and considers the footnotes and commentaries in the novel a parody of not only scholarly, but also occult learning. She reads the character of Fournier as a reference to Alan Fournier who wrote a novel about magic and comments on things such as the winds or the black air in the way that they might refer to auras and black substance respectively (both are features found in mysticism). As real Mathers might have been killed by his rival, she sees this link of the novel with esotericism/occultism as very strong. See Mary Power, “The Figure of the Magician in ‘The Third Policeman’ and ‘The Hard Life’,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* June 1982: 55-63.

Artifice and the resulting artificiality as well as unnaturalness constitute the alpha and the omega of *The Third Policeman*. Merriam-Webster defines artifice as follows:

1. a: clever or artful skill: **INGENUITY**
b: an ingenious device or expedient
2. a: an artful stratagem: **TRICK**
b: false or insincere behavior⁹

All these definitions are in one way or another present in the narrative of *The Third Policeman*, as will become apparent in the following lines. The fin-de-siècle decadence was not exclusively about art, yet likewise about human inventiveness in general – some critics, such as Holbrook Jackson, highlight its creative, and even *regenerative* potential.¹⁰ Although this creativity was to rival science, it almost bordered on it. In Huysmans' *Against Nature*, a scientific method causes that “blends of alcohols and spirits” result in a smell of a flower, which Des Esseintes considers superior to a real flower (“that rare touch which is the stamp of a work of art”¹¹). In his mind, he dismantles the perfume and puts together again so that he can “immediately tell you the proportions used in its composition, explain the psychology of its blending, practically name the artist who had created it.”¹² By such an operation, he discovers the delightful artificiality of the flower fragrances, artificiality which is the outcome of the creator's ingenuity.

The Sergeant in *The Third Policeman* describes a machine that “that splits up any smell into its sub- and inter-smells” (143) and is fascinated by “the dirty smells that are inside the perfume of a lovely lily-of-the mountain.”(143) Thus, as well as Des Esseintes, the Sergeant realises after his experiments the contrast between the smell of the ingredients used and that of their final mixture. If the process is artistic is marginal here, what is delightful is the incongruity between the two, which actually still retains the fin-de-siècle touch since incongruity of elements leads to unnaturalness. For Lanta Davis, such scrutiny makes the policemen lose their desire for sense experiences; she writes that “the modern attempt to turn everything into an objective, studied thing (...)

⁹ “artifice,” *Merriam-Webster*, web, 20 June 2014 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artifice>>

¹⁰ Jackson 70-71.

¹¹ Huysmans 93.

¹² Huysmans 95.

ruins such experiences.”¹³ Nevertheless, the policemen do not appear to be disappointed in the passage; on the contrary, they seem to be enjoying the discrepancy that such an experiment generates. Though there is no mention of beauty, Sergeant calls the process “interesting and edifying” (143) and MacCruiskeen promises the narrator “surprising things” (144) during his next visit to Eternity. Therefore, on the whole, the unnatural perception of the world mediated by an ingenious device (no longer a product of imagination as in the case of Des Esseintes) is presented as enticing rather than the contrary.

The artifice, which should also be understood in the metafictional manner, is accompanied by unnaturalness every step of the way. Besides the inventions and the unnatural outcomes of their use, it presents itself with the blend of the animate and inanimate. The policemen’s appearance, as well as their manner of speech, is unnatural. Mathers’ eyes do not seem to be “genuine eyes (...) but mechanical dummies animated by electricity or the like.” (26) Fox’s face is “red and gross as if gallons of hot thick blood had been pumped into it.” (189) Yet the most memorable instances are the consequence of the “atomic theory” as a result of which men become bicycles and vice versa due to riding too often. The Sergeant assures the flabbergasted narrator that the bicycles involved are “half-partaking of humanity.” (88)

The motif of interweaving of a human body and a body of a machine existed already in the 19th century. Minsoo Kang, in his book on the evolution of automatons and robots, notices that the late nineteenth century was a period in which “transcendent images of the hybridization of humanity with machinery appeared”¹⁴ and supplies examples from Villiers de l’Isle-Adam and Alfred Jarry. Villiers, who is still symbolist/decadent, creates Eve, a perfect artificial woman indistinguishable from a human one. Jarry deals with this topic, besides the Ubu plays, in *Supermale*, another contribution to the early avant-garde. Anson Rabinbach clarifies the fin-de-siècle parallel between a body and a machine by claiming that “the human body and the industrial machine were both motors that converted energy into mechanical work. The automata no longer had to be denied soul – all of nature exhibited the same protean

¹³ Lanta Davis, “Calmly Making Ribbons of Eternity: The Futility of the Modern Project in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*,” *Renascence* summer 2012: 346-347.

¹⁴ Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011) 235.

qualities as the machine.”¹⁵ In other words, humanity reached an era where the natural and the artificial might be indistinguishable from one another. While this is tackled critically by the decadents, Jarry and the early avant-garde favour such a change.

The treatment of this motif in *The Third Policeman* certainly undergoes exaggeration; the novel depicts, in satirical terms, precisely this hybridization of humanity with machinery, embellished by the fact that a bicycle is able to attain a human *personality* (which is close to a “soul”) by the means of a wacky “law of physics.” The inconvenient side-effects of such a process on social and political structure is pointed out by the Sergeant: “If you let it go too far (...) you would have bicycles wanting votes and they would get seats on the County Council and make the roads far worse (...) for their own ulterior motivation.” (92) Though to a certain extent the Atomic Theory is harmless and can even prove valuable (according to the Sergeant, “a little of it is a good thing and makes you hardy and puts iron into you” [93]), letting bicycles lead a fully-fledged human life could have disastrous consequences for the Parish. Hereby, both the decadent and the avant-garde viewpoint is ridiculed.

Richard Witt argues that Flann O’Brien “is a latecomer in a European movement of anti-naturalism begun by Rimbaud, Zola and Huysmans in the last quarter of the nineteenth century”¹⁶ and ascribes the unnaturalness in *The Third Policeman* not only to aspects such as de Selby’s theories in operation in the Parish, yet also to the false and deceptive nature of the hell-world.¹⁷ All this world looks as if created by another ingenious entity and if the word “unnatural” is not used, it is implied by the means of a description: “Everything seemed almost *too* pleasant, *too* perfect, *too* finely made. Each thing the eye could see was unmistakable and unambiguous, incapable of merging with any other thing (...). Trees were arranged here and there with far-from-usual consideration...”(41; my emphasis) This passage is doubtless metafictional, highlighting that the book is a world of its own, independent of commonly known reality. As Terence Brown puts it, the novel “certainly draws attention to itself as *artifice*, in what

¹⁵ Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992) 2.

¹⁶ Richard Witt, “Nature Denatured in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*” *University of Bucharest Review* Vol. XIV 2012: 133.

¹⁷ Witt 138-139.

we have come to recognise as the post-modern manner.”¹⁸ Astonishingly enough, an almost identical passage is to be found in one of the issues of *The Yellow Book*, a journal associated with fin de siècle, as part of a short story called “A Beautiful Accident” by a lesser-known author Stanley V. Makower. One of the opening paragraphs reads:

The whole scene is perfect. You could not pick a fault in it (...) You cannot tell why, but you feel that it is part of a scheme (...) an appropriateness in the relationship of one thing to another, and this is not through the cunning of the architect (...) It is so impossible to believe that they [the houses] contain all the attributes of the interior of a house and that people actually live in them.¹⁹

Like in *The Third Policeman*, it is a view from a road. Though here the perfection is considered accidental (which is clear already when glancing at the title) and devoid of a maker (“architect”), both its style and contents are amazingly close not only to the above-quoted passage from O’Brien’s novel, yet likewise to the one where the narrator is approaching the police barracks and is bewildered by his seemingly ingrained knowledge that despite the two-dimensional nature of the building (looking “as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside” [55]) there might be people inside: “what bewildered me was the sure knowledge deeply-rooted in my mind, that this was the house I was searching for and that there were people inside it.”(55) What is treated as unexplainable and beautiful instance of unnaturalness in *The Yellow Book* amounts to postmodern wonder at the skilfulness of the creator in *The Third Policeman*.

The portrait of this artificially developed, mechanical world is accompanied by a similarly mechanical language marked by repetitions or uncommon word usage. Keith Hopper refers to fin-de-siècle decadence when it comes to the recurring interest in colours apparent in the novel.²⁰ What is particularly curious yet omitted in Hopper’s essay is the amount of the adjectives “yellow” in *The Third Policeman*, including contexts where it seems rather forced or at least quite a bizarre choice. Examples such

¹⁸ Terence Brown, “Two Post-modern Novelists: Samuel Beckett and Flann O’Brien,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 218. My emphasis.

¹⁹ Stanley V. Makower, “A Beautiful Accident,” *The Yellow Book* July 1895: 298.

²⁰ Keith Hopper, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009) 109.

as “unbearable breathless yellow day” (164), “drinking yellow whiskey” (180) or “yellow water” (190) are plentiful.²¹ Given the number of other references to fin de siècle in the novel, this might also be one – more exactly an allusion to the “Yellow 1890”s, named so because of *The Yellow Book*. A similarly odd usage of “yellow” is typical of decadent literature of the 1890s, such as in the “muddy yellow sky”²² in *Against Nature* or “the moon hung low in the sky like a yellow skull”²³ in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Generally, the yellow colour tends to be associated with negative qualities and characteristics such as jealousy, various forms of deception (including irony) or even contamination²⁴ and therefore its status of “a decadent colour” is hardly surprising.

Richard Le Galienne even wrote a “defence of yellow,” employing irony not unlike O’Brien when attempting to divert people’s attention from green, which had very specific connotations at that time. One of his arguments in favour of yellow is that “it is in the quality, in the diversity of the things it colours, rather than in their mileage or tonnage, that yellow is distinguished”²⁵ and goes on that “when we say yellow we include golden, and all varieties of the colour – saffron, orange, flaxen, tawny, blonde, topaz, citron.”²⁶ As an outcome, nearly anything can be regarded as yellow; the same seems to apply to the narrative of *The Third Policeman* and its curious returns to this colour. These repetitions are one of the manifestations of the mechanicity of the narrative, together with words such as “box” or “queer.” However, none of these are accidental in relation to the action; each of them articulates something of import. As for “yellow”, its connotations of decadence and contamination are not unfit for O’Brien’s hell whose perfection is suspicious and where even the dawn can be “contagious.” (39) Furthermore, the resonation of “yellow” within *The Third Policeman* is chiefly ironic, especially in connection with the passage in which “dead” Mathers is describing the gowns according to which one can ascertain the length of his own life and claims that

²¹ Other examples of the (over)use of the adjective “yellow” in *The Third Policeman*: “it was an evening in a happy yellow summer”(10), (Mathers’) “hand was yellow”(25), (Mathers) “shook his yellow face”(28), (Mathers’ eyes) ”moved about restlessly in their yellow wrinkled sockets”(30), “yellow means a long life and the lighter the better.”(34), lamplight had “grown rich and yellow”(37), Sergeant’s “yellow stumps of teeth”(62) or “yellow light of an oil lamp”(181)

²² Huysmans 11.

²³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Harper Press, 2010) 182.

²⁴ Liz Constable, “Fin-de-siècle Yellow Fevers: Women Writers, Decadence and Discourses of Degeneracy,” *L’Esprit Créateur* fall 1997: 25.

²⁵ Richard Le Galienne, *Prose Fancies: Second Series* (London : H.S. Stone & Co., 1896) 90.

²⁶ Le Galienne 90.

“Yellow means a long life.”(34) The whole text of *The Third Policeman*, interspersed with idiosyncratic uses of the adjective “yellow,” is narrated by a dead narrator. Apart from irony, the occasionally unusual usage of yellow colour gestures to another ubiquitous and multifaceted topic in the narrative: sense perception.

Similarly to aestheticism and symbolism, decadence was concerned with achieving knowledge by means of new sensations and new experience; such knowledge served as an alternative to the objective exact science. As expressed by Walter Pater, “while all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems (...) to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours.”²⁷ To put it otherwise, although the mind and imagination are preferred in fin-de-siècle decadence, the senses are vital too – they are what kindles the imagination. The narrator in *The Third Policeman* experiences a lot of “stirrings of the senses” indeed, many of them in the nature. Although sometimes the narrator is terrified of his contrived surroundings, other times his senses succumb to the uncommon milieu without any trouble, such as in the following account of his impressions: “I felt a million little influences in my nostril, hay smells, grass-smells, odours from distant flowers, the reassuring unmistakability of the abiding earth beneath my head.”(45) At one point he even feels beautiful in such an environment; this happens when “a great heat (...) started to spread (...) like a magic influence, making everything, including my own self, very beautiful and happy in a dreamy drowsy way.”(44) The magic influence of the heat has a symbolic touch while heat and drowsiness are typically decadent expressions.

An even more decadent account of the environment comes up when, on his way to Eternity, O’Brien’s narrator observes the “gloominess and damp vegetation”(131) and further specifies that “there was a sultry smell and many flies of the gnat class were at home here.” (131) The ground is “covered with the damp and rotting fall of many autumns.”(131) The stress on the heat as well as the rot implies a fertile ground for insects and other low forms of life. Later on in the novel, the narrator remembers that: “Flying beetles came against me in their broad loops and circles, whirling blindly against my chest; overhead geese and heavy birds were calling in the middle of a journey.” (179-180) These passages are nearly devoid of irony. The gloom, sultry smell, flies, beetles and heavy birds are not unlike the first chapter of Aubrey Beardsley’s

²⁷ Walter H. Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1873) 211.

Under the Hill, the pastoral scene with a description of a portal as follows: “The place (...) waved drowsily with strange flowers, heavy with perfume, dripping with odours. Gloomy and nameless weeds (...) Huge moths (...) slept on the pillars.”²⁸ In fact, Beardsley’s passage can likewise be compared with the description of O’Brien’s entrance to Eternity itself: “The little porch was old, with green stains on the stonework and warts of moss in its many crannies. The door was an old brown door with ecclesiastical hinges and ornamental ironwork.” (132) The pastoral setting suggestive of symbolism and antiquarianism is ironised and subverted in *The Third Policeman* by being part of a clearly artificial environment.

