

# THE TREATMENT OF DR SELBY, POLICEMEN AND BICYCLES IN FLANN O'BRIEN'S NOVELS

## THE THIRD POLICEMAN AND THE DALKEY ARCHIVE (I)

*(A rationalisation of the absurd)*

### The Author and His Work

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Flann O'Brien then, was born in Gosport, Ireland, in 1911 and after a brilliant student career at University College Dublin, he did some linguistic research in Germany. Back in Ireland, he joined the Irish civil service but luckily for us

## The treatment of de Selby, policemen and bicycles in Flann O'Brien's novels The Third Policeman and The Dalkey Archive

Mr. Patrick H. Sheerin



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#### *The Author and his Work*

Flann O'Brien was one of the pseudonyms of Brian O'Nolan, or Briain O'Nuallain (Irish form of name). The other was Myles (or Miles) Na Gopaleen (or gCopaleen), under which he wrote a famous column called «Cruiskeen Lawn» in the Irish Times. It is with the first of these that this article will be mainly concerned for under it he wrote the novels that figure in the title, and indeed all the novels that came from his pen.

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(1) Of Flann O'Brien's novels, *At Swim-Two-Birds* was first published by Longmans Green (1939). It was republished by MacGibbon & Kee (1960), from which time its fame began to date. It was also published in Penguin Modern Classics (1967). *The Hard Life* was published by MacGibbon & Kee (1961), and in Picador by Pan Books (1976); *The Dalkey Archive* by MacGibbon & Kee (1964), Picador (1976); *The Third Policeman* by MacGibbon & Kee (1967), Picador (1974); *The Poor Mouth* by Hart-Davis, MacGibbon Ltd. (1973), Picador (1975). *An Béal Bocht*, the title of *The Poor Mouth* in Irish, was first published in 1941 by The Dolmen Press Ltd. Dublin. *The Best of Myles*, the selection from «Cruiskeen Lawn» was first published in 1968 by MacGibbon & Kee and later in Picador by Pan Books (1977).

entering that body wasn't the end of him as it had been of many. A versatile linguist with a thorough knowledge of French, German, Italian and Latin, he wrote with equal fluency in English or Irish. His books written in English are: *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), *The Hard Life* (1961), *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) and *The Third Policeman* (posthumously published in 1967). His one novel in Irish, *An Béal Bocht* (1941), was translated into English as *The Poor Mouth* (1973). He died in Dublin in 1966. As the blurb on the Picador edition of his book says, his reputation is constantly growing.

He was a friend of James Joyce until the latter's death ((if he indeed be dead, a fact we are inclined to doubt after reading *The Dalkey Archive*), and influenced by him. This influence is most notable in O'Brien's first book *At Swim-Two-Birds* with its experimental blend of satire, fantasy and farce. It is also evident in some of the puns in *The Dalkey Archive*. (With Joyce and Thomas Hood, O'Brien must be one of the greatest punners in English). Compare this quotation from *Ulysses*: «A shrew, John Eglington said shrewdly, is not a useful portal of discovery...», with this from *The Dalkey Archive*: «In confidence, mind, he said, wagging his finger waggishly». The admiration between O'Brien and Joyce was not all one-way, however. Joyce read *At Swim-Two-Birds* and liked it; he said of it: «That's a real writer, with the true comic spirit. A really funny book». Praise from any other quarter would seem unnecessary and insipid after this.

And, indeed, O'Brien was a funny writer, but his humour is disquieting. His novels portray a gallery of grotesque types and situations, very plausibly explained, and whose profusion makes abnormality itself normal. Reading them for laughs is rather like walking through the corridors of an asylum for the insane, amused by the antics of the inmates and finding when one reaches the end that the doors are locked and that neither

for you is there any escape. The Evening Standard reviewer of *The Poor Mouth* said: «Wildly funny, but there is at the same time always a deep sense of black evil. Only O'Brien's genius, of all the writers I can think of, was capable of that mixture of qualities» (2). The setting of his novels and the way the characters speak is invariably Irish. *The Third Policeman* and *The Poor Mouth* have a country setting and the others are largely set in Dublin. The countryside in *The Third Policeman* with its white ribbon of road and bogland on either side might well be that through which Molloy wended in search of his mother.

