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Not quite dead but definitely queer… Flann O'Brien's thanatophiliac characters

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This article describes the extent to which Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, *The Poor Mouth* and other less famous works offer a twofold movement of resistance by relying on a meticulous construction of strangeness articulated through oblique elaborations on non-existence, violence and death. The first movement is grounded in history and criticises the stifling nationalist environment of the newly independent Ireland. The second aims to underline the dubious transient ephemeral nature of all entities – be they abstract or concrete, linguistic or biological. The use of hyperbole and strange baroque similes to blur the line between reality and fiction, genuine and fake, alive and dead also serves the same twofold goal of, on the one hand, satirising a country pretending to be what it is not – pure, virtuous, lively and Gaelic – and on the other, of (re-)asserting the intrinsic uncanniness of what is usually taken for granted – sense and meaning, identities, usual physical or metaphysical landmarks.

Establishing a new typology of characters in O'Brien's work (the undead or thanatophilic), this study reassesses the thematic importance of death in its general architecture. After scrutinizing problematic echoes of Heidegger's notion of angst, it considers the hybridity of fictional elements oscillating between the animate and the inanimate via Masahiro Mori's 'uncanny valley.' The uncanny in O'Brien's work is provoked by an implicit persistent undoing of the subject revealing a hauntingly nihilistic subtext.

> Traditionally, the Irish concern with self-representation, the Irish paramount-post-colonial preoccupation, discloses a scenario of brokenness, impotence, division and paralysis, with notable but few exceptions gesturing towards regeneration and renewal. This negative occlusion of vital forces in the representation and critique of Irish reality has largely prevailed until the 1980s; and a related dominant imaginary of deathlike, agonizing subjective and collective identity has been all-pervasive in the literary discourse.[1]

> Proust characterized the literary work as an 'optical instrument' offered by the author, for 'every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self' [...]. Yet, as readers, we might see ourselves reflected in fiction as if in a mirror darkly, not realizing that it is happening.[2]

> The hell of *The Third Policeman* is not a hell in the sense of a place of punishment designed by an omniscient deity. It is, rather, a hellish space of uncanny, undead survival. The narrator dies, [...] to enter a strange, uncanny space.[3]

In post-Independence Ireland, it comes as no surprise that much of O'Brien's work is about death or the death drive, about sick, mutilated or (half-)dead characters, what Patrick Sheeran, taking after Vivian Mercier's analysis on the Irish macabre, calls Irish 'thanatophilia.'[4] This article draws on Sheeran's engagement with thanatophilia, and Bridget English's monograph on death in the modern Irish novel, to examine O'Brien's characters' seemingly dysfunctional or split psyches.[5]

Beyond the uncanny

In the most basic definition, proposed by Sigmund Freud in 1919, the uncanny is the feeling of unease that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar. However, as Anneleen Masschelein explains, taking after Nicholas Royle's 2003 monograph *The Uncanny*,[6] the concept has mutated in a postmodern

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[1] Roberta Gefter Wondrich, 'The Fictive and the Funerary: Macabre and Black Humour in the Contemporary Irish Novel,' in *Prospero. Rivista di Letterature Straniere, Comparatistica e Studi Culturali* 15 (2009): 148.

[2] Rayan A. Jones, 'Fiction and the "Uncanny Valley" of Self-Confrontation,' in *Jungian and Dialogical Self Perspectives*, ed.
Rayan A. Jones and Masayoshi Morioka (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 117.

[3] Maebh Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 57–58.

[4] Nina Witoszek and Patrick Sheeran, eds, *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions* (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998). See also chapter 3 in Vivian Mercier's *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[5] Bridget English, *Laying Out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel from James Joyce to Anne Enright* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017).

[6] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

fashion 'far beyond this concise definition. Perpetually postponing closure, Royle's uncanny is a general perspective, a style of thinking and writing, of teaching that is synonymous with "*deconstruction*." The uncanny becomes an insidious, all-pervasive "passe-partout" word to address virtually any topic.'[7] Including *primus in prima* death.

The narrator of *The Third Policeman* is dead. In 'Two in One,' Murphy is quite literally the *dead* spit of Kelly and Kelly is dead. The John Duffy in 'John Duffy's Brother' dies one hour after his birth. In *The Dalkey Archive* Hackett speaks to long dead people – such as Saint Augustine – thanks to a toxic gas released in a submarine cave. Amongst the coping strategies at hand, the deliberate creation of strangeness through death and macabre topics in fiction is a good one, as the unbearable nature of everyday life in Ireland is transmuted into artistry that also acknowledges the universal, bizarre mortal essence of life itself. O'Brien thus focuses on an idea Heidegger brought to the fore by reminding us that 'Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is. "As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die."'[8]