A certain fascination with the past emerges not only in the account of entering Eternity, yet also in how the narrator describes his own adventures, for instance when he emphasises that one day, he “picked up idly an old tattered book in the science master’s study.” (9) Considering that the book is one by de Selby, it poses the question: when did he write? The answer might be, with a slight hyperbole, that de Selby must be a fin-de-siècle figure since he writes about “the softening and degeneration of the human race.” (22) One of the principal books for grasping fin-de-siècle mentality is Max Nordau’s *Degeneration*. It contains two essential points, the first one being the similarity of the genius and the idiot in the age when degeneration takes place (i.e. at the end of the 19th century)²⁹: both are eccentric and reclusive.³⁰

In *The Third Policeman*, de Selby is referred to by his critics as the “eccentric idiot-genius philosopher”³¹ and the fact that he himself composes treatises on this topic is only one of the instances of O’Brien’s mockery in the novel. Not only are the fin-de-siècle writers close to mentally deficient people, they also wallow in writing on “disease, death and putrefaction.”³² In other words, according to Nordau the fin-de-siècle authors do prefer a cripple to the well-built man, indeed. In *The Third Policeman* it is not only de Selby’s doubtful ingenuity; the narrative contains a special focus on various diseases, malfunctions and disorders and at times it, being self-consciously a text, appears to relish in these. Even physically, de Selby seems to approximate the fin-de-siècle idea of a sick man: according to the narrative, “a malignant condition of the

²⁸ Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill* (London: John Lane, 1904) 7-8.

²⁹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1895) 23.

³⁰ Nordau 304; 309.

³¹ Hopper 47.

³² Nordau 296.

gall bladder (...) reduced de Selby to a cripple.” (97) Yet the peculiar predilection for health problems might rather be perceived in the narrator, who has, apart from the trouble with his memory (“blank anonymity coming suddenly in the middle of my life should be at best alarming, a sharp symptom that the mind is in decay” [43]), a wooden leg. After his death, his handicap no longer prevents him from being agile and doing things such as cycling and his ambivalent attitude to it is best illustrated by the preposition he uses when disclosing how it came about: he says “my leg was broken *for me*”(10), turning it into a beneficial act. On the other hand, the easiness with which he moves about has a clear source in the fact that he is dead and that all his “life” can be perceived as hallucinatory.

Second, Nordau’s book deals with degeneration in the form of effeminate men. For Nordau, a degenerate fin-de-siècle man displays a surplus of emotions; he “laughs until he sheds tears, or weeps copiously without adequate occasion; a commonplace line of poetry or prose sends a shudder down his back; (...) even the most insipid and least commendable, arouses in him the most vehement emotions.”³³ Nowadays it is quite generally known that the type of decadent hero made familiar by Huysmans, Wilde and others conforms to this description to some extent, in spite of the apparent overstatement on the part of Nordau. Regarding *The Third Policeman*, some protagonists in the “hell” where the narrator is to be found are not so far removed from the above, either. The effeminacy of O’Brien’s policemen is excessive and therefore comic; they do not only laugh or weep, some aspects of their appearance as well as behaviour are feminine too. MacCruiskeen “looked as if he shaved twice a day. He had white enamelled teeth (...) and when he smiled it was a fine sight to see.” (60) The narrator considers his face that of a poet rather than a policeman and to top it off, MacCruiskeen has a high, almost feminine voice and speaks “with a delicate careful intonation.” (60) Once it is even his movements that highlight this impression, such as when the narrator recalls that “MacCruiskeen (...) tiptoed delicately from the room like a trained nurse” (119). Elsewhere the narrator switches to the Sergeant when he points out that his call “rose nearly to the pitch of a woman’s scream.” (144) Fox is the only policeman who evades this comparison. These moments prove to be even more humorous by the fact that the policemen’s occasional effeminacy presents a stark

³³ Nordau 19.

contrast to their monstrous bodies. Though all the policemen differ in facial appearance and personality, all of them are “gross in body.” (60)

Not even the sexual curiosities, so typical of fin-de-siècle literature and tightly linked with Nordau’s book, are missing in *The Third Policeman*. Ellis Hanson emphasises that when the decadents wrote about sex, the decisive factor was to shock: “The more unnatural, the more grotesque, the more like a work of art it was, the better.”³⁴ Attacking the prevalent gender stereotype was a necessity for the fin-de-siècle decadents. O’Brien pushes this strategy even further and, as usual, with irony of his own. In the seemingly never-ending narrative of *The Third Policeman*, the “love that dare not speak its name” is the love towards (at least primarily) inanimate bicycles. Various affairs between a person and somebody else’s bike are well-known in the Parish and considered a scandal – however, only when it comes to opposite-sex bicycles. (91-92) Same-sex relationships between a person and his/her bike appear to meet the standard. Méabh Long puts it well by writing that “while sex might be in the air, it should not penetrate the female: it is always masturbatory, homosexual or queer.”³⁵ The narrator does not stand out in this environment. He says he has no interest in women whatsoever (50) and towards the end confesses to his affair with MacCruiskeen’s androgynous bicycle: “I liked this bicycle (...) better even than I had liked some people with two legs.” (177)

Simultaneously, the hell-world introduces a mixture of other sexual peculiarities and extravagances. There are scenes and/or jokes in the narrative implying homosexual behaviour. It is mentioned that the Sergeant was “a very close friend of MacDadd after office hours.” (108) When in Eternity, the policemen are “examining each other’s instruments” with a jocular, yet clear sexual undertone. (136-137) Moreover, the narrator’s fascination with the enormous body of Fox is, apart from being hardly heterosexual, mildly masochistic; he makes a comment that Fox “dwelt upon my mind so strongly that I felt many times more submissive than afraid” (186) and finishes with a climactic sentence: “In the presence of this man I stopped wondering or even thinking.” (187) Jeffrey Mathewes draws attention to the Sergeant’s perversity as to the possibly

³⁴ Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Berkeley, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 23.

³⁵ Méabh Long, *Assembling Flann O’Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 91.

sadistic treatment of his bicycle.³⁶ Likewise, de Selby is described as sexually idiosyncratic; it is said he did not distinguish between men and women, which caused that he was considered a monster by his contemporaries. (174) The self-conscious and weary contempt for social conventions comes into practice also in *The Third Policeman* – although in a substantially more ironic form.

As one can witness, many general motifs and themes associated with fin-de-siècle (mainly decadent) literature occur in *The Third Policeman*. Many of them are adapted to suit the metafictional framework of the novel. What is more, even a similarity to concrete passages can be noticed and not only when it comes to the major fin-de-siècle works, yet also the lesser-known ones. Here and there these features are handled ironically, elsewhere the original mood seems to stay – though only in fragments. Unnaturalness assumes multiple forms in *The Third Policeman* – it is disquieting, at times even terrifying, yet the ever-present curiosity produces also a certain fascination with it. Curiosity is supported by the stress on sense perception. The frequent and occasionally unusual use of the colour yellow interestingly agrees with how fin-de-siècle authors employed it, yet this relation amounts to an ironic one when set aside the narrative in which it occurs. Behaviour against social conventions typical of decadent artists and protagonists alike appears in the form of male effeminacy and idiosyncratic sexuality; these are driven to absurdity in O'Brien's novel. All in all, *The Third Policeman* could be taken as a pertinent example for Liz Constable's statement that "morbidity, a cult of artificiality, exoticism, or sexual nonconformism (...) often dominate the thematic texture of decadent writing, and their literary representations constitute, to a great extent, its most lasting influence upon twentieth-century culture."³⁷

³⁶ Jeffrey Mathewes, "The Manichaeic Body in *The Third Policeman*: or Why Joe's Skin Is Scaly" *The Scriptorium: Flann O'Brien*, 6 November 2011, 20 June 2014

<http://www.themodernword.com/scriptorium/obrien_mathewes.pdf> 19-20.

³⁷ Liz Constable et al., "Introduction," *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. Liz Constable et al. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999) 2.

2.Des Esseintes in the Parish:

The Third Policeman and Huysmans' Against Nature

“the Crampton, an adorable blonde with a shrill voice, a long slender body encased in a gleaming brass corset and the supple, nervous resilience of a cat (...) sets in motion the immense rosaces of her elegant wheels and leaps forward (...) at the head of an express or a train bearing the day’s catch!”
(Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*)

The similarity between *The Third Policeman* and Huysmans' *Against Nature*, a novel that Matei Calinescu describes as “the *summa* of decadence, an encyclopedia of decadent tastes and idiosyncrasies,”¹ has already been recognized and commented upon several times. Most likely, the first critic who drew attention to *The Third Policeman* in connection with Huysmans was Anne Clissman. She considers Des Esseintes a model for de Selby,² noticing resemblances such as life regarded as a hallucination or the system of mirrors that both Des Esseintes and de Selby used, and makes a parallel

¹ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) 172.

² Anne Clissman, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1975) 352.

between the artificial environment in O'Brien's novel and in *Against Nature*.³ Borrowings from *Against Nature* were also commented on by J.C.C. Mays, in *Myles: Portraits of Brian O'Nolan*.⁴ Keith Hopper elaborates on this topic in his book *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist*. He calls Huysmans a "ghostly collaborator"⁵ and wonders to what extent the parallels between *The Third Policeman* and *Against Nature* are heavy with meaning and to what extent mere intertextuality.⁶ Furthermore, he points out that the references to Huysmans corroborate the postmodernism of O'Brien's novel by confirming the fictionality of the characters. Other shared themes he comments on are synesthesia, philosophy or colour, misogyny and homoeroticism.⁷

Indeed, the "ghost" of the figure of Des Esseintes, the main protagonist of Huysmans' novel *Against Nature*, seems to be floating all over the narrative of *The Third Policeman* – Des Esseintes' actions and opinions can be detected in a great number of characters appearing in the novel. Most of all, Des Esseintes is reflected in de Selby, the narrator's beacon, and in the narrator himself. Anthony Cronin, as well as many others, claims that the character of "de Selby appears to have come from the portrait of the eccentric recluse and savant, Des Esseintes."⁸ Even the name of these two protagonists has a similar ring to it. As already highlighted, unlike *Against Nature* and many other decadent works, *The Third Policeman* is not about an artist or art, unless one deems its self-referential aspects such. Yet Des Esseintes is not only an aesthete; he takes an interest in (pseudo-)science, too. Like Edison in Villiers' *Tomorrow's Eve* and other fin-de-siècle protagonists, he is somewhere between a scientist and an artist. Apart from occupying himself with all kinds of art imaginable, he carries out eccentric experiments which, though they depend heavily on imagination, often have a scientific side as well (presented through various devices and instruments needed for these purposes). So does de Selby. Nonetheless, de Selby's experiments constitute one of the major contributions to the comicality of the novel – none of them can be taken seriously.

³ Clissman 353.

⁴ Hopper 107-108.

⁵ Hopper 82.

⁶ Hopper 82-83.

⁷ Hopper 109.

⁸ Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Paladin, 1990) 113.

Undoubtedly, the real world and actual experience are marginal for Des Esseintes – imagination and concentration enable him to live out things in his mind, including travelling. By activities such as “watching mechanical fish, consulting timetables, contemplating chronometers and compasses, [or] examining fishing rods”⁹ he is able to, while not leaving his home, experience the sensations of travel.¹⁰ This motif has its distinctive counterpart in *The Third Policeman*. For de Selby, progress is illusion. Like Des Esseintes, when de Selby wanted to go to Folkestone,

instead of going to the railway station and inquiring about trains, he shut himself up in a room in his lodgings with a supply of picture postcards of the areas which would be traversed on such a journey, together with an elaborate arrangement of clocks and barometric instruments and a device for regulating the gaslight in conformity with the changing light of the outside day. (53)

Though de Selby’s equipment is slightly more scientific, the core of the process is the same. Although the narrator is sceptical about the veracity of this, he admits that one (unnamed) man saw “the savant coming out of a Folkestone bank on the material date.” (54) Des Esseintes is more reasonable in the fact that he does not strive to actually *move* to another place by this strategy; he is content with imagining all the travel while being convinced that this does not make the experience less worthwhile. In the words of Kate Rees, “Huysmans’ works act to deny the dynamics of progress and progression; (...) [in his] work, the ideal of the stationary is both celebrated and parodied.”¹¹

Inaction and stasis in general were likewise typical of decadents and aesthetes, especially in the version of idleness which was not only “chic” yet also a certain way of protest articulating the rejection of modernity.¹² Outside of the narrator, who spends his youth loitering around and pondering de Selby’s conclusions, this is given a ludicrous rendition when it comes to de Selby and his “alternative” way of travel. In his experiment, de Selby refused to move and yet wanted to reach another place. Hopper as well as Long relate this issue to Zeno’s paradox; according to Long, “while for Zeno the

⁹ Huysmans 18.

¹⁰ Huysmans 18.

¹¹ Rees 141-142.

¹² Gregory Dobbins, *Lazy Idle Schemers: Irish Modernism and the Cultural Politics of Idleness* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010) 40. In this book, Dobbins also discusses the motif of idleness in connection with *The Third Policeman*. He emphasises the narrator’s inability to do anything practical, being interested only in De Selby and his work. This is also a relevant parallel, though the narrator’s laziness is jeered at by the narrative and thus is miles away from the politicised laziness of the 19th century. See Dobbins 205-206.

point is the impossibility of motion, de Selby draws the conclusion that relocation is not: one may not move, but one can still arrive at a new place.”¹³ Viewed from another perspective, what is deliberately imagined and appreciated as such in *Against Nature* becomes a real attempt in *The Third Policeman*, an attempt that is comic and disturbing at the same time.

Among other similarities between de Selby and Des Esseintes one could name details like the mirrors, which “mirrored one another”¹⁴ or motifs such as hydrotherapy which Des Esseintes needs and wishes to undergo. Des Esseintes is unable to install hydrotherapy equipment since it is impossible for him to have the water transported up to his house due to the unsuitable position of his residence. Besides, he has trouble obtaining the water as well since there is not enough supply in the village.¹⁵ This is completely reversed and laughed at in the figure of de Selby who is far from this problem, being successful at installing water virtually everywhere in his house. (151-153) His abode is said to be “the most water-piped edifice in the world” (153) and once, he is reported to have used incredible 80, 000 gallons of water during a week. Nevertheless, to utter astonishment of the officials and the narrator alike, “none of the vast quantity of water drawn in ever left the house.” (152) Contrary to Des Esseintes, who intends to use the water for health therapy, de Selby performs various experiments involving this liquid since he associates water with paradise. (149-151)

The parallel between Des Esseintes and the nameless narrator begins with the childhood of both characters. The parents of both O’Brien’s narrator and Des Esseintes die before the respective protagonists come of age.¹⁶ Before that, there is little communication in the family; O’Brien’s narrator confides: “...my father and I were strangers and did not converse much (...) We were all happy enough in a queer separate way.” (8) In a substantially longer passage, Des Esseintes’ childhood is disclosed as follows: “His father (...) he scarcely knew; (...) Only rarely did husband and wife meet and when they did, they sat opposite one another before a table lit only by a lamp with a large, very deep shade (...) they would exchange barely a couple of words in this semi-darkness.”¹⁷ When Des Esseintes is to come of age, his cousin gives him “a reckoning

¹³ Long 75. Hopper calls the passage about travel “a direct intertextual appropriation from (...) Zeno;” he considers de Selby’s “journey” an application of Zeno’s paradox to real life. See Hopper 219.

¹⁴ Huysmans 10.

¹⁵ Huysmans 82.