In the «Cruiskeen Lawn» column he wrote for the Irish Times under the name of Myles Na Gopaleen, O'Brien was as pedantic as Joyce in his condemnation of solecism and cliché, the latter which he described as «a phrase that has become fossilised, its component words deprived of their intrinsic light and meaning by incessant usage». One of the series of articles he wrote (in English, Irish or Latin), in that column was headed «The Myles na Gopaleen Cathecism of Cliché» (3). Here is an extract from it entitled «For Your Cliché Album». There is a reference to the War in it, but it can be as true today as it was then.

In what can no man tell the future has for us?

Store.

With what do certain belligerents make their military dispositions?

Typical Teutonic thoroughness.

In what manner do wishful thinkers imagine the war will be over this year?

Fondly.

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(2) The reviewer of The Times Literary Supplement saw the same book as: «A devastating and hilarious send-up of Irishy».

(3) This article appears In The Best of Myles, page 206 In the Picador edition.

Take the word, «relegate». To what must a person be relegated?

That obscurity from which he should never have been permitted to emerge.

What may one do with a guess, provided one is permitted? Hazard.

And what is comment?

Superfluous.

Here was a writer very conscious of and dexterous with the language he was using and implacable against literary sinners, so we must look in his books for precision and variety of language. We find these qualities as well as a great exuberance of expression, especially in the first books. In *The Dalkey Archive* there seems to be something of a falling-off in the exactness and exuberance as if he was too tired or couldn't be bothered to say all that we expect him to say. This linguistic dexterity and diffuseness with the hilarious but disquieting characters and situations are the most salient features of O'Brien's novels.

### *The Third Policeman & The Dalkey Archive*

As the title suggests, this article is concerned with the treatment of the de Selby/Policemen/Bicycle themes in the two novels of O'Brien's in which they appear. Before going on to examine this, it might be useful to see what the two novels are about.

*The Third Policeman* was published in 1967 but seems to have been written in 1939-1940. In the Publisher's Note to the Picador edition of this book we have an extract from a letter from O'Brien to a fellow-author, William Saroyan (4), in which

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(4) This Publisher's Note appears on the back fly-leaf of the Picador edition of the book.

he mentions having finished writing the novel. The letter is dated 14th February 1940. Whatever the reasons, the book was not published until after his death and this is an important fact for he cannibalized parts of it, (those treating with Policemen/Bicycles especially) for use in *The Dalkey Archive*. It is obvious that he couldn't have done this had *The Third Policeman* been published before.

In the above-mentioned letter, the author gives a very brief synopsis of the plot in these words:

...When you get to the end of this book you realize that my hero or main character (he's a heel and a killer) has been dead throughout the book and that all the queer ghastly things which have been happening to him are happening in a sort of hell which he earned for the killing. Towards the end of the book (before you know he's dead) he manages to get back to his own house where he lived with another man who helped in the original murder. Although he's been away three days this other fellow is twenty years older (5) and dies of fright when he sees the other lad standing in the door. Then the two of them walk back along the road to the hell place and start through all the same terrible adventures again, the first fellow being surprised and frightened at everything just as he was the first time and as if he'd never been through it before. It is made clear that this sort of thing goes on for ever —and there you are... When you are writing about the world of the dead — and the damned — where none of the rules and laws (not even the law of gravity) holds good, there is any amount of scope for back-chat and funny cracks.

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(5) In the story Divney is sixteen years older, not twenty.

The brief sketch of the plot needs further elaboration. The story is written in the first person like all the novels except *The Dalkey Archive*. The «I» of the story like that of *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Hard Life* is an orphan, but unlike the other two he does not have a relative to look after him. After his father's death, there is a tall man «in black leggings» who comes to stay with him for a few days and send him off to boarding school with the consoling words, «The poor misfortunate little bastard». This lack of vigilance is in a big part the reason for his sad decline, fall, death and damnation. The way they happened is this.

While he is at the boarding school, he purloins a book from the science master's study. He tells us: «the date was the seventh of March. I still think that day is the most important in my life...». The book he steals is by a dotty savant called de Selby, its title is «Golden Hours». This is his first introduction to de Selby and the beginning of a life-long and post-mortem love affair with the man. Nothing else in life now has any meaning for him but to study the works of his idol. He intends to buy de Selby's complete works with studies of him by his principal commentators, but in the course of his journeyings to find where these books could be obtained he breaks his leg, «(or if you like it was broken for me)» and he ends up with one leg made of wood.