This focus on mortality has long been a sensible option in a world perceived as absurd. Irish writers turned to exile, but unlike Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, or Elizabeth Bowen, O'Brien never left Ireland, a country towards which he constantly evinced a love-hate relationship. He kept interrogating his circumstances and the national narratives prevailing in his native land throughout his life and in his work. O'Brien *derealized* a good deal of what was around him, in 1943 jocularly diagnosing Irishness as a disease or a psychiatric condition in his column *Cruiskeen Lawn* in *The Irish Times*. Myles na gCopaleen, he wrote, 'too was Irish' but had 'cured [him]self after many years of suffering' from the weird fatal ailment, whose symptoms included witticisms, violence, alcoholism, a propensity for horse-races, and Gaelic sports: 'Remember that I too was Irish. Today I am cured. I am no longer Irish. I am merely a person. I cured myself after many years of suffering. I am sure I can help you [...]. Mark your envelope "Irish" in the top left-hand corner.'[9]

The definition of derealization in the American Psychiatry Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is a perfect fit for the atmosphere in *The Third Policeman:*

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[7] Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 2. My emphasis.

[8] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson, [1962] (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001), 289.

[9] Flann O'Brien, *Cruiskeen Lawn*, *The Irish Times*, 31 May, 1943, in John Wyse Jackson, *Flann O'Brien At War: Myles na gCopaleen 1940–1945* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 105.

> Derealization […] is experienced as the sense that the external world is strange or unreal. The individual may perceive an uncanny alteration in the size or shape of objects (*macropsia* or *micropsia*), and people may seem unfamiliar or mechanical. Other common associated features include anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms, obsessive rumination, somatic concerns, and a disturbance in one's sense of time, [i]n some cases, […] loss of feeling.[10]

O'Brien's nameless narrator experiences a disturbance in his sense of time. He also endures somatic concerns – think of the sheer number of mutilated one-legged men featured in the book or the recurring mention of painful teeth – as well as an uncanny 'alteration in the size or shape of objects (*macropsia* or *micropsia*),' such as the police barracks that 'looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child.'[11] This peculiar treatment of space as 'an extraordinary spectacle,' which characterizes the whole novel, accounts for the idiosyncratic aesthetics and quirky ideas inspired by quantum physics and pataphysical elements which inform the book.[12] In other words, instead of supporting the usual Coleridgean willing suspension of disbelief through realist conventions, the text consistently draws attention to its homological 'completely false and unconvincing' nature. The narrator admits: 'I had never seen with my eyes ever in my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions were missing.'[13]

The same impossible space appears in *The Poor Mouth* where the narrator Bonaparte O'Coonassa describes an impossible house in an impossible Ireland. The text is rife with disturbing ironic implicatures[14] that it is stating the obvious – its own illusory nature as a mere parodic textual representation–, while pretending to be the opposite, that is, a realistic description. In other words, the text clearly posits, even exposes its own outlandish impossibility, which is another instance of paralipsis that serves the two kinds of resistance and ensuing coping strategies identified above: the resistance

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[10] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-IV-TR* [Text Revision] (Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association), 2004, 488.

[11] Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 1993), 55, 204–205.

[12] For more information on this aspect of O'Brien's odd idiosyncratic aesthetics, see Thierry Robin, 'Representation as a Hollow Form, or the Paradoxical Magic of Idiocy and Skepticism in Flann O'Brien's Works', *Flann O'Brien: Review of Contemporary Fiction – Special Centenary Issue* 31, no. 2 (2011): 33–48.

[13] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 55, 204–205.

[14] British linguist and philosopher H. P. Grice [1913–1988] coined the term 'implicature' in 1975 to describe meanings which are not directly expressed or explicitly verbalised by the speaker but rather hinted at peripherally or by displacing the actual message onto a contiguous semantic vehicle, be it linguistic or situational. See Herbert Paul Grice, 'Logic and conversation' in *Syntax and Semantics 3*, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975), 41–58.

against Irish political disorder and hypocrisy and simultaneously the resistance against the absurdity of pain and injustice in an eminently ephemeral world, where being-towards-death always prevails as the supreme representational possibility of impossibility. *The Poor Mouth* follows the same elaboration on impossible finite stable spaces and identities. From Bonaparte's window you can see from Toraigh Island, up North, off the coastline of Donegal down to the Great Blasket island, in Co. Kerry, a total distance of nearly 400 kilometres.

