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## Going Round and Round: *In Bruges* and *The Third Policeman*

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A marker of the literary importance of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* is its influence on popular culture. This note considers the possible influence of O'Brien's novel on Martin McDonagh's film *In Bruges* (2008). The film's themes of murder, penance, purgatory, hellish repetition and queer relations all resonate with *The Third Policeman*, and McDonagh's possible homage to O'Brien's book is made more likely by the fact that, at the time, one of McDonagh's actors owned the film rights to O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds*.

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Although it has yet to be made into a film, *The Third Policeman* arguably made its silver screen debut in Martin McDonagh's *In Bruges* (2008). For most of the six decades since its publication, Flann O'Brien's great work has been a cult favourite, but its increasing impact on popular culture indicates that it may now be achieving canonicity. In October 2006 the cover of the book momentarily flashed on the screen during an episode of the popular TV series *Lost*. In the next three weeks the book sold 15,000 copies. And in the following months articles appeared in *The Observer* and *The World News* under headlines such as 'TV show provides boost for lost classic,' and 'Surreal bicycle book rides to fame on back of cult tv show.'<sup>1</sup> Not long afterwards, as I hope to show, O'Brien's book re-emerged in McDonagh's film, which resembles the book in several respects. These include engagement with murder, penance, purgatory, hellish repetition and queer relations, as well as the premise of a character unknowingly experiencing his afterlife – an aspect of the film that has until now gone unnoticed, but which is suggested in the concluding voiceover.

A work of popular entertainment, *In Bruges* is also a considerable aesthetic achievement, combining award-winning writing, Oscar-nominated acting, beautiful cinematography, and an exquisite setting. In the film, each of the three principal characters combines wickedness and goodness. Two Irish hitmen, Ray, played by Colin Farrell, and Ken, played by Brendan Gleeson, are killers with a conscience. As Ken says, he has mainly murdered people who 'were not very nice' and he regrets once killing a 50-year-old 'lollipop man' who was defending his brother. On Ray's first assignment, he shot a priest in a confessional, inadvertently killing a young boy in the process.<sup>2</sup> Employing these hitmen is an English gangster named Harry Waters, played by Ralph Fiennes. An honourable man in his own way, Waters has sent Ken and Ray to Bruges to await further orders and, by telephone, instructs Ken to kill Ray for the death of the little boy. It is a matter of principle for Waters that if you kill a child you 'should put a gun in your mouth' and kill yourself. Ken refuses to shoot Ray, and instead sends him out of Bruges. Furious, Waters comes to Bruges, where Ken sacrifices his life to warn Ray. Waters pursues Ray to an outdoor film set, where 'some kind of Boschian nightmare' is being filmed and where costumed Bosch figures appear, implicitly identifying the set, and Bruges itself, with hell. On the film set, Waters wounds Ray and accidentally kills Jimmy, an actor whose schoolboy costume causes Walter to mistake him for a child. True to his principles, Waters shoots himself.

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<sup>1</sup> Both articles quote the series script writer, Craig Wright, as mixing metaphors to say that anyone familiar with Flann O'Brien's book 'would have a lot' of 'ammunition in dissecting *Lost* plotlines.' Nicola Byrne, 'TV Show Provides Boost for Lost Classic,' *The Guardian*, 19 February 2006 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/feb/19/broadcasting.books>; Owen Boycott, 'Surreal Bicycle Book Rides to Fame on Back of Cult TV Show,' *The Guardian*, 24 February 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/feb/24/books.media>.

<sup>2</sup> What the boy had written is, pathetically, 1) Being moody, 2) Being bad at maths 3) Being sad.

As the film closes with Ray rushed away in an ambulance, whose space also resembles a hearse, Ray says twice in voiceover, 'I really, really hoped I wouldn't die,' words that imply that he may now be dead. Thinking of what he might say to the mother of the child he accidentally killed, he says:

I'd accept whatever punishment she chose for me cuz at least in prison, at least in death, you know, I wouldn't be in fuckin' Bruges. But then in a flash it came to me and I realized. Maybe that's what hell is. The entire rest of eternity spent in fuckin' Bruges.