This accident forces him to go back to the pub which his parents owned and which is being looked after by a hired man, John Divney. He is content to let Divney have the run of the pub as long as he is left in peace to compile the great work he is intending to give to the world, the «De Selby Index», wherein «the views of all known commentators on every aspect of the savant and his work had been collected». To publish the book he needs money and as Divney has the same necessity, they plan to rob a rich neighbour, called Old



Mathers, and kill him afterwards in order to avoid the possibility of being identified.

They carry out the murder as planned but Divney double-crosses the narrator, sending him to look for the money which had been robbed of old Mathers, and which according to Divney was under a floor board in Mather's house, when, in reality, what Divney had put there was a mine. Of course the author is killed when he puts his hand under the floor board but we do not know this, so all his adventures from this on are seen through the glass of a double illusion, the one illusion being that necessarily imposed by a work of fiction and the other that of our believing that the narrator is still alive.

He has many adventures which it is not possible or necessary to relate here, suffice it to say that each in its own way is disquieting, even terrifying, as the narrator and his soul, which has a speaking part and which he calls Joe, go in search of a black box which he thinks contains the money. The stopping place is a strange police barracks, the headquarters of three rare policemen, Sergeant Pluck, Policeman MacCruiskeen and a Policeman Fox, with whom the narrator has one chilling encounter before the story ends to begin all over again.

This barracks can be considered as a fixed hell and the policemen as the devil tormentors. This appears all the more outlandish since the policemen, especially Sergeant Pluck, are on the face of it bumbling and gross-mannered but not wholly unsympathetic. The torments they inflict are purely mental ones, forcing their obsessions on the narrator and forcing him to participate in them. The obsession of Sergeant Pluck concerns bicycles and more especially the danger of people turning into bicycles and vice versa because of the workings of the «atomic» theory. (This theory will be explained in more

detail in the third section). That of Policeman MacCruiskeen involves refining objects into invisibility and sounds into inaudibility, such as a spear with an invisible point or a set of Chinese boxes, several of which are invisible to the naked eye, or a miniature piano which emits sounds too high-pitched for the human ear to capture.

Each episode or adventure of the narrator is counterpointed by something parallel and equally ludicrous from the life of de Selby or from some of his zany «disquisitions». Since the latter are recounted in such a straight-faced way with copious, pseudo footnotes, we are compelled, if we willingly suspend disbelief in the story, to accept that de Selby was a real person living in a definite place (apparently England), and in a defined period of time, (apparently the last century), Corresponding to the «double illusion» of the plot, mentioned above, we have now a duplication of facts to give an illusion of reality, to make the abnormal normal, the ridiculous logical. This mixing of the real with the unreal introduces the story where on the fly-leaf we have a quotation from de Selby accompanied by one from Shakespeare.

Under sentence of hanging for the murder of old Mathers, (which this time paradoxically he did not commit), the narrator siezes the opportunity when the policemen are away of seducing the Sergeant's bicycle and, as he thinks, escaping. Perhaps it is more correct to say that he and the bicycle elope. He heads for his home, the pub that he lived in with John Divney, but at the outpost separating the world of the living from that of the dead he encounters Policeman Fox who is in reality, (if one can use such a word at this juncture), old Mathers. The latter reveals that he had been responsible for many of the most grotesque adventures which had befallen the narrator, by the manipulation of «omnium», a substance which he asserts is contained in the black box the narrator had been looking for. He directs the narrator to Divney's pub,

telling him that the black box and the omnium can there be found. When he arrives at Divney's he finds that man aged beyond recognition. The latter dies of fright at seeing him and both together through a bleak landscape redirect their footsteps to the same quaint police barracks where the same things begin to happen for the first time.

The action in *The Dalkey Archive* is much more straightforward and firmly set in our time and in recognizable surroundings. The central character is Mick Shaughnessy who, at the beginning of the story, together with his friend Hackett, is returning from an early-morning swim and helps into his house a man who had stubbed his toe against a rock. The man is called de Selby and defines himself as «a theologian and a physicist, sciences which embrace many others such as eschatology and astrognosy». To Mick and Hackett he reveals that he has invented a substance, which for no apparent reason he calls D. M. P. The initials however correspond to those of the Dublin Metropolitan Police, so we have the police motif introduced early in the story.