Needless to say, then, that very literally '[t]here is no view from any house in Ireland comparable to this and it must be admitted that this statement is true. [One has] never heard it said that there was any house as well situated as this on the face of the earth.'[15] The geography delineated in the book is that of pure exaggeration displaying its own satirical implausibility.[16] In addition to a Heideggerian anxiety related to death, the huge number of unlikely events, bizarre characters, and odd places described in O'Brien's work can also be linked to Harold Bloom's concept of anxiety of influence.[17] Here the anxiety of influence combined with existential angst translates into an anxiety of inauthenticity concerning the new Ireland imagined by the nationalist élite O'Brien looked down upon. Cronin captures that ambivalent stance in his biography of O'Brien, describing 'the rather grubby realities of independence' after 'the nationalist dreams which had informed the Revival' in Ireland:

> The result of these two discomforts – being a beneficiary of a nationalist revolution which you had largely come to despise: though however much you despised it, it was also unthinkable that you could regret the passing of British rule; and being a passive or active upholder of a faith which you often found abhorrent either in its beliefs or, at the very least, its public attitudes – was for some of O'Nolan's contemporaries a curious kind of latter-day aestheticism.[18]

Secondly, again tongue-in-cheek, O'Brien's text states the obvious, which is hidden in plain view, that is the universal mortality, ephemeral nature, vain finiteness of all things, dreams and beings alike: 'I do not think that its like will ever be there again.'[19]

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[15] Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, trans. Patrick C. Power (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon Ltd, 1973), 21.

[16] As a matter of fact, in physical reality, the earth's curvature prevents anybody presenting an average height to see much further than the optical horizon of perception, which is limited to 4.7 kms. See Andrew T. Young, *'Distance to the Horizon'. Green Flash website (Sections: Astronomical Refraction, Horizon Grouping). San Diego State University Department of Astronomy. See* https://web.archive.org/web/20031018020513/http://mintaka.sdsu.edu/GF/explain/atmos_refr/horizon.html, *last accessed 1 December 2024.*

[17] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[18] Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* [1989] (Stillorgan: New Island, 2019), 14, 65.

[19] O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 21.

This statement is all the idiotically truer since Corkadorogha has never been there at all, since it is pure parodic fiction and metatextual play outside any realistic *Gaelic* geography. This second type of anxiety stems from the intrinsic, inevitable, 'ownmost' transient essence of human life, as Heidegger reminds his readers:

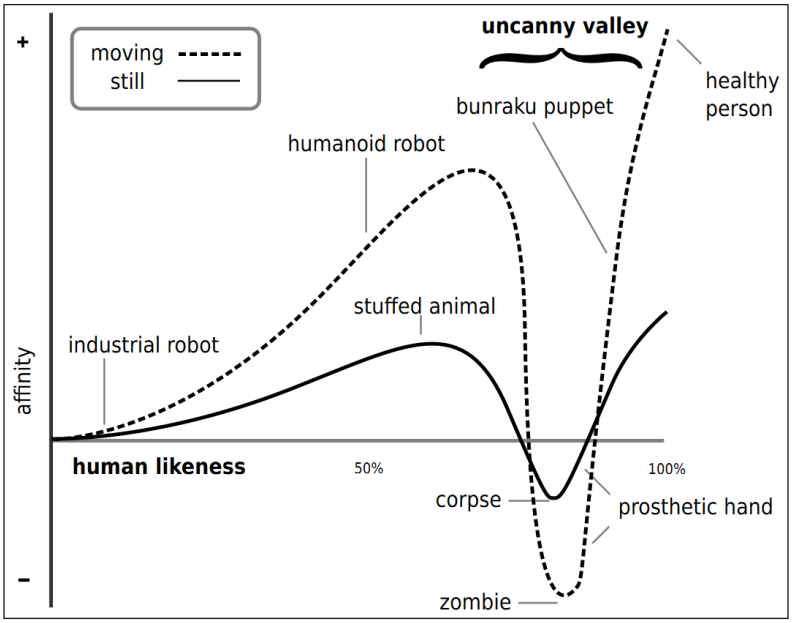
> Anxiety in the face of death is anxiety 'in the face of' that potentiality-for-Being *which is one's ownmost, nonrelational, and not to be outstripped*. That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world itself. That about which one has this anxiety is simply Dasein's potentiality-for-Being. Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise. This anxiety is not an accidental or random mood of 'weakness' in some individual; but, as a basic state-of-mind of Dasein, it amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being towards its end.[20]

So far, this article has endeavoured to address this haunting twofold movement in O'Brien's text, which simultaneously exposes its funny, satirical, metatextual quality and its funny, disturbing referential (i.e. historical) nature. Let us now turn to the *queer* narrative geography inherent in O'Brien's work, and his homegrown *Uncanny Valley*, especially in *The Third Policeman* and *The Poor Mouth*. The best part of O'Brien's fiction lies precisely where and when he explores those liminal landscapes where the boundaries between impossibility and possibility, life and death, visibility and invisibility, finiteness and non-finiteness are conflated. The Uncanny Valley is logically still strongly correlated to death and may account for a large part of the oddness encountered in his work. Yet the bizarre conflation labelled the Uncanny Valley is far from being exclusively Irish or O'Brienesque since the concept originated outside of Ireland, and did so long after O'Nolan died.