Ray's identification of Bruges with hell suggests that his afterlife may already have begun in Bruges, with the eternal repetition of his punishment tied to, and performed through, the repetitions that occur through the medium of film. That is, as the film *In Bruges* is shown and watched again and again, so too will Ray live out eternity, not merely trapped in the city of Bruges but forced to live on, undead, through the action of the movie.

Other things said and done strengthen the likelihood that Ray is dead. His repeated descriptions of Bruges as 'a shithole' aligns it with a place of punishment. Visiting the Groeningemuseum, Ray and Ken look at the hellscape panel of Hieronymus Bosch's *Judgment Day* (1482). Significantly, Ray is drawn to the artwork, which causes him to reflect on the possibility of life after death. He asks Ken, 'Do you believe in all that stuff, guilt, sin, hell and all that?' and 'What's that other place?,' to which Ken answers, 'Purgatory.' Later, on the phone, Ken reinforces the afterlife theme by telling Waters that Ray 'keeps going on about hell and purgatory.' When he orders Ray's killing over the phone, Waters refers to Ray in the past tense: 'He wasn't a bad kid was he?' Although Ray is still alive, as far as Waters is concerned he is already dead because he has been condemned to death. For Waters, who has sent them to Bruges in hopes that Ray would enjoy his final few days of life, Ray is a dead man walking. But Waters' metaphor would also be true if Ray had commenced his afterlife by the end of a previous showing of the film. That Ray is actually dead is suggested by the false assurance Ken gives Waters, saying that Ray likes Bruges and that Ray said, 'I know I'm awake but I feel like I'm in a dream.' The lie evokes, in retrospect, the conventional analogy between sleep and death, which informs Hamlet's famous intimation of life after death: 'to sleep, perchance to dream.' Later, Ray and a newly acquired love interest, Chloë, decline Jimmy's invitation to visit him on the filmset, and upon their refusal, Jimmy, walking away, responds, 'In another life!' His quip has thematic significance in the implication that there are lives other than their present, seemingly earthly life.

If Ray is in his afterlife-in-Bruges, the film shares the premise of *The Third Policeman*. Just as the reader of O'Brien's book does not know its true setting until the final two pages, the viewer of McDonough's film does not realize until the final minute that the events of the film have probably taken place in Ray's afterlife. Ray himself approaches this realization but, like O'Brien's narrator, may not attain it. Like O'Brien's narrator, he is trapped within cycles of repetition, his confusion with his surroundings and lack of awareness of his fate part of his infinite punishment. Analogies throughout the book, and particularly its original, working title, 'Hell Goes Round and Round,' indicate that the rest of the narrator's eternity will be endless cyclic repetitions.<sup>3</sup> Ray's afterlife would likely also be an unending cycle as the film is shown and reshown. That Ray has been dead from the start of the film adds emphasis to his statement at the beginning of his opening voiceover: 'I didn't even know where Bruges fucking was.' Ray's Bruges, is, like the narrator's parish, in the cyclical non-place of the afterlife.

Further aligning the film with O'Brien's book is a parallel between the two pairs of murderers – Ken and Ray in the film, Divney and the narrator in the book. The resemblance is strengthened by queer motifs. In the book, the narrator attaches himself to Divney to prevent him from absconding with the cashbox taken from Mathers, which Divney says he hid. They 'never parted company for more than one minute either night or day' and slept together in the same bed 'always.'<sup>4</sup> Their 'peculiar terms of physical intimacy' make their 'situation ... a queer one.'<sup>5</sup> A polysemic word, 'queer' in 1940, when the book was completed, could mean homosexual as well as odd. But Divney's sexual partner is female, and the narrator feels no homoerotic attraction to anyone. Later, the narrator falls in love with a policeman's bike – a male bike, but he thinks it female, so he is mistaken, but that does not make him homosexual. In their hotel in Bruges, Ken and Ray are likewise forced to share a room, though not a bed. Neither likes it, and Ray is visibly upset. Later in a bar with Ken he orders 'one gay beer for my gay friend, one normal beer for me because I'm normal.' Both texts, then, play and prevaricate with queer depictions.

Even in differences between the film and the book, there is resemblance. Because all three of McDonough's murderers have consciences and behave, in varying degrees, virtuously, their afterlives may not be hell but purgatory, defined in the conversation between Ken and Ray as a condition 'between heaven and hell.' The film concerns Ray's afterlife but maybe also Ken's, since he too dies in the film. Their afterlives would differ, even if both take place in Bruges, about which the first thing Ken says is, 'I like

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<sup>3</sup> O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 406.