With this substance he can work wonders, one of the simplest of which is producing perfect whisky in a week. By detonating an appropriate quantity of the stuff in an air-sealed compartment he can «suspend time» and converse with people long-since dead. But by far the most frightening potential of D.M.P. is that it can destroy oxygen and a sufficient quantity detonated at strategic points would destroy life on the world. This, in fact, is de Selby's plan because, as the scientist says: «It merits destruction. Its history and prehistory, even its present, is a foul record of pestilence, famine, war, devastation and misery so terrible and multifarious that its depth and horror are unknown to any one man. Rottenness is universally endemic, disease is paramount. The human race is finally debauched and aborted». This pessimism of de Selby's

corresponds to that of O'Brien especially in the last years of his life as is attested by Kevin O'Nolan (6).

Before Mick and Hackett leave de Selby, he invites them to witness an experiment with «suspended time» in an underwater sea cave. They keep the date and during the experiment they are able to hear and see St. Augustine conversing with de Selby, to such purpose that Mick thinks afterwards that «all is not well in the kingdom of Heaven». The principal effect of the experiment, however, is to dispel any doubt of the power of D.M.P. and of de Selby's ability and intention to use it to destroy the world. Mick consequently sets about making plans to steal the deadly substance to save the world from its threatened fate. He after all has some terrestrial interests and commitments including a poorly-paid office job, an aged mother who lives with him, a sophisticated girl friend, Mary, and a group of friends with whom he whiles away the time drinking.

To steal the D.M.P. he seeks the help of Sergeant Fottrell, who lives in a little police barracks with Policeman Pluck. Both of these guardians of the law are obsessed, in Pluck's case to a lesser degree, with bicycles. The first time we hear of Pluck: «He had a bicycle upside down on the floor of the day-room attending to a hernia at the front rim, grating white powder on to a protruding intestine». The Sergeant is always seen on the roads in the company of a bicycle. He tells Mick: «For me to go out on the roads or streets of this parish without my bicycle would be worse than going out without any trousers on me». However, he is always seen pushing the machine, never on it. «I have never been on top of a bicycle in my life and never will be, world without end».

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(6) In the preface to the Picador edition of *The Best of Myles*, Kevin O'Nolan writes about the «Cruiskeen Lawn» column: «In its more recent years the tome was often more sombre, more fiercely satirical, and many passages of savage denunciation deserve resurrection».

His reason for never mounting a bicycle? The danger of turning into one, of course, because of the workings of the «mollycule» theory. (The «mollycule» theory is the same as the «atomic» theory, mentioned before).

Mick easily manages to secure the key to the safe where de Selby keeps the D. M. P. and by a ruse he will have the owner absent from the house on a night when he and Sergeant Fottrell can effect the disappearance of the substance. In the meantime, he learns the startling news that James Joyce is still alive and living at small village not far from Dublin. As he is interested in meeting Joyce, he seeks him out where he is working as a «curate» in a small bar. Joyce disclaims any knowledge of *Finnegans Wake* having been written and denies strongly any participation in the writing of *Ulyses*, which, he says, was written by: «Muck rakers, obscene poets, carnal pimps, sodomous sycophants, pedlars of the coloured lusts of fallen humanity.» These bitter words can be compared to those of de Selby concerning the human race and confirm to some extent the pessimism of the author in his last years. However, it would be a mistake to take O'Brien too seriously for he was adept at doing about-turns.

His meetings with St. Augustine and Joyce have had an influence on Mick to the extent that he wants to mend his life. Although by no means a *débauché*, he plans to give up the drink, break with Mary, send his old mother to live with her sister and himself enter the Church in the strictest enclosed order he can find, the Cistercians. Joyce, on his second meeting with Mick, confides also his desire of entering the Jesuit Order and asks Mick's help. Joyce wishes to join the Jesuits so that he can put the Church right on a point of doctrine concerning the Holy Chost. In the treatment of religious matters in this book there is often an air of banter, badinage or even petty blasphemy. This is especially so in the St. Augustine episode. It is however done with tremendous exuberance and in a way

that completely takes the harm out of it, and indeed this tone is set in the dedication on the fly-page. This dedication is all the more poignant considering that the author then had only a couple of years to live.

I dedicate these pages  
to my Guardian Angel,  
impressing upon him  
that I'm only fooling  
and warning him  
to see to it that  
there is no misunderstanding  
when I go home.