In our contemporary era where Artificial Intelligence (AI) and robots already loom large, the Uncanny Valley has proven an astonishingly enduring and versatile concept. It was first hypothesized by a Japanese Robotics professor, Masahiro Mori, as early as 1970. It posits a disturbing relation between an object's degree of resemblance to a human being and the emotional response to the object. The concept suggests that humanoid objects that imperfectly resemble actual human beings provoke uncanny or strangely familiar feelings of uneasiness and revulsion in observers. That oddly familiar but flawed or deliberately botched resemblance of the Irish landscape or of Irish subjects is precisely what also informs the unique flavour of O'Brien's work within the twofold logic of resistance identified above; political and/or ontological.

[20] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 295.

The metaphorical term 'Valley' denotes a dip in the human observer's affinity for the replica—a relation that otherwise increases with the replica's human likeness. Here is an illustration of the process:[21]



Examples of the phenomenon exist in robotics, 3D computer animations and lifelike dolls, a trick consistently used in horror feature-movies such as *Annabelle*, the *Chucky* media franchise or Lorcan Finnegan's 2019 Irish hybrid horror sci-fi thriller *Vivarium* in which the Dublin suburbs prove uncannily fake, as if an alien world mimicking normality but ending up proving utterly inauthentic. The Uncanny Valley hypothesis predicts that an entity appearing *almost* but not quite human will elicit more unsettling, eerie feelings in viewers than perfect humanoid entities usually do. O'Brien consistently relies on this strategy, populating works such as *The Third Policeman* with automatons and reanimated corpses, as Maebh Long reminds us:

> The narrator dies, but he lives on after his death, surviving the explosion that killed him to enter a strange, uncanny space of reanimated corpses, automatons, split subjects, doubles, surreal landscapes, anthropomorphic bicycles, wooden legs, mechanical eyes, daemonic houses, unsettled time and infinite revolutions and repetitions.[22]

Long goes on to explain that this uncanny afterlife depicted in *The Third Policeman* is an unexpected, 'modernist' kind of hell, 'a hell of the everyday askew,' of 'alienation and

[21] Graph based on Masahiro Mori, 'The Uncanny Valley,' *Energy*, 7, no.4 (1970): 33–35.

[22] Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien*, 57.

defamiliarization, where identity, agency and control are eroded but not destroyed,' a hybrid hell which looks a lot like life, without its illusion of normality and with progress replaced with Sisyphean repetition.

> It's a hell otherwise, a '*sort of hell,*' an afterlife *as continued, confusing life*. Not quite a hell on earth, although Myles has equated them – 'I want to upset once for all this luciferian aberration and state boldly that we are all in hell, or in something so near it as makes no matter.'[23]

In other words, the novel employs a liminal sense of aesthetics where hesitation, ambiguity, uncertainty prevail. In O'Brien's fiction we find policemen who *partly* look like puppets, zombies, or automata – sometimes even fat bugs with 'a violent red moustache which shot out [...] far into the air like the antennae of some unusual animal.'[24] Conversely, objects like bicycles partly behave like human beings. And the same human beings may suddenly look and sound mechanical since they are persuaded that they have turned into trains, as in O'Brien's short story 'John Duffy's Brother.' The narrator in *The Third Policeman* feels like a machine or a robot after he has re-emerged in the hellish space of the Parish: he remembers 'that [he] noticed several things in a cold *mechanical* way,' and that words spilled out of him 'as if they were produced by *machinery.*'[25] Elsewhere, Policeman MacCruiskeen's 'lower jaw hung loosely also as if it were a mechanical jaw on a toy man.'[26] The Uncanny Valley effect reinforces the dehumanizing process aiming at producing strangeness.

The uncanny feeling arises from the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar. It is this blending of the recognisable with the strange that causes a sense of discomfort or unease or distance. O'Brien's writings, like the Uncanny Valley, challenge our perception of reality and question the limits of what is considered reassuring, normal, acceptable or simply *human*, creating a disorienting effect. This partial dehumanizing of authority figures like the policemen displaying a strong Irish accent in *The Third Policeman* is partly a way of coping with the stifling environment that was the newly independent Ireland. It is also a way of dealing with human finitude. To a large extent, the fake-looking, hybrid, bogus, half alive, half dead, unnatural quality of O'Nolan's prose speaks to the writer's view of Ireland as a fraudulent or inauthentic country, with a national language far from being entirely revived. O'Brien felt that Irish was practiced authentically by only very few isolated speakers, thus being a dead tongue to

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[23] Long, *Assembling Flann O'Brien*, 57.

[24] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 57.