¹⁶ Huysmans 4.

¹⁷ Huysmans 4.

of his stewardship”¹⁸ and thus Des Esseintes comes into full possession of his property. The narrator recounts that “the relationship between these two was of short duration, for there could be no point of contact between them, one being old, the other young.”¹⁹ O’Brien’s narrator experiences a similar situation: on his return he finds his family’s fortune in the hands of Divney who is supposed to restore it to him. Divney is likewise a much older man than the narrator and the only conversation between them is forced – however, this is not because of age difference yet because they do not trust each other.

Involuntary solitude is a repeated motif in decadent literature. In Stéphane Mallarmé’s prose poem “Autumn Complaint,” the speaker is abandoned by his lover and his only companion left is his cat . He points out that this has brought him to like decay and everything associated with it.²⁰ Another reason for both Des Esseintes’ and the nameless narrator’s isolation is their state of health. Des Esseintes is a weak “degenerate”, asthmatic and finicky while the nameless narrator of O’Brien’s novel has a physical handicap – a wooden leg. He says: “For years before that I had rarely gone out at all. This was because I was so busy with my work (...); also my wooden leg was not very good for walking with.” (13) (However, unlike Des Esseintes, his physical difficulty disappears once he gets to hell.) Des Esseintes spends his childhood alone, reads and goes on walks.²¹ O’Brien’s nameless narrator admits devoting nearly all his free time to studying de Selby and his French and German commentators. (11) Des Esseintes, though interested in education and science, scorns “men of letters” for their money-oriented character and for their views; he feels “contempt for humanity.”²² O’Brien’s narrator’s stance is not so unambiguous; his occasional criticism of de Selby is more to egoistically promote himself as a commentator than anything else. What brings the two novels more together is not so much a dislike of humanity, yet a dislike of women – one of the things that Hopper mentions in his book *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist*.²³ Des Esseintes had to endure “the innate stupidity of woman,”²⁴ while O’Brien’s narrator is completely indifferent when it comes to the opposite sex. (50)

¹⁸ Huysmans 6.

¹⁹ Huysmans 6.

²⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Vers et prose: morceaux choisis* (Paris: Perrin et cie., 1910) 107-108.

²¹ Huysmans 4-5.

²² Huysmans 7.

²³ Hopper 83.

²⁴ Huysmans 8.

Another trouble of both protagonists springs from their curiosity. After numerous experiments, Des Esseintes starts to be “haunted” by a smell or by a melody²⁵ since his senses stop functioning properly. Though he himself ascribes this to a disease, neurosis²⁶, it is likely that this is caused by the excessive use of his senses during his experiments. The senses are prone to overstrainment in both novels. In *The Third Policeman* the narrator is inquisitive since he wants to follow in de Selby’s footsteps and annotate his work (and yes, find the black box). Hence, although he often finds his experiences disagreeable rather than pleasant, he resumes his observation despite the difficulties. When MacCruiskeen is showing him his chests, the narrator complains: “All my senses were now strained so tensely (...) that I could almost hear my brain rattling in my head.”(75) Yet when the policeman hands him the magnifying glass to make him have a look at even smaller specimens, the narrator is unable to restrain himself and looks again. (75) In the fin-de-siècle decadence and aestheticism, the violation of senses was viewed as salutary; Martin Travers stresses that Rimbaud’s aim was to “arrive at the unknown through a derangement of all (...) senses.”²⁷ The discovery of new impressions simply made it worthwhile. In O’Brien’s novel, the outcome is rather bleak; the infinite regression causes that one can never stop observing since none of the chests is the last one.

At the end of the novel, both protagonists essentially end up where they started: as expressed by Nicholas White, “the narrative enjoys a structural circularity which takes Des Esseintes back to Paris.”²⁸ Des Esseintes’ attempt to restructure his life by the means of exceptional experiences proves to be in vain. Equally, O’Brien’s narrator makes the three-day effort to retrieve the black box, experiencing both horror and delight, only to find himself back at the starting point. This resemblance is noticed by Hopper as well; for him, “the existential outcome [of both novels] (...) is quite similar in mood and tone (...) and tends to serve the same moral and spiritual theme.”²⁹ Another peculiar resemblance between the two novels comes up exactly when this unfavourable outcome begins to approach. In one passage in the second half of *The Third Policeman* the narrator wakes up and can hear hammering since they are

²⁵ Huysmans 92; 101.

²⁶ Huysmans 92.

²⁷ Travers 128.

²⁸ Nicholas White, *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 141.

²⁹ Hopper 82-83.

preparing the scaffold for his execution. (“I was awakened the following morning by sounds of loud hammering outside the window...” [149; 154]) In *Against Nature* there is an almost identical passage, which likewise opens a chapter: Des Esseintes shuts himself up in the bedroom, trying not to listen to the *hammering* when the servants nail down the crates so that he can leave for Paris.³⁰

In *The Third Policeman*, the hammering awakes the fear of imminent death in the narrator. This could be said about Des Esseintes as well, though only in a metaphorical sense. The narrator explains Des Esseintes’ anxiety: “Each blow struck him in the heart, *the sentence* passed by the doctor was being carried out.”³¹ Interestingly, the motif of hearing thudding noises from outside that symbolise weariness and the advent of death is present also in Charles Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*, collection that prefigured fin-de-siècle decadence, more specifically in the poem “Autumn Song.” The sound of logs on the courtyard reminds the speaker of a gallows being built. The reason for such a vision is that the speaker is old, weary and can feel death coming. He is afraid (“I shudder as I hear each log that drops”³²). As far as Des Esseintes is concerned, when dealing only with the text and disregarding the historical reactions to it, such an outcome is definitely not supportive of beauty as the goal of life. In *The Third Policeman*, in turn, this motif is ironised by the fact that the narrator’s fear is pointless; obviously, he cannot die again when he is already in hell. It is only one negative moment in a chain of repetitions. Monique Gallagher connects these with “the mental *malaise* of modernity,”³³ which is in this case a continuation of the decay commenced at the end of the 19th century. What weakens the depressing feel of this repetitive hell is the fact that the narrator loses his memory every now and then.

The third figure in the novel reminiscent of Huysmans’ Des Esseintes is “dead” Mathers. Considering that the narrator is in hell, Mathers can be seen as a mere instrument for recalling the narrator’s own sins – he is part of the narrator’s hallucinatory punishment. The description of “dead” Mathers’ youth rings a bell when juxtaposed with *Against Nature*: Mathers tells the narrator:

³⁰ Huysmans 174. My emphasis.

³¹ Huysmans 174. My emphasis.

³² Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 117.

³³ Gallagher 204. My emphasis.

When I was a young man I led an unsatisfactory life and devoted most of my time to excesses of one kind or another [like Des Esseintes], my principal weakness being Number One.”(30) “After a time (...) I mercifully perceived the error of my ways [like Des Esseintes] and the unhappy destination I would reach unless I mended them. I retired from the world in order to try to comprehend it [like Des Esseintes] and to find out why it becomes more unsavoury as the years accumulate on a man’s body. (30)

In short, the protagonist of Huysmans’ novel lives through the same sinful experience, as a result of which he becomes disgusted by society and retreats into solitude, contemplation and imagination. The outcome of O’Brien’s passage is comical; Mathers’ reminiscence ends up at the conclusion that “no” is a better word than yes, ultimately leading to an amusing paradox since it allows him to sin as he wishes. (32) Des Esseintes’ attempt to change his profane life for the better is remoulded into the matter of trickiness of language in *The Third Policeman*.

Incidentally, the description of “dead” Mathers’ appearance is close to Huysmans’ description of Herod in Gustave Moreau’s painting *Salome*. The painted Herod’s face is “yellow, parchment-like, deeply lined, thinned by age.”³⁴ The hell-version of Mathers, about whom the narrator admits that he “might have been still dead save for the slight movement of his hand at the lamp” (25) fits this description as well. The narrator recollects that Mathers’ “hand was yellow, the wrinkled skin draped loosely upon the bones (...) [and that] the skin was like faded parchment.”(25) Apart from the obvious intertextuality, what also surfaces in the juxtaposition of Moreau’s painting and “dead” Mathers is another metafictional element of O’Brien’s novel: “dead” Mathers is also a figure in a work of art, a protagonist in a novel.

Regarding the “ghost” of Des Esseintes present in the characters of the policemen, one example has already been discussed in the first chapter: the one where Des Esseintes studies perfumes and is able to discern the details of their composition instantly. In contrast, the policemen in *The Third Policeman* are unable to identify such things themselves, being in need of a device for this purpose. The result is identical: the contrast between the separate ingredients and the product made of them is uncovered. A more significant passage bringing together Des Esseintes and the policemen is the one

³⁴ Huysmans 44.

regarding a device which MacCruiskeen calls “the mangle” and by the means of which he is going to mangle the light “for diversion and also for scientific truth.” (110) The nameless protagonist narrates how the light processed by the mangle gradually changed its appearance and how suddenly “the light seemed to burst and disappear and *simultaneously* there was a loud shout in the room, a shout which could not have come from a human throat.” (111; my emphasis) It might be apposite to stress once more at this point that plenty of the sense experiences in the novel are not positive; the narrator’s unquenchable curiosity is constantly accompanied by both horror and amazement. However, what is more significant in this passage is the switch, by making use of the mangle, from a phenomenon perceived by one sense (sight) to a phenomenon perceived by another sense (sense of hearing).

Synesthesia, the act of identifying one sense experience with another, did not originate in fin-de-siècle literature; evidence exists that correspondences between the senses have been observed since Greek antiquity.³⁵ Yet with Baudelaire and his successors it became an indispensable constituent of fin-de-siècle decadence. In Baudelaire’s “Correspondences,” the speaker maintains that “odours there are, fresh as a baby’s skin/Mellow as oboes, green as meadow grass.”³⁶ Via the cultivation of unusual sense perceptions, the human mind is prompted to creativity which results, for example, in the exchange of one sense for another by imagination. During one of such moments, Des Esseintes produces a row of caps with different types of liquor; each of these types corresponds for him to a sound of a musical instrument. He “would drink a drop of this or that, (...) providing his gullet with sensations analogous to those which music affords the ear.”³⁷

As far as *The Third Policeman* is concerned, synesthesia does occur there in its original sense, such as when the narrator remarks: “I was listening to this pitiless talk even with my eyes.”(116) Yet most of the time Huysmans’ and O’Brien’s treatments of synesthesia are not the same, as in the case of the passage with the mangle. One sense is *not* described as if it were another in the passage; the eye perceives light and the ear perceives sound, as they normally do. Nonetheless, the possibility of making a phenomenon perceived by one sense turn into another in a split second comes very close

³⁵ Jörg Jewanski, “Synesthesia Before the Nineteenth Century” *Oxford Handbook of Synesthesia*, ed. Julia Simner and Edward M. Hubbard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 369.

³⁶ Baudelaire 19.

³⁷ Huysmans 39.

to synesthesia. Such feasibility is caused by the fact that everything in this hell-world is part of a base substance called omnium and omnium “comes in waves.”(113) The waves can be lengthened or shortened. MacCruiskeen explains his mangling of the light as follows: “Light is (...) omnium on a short wave but if it comes on a longer wave it is in the form of noise, or sound. With my own patents I can stretch a ray out until it becomes sound.” (113) Thus, any thing or phenomenon can become another when manipulated in a specific manner or when it meets specific conditions; therefore the outcome that all sensory experiences are in fact alike is only one of many similar concurrences among phenomena in this fictional world. This law of the Parish is inspired by Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger.³⁸ Another distinction is analogous to the one already encountered, i.e. what Des Esseintes imagines in *Against Nature* (first he establishes the “rules” and then in his mind makes parallels between notes as in music and different tastes) happens in reality (whatever represents “reality” in the Parish) in O’Brien’s novel. Last but not least, the policemen require a special instrument that uncovers these correspondences; Huysmans’ creativity of imagination is substituted by an ingenious device.

The mangle is only one of many objects that MacCruiskeen invents and manufactures while the common denominator of most of these items is that nobody but him can fully appreciate them. They range from nearly invisible chests through a spear with an unseeable point to a musical instrument whose music only MacCruiskeen can hear. All these enable him to live out highly subjective experiences while putting the narrator into an outsider position. This private enjoyment of objects appears in *Against Nature* as well. At one point the narrator recounts Des Esseintes’ determination to arrange for his own pleasure “a domestic interior that was comfortable yet appointed in an exceptional manner.”³⁹ As Judith Ryan claims, “Des Esseintes’ interior decoration becomes a direct reflection, not simply of his character, but also of the state of his optical nerves, for which he decides that a combination of blues (...) will be most effective.”⁴⁰ This preference of the extremely personal is typical of the fin-de-siècle

³⁸ See José Laners, *Unauthorized Versions: Irish Menippean Satire, 1919-1952* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2000) 212 or Ondřej Pilný, “‘Did you put charcoal adroitly in the vent?’: Brian O’Nolan and Pataphysics,” *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies*, ed. Ruben Borg et. al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014) Forthcoming.

³⁹ Huysmans 12.

⁴⁰ Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) 43.

period and therefore it is no wonder that it was often linked with art. To return to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the distinguished composer Vinteuil is said to have used "colours not merely so lasting but so personal that (...) the disciples who imitate their discoverer, and even the masters who surpass him, do not dim their originality."⁴¹ Vinteuil's originality is linked to synesthesia – tones are said to have unique colours.

In *The Third Policeman*, the policemen furnish their police station with original objects whose subtleties "ordinary mortals" cannot grasp since their senses are not adjusted to them. Not only cannot the colour on MacCruiskeen's card be imitated, it cannot be even *perceived*, similarly to the invisible chests or the inaudible music. Its unrivalled originality can make a man mad (159-160). The failure of perception is not explicitly attributed to synesthesia in *The Third Policeman* yet such a possibility is implied when the narrator is in Eternity and observes the things falling through the chute; he says that their appearance "was not understood by the eye." (140) Needless to say, the policemen's inventions are not examples of art as such – their artistic aspects are suppressed by their sophisticated and scientific nature. On the other hand, MacCruiskeen's comment that the chest he has made is an "example of supreme art" (72), implies his feeling like an artist.

Occasionally, the views of Des Esseintes are not reflected in a single protagonist or the same kind of protagonist (such as the policemen), yet involve the whole Parish – for instance the treatment of a means of transport as a woman or even as a sexual partner. In *Against Nature*, a locomotive is compared to a woman which leads to the assertion of its superiority since it was invented by a human mind. A locomotive is evidently a more refined alternative of a woman:

the Crampton, an adorable blonde with a shrill voice, a long slender body encased in a gleaming brass corset and the supple, nervous resilience of a cat, is a stylish golden bonde whose extraordinary grace is almost frightening as (...) she sets in motion the immense rosaces of her elegant wheels and leaps forward (...) at the head of an express or a train bearing the day's catch!⁴²

Not only hand-made things are revered as it may seem at first sight. In the words of Rees, "sinister, claustrophobic and debased though modern vehicles may be, they

⁴¹ Proust 1671.

