

# Noman's Land

## or the Art of Spatial Transgressions and Haunting Strangeness in *The Third Policeman*

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I was now but two days from home – not more than three hours' walking – and yet I seemed to have reached regions which I had never seen before and of which I had never even heard.

— Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*

The reader who enters *The Third Policeman* – one of the most intriguing novels written in Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – is bound to be amazed at its very peculiar treatment of space, its fantastical geometry, its puzzling structure, its hyperbolic language and its unreal yet recognisably Irish picturesque landscapes. The strange, innovative, diegetic space created and warped by Brian O'Nolan clearly informs the debates theoreticians embarked upon after its publication. One cannot escape the central enigma of *The Third Policeman*, namely, its odd spatial treatment, which reflects the labyrinthine shapes of human imagination and the specular nature of fiction and representation in art – that is, its metafictional dimension. It is this double nature of O'Nolan's literary venture which keeps attracting new readers and fuels critics' interest. The text's treatment of space finds echoes in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, the reader is confronted with murder, satire, aporias of representation, a proliferation of footnotes, fake intertexts merged with real ones, and insane extradiegetic writers (de Selby in O'Nolan's book, Zampanò in Danielewski's). Each novel contains the mechanical treatment of metaphysical space: 'Eternity' is but a huge underground machine in *The Third Policeman*, while the hellish infinite internal space of the Navidson's house is regularly disturbed by a growl or mechanical vibration in *House of Leaves*. Moreover, interstitial worlds overlap with rational space in both books: closets in the Navidsons' house seem to open up endlessly onto new corridors or empty rooms, while Fox in *The Third Policeman* lives inside the walls of a dead man's house.<sup>2</sup> The space and landscapes created in *The Third Policeman* and *House of Leaves* are fantastical, dual in their nature and labyrinthine in their principle and investigation.

This essay aims to explore the ambivalence in spatial representation informing *The Third Policeman*, which translates into an unorthodox, uncanny brand of geometry. The word 'landscape' was originally inspired by or borrowed from the Dutch word *landschap*, meaning 'region, or tract of land.' But the same word progressively acquired an artistic and representational sense, that of 'a picture depicting natural scenery,' probably due to the influence of Flemish painting in the Renaissance period. This twofold meaning is crucial to an understanding of the treatment of space in O'Nolan's novel, a work which blurs the limits between fact and fiction, reality and represented reality. This principle is manifested in *The Third Policeman's* central material and peripheral gloss – as in *House of Leaves*, in which Danielewski includes in his footnotes yet another series of footnotes –, objective extradiegetic referents and diegetic pure inventions – for instance, the double epigraph that adorns the novel cites the real and unreal writers Shakespeare and de Selby.<sup>3</sup> The space, which is created and depicted, can thus be taken for that of the narrator's mind and, allegorically, of imagination in general, through the motif of pages in a book which can be referred to metaphorically as a 'house of leaves.' *The Third Policeman's* peculiar landscape has given rise to interpretations spanning from Charles Kemnitz's relativistic atomic parable to Paul Simpson's interactive readings, and one could regard the eternity machine and omnium as visionary harbingers of Promethean nanotechnological assembly or even K.E. Drexler's 3D printing as explained by Ray Kurzweil in *The Singularity Is Near*.<sup>4</sup> The landscape which is depicted in the novel is also characterised by the strangeness both analysed and historically contextualised by Seamus Deane in *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790*. A good instance of this uncanny geography is to be found in the cryptic map delineated on the ceiling in the narrator's cell. This scene, in which the narrator realises that cracks in the ceiling mean more than what they should, illustrates the convergence of map and territory, contrary to Korzybski's famous premise that 'The map is not the territory.' The problem here is eminently postmodern in positing the difficulty of demarcating clear limits between objects and their representations.