The action of *The Dalkey Archive* ends anti-climatically enough; Mick, with Sergeant Fottrell's help, succeeds in stealing de Selby's D.M.P. and lodging it in a secure place. Mick considers himself as a saviour of mankind, (it is surprising the number of persons with illusions of power in this book: de Selby, Mick himself, Joyce in his wish to set the Church on the right track, even the Sergeant, who tells Mick on one occasion: «There are times when I must take my superior officer to be the Man Above.»), and has all plans made to retire from the world. He has one last meeting with Mary to tell her that he is breaking it off with her but is caught in the trap of sentimentality that he had sworn to avoid. He ends up asking her to marry him and we are finally brought back to reality with Mary's words, which end the book. «Yes, Mick. I'm certain I'm going to have a baby.»

*De Selby / Policemen / Bicycles in The Third Policeman and The Dalkey Archive (7).*

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(7) In the rest of the article, since the titles occur with greater frequency, *The Third Policeman* will be referred to by the initials T. T. P. and *The Dalkey Archive* by the initials T. D. A.

De Selby is the figure which suffers the greatest variation between the one book and the other. In T. T. P. he is outside the action of the story, taking part only by his influence on the narrator, and serves to draw a parallel between the supposedly real world of the living and that of the dead. In T. D. A. he is one of the key characters, the precipitator of the action. In the second book he is described physically: «the man was spare, tall, clean shaven, with sparse fairish hair combed sideways across an oversized head.», and in spite of his foreign-sounding name, his accent is Irish. In the first book we know of him only from the writings and anecdotes of his commentators (8). He coincides in both books in being a scientist: in the first book he is dangerous only to those who take him seriously and follow his advice; in the second he is a bitter misanthrope who poses a threat to mankind.

In both books there occur the themes of the real or imaginary passage of time and mixing of illusion and reality and in both de Selby serves as a vehicle to convey the ideas. In T. T. P. we learn that de Selby: «discounts the reality or truth of any progression or serialism in life, denies that time can pass as such in the accepted sense and attributes to hallucinations the commonly experienced sensation of progression as, for instance, in journeying from one place to another or even 'living'.» In T. D. A., in his first meeting with Mick and Hackett, de Selby talks of time: «I have mastered time... I can suspend time, negative its apparent course.» Later in the same chapter we have: «Considerations of time», he said, «from intellectual, philosophic or even mathematical criteria is fatuity and the preoccupation of slovens. In such unseemly brawls some priestly fop is bound to introduce a sort of cerebral

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(8) These are carefully distinguished ones from the others and include Englishmen (?): Hatchjaw, Basset, Henderson; Frenchmen: Le Fournier, Du Garbandler; a «little-known Swiss writer», Le Clorque, and a «shadowy» German, Kraus.

catalepsy by bringing forward such terms as infinity and eternity.»

O'Brien, like many great writers, is concerned with that mixture of illusion and reality which constitutes life. De Selby in T. T. P. affirms that many of the things we firmly consider to be real are merely illusory. The quotation of his on the fly-page of that book is an example.

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

Other things he considers as hallucinations include a journey (mentioned above), which he considers as a series of intermediate resting places which are infinitely near each other but far enough apart to admit the insertion between them of another series and so on ad infinitum. Consequently there is no difference between the state of the person at A before starting the journey and that at B while he is allegedly engaged on the journey. The accepted shape of the earth as spherical is also an hallucination since human beings («though convinced they are free to move in any direction») can really only move in one, because: «if one leaves any point on the globe moving and continuing to move in any «direction», one ultimately reaches the point of departure again.» The logical conclusion he draws from this is that the earth instead of being spherical is sausage-shaped. Sleep, as such he claims, does not exist, the state we call sleep being: «a succession of fainting fits brought on by semi-asphyxiation» due to «black air» (night) which is caused by «volcanic eruptions too fine for the naked



eye to see» and also «certain regrettable industrial activities involving coal-tar by-products and vegetable dyes.»

In T. D. A., when de Selby takes Mick and Hackett to the sea cave to hear his conversation with St. Augustine, the two boys are not sure whether what they see and hear is real or an hallucination. Mick between doubt and believing tells himself that the vision might have been caused by a temporary physical malaise, «a phantasm such as would arise from taking mescaline or morphine». More suspicious, Hackett considers that de Selby might have administered «a very slow-acting drug on them» In any case, de Selby is the agent who initiates this conflict of doubt in their minds, and in ours, about what is real and what is imaginary.