⁴² Huysmans 21.

remain a source of ghoulish fascination for Des Esseintes.⁴³ Thus, already here surfaces the wonder at modern machinery typical of Jarry's avant-garde and 20th-century futurism. Like the train, the bicycle is an invention of the 19th century; Alfred Jarry, in his novel *Supermale*, treats not only the locomotive, yet also the bicycle, as a modern vehicle.

In contrast, the bicycle in *The Third Policeman* does not represent a groundbreaking means of transport; the contrary seems to be the case. Though its description is, as far as contents are concerned, more than an echo of *Against Nature*, the manner in which it is executed is humorous and therefore its relation to the extolled train is close to parody:

Notwithstanding the sturdy cross-bar it seemed ineffably female and fastidious, posing there like a mannequin (...) the saddle (...) reminded me of a human face (...) by some association of textures (...). I knew that I liked this bicycle more than (...) I had liked some people with two legs. I liked her (...) competence, her docility, her simple dignity (...) How desirable her seat was, how charming the invitation of her slim encircling handle-arms, how unaccountably competent and reassuring her pump resting warmly against her rear thigh! (178)

Both passages combine vocabulary used for people and vocabulary used for inanimate objects. As opposed to the locomotive, the description of the bicycle is not merely figurative, it really contains both animate and inanimate elements. What also contributes to the comedy in O'Brien's novel is that while Des Esseintes' locomotive is unambiguously female in the description, one cannot be so certain when it comes to O'Brien's passage. Despite the words hinting at the bicycle's femininity (it seemed "female", the pronoun "her"), it remains sexually ambivalent since the "sturdy crossbar" disrupts the fragility of the rest. What is more, the "female" bicycle has a "pump resting warmly against her (...) thigh," which obviously functions as a phallic symbol. While Des Esseintes voices his admiration from a distance (the locomotive is not present), O'Brien's narrator is in direct contact with the bicycle (has already ridden it). On the whole, compared to the brief account concerning the attractiveness of trains in *Against Nature*, the liking for the humanised bicycles amounts to an obsession within the Parish of *The Third Policeman*.

⁴³ Rees 154.

In conclusion, there are multiple similarities between the texts of *Against Nature* and *The Third Policeman* – in terms of lexis, in terms of content and occasionally also in terms of implications. Des Esseintes seems to be present as a ghost in *The Third Policeman*, bringing with him, scattered over a variety of protagonists, views and motifs from the end of the 19th century that acquire a new, distinctive form. The implications are frequently, yet not always, humorous transformations or even reversals of the original ones; *The Third Policeman* contains far more irony than *Against Nature*. Furthermore, O'Brien's novel prefigures postmodernism; thus, some of the borrowings from *Against Nature* represent mere intertextuality while other ones are adjusted to metafictionality. On closer comparison of the two novels one can witness how the power of imagination is in the latter substituted by phantasmagorical reality within a metafictional framework or by similarly out-of-the-ordinary inventions. The “failure of imagination”⁴⁴ typical of postmodernism is not reflected in the main *action* of the novel (the character of which testifies to the contrary), yet in the alternations of some fin-de-siècle passages. More generally, the excitement about new possibilities in *Against Nature* ends in delusion or disappointment, which Des Esseintes feels intensely toward the end of the novel. This applies to *The Third Policeman* as well yet is reduced by the fact that the narrator is continually forgetting about his predicament. The thoughtful, pessimistic outcome of *Against Nature* is in O'Brien's novel replaced by ambiguity generated by the narrator's hardships combined with an ironic detachment. This detachment does not turn the ending into an optimistic one – only it presents another type of pessimism characterized by mechanistic, dehumanized repetitiveness.

⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of New Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) 209.

3. Crime and (Lack of) Punishment:

The Third Policeman and Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray

"...without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love of strange affinity?"

(Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*)

Flann O'Brien has a few things in common with Oscar Wilde, particularly the journalist zest and the original sense of humour that has gone down in history. The strongest distinction between them lies in the fact that while O'Brien has, provably, travelled abroad only once in his lifetime,¹ Wilde, though Irish by origin, has travelled so extensively and his writing is so cosmopolitan that people almost tend to forget about his place of birth. Wilde's travels in Europe also confirm the weakness of the relation between fin-de-siècle decadence and Ireland. At the end of the 19th century, Ireland was too preoccupied with the National Revival as well as with the political emancipation of the country to focus more broadly on ideas where art is a separate venture unlinked to society. The only movement verifiably inspired by fin-de-siècle literature was Literary

¹ Cronin 77.

Revival's offshoot Celtic Twilight² which utilized the stances of aestheticism and symbolism. As far as decadence is concerned, the country did not suffer so widely from urbanisation, industrialism and capitalism as the rest of the kingdom and therefore the moral and physical "decay" typical of European decadence was not so likely to be felt. Anglo-Irish writers employing decadent features turned to French and British models. The nearly complete absence of decadence in Ireland at the turn of the 20th century is what makes *The Third Policeman*'s treatment of it even more interesting. Though the similarities between *The Third Policeman* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are not so obvious as those between O'Brien's novel and *Against Nature*, they are largely of a different kind (their essence being in paradoxicality) and therefore worthy of a closer look.

In both novels, the desire of the main character causes that he becomes a criminal. Dorian Gray is, as well as Des Esseintes, an aesthete "in search of new sensations."³ In *The Third Policeman*, there is only a quest for knowledge and after the narrator's death for the black box. The objectives of the nameless narrator and Dorian differ, yet their incentives are alike. Both feel a powerful craving, a hunger. "There was no doubt that curiosity had much to do with it, curiosity and the desire for new experiences,"⁴ says the narrator of *The Picture*. The same applies to *The Third Policeman*; neither the narrator's curiosity nor his longing for the black box is ever quenched, not even after all he undergoes. Both Dorian and the nameless narrator are vain and willing to risk anything, including their reputation, to gain what they desire. The latter boasts about killing Mathers (7) and boldly confesses to stealing de Selby's book: "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 and would probably do the same if I had my time again."(9) Dorian does not steal yet perpetrates a murder, like O'Brien's narrator. Concetta Mazullo writes about *The Third Policeman* when she points out that the narrator's experience in hell "lacks two distinctive Catholic elements: fire and

² Gregory A. Schirmer, *Out of What Began: A History of Irish Poetry in English* (London: Cornell University Press, 1998) 169.

³ Dennis Denisoff, "Decadence and Aestheticism," *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 49.

⁴ Wilde 57.

remorse”⁵ yet morality is patently set aside in both novels which becomes significantly reflected in the respective narratives.

Both novels address the topics of crime, (missing) remorse of conscience and ensuing punishment. The main character is a villain; the relish in negative characters representative of fin-de-siècle decadence surfaces. Nevertheless, neither Dorian nor O’Brien’s narrator act thoroughly according to their own will. In *The Picture* the immoral quest for experience and for everlasting youth is incessantly pushed forward by manipulative Lord Wotton. Maria Beville writes that “the most significant suggestion of the novel in relation to degeneration (...) is that Dorian’s soul or ‘self’ is not essentially good or bad but an entity that is subject to fashioning by corruptive influences.”⁶ As Lord Wotton expresses it, “to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins (...) are borrowed.”⁷ Thus, the protagonist is a “tabula rasa” through whom various intentions and experiments of others are carried out and hence he turns into an artificial creation. In *The Third Policeman*, the influence comes first from Divney, the con man who steals the narrator’s farm and then talks him into the murder, and de Selby, the narrator’s lifelong passion. (Incidentally, *Selby* Royal is also the name of Dorian’s country estate.⁸) The biggest villain of all is for many critics the latter; for instance, Jürgen Meyer calls him the most “devastating, corrupting influence on the anonymous narrator’s mind.”⁹ It is no wonder since it is de Selby because of whom the narrator becomes a criminal. De Selby’s ideas are also what constitutes the narrator’s personal hell.

In spite of any bad influences, the crime is committed and cannot be undone. The narrator in *The Third Policeman* murders wealthy Mathers. Dorian, in turn, first causes the death of Sibyl Vane, later murders Basil Hallward and finally accidentally kills Sibyl’s brother James. Both protagonists experience anxiety after their crime. One passage in *The Picture* reads: “What sort of life would this be, if (...) shadows of his crime were to peer at him from silent corners, to mock him from secret places (...) As the thought crept through his brain, he grew pale with terror, and the air seemed to him

⁵ Concetta Mazzullo, “Flann O’Brien’s Hellish Otherworld: From *Buile Suibhne* to *The Third Policeman*,” *Irish University Review* autumn/winter 1995: 325. My emphasis.

⁶ Maria Beville, *Gothic-postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) 65.

⁷ Wilde 16.

⁸ Wilde 32.

⁹ Jürgen Meyer, “Flann O’Brien’s Anti-Esotericism,” *European Journal of English Studies* Dec.2011: 274.

to have become suddenly colder.”¹⁰ This excerpt has its parallels in *The Third Policeman*, passages where the nameless narrator is scared. Though “shadows of his crime” mock him as well (such as meeting “dead” Mathers a couple of times or re-encountering the murder instrument – bicycle pump – in various situations), he has no remorse of conscience and is afraid of death rather than of punishment for something he perpetrated. In one such moment he utters: “Every time silence came the horror of my situation descended upon me like a heavy blanket (...) making me afraid of death.”(28)

This anxiety, no matter whether Dorian’s or the nameless narrator’s, does not lack irony since, and interestingly, both characters can be seen as displaying the paradox of being alive and dead at the same time. Each novel approaches this motif in a different way. In *The Third Policeman* the main character, due to his insatiable desire, dies and finds himself in “hell” (from where, however, he resumes the narration of his story), while in *The Picture* the anti-hero makes a wish of staying young forever (“I would give my soul for that!”¹¹) and afterwards experiences a sensation not unlike being stabbed: “As he thought of it, a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife, and made each delicate fibre of his nature quiver. (...) He felt as if a hand of ice had been laid upon his heart.”¹² Thus, one could say that Dorian “dies” in inverted commas – his soul becomes imprisoned in the painting so that the painting starts to age while his body turns into a live work of art resistant to passing years. As a matter of fact, some resemblance can be noted even between the length and presentation of the respective protagonists’ “dead” state. In *The Third Policeman*, Divney dies of fright when catching sight of the narrator’s ghost and thus the narrator eventually comes to know that he has been dead for 16 years. (203) In *The Picture*, there is a passage with a similar theme; towards the end of the novel, Dorian meets Sibyl Vane’s brother Jim and during a short skirmish he prompts Jim to say it has been eighteen years since Jim’s sister died (which also means eighteen years since Dorian’s soul entered the painting). Like the final passage of *The Third Policeman*, this moment is tense and decisive. Sibyl’s brother succumbs to logic and after witnessing Dorian’s youth under a lamp¹³ fails to believe that his sister’s murderer and this man are the same person. As far as Divney is

¹⁰ Wilde 200.

¹¹ Wilde 24.

¹² Wilde 24.

¹³ Wilde 189.

concerned, it is his terror of the narrator's ghost, reviving the memory of his crime, that causes his death.

The split of the main character into the body and the soul likewise happens in both novels. While Dorian's soul enters the painting after Dorian's unreasonable and fatal wish, in *The Third Policeman* Joe – the narrator's soul – appears as a separate character after the narrator's death. The relation between the soul and the body is a vital issue in both novels and is treated in a similar manner. Maria Beville, who focuses on *The Picture*, connects this feature both with fin de siècle and postmodernism and thus draws the two sets of ideas closer: first she claims that “we are presented with a *fin-de-siècle* self that is horrifying and monstrous in its disunity (...) [and] cannot openly exist within the conventional moral structures of society”¹⁴ and afterwards that Wilde “takes a double step and affords a glance into the realm of postmodernism in his ruminations on the fractured self.”¹⁵ In *The Third Policeman*, the separation of the soul does not expose any of the narrator's sins. The disunity is presented comically – the narrator, although a criminal, is everything but afraid of his soul; instead, he makes conversations with Joe. The postmodern fragmentary self surfaces with more urgency in the contrast between Joe's name (given to him by the narrator) and the narrator's anonymity.

This *literal* separation of the soul and the body in the novels can be viewed as a representation, as well as mockery, of one of the critiques of science, more specifically of Descartes' dualism. At one moment, Basil Hallward cries: “The harmony of soul and body – how much that is! We in our madness have separated the two, and have invented a realism that is vulgar, an ideality that is void.”¹⁶ In both novels there is a tendency to retrieve the unity of the soul and body, although expressed differently in each of them. Though Dorian and his soul are said to have become two separate entities, the painted Dorian does not only change his facial expression according to the sins that real Dorian commits yet also his body ages. Similarly, in one passage of *The Third Policeman* the narrator's soul Joe happens to be lying on the bed next to him and the narrator, who is not looking, starts musing about the nature of Joe's body. Joe hears all of it and takes offence at the thought of being “scaly.” (122-123) Moreover, the narrator's idea is

¹⁴Beville 65.

¹⁵ Beville 68.

¹⁶ Wilde 10.

spiced up by the infinite regress¹⁷, by imagining Joe's body as a mere link in an infinite chain of bodies "receding to some unimaginable ultimum." (123) Yet contrary to *The Picture*, where Dorian and his soul are interconnected and cannot exist without one another until the end, Joe abandons the narrator in the second half of the novel (167) – which is not a surprise since the narrator is literally dead and his soul superfluous. This fact also allows to read the separation of the soul and the body as in conformity with the Bible where the disunity is conditioned by death. As Jennika Baines admits with wonder, "only Flann O'Brien could create a soul with both Catholic principles and Cartesian scepticism."¹⁸

Dorian Gray, though soulless, does suffer from sporadic remorse of conscience. However, he partially manages to postpone the bad feelings by accumulating property and various experiences. The narrative offers a portrayal of the diverse activities that Dorian, as a forever-young man, enjoyed and pushed to the extreme:

And so he would now study perfumes (...) At another time he devoted himself entirely to music (...) he collected from all parts of the world the strangest instruments that could be found (...) On one occasion he took up the study of jewels and appeared at a costume ball (...) in a dress covered with five hundred and sixty pearls (...) Then he turned his attention to embroideries, and to the tapestries (...) for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile and embroidered work (...) He had a special passion, also, for ecclesiastical vestments (...) he had stored away many rare and beautiful specimens of what is really the raiment of the Bride of Christ.¹⁹

Another resemblance to *The Third Policeman* worth discussing at more length occurs with this motif: excess. Once in the novel the narrator is likewise successful at greedily accumulating objects – that is in Eternity where it is feasible to produce whatever one desires. Therefore he acquires fifty cubes of solid gold, a bottle of whiskey, bananas, fountain pen, serge suit, underwear, shoes, banknotes or a box of matches. (141) A mere

¹⁷ The notion of "infinite regress" comes from J.W.Dunne, a British philosopher. For more on infinite regress and *The Third Policeman*, see Mark O'Connell, "How to handle eternity': Infinity and the Theories of J.W.Dunne in the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*," *Irish Studies Review* May 2009: 223-237. Another essay dealing with this topic is: Mary A. O'Toole, "The Theory of Serialism in *The Third Policeman*," *Irish University Review* autumn 1988: 215-225.