This study of the treatment of space in *The Third Policeman* aims to show how its ambivalent openness engages with the problem of representation in time, space and mind. The bizarre landscapes which are observed in *The Third Policeman*, whilst often illustrating the now classical Ruskinian concept of pathetic fallacy, foreshadow the postmodern literary movement and demonstrate the aptness of the concept of postmodern ambivalence<sup>5</sup> by simultaneously reasserting conservative traditional notions about the nation while achieving an innovative and transgressive piece of literature. This realisation paves the way for the reconciliation between postmodern

theorists and new modernists, or other thinkers such as Terry Eagleton, who denounces a new conformism in postmodern thinking.<sup>6</sup>

The adjective 'postmodern' is understood here in terms of Brian McHale's ontological definition in *Postmodernist Fiction*. McHale defines modernism as dominated by an epistemological paradigm, whereas postmodernism centres itself on the problems and enigmas of a wavering ontology:

the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like the ones Dick Higgins calls 'post-cognitive': 'which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?' Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world it projects, for instance: what is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects? How is a projected world structured? And so on.<sup>7</sup>

This ontological description suits *The Third Policeman*, with its uncertainties and colliding worlds of the dead, of the living, and of the living dead. Although the term 'postmodern' has never been satisfactory or remained unchallenged, it remains quite cogent as a tool to account for O'Nolan's world in *The Third Policeman*.<sup>8</sup> The tension between the modern and the postmodern embeds itself within the tendency of *The Third Policeman* to delineate two opposite movements concurrently: the familiar and the strange, the local and the otherworldly.

### 1. A 'Queer' Metafictional Landscape

The queer<sup>9</sup> landscapes which are to be found in *The Third Policeman* involve the presence of an objective, eternal nature and its reconstruction through an observer's subjective, transient eye. A strong antithetic system seems to prevail, oscillating between geological eternity and human impermanence. Yet places which are natural and external to mental construction are simultaneously recognised to be of human construction – landscape in its dual connotations.

The narrator himself originates from an ambivalent family scene: 'My father I do not remember well but he was a strong man and did not talk much except on Saturdays when he would mention Parnell with the customers and say that Ireland

was a queer country.<sup>10</sup> The narrator's origins are thus both clearly stated and blurred, and thereby echo McHale's ontological definition of postmodernism. Wavering definitions and ontological uncertainty prevail, made more, rather than less, ambivalent by the use of both a place name – Ireland – and a proper name – Charles Stewart Parnell. While real Ireland and referential history are implicitly lurking in the reader's objective background, the novel creates an imaginary space which is purely literary and where direct elements of identification are deliberately omitted. Thus, the narrator remains nameless and the setting remains vaguely known under the generic name 'The Parish' whose disturbing effect is redolent of the Village in Patrick McGoochan's famous TV series *The Prisoner* (first broadcast in 1967, the same year in which *The Third Policeman* was posthumously published). The boundaries between the two sets of referents – imaginary and real – are cleverly blurred and self-consciously intertwined. The setting described throughout the text reveals the same evanescent, ambivalent nature, and it is rife with signs of subjective mental construction:

The lowering skies seemed to conspire with us, coming down in a shroud of dreary mist to within a few yards of the wet road where we were waiting. Everything was very still with no sound in our ears except the dripping of the trees.<sup>11</sup>

This instance of pathetic fallacy preceding the murder scene of Mathers is conspicuous. The personification of the skies as conspiring and the isotopy of 'lowering,' 'shroud,' and 'dreary' emphasise a disquieting atmosphere. The landscape present in the novel is typified by this sense of conspiracy, of inanimate stillness and omnipresent, buoyant anthropomorphism. Hence the central notion of ambivalence potentially implying two – mark the Latin root '*ambi-*' – synchronous, opposite movements or meanings or values – through the Latin suffix '*valence*.'

In Chapter 3, the landscape is described thus:

The road was narrow, white, old, hard and scarred with shadow. It ran away westwards in the midst of the early morning, running cunningly through the little hills and going to some trouble to visit tiny towns which were not, strictly speaking, on its way. It was possibly one of the oldest roads in the world. I found it hard to think of a time when there was no road there because the trees and the tall hills and the fine views of bogland had been arranged by wise hands for the pleasing picture they made when looked at from the road. Without a road to have them looked at from, they would have a somewhat aimless if not a futile aspect.<sup>12</sup>

This description shows roads which are personified, designed to enable a perfect view. The prose itself becomes animistic. O'Nolan cryptically asserts the spontaneous human reluctance to think that the world may have been uninhabited at some stage in history and may still be utterly 'futile,' causeless, and purposeless, with no general explicative schema.<sup>13</sup> The landscape, through its beauty or ugliness, is repeatedly used to illustrate this idea. The narrator finds it hard to think of a time when there was no road there because without a road the scenery would have no-one to look at it and would have a futile aspect. This is the notion of an 'anthropic principle,' quite often associated with that of the 'intelligent designer.' In other words, to paraphrase physicists such as Brandon Carter, Frank Tipler, or John Barrow: conditions that are observed in the universe must allow the observer to exist; the paramount observer being obviously some entity close to what humanity names as 'God.'