Apart from their parallel ideas on time and what we have seen about illusion and reality, the author did not use much of the de Selby from one book for the other. The scientist in T. T. P. is introduced in many cases to provide us with uneasy laughs and we are not meant to consider any of ideas or «disquisitions» outside the context of the story. The de Selby in T. D. A., as well as being the instigator of the action, serves as a vehicle to convey the author's often serious ideas on some scientific or mathematical treatise and especially to show us his knowledge of Church history and doctrine.

With the theme of Policemen and bicycles the case is different, many ideas and even passages being lifted word for word from one book for inclusion in the other. In T.T.P., as we have seen, there are three policemen altogether but only two of them dwell at their quaint barracks. The names of these two are Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen. In T. D. A. there are two policemen, Sergeant Fottrell and Policeman Pluck in an unobtrusive barracks at Dalkey. Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen, as befits characters from the other world, are strange and gross of

mien and manner. The corporal mass of Pluck is described like this:

He was very big and fat and the hair which strayed abundantly about the back of his bulging neck was a pale straw-colour; all that was striking but not unheard of. My glance ran over his great back, the thick arms and legs encased in the rough blue uniform. Ordinary enough as each part of him looked by itself, they all seemed to create together, by some undetectable discrepancy in association or proportion, a very disquieting impression of unnaturalness, amounting to what was horrible and monstrous.

And MacCruiskeen like this:

He had a dark Jewish face and hooky nose and masses of black curly hair. He was blue-jowled and black-jowled and looked as if he shaved twice a day... He was heavy-fleshed and gross in body like the Sergeant but his face looked far more intelligent. It was unexpectedly lean and the eyes in it were penetrating and intelligent. If his face alone were in question he would look more like a poet than a policeman but the rest of his body looked anything but poetical.

In T. D. A., the Policemen, who have less important rôles, are described with more brevity. Though not beautiful maybe, they are at least not grotesque. This is what the author says of Sergeant Fottrell:

He was tall, lean, melancholy, clean-shaven, red in the face and of indeterminate age. Nobody, it was said, had ever seen him in a uniform yet he was far from being a plain-clothes man; his constabularity was unmistakable.

And this is what of Policeman Pluck:

Policeman Pluck was young, raw-boned, mottled of complexion and wore an expression of friendly stupidity... all his visible teeth seemed to be bad and discoloured.

There is little in common between the subordinates, that is Policeman MacCruiskeen and Policeman Pluck, in the two stories. The former is intelligent, inventive and frightening and plays a every sinister and effective role in the mental torture of the narrator and in repelling a rescue bid. Policeman Pluck is a nonentity and we only see him twice in T. D. A., the first time as described above and the second when Mick calls on Sergeant Fottrell at the barracks. Both of them have a secondary interest in bicycles but not nearly as great as that of their superiors. Apart from this, Policeman Pluck's name seems to be the only thing about him borrowed from the first book.

Apart from the physical difference, which is noted in the description quoted above, Sergeant Fottrell (9) and Sergeant Pluck are one and the same man. They are the same because of their obsession with bicycles and their theories about them, (when dealing with these two books it is impossible to consider separately policemen and bicycles, they go together as logically as a horse and cart or apples and pears), and also because of the way they speak, the turns of phrase they have, the malapropisms they use. First the theory about bicycles, the «atomic» theory of Sergeant Pluck or the «mollycule» theory of Fottrell, because a lot that is funny and important in both books hinges on it.

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(9) The name Fottrell appears in the Nighttown episode in Ulysses.

The explanation of these theories occurs in chapter six of T. T. P., and chapter nine of T. D. A. and not only does the wording of the theory correspond almost exactly in the second book to that in the first but the rest of chapter nine of T. D. A., which is mostly concerned with bicycles, is an almost exact reproduction of chapter six of T. T. P. with minimal changes to indicate the different personages. In the first book, where Sergeant Pluck is talking to the narrator during a walk in the country, the description and explanations fit in more logically and effectively than in the second, where Sergeant Fottrell is talking to Mick in the lounge of the Metropole in Dublin. Here in an abbreviated form is the «atomic» or «mollycule» theory which shows why people turn into bicycles and vice versa, in Pluck's or Fottrell's words. Where a word or phrase is different in one book from the other it is put in brackets here:

Everything is composed of small particles (mollycules) of itself and they are flying around in concentric circles and arcs and segments and innumerable geometrical figures (various other routes) too numerous to mention collectively, never standing still or resting but spinning away and darting hither and thither and back again all the time on the go. (These diminutive gentlemen are called atoms). Do you follow me intelligently? (Mollycules?)... What is a sheep only millions of little bits of sheepness whirling around (and) doing intricate convolutions (convulsions) inside the sheep (baste)? What else is it but that?