¹⁸ Jennika Baines, "Un-Understandable Mystery': Catholic Faith and Revelation in *The Third Policeman*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* Fall 2011: 83.

¹⁹ Wilde 129-135.

glance at these mutually incongruous items indicates an ironic shift from *The Picture*. Before entering the lift the narrator is asked to leave all the articles behind providing he wants to return to the Parish safe and sound, which results in the narrator crying like a child. (144-145)

Yet the motif of excess in O'Brien's novel is more varied and does not end here. When the nameless narrator is planning what he will do with omnium once he retrieves the box, he reflects, in another excess passage, as follows:

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 own imagination. Perhaps I could use it even to extend my imagination. I could destroy, alter and improve the universe at will. I could get rid of John Divney (...) I could write the most unbelievable commentaries on de Selby ever written and publish them in bindings unheard of for their luxury and durability. Fruits and crops surpassing anything ever known would flower on my farm, in earth made inconceivably fertile by unparalleled artificial manures. (...) I would improve the weather (...) The barrels and bottles in my public house would still be full and inexhaustible (...) I would bring de Selby himself back to life to converse with me at night and advise me in my sublime undertakings...(196)

What happens here is a reversal of what has prevailed so far since as opposed to *The Picture*, the narrator *imagines* rather than experiences. Further ahead, there is another passage mirroring this one and concerning the revenge the narrator would concoct for the two policemen; his "obscene thoughts of punishment and darkness"²⁰ contain plenty of decadent imagery, such as "putrescent offals, insupportable smells [or] un beholdable corruptions."²¹ While for Dorian the excess is a means by which he temporarily forgets about his fear of punishment ("the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne"²²), for O'Brien's nameless narrator these are simply unfulfilled dreams. Dorian is able to obtain all the objects; O'Brien's narrator only imagines what

²⁰ Long 73.

²¹ He wants 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, un beholdable corruptions containing tangles of gleaming slimy vipers each of them deadly and foul of breath, millions of diseased and decayed monsters clawing the inside latches of the ovens to open them and escape, rats with horns walking upside down along the ceiling pipes trailing their leprous tails on the policemen's heads..."(197)

²² Wilde 136.

he would do if he had the chance. This dreaming about changing and thus controlling the world is doubtless Faust-like. Such an analogy is hardly accidental since O'Brien himself was not only familiar with Goethe's Faust,²³ yet likewise wrote a distinctive (and Irish) version of this legend: the play *Faustus Kelly*. Nonetheless, the nameless narrator is already in hell and therefore no matter what his dreams are like, he is bound to fail.

Many items named in the passages depicting excess are objects. Dorian says, capturing one of the predilections of aestheticism: "I love beautiful things that one can touch and handle. Old brocades, green bronzes, lacquer-work, carved ivories, exquisite surroundings, luxury, pomp (...)." ²⁴ Aestheticism (emphasising the quest after beauty) is what often appears in combination with decadence (which carries aestheticism further: beauty is sought even in repulsive phenomena) in fin-de-siècle literature and *The Picture* is not an exception. In *The Third Policeman*, the policemen, like Dorian, surround themselves with objects and not only their puzzling nature is addressed by the narrative yet also their originality and their visual aspect. At the end of the 19th century, objects said to possess an artistic value were not only visually pleasing yet often also hand-made and unique.²⁵ This stemmed partly from elitist, Asian-inspired decorative art and partly from decorators like the socialist-minded William Morris who emphasized the need to react at machine manufacturing via beautiful but usable objects.²⁶

In O'Brien's novel, it is MacCruiskeen himself who manufactures all the incomprehensible items stored at the police station. He is well-aware of their unique character; in one passage he boasts that "there is no other spear like it in the length and breadth of Ireland and there is only one thing like it in Amurikey." (70) Nevertheless, this is only a fragmentary remnant of fin-de-siècle uniqueness, reduced to a timeless pride on making an original object. On the other hand, an ironic version of a certain artistic/aesthetic interest is noticeable in the novel, even in the completely mechanical Eternity: the narrator recounts how "large expensive-looking cabinets of these articles were *placed tastefully* about the floor." (136; my emphasis) The mention of "taste" linked with simple machines with dials, meters, coarse wire, and knobs that remind the

²³ Cronin 76.

²⁴ Wilde 107.

²⁵ Rhonda K. Garellick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998) 14.

²⁶ Shearer West, "The Visual Arts," *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 140-141; 150.

narrator of “American cash registers” (136) works well as an ironic reversal of the refined artistic taste valued at the end of the 19th-century. Moreover, these were not placed there deliberately by the policemen – as one learns at the end, Eternity had sprung into being by Fox’s use of omnium (193-195) and therefore the tastefulness is largely accidental or comes down to metafictionality. Fox is also concerned about the visual aspect of his abode; he says he has “gone to great pains to make it [his tiny office] spick and span.” (189) MacCruiskeen is in turn a successful caricature of a fin-de-siècle aesthete or decadent. It is suggested that he feels like an artist when he calls his chest an “example of supreme art.” (72) His devotion to creating hand-made, original and sometimes also beautiful objects is accompanied by his hobby of making “esoterically rarefied sounds” (109) on his personal musical instrument.

Concerning the awe of beauty, the parallel deserves more space. In one passage of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian takes out a chest with a green paste in it and a description of the chest is provided: it is “a small Chinese box of black and gold-dust lacquer, elaborately wrought, the sides patterned with curved waves, and the silken cords (...) with round crystals and tasselled in plaited metal threads.”²⁷ To juxtapose this passage with the one about MacCruiskeen’s chest,

“It was a brown chest like those owned by seafaring men or lascars from Singapore, but it was diminutive in a very perfect way (...) It was (...) perfect in its proportions and without fault in workmanship. There were indents and carving and fanciful excoriations and designs (...) and there was a bend on the lid that gave the article great distinction (...) The whole thing had the dignity and the satisfying quality of true art.” (72)

The chest is simply, to quote Hopper, “an image of impenetrable beauty, and in its very essence it transcends the human domain.”²⁸ The narrator acknowledges the beauty, the supreme aesthetic quality, of the chest, which makes it almost sacred since neither “hot bits” in letters nor machine-made things are suitable for it. In short, the chest is too *beautiful* to store anything else than the same article. (73)

Yet when it comes to a longer observation of such an object, an evocation of beauty gradually but inescapably changes into an evocation of terror. Despite all the initial superlatives, the narrator does not enjoy the sight for long since his admiration

²⁷Wilde 180.

²⁸ Hopper 79.

gradually grows into weakness and subsequent fear of the “perfect brasswork.” (74) Taken from the perspective of Immanuel Kant, this can be seen as a transition from the beautiful towards the sublime. According to Kant, “the beautiful (...) is a question of the form of the object, and this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form” and “involves, or (...) provokes a representation of limitlessness.” The mind is both attracted to and repelled by such an object.²⁹ In *The Third Policeman* the attraction is the initial impression which subsequently changes into its opposite. Describing his feelings at the sight of the miniature chests, the narrator says: “All my senses were now strained so tensely watching the policeman’s movements that I could almost hear my brain rattling in my head.” (75) Richard Murphy extends this by introducing the notion of “*postmodern* sublime”³⁰ and explains that “in exceeding the limits of representation the sublime is consequently associated firstly with the monstrous and formless, and secondly with that which fails to adhere to the (generally agreed upon) conditions of the aesthetic.”³¹ As the chests are successively presented in a smaller and smaller form, the narrator becomes unable to see them, which perplexes and terrifies him (“What he [MacCruiskeen] was doing was no longer wonderful but terrible.” [76]). An observation of a beautiful article in *The Third Policeman* thus results in a rather overwhelming experience which is not unlike Murphy’s conception of the postmodern sublime and therefore outside traditional aesthetic categories.

Moreover, an unusual physical and psychological *dependence* on objects is what is also characteristic of both fin-de-siècle decadence/aestheticism and O’Brien’s hell; though in the latter it is constantly accompanied by ubiquitous irony. Rhonda K. Garellick contends that the fin-de-siècle dandy “ends up conquered by the inanimate world or even aspiring to its condition.”³² The dandy, as a result of his longing for aesthetic perfection, gradually approximates a beautiful inanimate object, hence the dominance of the inanimate world. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian makes a mad wish of achieving the perfection of his portrait and when it comes true, the painting gains control over him. In one passage, Dorian ruminates on the interrelation between

²⁹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Radford, VA: A & D Publishing, 2008) 55.

³⁰ Murphy 273. My emphasis.

³¹ Murphy 273.

³² Garellick 18.

his soul and the atoms of the inanimate painting: “Was there some subtle affinity between the chemical atoms, that shaped themselves into form and colour on the canvas, and the soul that was within him? Could it be that what the soul thought, they realised?”³³ The wooden-legged narrator in *The Third Policeman* is far from a dandy and so are the policemen; yet the dominance of the inanimate objects over a person, as well as the interatomic relations is what *The Picture* shares with O’Brien’s novel. In *The Third Policeman* the atomic process is more complex since it concerns the whole Parish (it is a similar enlargement of a motif as with Des Esseintes and the locomotive). It even attains a pseudo-scientific term: Atomic Theory.

Questions concerning atoms were embedded in the scientific discourse already at the end of the 19th century. Bell explains that “the last decade of the [nineteenth] century saw a running controversy as to whether the basic material of the universe behaved like waves or particles.”³⁴ Thus he indicates that even before Einstein and other 20th-century scientists came with their discoveries, such issues were debated. Only a few pages after the first mention of this motif, Dorian’s thoughts approximate *The Third Policeman* even more: “Nay, without thought or conscious desire, might not things external to ourselves vibrate in unison with our moods and passions, atom calling to atom in secret love of strange affinity?”³⁵ In O’Brien’s novel, this “strange affinity” between the animate and the inanimate becomes a literal interpenetration. Moreover, though the theory described by the Sergeant revolves mainly around people and bicycles, it is insinuated that in the Parish, any two phenomena involved in a regular mutual contact unavoidably interchange their atoms (horse and man [93], man and road [93], man and bed [119]). Thus anew, what is only imaginary in *The Picture* (i.e. the reciprocal influence of the atoms) becomes a fact in *The Third Policeman*, though real only to the degree to which the Parish is real.

Dorian, who calls the picture “his soul”, ascribes the semblance of life that the painting exhibits to the fact that it is a *portrait*, painted with a certain emotional attitude.³⁶ The interatomic relations are not understood as the cause of the process. In *The Third Policeman*, inanimate matter acquires not a soul, but a human *personality* through the human atoms. (88) As a result, even bicycles can sin and be hanged in the

³³ Wilde 92.

³⁴ Bell 11.

³⁵ Wilde 102.

³⁶ Wilde 113.

Parish when convicted of a crime. (108) In both novels this interchangeability becomes manifest in an unusual emotional attachment of the owner to such an object. Dorian “hated to be separated from the picture that was such a part of his life, and was (...) afraid that during his absence some one might gain access to the room, in spite of the elaborate bars that he had caused to be placed upon the door.”³⁷ Such an object, though terrifying, forms a part of the owner’s identity. Equally, the Sergeant’s bicycle is locked up in the cellar (101) and has to escape in order to experience a romantic tryst with the delighted narrator. However, the Sergeant’s attachment is of a different kind; besides keeping his bicycle as a sexual slave, he is also jealous of it since it has a high percentage of humanity and could escape. (100-101)

Regarding the outside of the “living object”, the novels also correspond to each other. In *The Picture*, the reader learns that “the surface seemed to be quite undisturbed (...) It was from within, apparently, that the foulness and horror had come (...) the leprosies of sin were slowly eating the thing away.”³⁸ The same applies to *The Third Policeman*; the Sergeant explains that though the affected person assumes the bicycle’s nature, his outward appearance remains the same. In his words, “you cannot expect him to grow handlebars out of his neck.” (89) None of the inner transformations disrupt the exterior. “The foulness and leprosies of sin” from *The Picture* have a humorous counterpart in *The Third Policeman*, being substituted by the cunning behaviour of the bicycles (originating in the person who rides it) that comically illustrates human sins such as stealing or seducing women. Like the painting in *The Picture*, the bicycle also recalls the narrator’s sins: a bicycle pump was one of the instruments that he and Divney used for murdering Mathers. Nevertheless, contrary to Wilde’s novel, the bicycle does not *display* these sins.

In neither of the novels is the question of punishment clear-cut. While it is fairly obvious where the immoral and moral features lie in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Dorian’s accomplishments together with the disinterested narrator as opposed to the disastrous consequences of Dorian’s quest), with O’Brien’s novel it might not be so – many critics consider it a wholly moral book, a philosophical treatment of a villain’s punishment accompanied by comic moments. Nonetheless, the narrator’s punishment turns into a problematic issue once several aspects are brought into focus. First of all, it

³⁷ Wilde 136.

³⁸ Wilde 154.

is the description of the weather and countryside. One of them goes as follows: “There was incommunicable earliness in everything, a sense of waking and beginning. Nothing had yet grown or matured and nothing begun had yet finished. A bird singing had not yet turned finally the last twist of tunefulness. A rabbit emerging still had a hidden tail.”(147) This is one of O’Brien’s depictions of what is most likely hell, appearing after the narrator, together with the policemen, comes back from Eternity and astonishingly realises that no time elapsed when they were there. Such characterizations of the environment are the reverse of what normally constitutes the inferno – they are almost paradise-like. Other examples are the sheep on rocky hills (46), the “bright sky” (123), the birds, rabbits and no rain (123), and plenty of others.

The contrast between the pleasing nature and the repulsive crime is another aspect shared between *The Third Policeman* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; it mirrors the contrast between the perfect nature and a depraved human. Only a while after the news of Sibyl Vane’s death reach Dorian, the narrator makes the following comment: “It was an exquisite day. The warm air seemed laden with spices. A bee flew in, and buzzed round the blue-dragon bowl (...). He felt perfectly happy.”³⁹ Thus, the remark concerning Dorian’s joy caused by the weather underscores Dorian’s moral corruption since not even Sibyl’s death averts it. The narrator seems as if he endorsed Dorian’s depravity since he draws attention to the beauty at such dreadful moments. Perversity comes to the fore. Equivalently, after Dorian murders Basil, the description of the weather is as follows: “The sky was bright, and there was a genial warmth in the air. It was almost like a morning in May.”⁴⁰ In *The Third Policeman*, the narrator’s uneasiness and fear frequently alternate with moments of relief, joy or wonder. The cause of his good mood is often his pleasant surroundings; thanks to it, he is “pleased enough with everything” (33), his heart is “happy and full of zest” (39), he feels “happy and heart-light,” (41) or he wakes up with a “happy thought about the weather.” (156) There are many more positive moments like these.⁴¹

³⁹ Wilde 91.