<sup>4</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, in *The Complete Novels* (London: Penguin Everyman's Library, 2008), 229.

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 234, 229.

it here.' After all, Ken is a Christ-figure, though an unlikely one. His death is an act of love for Ray who, seeing his corpse, exclaims significantly, 'Oh Ken. Jesus!' Ken, not Ray, had earlier touched the vial purportedly containing Jesus's blood in the Basilica of the Holy Blood, and when they are in the museum, at least one painting of Jesus in his Passion appears briefly onscreen. Ken and Ray both being in Bruges for the rest of eternity would exemplify Milton's words: 'The mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.'<sup>6</sup> However different, their afterlives potentially intersect and would probably overlap with that of Waters. These three, and especially the two hired killers, would then resemble Divney and the narrator, condemned to spend the rest of eternity together.

For O'Brien's murderers, who have no regrets and show no signs of conscience, the prospect is more hellish than purgatorial. As the narrator says of himself and Divney, 'two people never came to dislike each other as bitterly as did I and Divney.'<sup>7</sup> But before being joined by Divney, the afterlife of O'Brien's narrator is unconventionally hellish, since he suffers hardly at all. This is arguably owing to his being, unlike McDonagh's killers, nearly devoid of humanity. Having dedicated his life to the idiocies of de Selby and having surrendered nearly all agency to Divney, he seems not to have been human enough to qualify for hell as conventionally imagined. Instead, his hell is a de Selbian version of Dante's first circle, reserved for those who never were alive.

The alignment of the film with the book hardly seems coincidental. It is highly likely that as an accomplished writer of Irish parentage who identifies with Irish culture and writes on Irish subjects, McDonagh would have known about *The Third Policeman*. Increasing this probability is that his friend Brendan Gleeson – Ken in the film – in 2004 obtained the rights to O'Brien's first book, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, with the intention of making a film version of it.<sup>8</sup> Conversation between Gleeson and McDonagh likely would have included among its subjects O'Brien's books, *The Third Policeman* among them.

McDonagh's use of the basic premise of *The Third Policeman* also contributes to a motif in the film of art including prior works of art by incorporating formal elements from them. As we have seen, the nighttime set of *In Bruges*' film-within-the-film incorporates the hellscape of a Bosch painting seen earlier in the day. This film-within-the-film – which has echoes of the book-within-a-book of *At Swim-Two-Birds* – is said by Chloë to be 'a pastiche of' the English filmmaker Nicholas Roeg, 'homage is too

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<sup>6</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost* I, 221–70, [poets.org](https://poets.org), <https://poets.org/poem/paradise-lost-book-i-lines-221-270>.

<sup>7</sup> O'Brien, *The Complete Novels*, 229.

<sup>8</sup> 'Brendan Gleeson secures funds for Flann O'Brien film.' *BBC News*, 11 July 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-north-ern-ireland-14105242>, 2 December 2024.

strong – a nod of the head.’ The situation of the two killers awaiting orders is taken from Harold Pinter’s *The Dumb Waiter*.<sup>9</sup> This is established and, in effect, acknowledged, by McDonagh’s killers registering at the hotel in Bruges under false names that are the surnames of Kenneth Cranham and Colin Blakely, who played Pinter’s killers in the 1985 BBC production of *The Dumb Waiter*.<sup>10</sup> This inclusion of prior works of art is an aesthetic analogue to the metaphysics reflected in *The Third Policeman*, since, in a sense, the film provides an afterlife for the earlier works of art.

And, of course, the absorption of prior artworks by the film has an affinity, in O’Brien’s book, with the famous Atomic Theory of Policeman Pluck, by which identities are absorbed or transferred through an exchange of molecules between rider and bicycle. As such, even if *In Bruges* was not originally conceived as a homage to *The Third Policeman*, the film rides over the book’s roads, and we can trace the evidence of a molecular exchange from O’Brien to McDonagh.

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<sup>9</sup> Joseph LaBine, email to author, 15 December 2022.

<sup>10</sup> *The Dumb Waiter*, Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Dumb\\_Waiter](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dumb_Waiter).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to report.

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