[25] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 27. My emphasis.

[26] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 169.

many. Even the territory of the free Ireland in the twentieth century may have looked like the outlandish outcome of a half-baked nationalist emancipation project, with its partitioned territory and dual political government based in Dublin and Belfast, with London still retaining elements of power.

O'Brien's work betrays a disturbing combination of the familiar with the unfamiliar, of the close within the distant and vice-versa, which is most effective in eliciting a powerful strange atmosphere, as already explained by Heidegger: 'Uncanniness reveals itself authentically in the basic state-of-mind of anxiety [...] Dasein is anxious with anxiety about its ownmost potentiality-for-Being.'[27] O'Brien loved resorting to antitheses and paradoxes, with this texts frequently pointing to opposite interpretations, as one letter written in 1963 shows: 'So here I am, feeling perfectly OK, though clinically I may be a corpse.'[28] This uncanniness deconstructs identities and figures of authority, be they policemen, a moralizing writer like Trellis in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, an employer or a boss in 'Two in One,' or the sadistic Christian brothers in *The Hard Life*. That humbling nothingness informs the landscape lying at the heart of *The Third Policeman*, as in the beautiful description found at the beginning of chapter 10: 'The sky was a light blue without distance, neither near nor far. I could gaze at it, through it and beyond it and see still illimitably clearer and nearer the delicate *lie* of its nothingness.'[29] This image of in-betweenness, 'neither near nor far,' draws the reader's attention once again onto its own limited ambiguous nature through the double-entendre of the word 'lie,' which may refer either to untruth or to spatial extension or even both in an undecidable fashion.

A final triad of thanatophiliac characters

The final part of this article will focus on a sample of these striking examples of the uncanny dimension which contaminates and pervades themes, settings and characters alike, to drive a few final nails into the metaphorical metafictional Irish coffin fashioned by Joyce and further assembled by O'Brien.

Let us note that the derealization strategy used by O'Brien is incidentally redolent of the defamiliarization technique theorised by the Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky as early as 1917.[30] Old Mathers, Sergeant Pluck, and Maeldoon

[27] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 321.

[28] Maebh Long, ed., *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 356.

[29] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 156, my emphasis.

[30] The term 'defamiliarization' was first coined in 1917 by Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay 'Art as Device' (alternate translation: 'Art as Technique'). It is the artistic technique of presenting to audiences common things in an unfamiliar or strange way so they could gain new fresh perspectives and see the world differently. The concept has

O'Poenassa are all good instances of the strategy, recycling familiar elements within a seemingly banal narrative frame that plays with the anxiety brought about by inauthenticity and death, or facticity in Heideggerian terminology.[31]

1. Old Mathers

Phillip Mathers is the first name the reader comes across in *The Third Policeman*. He appears multiple times in the narrative, first when he is still alive, then after his apparent murder by the narrator (and his accomplice John Divney) and ensuing death. Despite being 'a man completely dead and turned to stone,' with a hand that 'looked quite dead,' Mathers speaks and answers the narrator's questions.[32] Ultimately, he reappears as a hideous creature and doppelgänger entity through the eponymous third policeman himself, namely policeman Fox. He is a hybrid creature bridging different worlds.

> The man was old Mathers. He was watching me in silence. He did not move or speak and *might have been still dead save for the slight movement of his hand* at the lamp, the very gentle screwing of his thumb and forefinger against the wick-wheel. The hand was yellow, the wrinkled skin draped loosely upon the bones. […] The eyes were horrible. Looking at them I got the feeling that they were not genuine eyes at all but mechanical dummies animated by electricity or the like, with a tiny pinhole in the centre of the 'pupil' through which the real eye gazed out secretively and with great coldness.[33]

Old Mathers embodies the permanence and pre-eminence of death within the narrative in a subterranean blurred, confusing manner. Mathers' death is a kind of death which still holds on to elements of life, as the unnerving 'slight movement of the hand' shows. But it is Old Mathers's eyes that are particularly horrible:

> Such a conception […] gave rise in my mind to interminable speculations as to the colour and quality of the real eye and as to whether, indeed, it was real at all or merely another dummy with its pinhole on the same plane as the first one so that the real eye, possibly behind thousands of these absurd disguises, gazed out through a barrel of serried peep-holes. Occasionally the heavy cheese-like lids would drop down slowly with great languor and then rise again.[34]

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influenced 20th-century art and theory, ranging over movements including Dada, postmodernism sci-fi, and philosophy. It is used as a tactic by recent movements such as culture jamming.

31 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 82.