God is, however, the great Beckettian absent from the entire book, and one needs to be careful when suggesting this kind of parable since *The Third Policeman* is also a light-hearted comical piece, presenting a satire quite obviously remote from the genre of theological treatises. But even this alleged comicality is questioned by O'Nolan: 'It is supposed to be funny but I don't know about that either.'<sup>14</sup> It goes without saying that the final tableau featuring a narrator caught in endless repetition is more hellish and nightmarish than hilarious. The book is so cleverly built that it cannot but entail and justify conflicting, paradoxical interpretations. The very first sentence in the book is amphibological, in that it points in two conflicting directions: 'Not everybody knows how I killed old Philip Mathers.'<sup>15</sup> This strange initial negation could lead to a truism: 'there are still a few people who do not know how I killed old Mathers,' which is hardly plausible, for no one knows how Mathers was killed except his killers. Hence the second, less likely but more sensible, grammatical interpretation of 'Nobody knows how I killed old Mathers and that is what I am going to tell you.' In other words, this trope is a litotes, an affirmation expressed by negating its opposite, in the same way that the narrator – referred to as 'Noman' by Keith Hopper – is identified through negation by scholars.

It is the core contention of this essay that the apparent scepticism which pervades the whole novel is to be interpreted in an entirely ambivalent manner, making O'Nolan either an Irish author taking after a long Christian tradition of focusing on the paramount importance of sin – albeit one oddly reminiscent of Berkeley's subjective idealism in the process of losing sight of reality – or a revolutionary writer intent on transgressing narrative norms and space. His sceptical prose often leads to conservatism and the negative idea that there is bound to be nothing new under the Sun, that the main elements in our universe are eternal and cannot be altered and that their inner mystery cannot be utterly revealed. Sin, hell,

human weaknesses, and vanity are to endure, and the outlook – landscape – in this perspective is bleak and immutable. But simultaneously, the witty irony displayed by Sergeant Pluck's 'Atomic Theory,' for example, also has to be regarded as a tool to debunk scientific pretensions to absolute knowledge and established dogmas, including that of the wisdom conveyed in the Old Testament and more specifically in Ecclesiastes.<sup>16</sup> That is doubtless why Hopper sees in *The Third Policeman* a revolutionary piece of work, naming it 'the first great masterpiece [...] of what we generally refer to now as post-modernism,'<sup>17</sup> adding that the book is more formally experimental than *At Swim-Two-Birds*. Hopper declares it is 'a more radical and involved metafictional fantasy'<sup>18</sup> while also acknowledging in the book the illustration of moral conservatism, misogyny, and the endurance of traditional Irish values. This duality and contradiction in O'Nolan's works are fundamental, for he keeps oscillating between chauvinism and emancipation. Still, it remains crucial to understand that this ambivalence is inherent to O'Nolan's prose and the postmodern canon. It is also in keeping with the dubious status of an Irish writer born in 1911, influenced more or less consciously by a rather patriarchal *Zeitgeist*.

Hence, the same dark ambivalence seems to characterise the treatment of space throughout *The Third Policeman*. The impossible or implausible space delineated in the novel may well be that of Ireland seen through a problematical – I was about to say pathological – prism, that of self-doubt as regards identity. Let us quote the beginning of Chapter 3 for instance: 'The dawn was contagious, spreading rapidly about the heavens. Birds were stirring and the great kingly trees were being pleasingly interfered with by the first breezes'.<sup>19</sup> What is striking yet again in these lines is that the dawn is 'contagious' as a disease might be, the trees are 'great and kingly and pleasingly interfered with' as bored monarchs looking for entertainment could be. Order and disorder, pathology and pleasure reign, with an emphasis put on the ambiguous process of 'contamination of heavens.' Of course, a symbolic reading of the extract may prove apt, especially since *The Third Policeman* is a crime story narrated by a dead murderer. This requires a reading all the more cautious or reflexive not only as regards words and their connotations, but also as regards what is not said. And that 'not-said' probably proves even more revealing.<sup>20</sup> The haunting strangeness in *The Third Policeman* resonates with its spatial aporias, its geometrical puzzles, its permanent duplicitous reading as a fictional object in two dimensions.