We are next told what happens if you hit an iron bar with a good coal hammer or a rock with an iron hammer; some of the atoms, or «mollycules» of the hammer are driven into

what is being hit and «contrariwise likewise». Sergeants Pluck and Fottrell go on explaining:

The gross and net result of it is that people who spend most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycles as a result of the interchanging of the atoms (mollycules) of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these (country) parts who are nearly half people and half bicycles.

This interchanging of the personalities of people and bicycles causes serious problems to the good Sergeants and gives rise to tragi-comic situations. Sometimes the Sergeants have to go round stealing the bicycles of people who have a lot of bicycle in their make-up so that they will be forced to walk a little and get their «percentage» down again. A bicycle, in the words of Sergeant Fottrell, with a high percentage of «homo sapiens» in its make-up manifests very human characteristics: «it is very cunning and entirely remarkable. You never see them moving by themselves but you meet them in the least accountable of places unexpectedly. Did you ever see a bicycle leaning against the dresser in a warm kitchen when it is pouring outside?».

«I did».

«Not very far from the fire?».

«Yes».

«Near enough the family to hear the conversation?».

I suppose so».

«Not a thousand miles from where they keep the eatables?».

«I did not notice that. Good Lord you do not mean to say that these bicycles eat food?».

«They were never seen doing it, nobody ever caught them with a mouthful of seedy cake. All I know is that food disappears».

«What!».

«It is not the first time I have noticed crumbs at the front wheels of some of those gentlemen».

Even more serious than this is that a man's bicycle develops male characteristics and a woman's bicycle female ones so that a person riding a bicycle of the opposite sex, so to speak, could very well be indulging in an immoral act. In fact, Sergeant Pluck cites the example of a Michael Gilhaney (a man who features in T. T. P. and T. D. A.), who took a woman teacher's bicycle out to the country for his own nefarious ends meanwhile his own male bicycle managed to get away with the teacher. As the Sergeant says: «Need I inform you of what the result was or what happened?».

All this theorising and «backchat» on bicycles and people is hilariously funny and well bears repetition in T. D. A. for it is very amusing in any context. However, in T. T. P. it fits in more appropriately in the story and leads on to «a tender, brief, erotic story about the... love affair between a man and his bicycle». The man is the narrator and the bicycle is Sergeant Pluck's, which he was keeping locked in a cell (and which makes one wonder if the Sergeant's motives were as pure and blameless as he would like one to think). The occasion for the meeting and the elopement (I think that must be the appropriate word), of the narrator and the bicycle is, as was mentioned above, while the former is awaiting execution for murder. It is worth while to note how this necessarily brief courtship is described.

The narrator sitting dejected at the barrancks glances from time to time at the cell and notices that each time the bicycle seems to have emerged farther. He describes the machine first

using the neuter pronoun «it». «It seemed to have some peculiar quality of shape or personality which gave it a distinction and importance». It was «extremely well-kept» with a «pleasing lustre». The bicycle is already beginning to attract him and he goes on to say that, now fully emerged from the cell, it was «resting before me like a tame domestic pony». Still using the neuter pronoun, he is now describing the bicycle in terms of animal imagery. Next comes the phase when he dares to carres the machine: «I passed my hand with unintended tenderness — sensously indeed — across the saddle. Inexplicably it reminded me of a human face». From here on he uses human imagery in describing the female bicycle and its coquettish responses to his overtures and employs the feminine pronouns «her» and «she», saying how she invites «me to lend my mastery for free and joyful journeyings» and continues: «How desirable her seat was, how charming the invitation of her slim encircling handle-arms». This kind of description continues until both the narrator and the bicycle disappear into the darkening evening on the journey he fondly believes is towards freedom.