32 O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 29, 37.

33 O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 25. My emphasis.

34 O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 25.

In keeping with the initially robotic nature of the Uncanny Valley effect posited by Masahiro Mori, the eyes do not look genuine. Each eye seems to hide behind itself another infinite fractal series of dummy-eyes where no human subject ever seems to appear, re-establishing the motif that the actual end of any process or entity is impossible to perceive or catch. Much later, towards the end of the book, Mathers' head reappears in a composite Frankenstein-like manner stitched onto the top of policeman Fox's shoulders:

> 'I thought you were dead!' The great fat body in the uniform did not remind me of anybody that I knew but the face at the top of it belonged to old Mathers. It was not as I had recalled seeing it last whether in my sleep or otherwise, deathly and unchanging; it was now red and gross as if gallons of hot thick blood had been pumped into it. The cheeks were bulging out like two ruddy globes marked here and there with straggles of purple discolouration. The eyes had been charged with unnatural life and glistened like beads in the lamplight.
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> When he answered me it was the voice of Mathers.[35]

Here, the vocabulary of death ('dead,' 'deathly') is superseded by that of hyperbolic monstrosity underlined by similes which mark the atrocious composite nature of the face: red, gross, full of blood, cheeks bulging, eyes like beads. The use of the passive voice and the baroque similes beg for clarification. The reader cannot help but wonder what mad savant may have pumped all that blood into that monstrous head, inflating those cheeks into two bulging globes, lighting up that pair of unnatural beady eyes. Again, the description does not aim towards realism. The point of the description is precisely to draw the reader's attention onto its own scary outlandish nature, reminiscent – homologically – of Ireland's alleged monstrous hybrid nature,[36] in keeping with the Uncanny Valley logic and effect.

2. Sergeant Pluck

Our second instance is yet another figure of authority, a policeman who also looks massively fake. Here, the partial dehumanisation of Sergeant Pluck is not only based on reification but also animalisation. Pluck is described in terms combining an empty watering-can, a fat man and an insect or wild animal, all elements being sketched as blown out of natural proportions:

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[35] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 189.

[36] See the mock mythological creature of the 'seacat' resembling a map of Ireland in O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 77.

> The Sergeant shook his head and tapped his forehead three times with his finger. Soft as porridge […] I nearly choked at the sound his finger made. It was a booming hollow sound, slightly tinny, as if he had tapped an empty watering-can with his nail.[37]

Pluck's face shows the 'clumsy weightiness of a sack of flour.' Yet though he is described as heavy, 'very big,' 'swollen,' 'enormously fat,' even 'monstrous' in his proportions, he essentially also appears nearly non-existent. He is all the stranger and disturbingly bizarre since what underlies his character is his spectral emptiness, a nothingness revealed by the use of such adjectives as 'hollow' or 'empty,' not to mention the 'tinny' qualifier which reminds one of an empty dead shell. Though Pluck is impressively there, his paradoxically simultaneous absence is underscored, which is reminiscent of the futural nature of being-towards-death in Heidegger's philosophy.[38] Pluck, like all the other entities in the Parish is a reminder that being is to be understood in relation to its own simultaneous understanding of its intrinsic death and finitude.

> His back appearance was unusual. […] his mouth was open and he was looking into a mirror which hung upon the wall. […] Ordinary enough as each part of him looked by itself, they all seemed to create together, […] a very disquieting impression of unnaturalness […]. His hands were red, swollen and enormous and he appeared to have one of them half-way into his mouth as he gazed into the mirror.
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> 'It's my teeth' […]. 'Nearly every sickness is from the teeth.'

The disquieting 'unnaturalness' characterizing the passage is an expression of the uncanny atmosphere which pervades the Parish. The teeth motif is part of the blending of the familiar and the odd. There are over 20 mentions of teeth in the 206-page-long novel, and about half a dozen references to dentists too. One may wonder why there are so many mentions of these. The first explanation may be quite mundane and biographical, in keeping with a time when dental care in Ireland and elsewhere was rather poor and ineffective, as Beckett's dental plight attests about the same time in the 1930s and 1940s.[39] But in a more convincing manner, the tooth motif – in keeping with

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[37] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 159.

[38] See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 373. 'By the term "futural," we do not here have in view a "now" which has not yet become "actual" and which sometime will be for the first time. […] The character of "having been" arises, in a certain way, from the future.'

[39] In February 1931, Samuel Beckett wrote to his friend Thomas McGreevy from Paris to acknowledge receipt of McGreevy's new book. He was sorry he hadn't done so already, explaining, 'My teeth have been afflicting me and some have to come out and some have to be filled and I am feeling very sorry for myself.' In Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (eds.), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, Volume I, 1929–1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 64. See also: https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/love-sam-letters-samuel-beckett/. Last accessed 1 December 2024.

that of mutilation and amputation or maiming of the human body in general – and that of tooth decay more precisely are objective correlatives of Being-towards-Death. They are parts of the human organism whose biological nature (tooth buds exist in limited number right from the start in embryology, and after the replacement of decidual milk teeth are routinely subject to wear and tear, decay and ultimate fall) is equated with frailty and loss. The reified description of the policeman only serves to underline his existential disquieting nature.