## 2. A Strange Geometry

The police barracks epitomises a topsy-turvy sense of order and structure. It is seen in two dimensions only, metaphorically indicating the process of representation in

writing: 'It looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and indeed very poorly painted. It 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.'<sup>21</sup> This strange lack of depth is reminiscent of the postmodern apprehension of reality in terms of 'surface' or 'rhizome not contents,' to quote Ihab Hassan in his *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*.<sup>22</sup> The same barracks is later described as 'unnatural, appalling [...] as if one of the customary dimensions was missing.'<sup>23</sup>

Once again, the problem of strangeness can be analysed in visual, geometrical terms through the notion of perspective: 'I seemed to see the front and the back of the "building" simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side. As there was no side that I could see I thought the house must be triangular with its apex pointing towards me.'<sup>24</sup> What clearer illustration of amphibology could be given than this quotation equating the back with the front of the same object? What is described in those lines is an impossible brand of geometry confusing 2D and 3D worlds, the world of representation and that of real space. This process is made even more blatant when a 1D world is described by de Selby, who asserts that the Earth is 'sausage-shaped and that there is only one alternative to this only dimension, that is, death,'<sup>25</sup> thus achieving the feat of being sophisticated and ludicrous in the same concise sentence. The same treatment of perspective is to be found in the narrator's description of Policeman MacCruiskeen's work, which consists of an infinite series of Matryoshka-like chests: 'they looked to me as if they were all the same size but invested with some crazy perspective.'<sup>26</sup> In O'Nolan's book, seeing leads to the realisation of a deep contradiction based on misperception, like MacCruiskeen's magnifying glass, which magnifies to invisibility.

An aesthetics of ambivalence is carefully developed by O'Nolan, underscoring the extreme difficulty of advancing a coherent discourse on the land and its people without verging on mythmaking or simply the process of fictionalising. What is striking in O'Nolan's case is that while debunking myths and clichés about Ireland, he both resists and reasserts the same clichés. It is no mere coincidence that the symbol of power and authority – the police barracks – should seem to lack depth or credibility in the novel, while remaining at its very centre. Even time is contaminated and frozen in a strange manner, creating a nonsensical chronology in the novel where it is 'always five o'clock in the afternoon'<sup>27</sup> as in a freak quantum physics experiment.

The leitmotiv which informs the novel is that of a 'queer country,' that is, a nation that escapes common sense or understanding. The scenery is beautiful and impressive yet oppressive too, anchored or bogged down into a 'flat,' motionless tradition of representation.

It was a queer country we were in. There was a number of blue mountains around at what you might call a respectable distance with a glint of white water coming down the shoulders of one or two of them and they kept hemming us in and meddling oppressively with our minds. Half way to these mountains the view got clearer and was full of humps and hollows and long parks of fine bogland.<sup>28</sup>

One cannot but emphasise the recurring motif of the 'fine bogland' echoing that of the 'queer country.' The Ireland depicted in these extracts is both 'fine' and incurably 'strange,' it is partly the result of ironically reconstructed identity or idealised nostalgia: the emerald island based on a rural, peaceful, self-sufficient civilisation producing its own energy by extracting peat from the ground. It is the portrait of a prosperous, not to say somnolent fairy-tale Ireland which of course never really was, except in hackneyed speeches or in the purple patches to be found in de Valera's tritest nationalist harangues. This bucolic portrait is repeated:

I looked carefully around me. Brown bogs and black bogs were arranged neatly on each side of the road with rectangular boxes carved out of them here and there, each with a filling of yellow-brown brown-yellow water. Far away near the sky tiny people were stooped at their turfwork, cutting out precisely-shaped sods with their patent spades and building them into a tall memorial twice the height of a horse and cart. Sounds came from them to the sergeant and myself, delivered to our ears without charge by the west wind, sounds of laughing and whistling and bits of verses from the old bog-songs. Nearer, a house stood attended by three trees and surrounded by the happiness of a coterie of fowls.<sup>29</sup>

In this passage, we see the nostalgic undertones of an Ireland viewed as a rural nation thriving on hard work in the fields and bogs. And yet again, geometry overtly reveals the fake or artificial nature of that dream-like, strange country. In the distance, tiny people are seen 'far away near the sky.' Obviously, these tiny people are no closer to the sky than the narrator is, it is just a problem of distance and (naïve) perspective – as in Rousseau's naïve paintings. An ambivalent symmetry also plays an important role in the description of this idyllic scenery: it is reflected in the very neat repetitive structure of sentences throughout the fragment. Its very artificial nature calls the reader's attention to its questionable verisimilitude: 'Brown bogs and black bogs were arranged neatly on each side of the road [...] each with a filling of yellow-brown brown-yellow water.'<sup>30</sup>



