

‘Calmly Making Ribbons of the Natural Order’ *The Third Policeman*, the Culture Industry, & Right Laughter

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At the close of *The Third Policeman*, we learn that Policeman Fox’s devilish machinations and control over his fellow policeman are enabled by his possession of the strange substance omnium. The unexpected revelation of his responsibility for the underworld’s most grotesque features comes as a profound shock to the narrator:

If I could believe [Fox] he had been sitting in this room presiding at four ounces of this inutterable substance, calmly making ribbons of the natural order, inventing intricate and unheard of machinery to delude the other policemen, interfering drastically with time to make them think they had been leading their magical lives for years, bewildering, horrifying and enchanting the whole countryside.¹

Evidently not fully trusting the policeman’s assertions, the narrator has a hard time grasping the enormity of the sudden disclosure. The substance Fox is talking about is ‘inutterable,’ the machinery he has invented ‘unheard of,’ and time itself is ‘interfered with.’ Everything that has happened defies the rules of logic. In short, the third policeman has ‘calmly [made] ribbons of the natural order.’ O’Nolan’s choice of metaphor and employment of the adjective ‘calmly’ takes the sting out of what might otherwise be a grimly apocalyptic narrative. In contrast to the derisive and often sadistic humour associated with parody, the laughter evoked is the result of surprise and cognitive unease. ‘Right’ rather than ‘wrong,’ this kind of laughter constitutes a formidable weapon against the culture industry.

In what follows, I read *The Third Policeman* through the lens of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.’ This means, first and foremost, that I will consider the novel as a potential *commodity* and the reader as cultural *consumer*. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, under late capitalism works of art, film, music, and literature are produced predominantly with the hope of generating profit. To be lucrative, they need to conform to a model that has been proven successful; thus, standardisation and schematisation are among the

culture industry's key features.² Standardisation and schematisation, in turn, depend on predictability and meaning. By providing an endless stream of amusement that fits consumer expectations and that is easily digestible as well as ideologically sound, the industry posits the immutability of the system. In this view, leisure is an extension of the realm of labour and just as thoroughly regimented.

Mass culture seduces by gratifying the desire for distraction and amusement, which are meted out as a panacea to the exhausted, unthinking subject. 'Amusement itself becomes an ideal,' Horkheimer and Adorno write, 'taking the place of the higher values it eradicates from the masses by repeating them in an even more stereotyped form than the advertising slogans paid for by private interests.'³ Yet amusement, with its connotation of fun and laughter, need not have a narcotic effect. According to Danielle Jacquin, laughter itself is 'double-edged' in that it simultaneously 'forces us to think' and 'soothes our pain.'⁴ While cognitive or rational reconciliation remains elusive, laughter offers another kind of reconciliation. In an intriguing section on laughter, Horkheimer and Adorno posit a distinction between 'right' and 'wrong' laughter:

Laughter, whether reconciled or terrible, always accompanies these moments when a fear is ended. It indicates a release, whether from physical danger or from the grip of logic. Reconciled laughter resounds with the echo of escape from power; wrong laughter couples with fear by defecting to the agencies which inspire it. It echoes the inescapability of power.⁵

Whether an escape from logic or power, in circumventing the agenda of the culture industry, 'right' or 'reconciled laughter' articulates an individual's resistance to the passive consumption of amusement.

The Third Policeman offers multiple occasions for resistance through laughter. In the excerpt cited at the beginning of this essay, the narrator's initial shock at the disintegration of the natural order almost immediately gives way to enthusiasm. Gripped by 'a wild excitement,' he begins to contemplate the enormous possibilities the possession of omnium would allow. What follows is a detailed list of desirable deeds and items that swiftly shifts from the dreadful to the ludicrous, from bribing Divney and luxuriously bound commentaries on de Selby to wonderful fruits 'made inconceivably fertile by unparalleled artificial manures.'⁶ But the narrator's dreams are of an altogether grander cast – or are they? Consider the following wish list, which combines, higgledy-piggledy, the grandiose with the mercantile:

I would improve the weather to a standard day of sunny peace with gentle rain at night washing the world to make it fresher and more enchanting to the eye.