There is more that could be said about the treatment of Policemen/Bicycles in these two books but I think this is enough to show how funny, original and disturbing O'Brien can be as an author. On the other hand, the obsession with Policemen/Bicycles was not so strange when T. T. P. was written in 1940 as it might seem now. Policemen and bicycles were constant companions then and for long after traversing bad country roads in all kinds of weather the one, as it were, depending on the other to get back to the warmth of the barracks. One would not be surprised if some of the same policeman had a high percentage of bicycle in their make-up and thinking further on the problem one wonders about the percentage of foreign «mollycules» in the case of the

motorcycle police or the Canadian Mounted. Nowadays if policemen in Ireland are in danger of turning into anything it will be into little Fiat patrol cars — for they spend most of their life in them. The menace of bicycles has not completely passed however as is attested by something I overheard recently at a little railway station in the West of Ireland.

The station-master with a shapeless florid face and handlebar moustaches and a shiny peaked cap like Sergeant Pluck himself was talking urgently into the telephone:

«It's about a bicycle» he was saying. «The girl is greatly distressed. She claims she put the bicycle into the wagon but when the train reached Balliná there was no sight or light of the machine».

There are a number of possibilities to explain that but I wondered if anybody had actually thought of counting the number of passengers that got off at Balliná station!

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To sum up, it is not possible to fit Flann O'Brien into an easy niche in the gallery of modern Irish novelists. There are two reasons for this. One is that being a comic writer and an idiosyncratic one at that he resists pigeon-holing in any well-defined group such as «realists» or «angry young men» etc. In fact in his novels he carefully avoided themes to do with the social, the trendy or the actual and gave full rein to his fantasy. I say this even bearing in mind that in *The Poor Mouth* he takes the Michael out of the Gaeltacht and that he dedicates *The Hard Life* to Graham Greene and subtitles it «An Exegesis of Squalor», for these two novels are also fantastic and absurd in their own way.

He is more influenced than an influencer. His first novel, *At Swin-Two-Birds*, owes a lot to *Ulysses* in the use of fantasy



and dream sequences and, as Anthony Burgess, states (10), in counterpointing myth, fiction and actuality as well as in parodying the literature of action. In the later novels the Joycean influence is less evident in the technique although it is still evident in the use of language. I do not think that Flann O'Brien will greatly influence any future generation of Irish novelists. He was not really an innovator for his best novel was his first one but, like *Ulysses*, it was the end of a line, not the beginning.

The second reason is that the post-war Irish novel genre cannot be really said to exist as it exists in England, The United States, Germany, France or Spain. Of the other two novelists of distinction one considers in the post-war context, one, Beckett, writes in French and the other, Joyce Cary, is more Anglo-Irish than the Anglo-Irish themselves. The Irish literary genius now seems to be more adapted to poetry, the theatre and, particularly, the short story. Irish writers — one readily thinks of George Moore, Joyce himself, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faoláin — are among the greatest specialists in the short story. The reason for this lack of prominent novelists in Ireland is that any Irish novelist would necessarily be hindered rather than helped by the brilliance of Joyce. An example is John McGahern, whose *The Dark*, good as it is, shines with something of a borrowed light. There is also the problem, as Grattan Freyer says in «The Irish Contribution» (11), of «the amorphousness of the class structure» and «the almost complete lack of social purpose or moral earnestness». It might be worth while quoting an extract from the above-mentioned article:

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(10) *The Novel Now. A Student's Guide to Contemporary Fiction.* (Faber) The quotation appears on page 78 in the chapter headed «Great Individuality».

(11) *The Pelican Guide to English Literature. The Modern Age* (Penguin Books) Page 206.

It has already been mentioned that the absence of a firm class structure in modern Ireland has been blamed for her failure to produce any novelists of real distinction during these years. Perhaps it is true that the novel requires a background of established society against which the individual characters are set... In Ireland the only forces which might have offered such a unifying concept were Catholicism or the national movement. But Irish Catholicism has been of such a narrow and parochial character as to prove a millstone round the neck of any intellectual. This certainly has a depressing effect on writers. As for the national movement, it had lost its real *raison d'être* after the establishment of the Free State in 1922.

Returning briefly to Flann O'Brien, one can see that he had to work within limitations unknown to many novelists. These limitations were in part those imposed by the society in which he lived and which particularly affect a Catholic writer in Ireland and some of his own making — the theme he chose and his own particular treatment of them. Paradoxically, this limitation of treatment and theme provided him, in Anthony Burgess's words (12), with a «scope for the only extension that means much to an Irish writer — extension in the use of language». This is only one of the many apparent absurdities which are seen as rational when considering the work of Flann O'Brien, whose star is now on the ascendent. Only time will tell whether the brilliance comes from a passing comet or a fixed star.

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(12) As in 10.