> His face gave me one more surprise. It was enormously fat, red and widespread, sitting squarely on the neck of his tunic with a clumsy weightiness that reminded me of a sack of flour. The lower half of it was hidden by a violent red moustache which shot out from his skin far into the air like the antennae of some unusual animal. His cheeks were red and chubby and his eyes were nearly invisible, hidden from above by the obstruction of his tufted brows and from below by the fat foldings of his skin.[40]

Here being and matter proliferate as indicated by the lexicon of excess ('enormously fat,' 'widespread,' 'clumsy weightiness,' 'chubby,' 'fat foldings'). This proliferation in turn leads to reification ('sack of flour') or brutal animalization ('antennae').

3. Maeldoon O'Poenassa

Our last instance of this uncanny derealization strategy is Maeldoon, a character recycled from ninth-century Celtic mythology, *Immram Maíle Dúin*, who embodies the disquieting notion of 'alien voice' within the narrative of *The Poor Mouth*. This is an important feature in O'Brien's work: in *The Third Policeman* you find Joe, the personified soul or conscience of the narrator, who startles the narrator by speaking inside his skull in an impromptu manner: 'I heard someone [...] But who had uttered these words? [...] They came from deep inside me, from my soul. [...] I called him Joe. [...] Joe was helping me.'[41] This seemingly schizoid perception could be accounted for by resorting to Heidegger's concept of the 'alien voice.'[42] Paul Fagan also accounts for that inner

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[40] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 56–57.

[41] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 27.

[42] See 'What if this Dasein, which finds itself [sich befindet] in the very depths of its uncanniness, should be the caller of the call of conscience? Nothing speaks against this; but all those phenomena which we have hitherto set forth in characterizing the caller and its calling speak for it. In its "who," the caller is definable in a "worldly" way by nothing at all. The caller is Dasein in its uncanniness: primordial, thrown Being-in-the world as the "not-at-home"-the bare "that-it-is" in the "nothing" of the world. The caller is unfamiliar to the everyday they-self; it is something like *an alien voice*.' Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 321. My emphasis.

voice by referring to 'the dynamics of modern writing as concerning the revelation of and granting of access to a secret inner self.'[43] Maeldoon is literally a talking corpse speaking a 'dead tongue' that is Old Irish.

> What almost took the sight from my eyes was an old person, *half-sitting*, *half-lying* by the flames and away from me, *a species of chair* beneath him and his appearance *suggested* that he was dead. […] he had an appearance totally unnatural about him. His two eyes were closed, his *black-toothed* mouth was open and his head inclined feebly to one side. […] I had finally met Maeldoon O'Poenassa!
>
> — He has nothing to say, said I, *half* to myself and *half* aloud. My heart faltered once more. I heard a sound coming *from the corpse which resembled someone speaking from behind a heavy cloak* […].
>
> Then *I saw the dead person — if he were dead* or only soaked with spiritsweariness […] and I *almost* died with terror.[44]

This excerpt is rife with in-between, uncertain, liminal tropes and phrasings: 'half-sitting,' 'half-lying,' 'a species of chair,' 'his appearance *suggested* that he was dead' etc. A careful reader also immediately recognizes the tooth motif in Maeldoon's gaping 'black-toothed mouth.'

O'Brien's writing tends to blur the boundaries between machines, creatures and artefacts and their initial creators. Nearly 30 occurrences of the word 'mechanic' or one of its cognates (machine, machinery) are to be found in *The Third Policeman* and MacCruiskeen himself characterizes all his infernal inventions as 'Examples of the Machine Age.'[45]

A thanatophiliac conclusion

In addition to reflecting the cultural and intellectual *Zeitgeist* in Europe, when *The Third Policeman* was written O'Brien's literary exploration of an absurdly violent mortal human condition, or corrupt world, or imperfect little island of Ireland, echoes the blurred realities, unconventional characters and displaced or deconstructed norms in the heart of Europe. Europe had been witnessing the rise of death-driven totalitarianisms like fascism, Nazism and Stalinism, aptly explained by Heidegger's

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[43] Paul Fagan, '"I've got you under my skin": "John Duffy's Brother," "Two in One," and the Confessions of Narcissus,' in Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan & Werner Huber (ed.), *Contesting Legacies* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014), 65.

[44] O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, 109. My emphasis.