⁴⁰ Wilde 159.

⁴¹ His first impression of his surroundings is also completely favourable; a lot of the vocabulary has undeniably positive connotations. The air is “keen, clear, abundant and intoxicating” (40) and the sun is “standing benignly in the lower sky pouring down floods of enchanting light and preliminary tinglings of heat” (41). A few pages further, the narrator comments on the “magic influence” (44) of the sun which makes “everything [...] very beautiful and happy” (44). Sometimes his positive mood is not connected to the nature, such as when he briefly feels “happy and satisfied” (142) in Eternity or “pleasurable and profound.” (121) when falling into sleep.

In spite of this, it might be objected that the beauty of the environs in *The Third Policeman* only intensifies the narrator's punishment by causing, owing to its agreeable nature, that the subsequent horrors have a stronger impact. Each of the positive moments is followed shortly after by a negative one. Besides, the narrator is conscious of the artificiality of his surroundings which is apparent in the multiple metafictional remarks in the narrative. Thierry Robin sees this as a Catholic view of the world; in his perspective,

what is strange and deceptive is precisely the beauty of the scenery and the pleasure derived from admiring such a conflicting object (...) a beautiful land marked by harmony and a clear sense of purpose (...) cannot be real Ireland, but must be hell or the prison of pure solipsism. The traces of the Catholic stereotype associating beauty and pleasure with sin and displeasure and ugliness with reality remain.⁴²

However, the seemingly convenient and morally ambiguous position of the narrator is not limited to the visual aspect of the environment, weather or to his mood. In general, the narrator seems to benefit more of this "hell" than he did of the dreary real Ireland before he died. He finds helpers with the same handicap as he has (the wooden-legged men) and a companion in the form of his soul Joe. (22) His final impression of the beings he meets in this "hell" is often positive.⁴³ Gradually, he grows accustomed to the bicycle world (at the end he even experiences a love affair with one attractive bike) and finally, if one considers the footnotes to be his, he even has time for studying de Selby – next to searching for the black box of course. Last but not least, though pleasure and beauty might be rightfully associated with sin, this is hardly customary in hell where the narrator should already be experiencing punishment for his previous sins rather than commit other sins.

Hopper, as well as many other critics, sees the punishment in the infinite nature of the afterlife; he states that "Noman [as he calls the narrator] is cyclically bound to re-enact his crime and punishment ad infinitum."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this is not straightforward

⁴² Thierry Robin, "Noman's Land or the Art of Spatial Transgressions and Haunting Strangeness in *The Third Policeman*," *The Parish Review* fall 2013: 31.

⁴³ During his encounter with "dead" Mathers he comes to realise that they "seem to understand each other;" (26) he even begins to like him (32). Similarly, he finds Martin Finnuccane "amusing and interesting" (43) while Fox is for him "innocent and good-natured" (160). Such passages testify that the narrator recovers from his trepidation unusually quickly.

⁴⁴ Hopper 100.

either. When the narrator's fellow plotter Divney sees his ghost and dies of fright, he *joins* the narrator in his journey. Therefore, as Long argues, "the repetitions in *The Third Policeman* are never simply repetitions of the same, but repetitions with difference."⁴⁵ This reduces (though not to a great degree) what would otherwise mean a punishment for the infinity by implying the possibility of changes in the cycle. Simultaneously, even though the narrator's good temper and advantages are only provisional and never induce success, there are several reasons to believe that he is unaware of being punished. His memory regularly erases and therefore he always regains his good mood without any traces of his past suffering on his mind. Only the reader recognizes the hopelessness of his situation; in the words of Francis Doherty, "moral deadness has overtaken the narrator, and (...) he will learn nothing about his state ever again."⁴⁶ Additionally, the focus on the structure of the narrative rather than on the content leads one to the pessimistic notion that there is no actual experience of the narrator at all, nor, possibly, the narrator as such. The only thing there is is the *narrative*, the *words* repeating to infinity.⁴⁷ From this perspective, the narrator passively succumbs to the hellish world, its logic and its language. And providing he *is* aware of his punishment, his call for help is impossible to discern in the mechanical and repetitive narrative.

The extraordinary power of words brings one back to *The Picture*; in one passage, the devilish Lord Wotton exclaims: "Mere words! How terrible they were! (...) One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute. (...) Was there anything so real as words?"⁴⁸ Wilde can be seen as having anticipated the postmodern view on language by emphasizing its ability to create powerful illusions. In the 1980s, Paul de Man extends this in his article "Resistance to Theory" by stating that the use of literary language "can no longer be said to be determined by considerations of truth and falsehood, good and

⁴⁵ Long 76. Thus, the future that the ending anticipates may be of the same sort yet *cannot* be the very same and therefore it does *not* partake in the "infinite regression" the narrator is terrified of.

⁴⁶ Francis Doherty, "Flann O'Brien's Existentialist Hell," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* December 1989: 65.

⁴⁷ Although there are slight changes (in punctuation or, and especially, when Divney appears [205]), the majority of the passages closing the novel is *identical* to those in the first half of the text. Besides, if the narrator has time to narrate something all over again, he cannot have time for anything else, let alone wandering around and searching for the black box. The body without soul (one should remember that the narrator's soul definitely leaves him during the narrative), is unveiled at the end of the novel.

⁴⁸ Wilde 18.

evil, beauty and ugliness, or pleasure and pain.”⁴⁹ Here, language is already a self-contained world with no direct connection to reality and issues associated with it. The narrative structure of *The Third Policeman* reflects this enclosed and self-sufficient world of language.

Flann O’Brien’s nameless narrator and Dorian are villains between life and death, soulless and playing out somebody else’s predictions and intentions. Both are figuratively subjugated by inanimate matter; in *The Picture* by the painting, in *The Third Policeman* by the unfathomable devices of the policemen and apparently also by anything inanimate the narrator comes into contact with. Dorian’s brief musing on the connection between the animate and the inanimate occurs in a much more magnified form in O’Brien’s novel. Furthermore, although both novels have a villain as the main protagonist and crime and punishment as a theme, neither of the narratives is unambiguous as far as the punishment is concerned. Curiously, the narratives present the respective protagonists’ corruption as complemented by occasional benefits and feelings of satisfaction, which might even suggest a decadent celebration of depravity. The reduced punishment in *The Third Policeman* can be viewed from several perspectives, such as the pleasing environment, the narrator’s regular losses of memory or the mechanical repetitiveness of the narrative.

⁴⁹ Paul de Man, “The Resistance to Theory,” *Yale French Studies* 1982: 10.

4. Extraordinary Affairs and Supreme Surprises:

The Parish as Jarry's "Supplementary World"

"Ma Ubu. Perfectly dreadful! Ugh! There's one who's had his skull bashed in.

Pa Ubu. What a beautiful sight! Bring up more chests of gold."

(Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Rex*)

When reading or watching Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Rex*, it is not only this quote that brings to one's mind Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. The peculiar resemblance between O'Brien's novel and the works by Alfred Jarry is not unknown to critics as there are already several (though not many) essays on the two authors. One of them is Anthony Adams' essay "Butter-Spades, Footnotes, and Omnium: *The Third Policeman* as 'Pataphysical fiction.'" For Adams, the similarities between O'Brien and Jarry comprise language play, the protagonist of Faustroll or the motif of bicycles.¹ In "Butter-Spades", however, he mainly focuses on "pataphysics" in *Third Policeman*; more concretely pataphysics in the objects and in the paradoxical language. Ondřej

¹ Anthony Adams, "Butter-spades, Footnotes, and Omnium: *The Third Policeman* as Pataphysical Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* fall 2011: 109.

Pilný's essay "‘Did you put charcoal adroitly in the vent?’ Brian O’Nolan and Pataphysics" concentrates on, besides *The Third Policeman*, pataphysics in Brian O’Nolan’s/Myles na gCopaleen’s satirical column "Cruiskeen Lawn." It is certainly pataphysics that deserves the most attention yet one should not forget that in *The Third Policeman* there are also similarities to the action and characterisation of Jarry’s *Ubu Rex*.

Ubu Rex likewise opens with an anti-hero planning a murder. Ubu is influenced by Ma Ubu who assumes nearly the same role as Divney in *The Third Policeman*. She lures Ubu into committing a crime ("Why shouldn't you finish off the whole bunch and put yourself in their place?"²), arousing his interest by relating the crime to his weaknesses: "You could (...) eat as many bangers as you liked, and roll through the streets in a fine carriage."³ Divney acts in the same manner, utilizing the vision of the narrator finally publishing his commentaries; in the words of the narrator, he "discussed with me (...) the serious responsibility of any person who declined by mere reason of personal whim to give the 'Index' to the world." (16) Greed is one of the essential motifs in Jarry's play – in the words of Elizabeth K. Menon, Ubu "runs amok in quest of land and riches."⁴ The narrator of *The Third Policeman* is greedy in wanting money and recognition. Both Pa Ubu and O'Brien's nameless narrator acquire what they desire until a certain point, yet Ubu is more successful than the other. The actual assassination of the king in *Ubu Rex* is as cunning as the murder in *The Third Policeman*, despite the obvious genre difference: in Jarry's case it is a puppet-theatre killing while in O'Brien's a brutal, naturalistic act. The offenders of *Ubu Rex* are never appropriately punished which in turn finds its reflection in the situation of O'Brien's narrator who does not realize the scope and severity of his punishment.

The reason why making the parallel between Jarry's play and O'Brien's novel is relevant arises from the emergent postmodernism in Jarry's works. As Richard Murphy articulates it, the "optimism about the prospects for a progressive 'de-auraticization of art' clearly applies (...) to the avant-garde and to its strategies of desublimation and de-aestheticization."⁵ By divesting art of the necessity of the beautiful and by

² Alfred Jarry, *The Ubu Plays*, trans. Cyril Connelly and Simon Taylor (Broadway, NY: Grove Press, 1969) 21.

³ Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 22.

⁴ Elizabeth K. Menon, "Potty Talk in Parisian Plays: Henry Somm's *La Berlino de l'émigré* and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi*," *Art Journal* autumn 1993: 61.

⁵ Murphy 252.

emphasizing its missing originality by the stress on intertextuality, art loses its “aura”, its superior status to everyday life and society. Such a stance was adopted not only to offer a fresh viewpoint on art, yet also to disrupt the institutional nature of art already existing. The works by Alfred Jarry can be said to embody this literary strand, new within the fin de siècle; the early avant-garde, though attacking the tenets of most of the late-19th-century movements (such as the emphasis on art for its own sake or, contrariwise, the conventions of realism/naturalism), emerged in the 1890s as well. For all this, a fundamental difference between *The Third Policeman* and *Ubu Rex* must be taken into account and that is grounded in the genre of the respective works; comparing a French comedy *play* from the late 1890s with an Irish novel from the 1930s, oscillating between humour and horror, is hardly an obvious thing to do. Importantly, the crime and murders in *Ubu Rex* are much closer to Punch and Judy, i.e. to the slapstick comedy genre; even when interpreting the Ubu plays with an emphasis on their satirical aspects, the genre difference does not allow to unite them with *The Third Policeman*. What makes the comparison of this chapter practicable is above all the pataphysics, an imaginary science which works irrespective of genre classification and which is the principal feature that *The Third Policeman* shares with the Ubu plays.

The largely abstract setting of *Ubu Rex* is not hell, yet what is called “Poland” is closer to O’Brien’s Irish inferno than to anything else. Jarry’s grotesque world is run by pataphysics, a fictional science resembling de Selby’s outlandish philosophy and receding from logic as we know it. However, though Pa Ubu repeatedly refers to himself as a “pataphysician,” the definition and the attendant “clarifications” of pataphysics are present not in the Ubu plays, yet in *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, a brief novel that prefigured 20th century surrealism. The definition goes as follows: “Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes to the lineaments of objects the properties described by their virtuality.”⁶ What logically stems from this is that pataphysics operates in worlds created by imagination and makes practically anything feasible in such spheres. In Book 2 of *Faustroll*, one also learns that pataphysics is a science transcending metaphysics in the same manner as metaphysics transcends physics.⁷ Thus it automatically ascribes itself a superior position, despite being entirely notional. Furthermore, pataphysics

⁶ Quoted in Jill Fell, *Alfred Jarry* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010) 135.

⁷ Alfred Jarry, *Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien; suivi de Spéculations* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1911) 15.

refuses to focus on generalities like other sciences; it is concerned with exceptions and worlds where these exceptions form natural laws.⁸ To quote Jarry directly, “pataphysics is the science of the particular (...) It will study the laws governing exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one.”⁹ While in the Ubu plays this additional and twisted world is present from the beginning, in *The Third Policeman* it appears only after the narrator’s death. As already discussed in the previous chapters, O’Brien’s hell is a fictional world where normal rules and laws do not apply. Not only does it reflect and/or *refract* the twisted originality of decadence, it also appears to be in agreement with Jarry’s “supplementary world” in his Ubu plays. Like Jarry’s Poland where an obese and greedy man who never washes¹⁰ wins a decoration from the king, O’Brien’s hell is a world governed by what one would call exceptions. A world where nobody would steal anything but a bicycle, where human senses cannot grasp its reality and where what is on Earth rational or logical comes across as ridiculous.

In pataphysical discourse, the “surrealistic”, absurd or as-if purely accidental passages (Jarry’s avant-garde prefigured 20th-century dada, surrealism or absurdism and pataphysics is one of its central tools) are constantly accompanied and underscored by the use of quasi-scientific terms, their definitions, and their applications to “reality.” In the words of Jill Fell, via pataphysics Jarry “invites a latitude of scientific imagining which has no limits.”¹¹ Very common are inventions and experiments close to phantasmagoria, such as when Ubu makes a proposition: “we shall, by making use of our knowledge of physics and in consultation with our learned advisers, invent a wind-driven carriage capable of transporting the entire army.”¹² As far as Flann O’Brien is concerned, these are not limited to *The Third Policeman* – one might recall plenty of grotesque, bizarre and entertaining items depicted in “Cruiskeen Lawn” and ranging from an ingenious theatre layout through “snow-gauge” or thermometer-watch towards more elaborate ones such as the train that traverses only bogland and is equipped with intricate machinery as well as staff or the midnight oil made from “turf, whiskey, offals

⁸ Jarry, *Gestes et opinions* 15-16.

⁹ Quoted in Fell 131.

¹⁰ Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 25.

¹¹ Jill 136.