I would present every poor labourer in the world with a bicycle made of gold, each machine with a saddle made of something as yet uninvented but softer than the softest softness, and I would arrange that a warm gale would blow behind every man on every journey, even when two were going in opposite directions on the same road. My sow would farrow twice daily and a man would call immediately offering ten million pounds for each of the piglings, only to be outbid by a second man arriving and offering twenty million.⁷

Rather than ponder the destructive potential of omnium, O'Nolan permits the narrator to run away with his fancy and to dream of endless possibilities. There is something infectiously humorous about this zany wish list; in fact, it is its very zaniness that produces the 'right laughter' inimical to the culture industry. 'Right laughter' gestures to the freedom that characterises true art.⁸ 'Wrong laughter,' by contrast, is of the kind elicited by a joke that becomes a 'smirking caricature of advertising,' as Adorno would later write.⁹

In *The Third Policeman*, 'right laughter' is called forth by unpredictability and meaninglessness. My thesis rests on the premise that products sanctioned by the culture industry are largely predictable. They follow a familiar schema and, in so doing, fulfil the audience's expectations. Since the consumer derives comfort from the familiar, mass culture is characterised by stock characters and storylines which develop along predictable rules. Unvarying sameness masquerading as novelty provides superficial meaning and entertainment: it does not so much challenge as soothe into apathy. The truly unfamiliar, however, seems meaningless and, from the perspective of mass culture, threatening. In contrast to simple nonsense, meaninglessness presupposes at least the possibility of meaning and thus problematises the question of meaning explicitly. Taken together, predictability and meaning, or their lack, provide the main coordinates along which I situate my analysis.

Since the culture industry is driven by the profit motive, the products it supports need to be both predictable and conventionally meaningful. It does not take an in-depth reading to realise that *The Third Policeman* defies these parameters. Beginning with the unpredictability of the plot, O'Nolan delights in diverting and disconcerting his reader. From the very first sentence the reader is on unstable ground. 'Not everybody knows how I killed old Phillip Mathers, smashing his jaw in with my spade,' the book opens – and immediately makes an about-turn: 'but first it is better to speak of my friendship with John Divney.'¹⁰ Rather than talk about Divney, however, the narrator then decides to offer an account of his early life. Thus, within the space of one short paragraph, there are three possible beginnings to the same story.

The narrative's unpredictability makes its classification a conundrum. Indeed, the text consistently establishes genre expectations, only to immediately defy them. As a result, any attempt at classification is doomed to failure from the outset. In this sense, *The Third Policeman* evades the strictures of the culture industry. What Horkheimer and Adorno claim about film may be applied to literature as well: 'the outcome can invariably be predicted at the start – who will be rewarded, punished, forgotten [...]. The gags and effects are no less calculated than their framework. They are managed by special experts, and their slim variety is specifically tailored to the office pigeonhole.'¹¹ Clearly, *The Third Policeman* does not fit these criteria. The outcome of the narrator's ordeal in the underworld is as elusive as the development of the story itself. From beginning to end, there is precious little evidence of the kind of 'expert management' Horkheimer and Adorno deplore.

To be predictable, products sponsored by the culture industry need to fit into a specific genre or type. As Horkheimer and Adorno write: 'Sharp distinctions like those between A and B films, or between short stories published in magazines in different price segments, do not so much reflect real differences as assist in the classification, organisation, and identification of consumers.'¹² As 'a picture of dislocated reality,' to use Anne Clissmann's apt description, *The Third Policeman* brazenly challenges critical taxonomies.¹³ Though the book opens as a 'very orthodox murder mystery in a rural district,' in the author's own words, the reader soon realises that if it is a murder mystery, it is anything but orthodox.¹⁴ The murder of old Mathers is real enough, down to the sound of the victim's cracking skull and the mud tinged with blood. The inclusion of graphic detail does not suffice to turn the novel into a ghost story, although there are elements of that as well. To muddy the waters further, O'Nolan has his narrator fall in love with a bicycle. By including this unconventional romance he pays tongue-in-cheek tribute to the standards of popular novels which almost invariably feature some sort of love story for pathos, and the narrator's language when describing his feelings conjures the sticky sentimentalism of a Danielle Steele novel: 'I felt that I had known her for many years and that she had known me and that we understood each other utterly.'¹⁵ Since the object of the narrator's affection is a mechanical contraption, the reader is more likely to laugh than to swoon.