In *The Third Policeman*, irony springs from the gap between the representational level and referential reality. Everything is said to be incontrovertible, real and uncompromising. And yet, as a fantastic work of novelistic fiction narrated from beyond the grave, the events depicted are of course far from being obvious or incontrovertible. The same paradoxical dimension involving death or mortality is to be witnessed later in the novel through the scaffold which is to be used by the policemen to hang the narrator. It should be ominous and sinister and yet what is said about it is rather idyllic contrary to common sense: 'Through the struts of the structure I could see the good country. There would be a fine view from the top of the scaffold.'<sup>31</sup> This is at least a strange consideration on the part of a man sentenced to death by hanging. Death looms large in the story, even if it is a strange sort of death, since it is second degree or 'post-mortem' death, death dreamt or imagined by a dead man. It leads the narrator and his split identity (involving his soul Joe) to create new horizons and visions. Elemental timeless contemplation then prevails, accompanied by an original aesthetics of absence in the last quarter of the book, when the narrator ponders what he might become after his execution.

Or perhaps I would be an influence that prevails in water, something sea-borne and far away, some certain arrangement of the sun, light and water unknown and unbeheld, something far-from-usual. There are in the great world whirls of fluid and vaporous existences obtaining in their own unpassing time, unwatched and uninterpreted, valid only in their essential un-understandable mystery, justified only in their eyeless and mindless immeasurability, unassailable in their actual abstraction.<sup>32</sup>

In this respect, *The Third Policeman* is a novel imbued with bizarre poetry which aims at depicting a metaphysical space made of ineffability, as underlined in the quote above by the recurrent negative prefixes: 'unknown and unbeheld,' 'unwatched and uninterpreted' 'un-understandable,' 'immeasurability,' 'unassailable' and suffixes as in 'eyeless,' 'mindless.' The novel is also marked by its cyclical aspect, which oscillates between two visions of the Irish countryside: either it is repetitive, conservative and hellish – in a combination of authorial irony and sick humour – or it is spiritualised in a process of transmigration or metempsychosis. Thus, the narrator finally considers becoming 'the spirit of the scenery in some beautiful place like the lakes of Killarney [...] a big wave in mid ocean, for instance, it is a very lonely and spiritual thing.'<sup>33</sup>

The dark alternative is also offered:

I felt sad, empty, and without thought. The trees by the road were rank and stunted and moved their stark leafless branches very dismally in the wind. The grasses at hand were coarse and foul. Waterlogged bog and healthless marsh stretched endlessly to left and right. The pallor of the sky was terrible to look upon. My feet carried my nerveless body unbidden onwards for mile upon mile of rough cheerless road.<sup>34</sup>

These rank and stunted trees are quite Beckettian, but they go beyond the aesthetics of restriction. The 'Waterlogged bog and healthless marsh' under a lowering cloudy sky are also recognisably Irish. This fictional scenery refers to the actual space of Cromwell's massacres, the Great Famine, the Easter Rising *etc.* The Ireland depicted in the novel is worryingly strange, tragic, hanging between fiction and hell for reasons which relate to a postmodern ethos of writing and a postcolonial fragmentation of space, as well as an ontological void caused by the successive ordeals of history. This convergence or collision of literature and history is clearly redolent of a postmodern problematic. Linda Hutcheon reminds her readers in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* that history and literature

are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalised in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. [...] Today, the new scepticism or suspicion about the writing of history [...] is mirrored in the internalised challenges to historiography in novels [...]. They share the same questioning stance towards their common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality, and even of their implication in ideology.<sup>35</sup>

### 3. The Haunting Strangeness of the Irish Nation

This sceptical – conservative? – reading of history and stories superimposes an element of irony upon the process of sensemaking, of establishing identities, of building a national horizon, especially when the concept of landscape is involved with all the duplicitous undertones I mentioned in the introduction. The following description is worth pondering in dialectical terms, as regards what is deliberately omitted or indirectly said:

Furthermore, there was nothing familiar about the good-looking countryside which stretched away from me at every view. [...] My surroundings had a strangeness of a peculiar kind, entirely separate from the mere strangeness of a country where one has never been before. Everything seemed almost too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made. Each thing the eye could see was unmistakable and unambiguous, incapable of merging with any other thing or of being confused with it. The colour of the bogs was beautiful, and the greenness of the green fields was supernal. Trees were arranged here and there with far-from-usual consideration for the fastidious eye. [...] I was clearly in a strange country.<sup>36</sup>

The countryside is literally too good-looking, too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made to be real or true. This is yet another metafictional hint conceived by O'Nolan to remind his reader that they are perusing a book.<sup>37</sup> Even obvious tautological statements turn dubious, such as 'the greenness of the green fields,' which is 'supernal.' This unlikely beauty even 'contaminates' the bogs, whose colour becomes 'beautiful.' All this ironically implies that the reality in Ireland is quite the opposite: it is unpleasant, imperfect, plain. What is strange and deceptive is precisely the beauty of the scenery and the pleasure derived from admiring such a conflicting object. In other words, if one is walking through a beautiful land marked by harmony and a clear sense of purpose, that land cannot be the real Ireland, but must be hell or the prison of pure solipsism. The traces of the Catholic stereotype associating beauty and pleasure with sin and displeasure and ugliness with reality remain. Since O'Nolan keeps repeating that his Ireland is a 'queer country,' one cannot but think of the following passage from Seamus Deane's book, appropriately entitled *Strange Country*:

there developed from Burke a set of narrative procedures that dealt with the history of Ireland in a series of stories that had in common [...] a totalising ambition. That ambition was quite simply to provide a narrative predicated on the notion of recovery and redemption from ruin and oppression. It was consistently frustrated by the impossibility of finding an *ab extra* vantage-point from which the story could be told, precisely because the nature of historical experience was too disturbed and disturbing to allow for the establishment of a secure subjectivity, the disengaged individual narrator. [...] In Irish discourse, the compensatory stratagem for this is the generation of a narrative of strangeness, the story or stories of a country that is in a condition that cannot be represented at all or that still has to be represented.<sup>38</sup>

*The Third Policeman* is a 'narrative of strangeness' wholly suited to Deane's description. It is also a novel about the impossibility of establishing a 'secure subjectivity,' that of 'the disengaged narrator' mentioned by Deane and generated historically by a progressive understanding of history. In his analysis, Deane employs the British political label of 'Whig.' In *The Third Policeman*, the landscape is both completely familiar and radically strange. The same observation applies to the narrator who first seems to correspond to the classical protagonist in an Irish *Bildungsroman* but soon turns out to be particularly odd, even to himself. The most striking features being that the narrator cannot even remember his own name and that his personality is split into several sub-entities 'like the skins of an onion.'<sup>39</sup> No wonder, then, that the landscape depicted by such a disturbed narrator should be that perplexing. As Deane posits in the excerpt quoted above, the reader is faced with 'the generation of a narrative of strangeness, the story or stories of a country that is in a condition that cannot be represented at all or that still has to be represented.' And Deane's postcolonial reading achieves a poetic dimension in *The Third Policeman*. What prevails throughout the text is that feeling of puzzlement mixed with alienation and irrational strangeness which constitute an innovative aesthetics. As Deane demonstrates, it takes after an Irish tradition, but it also paves the way for a radical re-thinking of the act of creation and its problematic boundaries with reality. What some could call post or new modernism.

I walked on unperturbed. The sun was maturing rapidly in the east and a great heat had started to spread about the ground like a magic influence, making everything, including my own self, very beautiful and happy in a dreamy drowsy way. [...] The road was being slowly baked to a greater hardness, making my walking more and more laborious.<sup>40</sup>

'Magic influence' and 'dreamy drowsy way' point to that strange reading of the narrative. The syntax also elaborates on that strange logic of dissociation, for instance, when the narrator builds such a structure as 'making everything, including my own self, very beautiful.' This phrasing both reifies 'Noman's' self as an external object – that of a fiction which escapes the fiction-writer – and makes it human through its analytical dimension. This feat is achieved in a slightly schizophrenic manner, just as in the following passage:

Of my own journey to the police-barracks I need only say that it was no hallucination. The heat of the sun played incontrovertibly on every inch of me, the hardness of the road was uncompromising and the country changed slowly but surely as I made my way through it. To the left was brown bogland scarred

with dark cuttings and strewn with rugged clumps of bushes, white streaks of boulders and here and there a distant house half hiding in an assembly of little trees. Far beyond was another region sheltering in the haze, purple and mysterious. [...] There was no sign whatever of human life. It was still early morning perhaps.<sup>41</sup>

This description reveals the novel's core ambivalence. The narrator clearly states his journey is no hallucination, that the hardness of the road is uncompromising and the sunshine incontrovertible and yet, following the logic of apophasis – mentioning while pretending not to mention – the atmosphere which is created is one of incredulity, deconstructing the hard, incontrovertible, uncompromising narrative reality.