¹² Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 53.

and cider.”¹³ In “Cruiskeen Lawn,” the inventions are presented in an optimistic fashion, with no dark undercurrent, which strengthens the parallel with Jarry’s pataphysics. *The Third Policeman*, though being packed with outlandish contraptions as well, is considerably more bleak in the long run. Adams, who sees pataphysics and the genre of steampunk as alike, rightly notes that “the steampunk attitude toward machinery remains an optimistic one at heart, to which the dark artefacts of *The Third Policeman* stand in uncanny contrast.”¹⁴

In the novel, the philosopher and scientist de Selby is not a long way from what Jarry would call a pataphysician. De Selby’s patents comprise roofless houses and houses without walls (22-23), the fragile water box paradoxically created as a result of hammering (149) and discoveries such as that Earth is in reality sausage-shaped (97) or that darkness is caused by mysterious “black air.” (120) The policemen do not lag behind de Selby – at their police station, they store a wide variety of fantastical appliances, for instance a mangle for mangling light. Christian Bök argues that “rather than build operative devices for harnessing thought (...) the ’pataphysician must instead build excessive devices for unleashing thought.”¹⁵ There is less absurdity in comparison to Jarry’s *Faustroll*; like in *Ubu Rex*, unintelligibility takes turns with lucidity in *The Third Policeman*. In any case, providing one lets his thoughts be unleashed, reflection on de Selby’s or the policemen’s contraptions always ends up in paradox or in sheer absurdity.

Not only is *The Third Policeman* brimming over with various inventions, it also contains what could be called a pataphysical train of thought. A perfect example of how pataphysics operates is the passage where de Selby observes his past in a complex arrangement of mirrors. (66-67) It begins with what holds true in the real world (“before the reflection of any object in a mirror can be said to be accomplished, it is necessary that rays of light should first strike the object and subsequently impinge on the glass, to be thrown back again to the object” [66]) which is subsequently exaggerated to ludicrous dimensions: de Selby “claims to have noticed a growing youthfulness of his face (...) the most distant (...) being the face of a beardless boy of twelve.”(67) The real

¹³ O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 112-114; 116; 124. For more on pataphysical inventions in “Cruiskeen Lawn”, see Ondřej Pilný, “‘Did you put charcoal adroitly in the vent?’: Brian O’Nolan and Pataphysics,” *Flann O’Brien: Contesting Legacies*, ed. Ruben Borg et. al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014) Forthcoming.

¹⁴ Adams 114. Adams sees pataphysics and the genre of steampunk as alike.

¹⁵ Christian Bök, *Pataphysics: The Poetic of an Imaginary Science* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002) 29.

scientific notion that O'Brien draws on here is the speed of light. This was measured both in and before the 19th century. However, not all the science dealt with in the novel is based on old discoveries. Pilný draws attention to the inevitable difference between Jarry and O'Brien as to the physics their oeuvres employ – while Jarry's pataphysics stemmed from "original experimentation and thought of (...) the late nineteenth-century British scientists Lord Kelvin, James Clerk Maxwell, Sir William Crookes, Arthur Cayley, and C.V. Boys," O'Brien's fantastical hell is indebted to 20th-century scientists such as Einstein or Schrödinger.¹⁶ Though the views of these scientists have nothing to do with pataphysics, they provide the starting point for many pataphysical passages in the novel; Einstein's relativity theory supplies the basis for the narrator's approach to the police barracks while Schrödinger's quantum physics has its reflection in omnium, the universal substance subject to pataphysical laws in the novel.¹⁷

Another example of pataphysics at work in the Parish is the Atomic Theory,¹⁸ most probably derived from quantum mechanics.¹⁹ Atoms perpetually move and mingle – only this fact is utilized and all the rest stems from it while disregarding all the other coincident laws of physics. It is driven into such an extreme that a person can become a bicycle and vice versa; as a result, the original scientific notion (here quantum mechanics) is ridiculed. Science is manipulative since it generalizes at the expense of special cases and usurps for itself the right of knowing reality. In the words of Bök, pataphysics "simulates knowledge, perpetrating a hoax (...) but only to reveal the hoax of both the real and the true."²⁰ The presence of satire on both philosophical and scientific inquiry in the novel is clear; it is sufficient to take a glance at the footnotes. Yet not always is the pataphysical outcome represented by an exaggeration of scientific laws; sometimes it lies in a simple paradox. MacCruiskeen has no trouble at all manufacturing invisible chests for many years; his sight is becoming poorer and poorer since he has to read the small print in the newspapers. (77)

There is plenty of pataphysical discourse in O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. The "exceptions" that it engages in frequently encompass also human behaviour – sexual

¹⁶ Pilný.

¹⁷ For more, see Pilný.

¹⁸ Adams 109. Adams writes that the bicycles in *The Third Policeman* "are described and operate according to the strictest suggestions of pataphysics" yet he does not elaborate on this parallel further. Pilný likewise mentions the Theory as pataphysical. See Pilný.

¹⁹ See Charles Kemnitz, "Beyond the Zone of Middle Dimensions: A Relativistic Reading of *The Third Policeman*," *Irish University Review* autumn/winter 1995: 56.

²⁰ Bök 9.

and moral excentricities included. Flore Coulouma points out that O'Brien's writing is inherently digressive and divides these digressions into the spatial one and the moral one – going astray.²¹ In essence, anything deviant, swerving²² can be seen as pertaining to pataphysics. The notion of *a swerve* is contained in one of the principal terms of Jarry's pataphysics, "clinamen." This notion of "clinamen atomorum" comes from Lucretius (a poet who, incidentally, lived and wrote in the time of Roman decadence²³) and his philosophical poem *De Rerum Natura*. According to Lucretius, clinamen is "a minute deviation or swerve that sometimes occurs in the normal vertical fall of atoms."²⁴ *De Rerum Natura* contains more remarks on atomic movements, one of which goes as follows: "the little atoms, tumbling topsy-turvy (...) clashing together (...) hooking up with each other in diverse patterns."²⁵ Interestingly, this brief excerpt well corresponds to the atoms described by the Sergeant, atoms which are responsible for the Atomic Theory: "never standing still or resting but spinning away and darting hither and thither and back again." (86) One of the chapters in Jarry's *Faustroll* is called "Clinamen" and tells a surreal story about a painting machine deviating from its normal trajectory. The deviation or swerve that clinamen embodies can be of any kind: moral, philosophical, artistic, sexual, or a deviance made manifest in words.²⁶

Pataphysical discourse is certainly beyond morality. As expressed by Roger Shattuck, "'pataphysics is pure science, lawless and therefore impossible to outlaw."²⁷ Pataphysical depictions of events also lack pity or empathy; the "soul" is absent. It is not a mere coincidence that in both *Ubu Cuckolded* and *The Third Policeman* the main protagonist's soul is an independent entity. In the former this goes without saying since the Ubu plays are an example of puppet theatre: already in Jarry's introduction to *Ubu Rex* it surfaces that the protagonists are meant to be puppets: "man-sized marionettes that you are about to see."²⁸ In *The Third Policeman* there is a different explanation for

²¹Flore Coulouma, "Negotiating Tradition: Flann O'Brien's Tales of Digression and Subversion," *Digressions in European Literature: From Cervantes to Sebald*, ed. Alexis Grohmann and Caragh Wells (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 143.

²² Coulouma 143.

²³ Philip de May, *Lucretius: Poet and Epicurean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 104.

²⁴ Fell 131.

²⁵ Quoted in Philip Ford, "Lucretius in Early Modern France," *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie, Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 234.

²⁶ Bök 44.

²⁷ Roger Shattuck, "Superliminal Note," *Auctor Ludens: Essays on Play in Literature*, ed. Gerald Guinness and Andrew Hurley (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Pub.Co., 1986) 11.

²⁸ Alfred Jarry, "Preliminary Address at the First Performance of *Ubu Roi*, December 10, 1896," *The Ubu Plays*, trans. Cyril Connelly and Simon Taylor (London: Methuen Drama, 1993) xxvii.

the soulless body: the narrator is dead. O'Brien's narrator confides: "Never before had I believed or suspected that I had a soul but just then I knew I had. I knew also that my soul was friendly, was my senior in years and was solely concerned for my own welfare. For convenience I called him Joe." (26) This comic account makes it clear that Joe is another character: he is older than the narrator and unlike the narrator, he obtains a name. Joe's voice is what also differentiates him from the narrator – even in the text itself, where his parts are rendered in italics. At one point, it is even suggested that Joe might have his own body and sleep beside the narrator. (121-123) Méabh Long emphasises that "without Joe (...) the narrator is no more than an empty husk."²⁹ And indeed, Joe abandons the narrator completely towards the end, leaving only the vacant body behind. Similarly, in *Ubu Cuckolded*, Ubu's conscience is a separate character with its own lines. Its absurdity is carried ever further than in the case of O'Brien's nameless narrator. It never resides in Ubu – it is (supposed to be) hidden in a *box* instead and its physical body is implied by the fact that it wears shirt-tails.³⁰ Its role resembles that of Joe: giving advice to Ubu. Nonetheless, Ubu, who flaunts absolute immorality, never follows it. In both works, the absence of the soul is a sign of absent morals.

The Third Policeman is all about being soulless, whether one considers the action of the novel literally or metafictionally. The frequent emphasis on a hollow/uninhabited body is not limited to the narrator. Here and there, the policemen are reminiscent of Ubu too, by being puppet-like. For instance, Fox's eyes are "charged with unnatural life" and remind the narrator of *beads*. (189) Importantly, the emptiness of the body is not merely in terms of the missing soul. Many times, the hollowness of (mainly) the head is stressed, which also finds a parallel in Jarry's Ubu plays. In *Ubu Rex*, Ubu orders to execute several Nobles,³¹ which is presented in a fairly absurd and playful way. The nobles are likened to pigs and will be dealt with as pigs; Ubu says: "Those who are condemned to death (...) will fall down into the bleed-pig chambers, and will then proceed to the cash-room where they will be debrained."³² Pataphysics is simply elevated above humankind, degrading the people to the level of animals. The motif of emptying heads or "debraining" is very prominent in Jarry's Ubu plays; the

²⁹ Long 86.

³⁰ Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 79.

³¹ Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 39.

³² Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 39.

ideal body seems to be vacant. In *The Third Policeman*, it is likewise suggested that the heads are empty, although this motif is not celebrated like in Jarry's plays. When the Sergeant taps his forehead, the narrator hears "a booming hollow sound (...) as if he had tapped an empty watering-can with his nail." (159)

As much as his soul is disregarded, Ubu's giant body is magnified. In O'Brien's novel, passages in which the monstrous stature of the policemen is hinted at also occur throughout the whole novel. The Sergeant, whose body is depicted as "enormous" (56) is doubtless Ubuesque and so is Fox. In *Ubu Cuckolded*, Ubu complains to Achras: "when your flunkys at last make up their minds to let us in, we are confronted by such a miserable orifice that we are at a loss to understand how our strumpot managed to negotiate it."³³ In *The Third Policeman*, Fox, when about to enter the walls of Mathers' house where his police station is, "stooped his head (...) and began putting his immense body in through the tiny opening." (187) Since "strumpot" refers to Ubu's huge stomach ("gidouille" in the original³⁴), the situation is nearly the same; unlike Ubu, though, Fox miraculously manages to get in without difficulties.

As Ondřej Pilný points out, "pataphysics has a strong propensity for the grotesque."³⁵ Like pataphysics, the grotesque also concerns exceptions from the universally accepted norm. Curiously, this aspect brings both Jarry and O'Brien to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque introduced in *Rabelais and His World*. This concept is characterised by a stress on the *body*, its parts (especially the open parts, the protruding parts and the lower parts) and their functions. By way of the specific parts, the body spreads outside itself and thus frequently, the differences between the animate and the inanimate are erased;³⁶ everything is part of one festive whole. The lower parts are also necessary for both degradation and subsequent regeneration. Regeneration must follow debasement³⁷; thus, Bakhtin's grotesque is an apposite tool for Jarry's pataphysics. As might have been shown already, pataphysics also works through degrading. Like in the Ubu plays, the emphasis in *The Third Policeman* is put on the body, on the flesh, and on its contact with its outside. Bakhtinian grotesque is thus

³³ Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 78.

³⁴ Alfred Jarry, *Ubu: Ubu roi, Ubu cocu, Ubu enchaîné, Ubu sur la Butte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000) 136.

³⁵ Pilný.

³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 317.

³⁷ Bakhtin 348.

reduced (especially in *The Third Policeman* as there is no festivity involved) and transferred into the realm of puppet-like (i.e. soulless and empty) protagonists.

All this has a purpose; the existence of a pataphysical discourse is conditioned by the existence of a system where it thrives by representing it and at the same time subverting it. Dr Faustroll's absurdity exposes the absurdity of exact science. Jarry's *Ubu* lays bare the greed and selfishness of 19th-century French bourgeoisie. One of the means through which the subversion operates is pataphysical language, the "unique linguistic creativity,"³⁸ to quote Ondřej Pilný. Words within a pataphysical discourse often (yet not always!) succumb to shifts and alternations in compliance with the notion of "clinamen"³⁹ – they are linguistic reflections of the pataphysical worldview. *Ubu*'s identity is given voice by the overuse of "Pschitt," ("Merdre" in the original) a word coined by Jarry. Appearing in multiple transformations ("a la pschitt" [8], they ate "pschitt" [9]), it attains many meanings according to the context or in some cases it carries no meaning at all. Still, its original scatological reference ("shit") remains a ghostly and provocative presence. Linda K. Stillman connects this strategy with an implicit rebellion: "By utilizing recognizable signs, but by deforming them with the aim of conferring upon them a morphophonetic motivation that is personal to himself, Jarry rendered these anti-signs capable of signifying both of these dimensions: action and reaction, the given and the revolt."⁴⁰ Jarry's *Ubu* plays provoked French bourgeoisie through the archetypal character of *Ubu* who embodied their vices.

O'Brien's "hell" is likewise a world with its own signifiers. Like Jarry's "pschitt", many of these language mutations are easily decipherable. Aspects of real Ireland (for instance "beyant" [157], the wrong spelling of "beyond" as used in the Irish dialect of English⁴¹) are mingled with neologisms such as "ultimatum" (50) or "surnoun." (58) While "ultimatum" stems from "ultimate", "surnoun" is inspired by "pronoun," one of the language means metafictionally hinting at the predicament of the narrator who might be doomed to narrate the same story all over again. Surnoun is a neologism most likely created by blending "surname" and "noun", showing how the

³⁸ Pilný.

³⁹ Jarry even proposed a shift from conventional naming in the word 'pataphysics' itself; he suggested the spelling 'pataphysics' ('pataphysique' in French) with a superadded apostrophe. This apostrophe was to avoid a pun in the French word *pataphysique*³⁹ yet it well-complements other linguistic changes in such a discourse. See Fell 135-136. Though Jarry did not use the apostrophe himself, some critics writing about pataphysics (such as Christian Bök) embraced it.