[45] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 73.

being-towards-death concept.[46] The old world was about to destroy itself beyond repair and recognition during World War 2. O'Brien's style challenges our understanding of what was *presented* as benign, normal or acceptable – like too beautiful and picturesque a bog – but was intrinsically disturbing, tinged with the catastrophic undertones of corruption or death. This ultimately reveals his pessimistic understanding of the human condition, as Cronin explains that to O'Brien, 'anybody who "has the courage to raise his eyes and look sanely at the awful human condition [...] must realise finally that tiny periods of temporary release from intolerable suffering is the most that any individual has the right to expect."'[47]

The literary country Brian O'Nolan both created and inhabited turned him into a strange sort of exile. Since he remained in Ireland, he became an exile from within, an exile in fiction. He stayed on in a country which remained forever strange and alien by his own standards, maybe because any attempt at escaping for real seemed futile to him. That is the terminal paradox he represents: while being acerbically critical of the modalities of being Irish, O'Nolan perfectly fitted a typically Irish pattern in literature, as Roberta G. Wondrich argues:

> More specifically, the obsession with death in Irish culture shows several features among which the funeral and the wake are dominant. As the blurb of Nina Witoszek and Patrick Sheeran's book on Irish funerary traditions goes, 'there are few traditions in which funerary motifs have been so ubiquitous in literature, popular rituals, folk representations, public rhetorics, even representations of place.'[48]

A large part of the strangeness in *The Third Policeman* is due to that thanatophiliac treatment of life and its eventually undecidable intricately interwoven boundaries with death, reminiscent of the Uncanny Valley effect and its inherent odd thrilling escapist unease. *The Third Policeman* offers a postmodern variation on the obsession with death in Irish culture. Part of its disturbing unique quality also boils down to Proust's understanding of books as mirrors to the reader's self. It offers an uncanny possibility for the reader to identify with a dead man and read about their own inexorable being-

[46] Let us note Heidegger may well have embodied that nihilistic aporia himself. Critics used to believe he 'only' joined the Nazi Party to facilitate his ambition. Fred Dallmayr, *The Other Heidegger* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) is a good example. Yet since the 2014 publication of the so-called 'Black Notebooks,' in which Heidegger recorded his philosophical notes between 1931 and 1941, there has been a growing consensus that these notebooks betray his philosophical commitment to National Socialism. See, for example, Ingo Farin and Jeff Malpas (eds), *Reading Heidegger's Black Notebooks 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016).

[47] Cronin, *No Laughing Matter*, 289.

[48] Gefter Wondrich, 'The Fictive and the Funerary', 148. See also Witoszek and Sheeran (eds.), *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions*.

towards-death. The final metafictional twist in that strangely reflexive novel happened through its posthumous publication in 1967. In O'Nolan's correspondence, amongst other biographical details about smoking, alcohol and self-destruction, the reader also runs into a bizarre prescient hint which mixes fact and fiction in yet another unwitting metafictional way. In a letter to Jack Sweeney, dated 28 March 1972, Niall Montgomery notices that in *The Third Policeman*, O'Brien coincidentally predicted the moment of his own death, through his narrator's exchange with Joe, his soul or conscience, who reminds him that the 'usual arrangement' is the death of every human being and that after his death he 'would perhaps be the chill of an April wind'[49]:

> 'Montgomery's account of O'Nolan's final days reminds us of the pain that O'Nolan suffered: in a letter to Jack Sweeney, he writes of the 'sadness that struck me when reading the Policeman – p. 159, line 9 O'Nolan had written: 'I would perhaps be the chill of an April wind …' The poor divil died on the first of April of terrible trouble in his throat – at the end I think he couldn't breathe or swallow.'[50]

The Third Policeman offers many intriguing correspondences with *Sein und Zeit*. When Heidegger explains that '[t]he call of conscience has the character of an appeal to Dasein by calling it to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self; and this is done by way of summoning it to its ownmost Being-guilty,'[51] one may immediately recognize Joe's 'alien voice' discussing the implications of the death of the narrator who equates death with liberation or freedom. This focus on death also proves the adage right that a coffin *is* an Irish writer's house… after all and in accordance with Joe's (Noman's soul's) testament:

Listen. Before I go I will tell you this. I am your soul and all your souls. When I am gone you are dead. Past humanity is not only *implicit* in each new man born but is contained in him. Humanity is an ever-widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each succeeding ring. All humanity from its beginning to its end is already present but the beam has not yet played beyond you. Your earthly successors await dumbly and trust to your guidance and mine and all my people inside me to preserve them and lead the light further. You are not now the top of your people's line any more than your mother was when she had you inside her. When I leave you I take with me all that has made you what you are – I take all your significance and importance and all the accumulations of human instinct and appetite and wisdom and dignity. You will be left with nothing behind you and nothing to give the waiting ones. Woe to you when they find you out! Goodbye![52]

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[49] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 164.

[50] Long, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, xv.

[51] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 314.

[52] *The Third Policeman*, p. 123. My emphasis.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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