After reading the novel carefully, there is no doubt Deane's nationalist interpretation of strangeness proves both fruitful and justified. Nonetheless, it is insufficient for a full appraisal of the text, for the strange space delineated in *The Third Policeman* does not only involve Ireland but various offshoots of (human) perception of reality, namely death, metaphysics, history, literature, and science. The strange geometry which informs the novel then befits the mysterious nature of human creation itself in *The Third Policeman*. Just as Danielewski's *House of Leaves* constitutes a parable for the book itself as an imaginary space, a house of paper inhabited by the reader, O'Nolan's queer or strange country is literature itself, literally *Noman's Land*.

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## Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> This theme of worlds within worlds is also tackled by Myles in a column about Victorian 'cupboard mania.' See Flann O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien At War*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Duckworth, 1999), 100–2.

<sup>3</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Kemnitz, 'Beyond the Zone of Middle Dimensions: A Relativistic Reading of *The Third Policeman*,' *Irish University Review* 15, no. 1 (1985), 56–72; Paul Simpson, 'The Interactive World of *The Third Policeman*,' *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O'Brien*, ed. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1997), 73–81; Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 226–58.

<sup>5</sup> Ambivalence, in syntax or semantics, is the coincidental undecidable reference to two different meanings, deriving in this case from the setting in *The Third Policeman* which both points to a traditional space and a postmodern metafictional environment.

<sup>6</sup> See Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) and *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), where he strongly criticises what he deems the complacent ideological implications of postmodernism. Before Eagleton, Raymond Williams also voiced concerns about certain

aspects of nihilistic postmodern ethos in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, ed. T. Pinkney (London: Verso, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 10.

<sup>8</sup> To get an idea of the controversial interpretation of the neo-modernist or postmodernist nature of O'Nolan's work, one may profitably refer to the recent conference held in Sydney in November 2011 aptly entitled *Flann O'Brien and Modernism*. Rónán McDonald's ideas as regards this particular issue prove quite enlightening.

<sup>9</sup> The adjective 'queer' is repeated dozens of times throughout the novel, constituting a strange polysemic leitmotiv.

<sup>10</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> O'Nolan at his best often sounds quite Pascalian: '*Le silence éternel des ces espaces infinis m'effraie*' [The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me]. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, fragment 185 (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 154.

<sup>14</sup> Brian O'Nolan to William Saroyan, 14 February 1940, as quoted in *The Third Policeman*, 207.

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> 'Vanity of vanities! All is vanity' (*Ecclesiastes* 1:1-2) or 'A generation goes and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever' (*Ecclesiastes* 1:4), and so on.

<sup>17</sup> Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-Modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>20</sup> 'Therefore it seems essential to look beyond the obvious narrative structures for the "not-said"; the silences and gaps'; Hopper, 64.

<sup>21</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>23</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 80. The metaphor 'shoulders' points towards and develops the same ambivalent code, both orographic and anthropomorphic, while 'respectable' sounds ambivalent pointing towards two meanings, an anthropomorphic one 'deserving respect' and a metaphorical one 'great, impressive.'

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 167. In this case, the idea of landscape as reinforcing the cyclical dialectics informing the book is crucial. I could also quote: 'Down into the earth where dead men go I would go soon and maybe come out of it again in some healthy way, free and innocent of all human perplexity. I would perhaps be the chill of an April wind, an essential part of some indomitable river or be personally concerned in the ageless perfection of some rank mountain bearing down upon the mind by occupying forever a position

in the blue easy distance. Or perhaps a smaller thing like movement in the grass on an unbearable breathless yellow day.' *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>35</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989), 105–6.

<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, Flann, *The Third Policeman*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> This self-conscious, metafictional dimension is made obvious by Joe's remark about what is going on in the book: 'Apparently there is no limit, Joe remarked. Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed' (88). Joe's words make up a good definition of literature when applying Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief.

<sup>38</sup> Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 145–6.

<sup>39</sup> O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 54–55.