⁴⁰ Linda Klieger Stillman, "The Morphophonetic Universe of *Ubu*," *The French Review* March 1977: 588.

⁴¹ "beyant," *Merriam-Webster*, web, 3 August 2014 <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/beyant>>

language undergoes modifications parallel to those undergone by things in the novel; words merge into each other like the atoms causing changes in people and things. On the other hand, O'Brien's neologisms can be viewed as standard English words deviating from their original spelling; "surnoun" can be seen as a twisted "surname" which is the meaning intended by the Sergeant.

Unlike Jarry, there is no scatology in O'Brien's novel. Yet Jarry's language provocation works with other socially controversial terms as well, such as swear words, central capitalist terms (finance) or phallic symbols. "By my green candle"⁴² is one of the sexually-charged instances of Ubu's idiolect. *The Third Policeman* is not devoid of such expressions either; examples comprise the pervasive "pump" (81), the "sausage" in de Selby's theory of the shape of the Earth (97) or the thermometer/baton (137) that the policemen manipulate with in Eternity. Nevertheless, the Rabelaisian aspect typical of Jarry's liberating phallic symbols is reduced in *The Third Policeman* as the humour in the novel is continually accompanied by horror.

In O'Brien's novel, the language is influenced by the bicycle-laws of the hell-world in a similar vein as Jarry's is by Ubu's scatological identity ("pschitt") or by his greediness (the overuse of "phynance"). The text of *The Third Policeman* is swarming with references to the pivotal word "bicycle" and not only via words generally associated with this means of transport such as "pump", "three speed gear" or "lamp." There are proper names supporting the obsession with bicycles, too, such as "Unified Stations" (60). Moreover, in one passage, the Sergeant tells the narrator a story about a man looking for his "mother" which ends by the revelation that "she had rust on her rims and that her back brakes were subject to the jerks." (65) Here the word "mother" is completely standard English, what is puzzling are the laws of O'Brien's fictional hell; a bicycle can be called "mother" because everybody in the Parish is fixated on bicycles. Alternatively, it may really be this person's mother whose personality has entered the bicycle.

In short, the decoding is sometimes not so simple; pataphysical discourse ignores if people understand it or not. In *Ubu Rex*, some of the objects with idiosyncratic names are not even described and if the director follows Jarry's stage directions, these do not appear on the stage either. Some of these are "cash-sword",

⁴² Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 21.

“phynance-hook,” “pschittasword” or physick-stick.”⁴³ Though they cannot be imagined, their use supports the key terms of the play, “pschitt”, “phynance” and (pata) physics. In *The Third Policeman* the incomprehensibility experienced by the narrator and by the reader alike does not lie in neologisms so much yet rather in standard English words having different denotations. When the Sergeant in *The Third Policeman* asks about the narrator’s “cog”, the narrator just confusedly repeats the word: “Cog?” (58) From what follows in the dialogue it is made clear that the Sergeant means the narrator’s second name. Clearly, what happens with objects in the novel tends to happen with the language as well: it perplexes the narrator. As Doherty claims, “the narrator (...) is a child loose in a world whose rules he still has to learn.”⁴⁴ “Originality” (59) denotes “origin” in the Sergeant’s question yet at the same time subtly refers to the narrator’s originality as a character in a novel and thus exposes the novel’s fictionality. Other ones are the above-mentioned “pronoun” (58; meaning “first name”), “sexuality” (59; meaning “pregnancy”) or “stretch” (101; meaning “hang”). These (in tandem with the guessing conversations such as the one on the meaning of “bulbul” [68]) uncover the arbitrariness (and therefore unreliability) of any language reference.

Not even this is all. Only a page after the “pronoun” dialogue, the Sergeant suddenly utilizes the word “name” (59) in the usual sense and thus returns to conventional English. The same happens with “stretch” (101) and “hang” (102). In Jarry’s *Ubu Rex*, this occurs with modified and conventional spelling, such as the alternation of “phynance” with “finance”.⁴⁵ These instances juxtapose the real world with O’Brien’s or Jarry’s fictional one. In *The Third Policeman* this particular effect is more viable to perceive since it is a novel; in *Ubu Rex*, it is impossible to recognize that “phynance” is modified when seeing the play since the modified version sounds the same as the original. Still, it might be seen as a subtle instance of “invading” the language and disrupting it inconspicuously from the inside.

As might already be apparent from the above, the subversive and *digressive* character of pataphysics is a very suitable and effective means for satire. For Coulouma, who writes on digression as a general concept unconnected to pataphysics, “digression as a satirical device disturbs the notion of authority in discourse, as it is traditionally

⁴³ Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 42; 48; 53.

⁴⁴ Doherty 60.

⁴⁵ Jarry, *The Ubu Plays* 20; 45. In the French original “phynances” and “finances”. See Jarry, *Ubu: Ubu roi, Ubu cocu, Ubu enchaîné, Ubu sur la Butte* 104 ;117.

linked with stability and fixity.”⁴⁶ It is no wonder that an anti-discourse built on pataphysical foundations is discoverable in the work of Brian O’Nolan, a writer famous for his mockery of science, society and politics. Via the lunatic inventions and their outlandish background, satire thrives. The distrust of exact science and its conclusions can be witnessed in both Jarry’s and O’Brien’s works. The inventions as well as the pataphysical reasoning are phantasmagorical, yet by using existing terms and sometimes even existing laws of physics they stimulate thinking on the preposterousness of science in the real world as well. In *The Third Policeman*, another means through which satire becomes manifest is the alienation of language from its original denotates and connotations, which brings to mind the unreliability of language communication in general. Mathewes is accurate when he writes that “these ‘fantastical’ lands, through their very excesses, all bring to light truths and hidden realities that the ‘normal’ world has been able to keep tucked safely in the shadows.”⁴⁷ Nonetheless, as outlined in the text above, there is an essential difference between Jarry’s and O’Brien’s pataphysics. As Pilný has it, although *The Third Policeman* “displays all the basic features that are typical of pataphysical anti-discourse,”⁴⁸ the narrative is “far from sending the (...) message of radical liberation.”⁴⁹ The humour of *The Third Policeman* is substantially darker than that of Jarry and the outcomes more ambivalent. O’Brien’s great deal of irony satirises yet is far from Jarry’s liberating anarchy.

While the decadent approach denounces exact science by its inclination towards art, Jarry’s does so by adopting a fictional science with lunatic conclusions. As a matter of fact, numerous passages in *The Third Policeman* can be viewed from both the decadent/aesthetic and the avant-garde/pataphysical perspectives, such as de Selby’s travel⁵⁰ or MacCruiskeen’s mangling of the light.⁵¹ The ingenious devices in O’Brien’s novel that “interrupt” the decadent elements often occur in fin-de-siècle literature as well, more precisely in Jarry’s pataphysics. De Selby and the policemen resemble Des Esseintes and at the same time contribute to the presence of pataphysics within the novel. The motif of unnaturalness can be seen as both decadent and pataphysical; the uneasiness and horror that it produces is more associated with decadence while the

⁴⁶ Coulouma 154.

⁴⁷ Mathewes 16.

⁴⁸ Pilný.

⁴⁹ Pilný.

⁵⁰ For comparison of this passage with Jarry’s ‘pataphysics, see Pilný.

⁵¹ For comparison of this passage with Jarry’s ‘pataphysics, see Adams 116-117.

comedy is what is typical of Jarry and his liberating mockery of the bourgeoisie. The idea of art as a separate realm that the decadents, aesthetes and symbolists embraced is not so distant from Jarry's avant-garde as it might seem, either. Both introduce an idea of an artificially created world, differing mainly in the fact that while the former stresses its artistic value, the latter establishes it in a dialogue with the real one. Fell points out that Jarry "speculated whether a world of phenomena that we could not sense was not already around us"⁵² which implies that the "supplementary world" is not considered solely as a matter for fiction.

To summarize, Flann O'Brien's novel does resemble Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Rex*, in spite of the great genre difference between the two. Though not as optimistically presented as in the case of Jarry, eccentric inventions abound in *The Third Policeman* as well as specifically pataphysical thinking and conclusions. Crucially, pataphysics exists also as a discourse in *The Third Policeman* and therefore does not consist only of absurd scientific views yet comprises also diverse exceptions. Jarry's notion of "clinamen" embodies the digression from what is ordinary, the *making* of the exceptions. Therefore, like in *Ubu Rex*, pataphysics is reflected in the absent morality, in the grotesque and finally also in the variously twisted language. All this works satirically; pataphysics fights the system via exaggeration of its manifestations. Putting the comparison to Jarry and to decadence next to each other, it is revealed that the similarities with fin de siècle discovered in *The Third Policeman* do not exclude one another; the "yellow worlds" of Huysmans's *Against Nature* and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* coexist with Jarry's "supplementary world" within O'Brien's novel.

⁵² Fell 135.

Conclusion:

The narrative of *The Third Policeman* contains motifs, vocabulary and even particular passages that are similar to various fin-de-siècle works. While some of these elements are mocked immensely (the previously serious is laughed at and the previously ironic becomes double so) and many are shifted to accommodate to the postmodern metafictional viewpoint, others stay unchanged. The combination of the decadent and the early avant-garde features is what is partially responsible for the horror mingled with comedy in the novel as well as the pessimism with optimism. O'Brien's novel seems as if it were on the border between opposites; between the moral and immoral, between the tragic and comic and also between modernism and postmodernism.

Curiosity is ever-present and pushes the limits. "Artifice" is another theme in *The Third Policeman* and occurs in conjunction with artificiality and unnaturalness. Told by an egoistic and morally corrupt narrator, the narrative amounts at some moments, by its fascination with and constant return to such themes, to perversity. Contrary to fin-de-siècle literature, artifice and unnaturalness are not limited to art yet comprise everything out-of-the-ordinary. The policemen also give an air of unnaturalness and so does the Parish itself. Both the inhabitants and the environment

can, however, be seen also in metafictional terms – as part of a work of art. Seeing a 19th-century theme in the metafictional framework is even more interesting when taking into account that the preliminary manifestations of what is now called postmodernism began precisely in the fin-de-siècle period. The decadent attention to physical and psychical diseases has found its way into *The Third Policeman* as well. Regarding fin-de-siècle sexuality, O'Brien's narrative carries it on to a new and humorous level by making people attracted to bicycles. While fin-de-siècle decadence expressed the atmosphere of an approaching end of the century and thus articulated, many times unintentionally, its ambivalent feelings towards it, in the case of *The Third Policeman* it cannot be so as the novel was written between 1939 and 1940. Therefore, if it bears a direct link to the turn of the century, it must be a satirical one. The “decay” in *The Third Policeman*, though often treated ironically, works quite well as an allusion to the bleak state of Ireland in the 20th century, to “the cultural *malaise* of the Free state.”¹

There are many resemblances between *Against Nature* and *The Third Policeman* – in the latter, the decadent features have been *interfered with*, to borrow an expression from the nameless narrator (39), yet remain fairly easily recognizable. The protagonist of Des Esseintes is divided into many, lending O'Brien's characters his temper, his actions, his sins or even specific words. Synesthesia is adjusted to suit the needs of a more technologically developed world. The products of imagination become real, though only in the fantastical part of the novel (and therefore one can keep on arguing about their realness). Des Esseintes' brief praise of the humanness of a locomotive turns into a ubiquitous and comical theme of O'Brien's novel: the “real” humanness of bicycles, caused by the scientific laws at work in the Parish. Overall, what happens to the features of *Against Nature* is often similar to what happens to the fin-de-siècle features in general; they are ironized or adjusted to the metafictional framework of O'Brien's narrative.

The similarities between *The Third Policeman* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are, compared to those between *The Third Policeman* and Huysmans' novel, less ostentatious. A juxtaposition of the two villains with impossible objectives whose fulfillment transcends reality towards a macabre world of fantasy reveals that

¹ John Wilson Foster, “Introduction,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 19. My emphasis.

the similarity between the two novels lies in their paradoxicality. Both novels flirt with the motif of being alive and dead simultaneously. The motif of excess is likewise used by both novels; in *The Third Policeman* it is a postmodern, ironical comment on accumulating property as well as an account of unfulfilled dreams with preserved decadent lexis. Aesthetic qualities of objects are significantly reduced in *The Third Policeman*, appearing mainly in caricatures. The paradox of the “living object” is introduced by, on the one hand, the peculiar treatment of the soul and the body and on the other by the motif of the interatomic relations. O’Brien’s Atomic Theory is no longer about approximating the beauty of an object; the interchange of atoms happens regardless of one’s desires. Paradoxical is also the issue of punishment. While the narrative of *The Picture* seems to denounce and support the sinner at the same time, in *The Third Policeman* the narrator is already in hell and yet experiences feelings such as relief or happiness. The fact that language is able to gain the upper hand, a matter lightly insinuated in *The Picture*, assumes more intensity in *The Third Policeman*.

As far as *Ubu Rex* is concerned, Jarry’s artificial science called pataphysics pervades the whole of *The Third Policeman*; not only is it to be found in the eccentric inventions of de Selby and their “real” counterparts made by the policemen, yet is also embedded in the narrative and its style. The exceptions propounded by Jarry in *Faustroll* concern various things, including morality. The protagonists of both *The Third Policeman* and Jarry’s another Ubu play, *Ubu Cocu*, are soulless. From the pataphysical point of view, the missing soul represents the necessary detachment from humanity and morality. The emptiness of the body is what also comes into play together with the grotesque enormity of the policemen’s bodies. Words are part of the pataphysical discourse as well – in conformity with the notion of “clinamen”, they are altered to suit the supplementary world and at the same time uncover issues about the real one and its language(s). O’Brien’s version of pataphysics works in a similar way as Jarry’s since its relation to the real world surfaces. Finally, it is this “science” that sometimes explains the shift that the decadent features appearing in the novel have to undergo; though also part of the fin de siècle, its outcomes are different and sometimes even opposite to the decadent ones.

In “Cruiskeen Lawn”, Brian O’Nolan’s fictional persona Myles na gCopaleen makes references to French literature and culture. These are, with a dose of sarcasm, what makes an Irishman seem gracious: “If you would be gracious in Dublin (...)

number wan is the little shelf with nothing on it bar the paper covered novels, all written in French.”² With a bit of exaggeration, it seems that Flann O’Brien could indeed rank himself among these “gracious Dubliners” mentioned by Myles, possessing and reading French literature. Not only does his *The Third Policeman* betray a detailed knowledge of Huysmans’ *Against Nature*, yet here and there even approximates the mood typical of fin-de-siècle literature. The irony in the novel is not of a scornful kind; it does not denounce the literature of this period. Rather, the narrative humorously “strikes back” against European influences while simultaneously preserving some of their former sentiment.

² O’Brien, *The Best of Myles* 247.

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