Predictably, attempts to categorise *The Third Policeman* have been extraordinarily varied. While scholars such as Keith Hopper and M. Keith Booker read the novel as an example of Menippean satire, others including Jack Fennell and Val Nolan highlight the features that make it akin to science fiction and fantasy. Alternatively, Tom Walker has made a powerful case for the work as a parody of Irish realism.¹⁶ Sharing the 'ramshackle hybridity' of O'Nolan's entire fictional *œuvre*, *The Third Policeman* does not simply resist being slotted into a common genre.¹⁷ What

makes the novel impossible to pigeonhole is the essential strangeness of the content, the cat-and-mouse game the author plays with both narrator and reader. Unlike *Alice in Wonderland*, for example, which makes no pretence at normality, *The Third Policeman* initially appears just sufficiently normal to make subsequent developments disorienting. Although magical realism appears to offer a useful coordinate here, it would be wrong to consider the text an uncomplicated example of the genre. When the first rupture between quasi-normality and eccentricity occurs, it does so almost unbeknownst to the reader. During the narrator's attempt to retrieve the cashbox from under the floorboard of Mathers's dwelling, 'something happened.' The passage illustrates the author's remarkable skill for misleading the reader:

I cannot hope to describe what it was but it had frightened me very much long before I had understood it even slightly. It was some change which came upon me or upon the room, indescribably subtle, yet momentous, ineffable. It was as if the daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or twice as dense as it had been in the winking of an eye.¹⁸

The extraordinary occurrence, we learn later, was the explosion of the bomb Divney had planted in this spot. Since the reader is not aware of this fact until the very end of the novel, the passage indicates a switch that is as likely to confuse as to intrigue – that is, if the occurrence is properly appreciated at all. It would take a second reading to clarify the course and significance of the event. On the most basic level, what has appeared to be a murder mystery now metamorphoses into a ghost story, if only temporarily.

O'Nolan's continuous disruption of readers' expectations of what constitutes a predictable narrative highlights the playfulness of his writing. Blithely ignoring the editorial censorship that tends to have such a baneful effect on literary creativity, he plays with his characters and his story in ways that disregard considerations of value and meaning. Indeed, *The Third Policeman* is a profoundly ludic novel. Following Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, we might identify it as a 'Play-Text' that engages the reader in an exhilarating dialogue with author and text.¹⁹ Instead of guiding the reader with all the necessary clues, a process that results in highly predictable narratives, O'Nolan takes a mischievous delight in misdirection, whether in terms of plot, setting, or character. An extended example of this tendency can be found in the account of the narrator's first day in the underworld. Although the narrator is unaware that he has just died, the peculiar circumstances surrounding his encounter with Mathers's ghost and his sudden amnesia regarding his name warrant a far more sombre setting than

the one given: '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. My heart was happy and full of zest for high adventure.'²⁰ The state of happy excitement is reiterated two pages later when the narrator reports 'feeling happy and heart-light and full of an appetite for going about my business.'²¹ This happiness corresponds with his surroundings: '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 sort of way.'²² This strenuously emphasised happiness is inexplicable considering the odd events and characters that the narrator encounters along the way. Rather than being awed, the reader is inclined to laugh at the deliberate juxtaposition of the serious and the absurd. O'Nolan employs this narrative technique even in seemingly irrelevant descriptions, such as when comparing the metal bars of his beloved bicycle to 'spear-shafts superbly cast by angels.'²³ It is precisely the incongruous and seemingly arbitrary application of lofty discourse to the most trivial topics that accounts for a significant part of the novel's humour.

From the perspective of the culture industry, predictability and conformity go hand in hand with normative meaning. Both are the result of passive consumption rather than active meaning making. As we have seen, to appreciate the novel's unorthodox message the reader needs to be actively engaged with the text. Hopper reminds us that 'a text is not just written but *read into existence*.'²⁴ Put differently, the reader plays an integral role in creating the text's meaning. What if the meaning it yields consists in meaninglessness? Take the narrator's description of going to bed on the eve of his execution:

I felt as if all my weariness and perplexities of the day had descended on me pleurably like a great heavy quilt which would keep me warm and sleepy. My knees opened up like rosebuds in rich sunlight, pushing my shins two inches further to the bottom of the bed. Every joint became loose and foolish and devoid of true utility. [...] Lying there, I felt the weariness ebbing from me slowly, like a tide retiring over limitless sands. The feeling was so pleasurable and profound that I sighed again a long sound of happiness.²⁵

The depiction of the warm bed complete with a cosy quilt conjures a state of virtually primeval bliss, the obligatory jarring note notwithstanding (the knees opening up 'like rosebuds in rich sunlight'). The narrator does not feel and think the way we would expect a person about to be executed to think and feel. Instead of panicky fretting or painful soul-searching, he enjoys the fact that at this particular moment even his very

limbs have lost their 'true utility.' From the point of view of literary realism, the narrator's ruminations are blatantly unreasonable. *Pace* Hopper, meaning (or meaninglessness) does not only need to be 'read into existence' but in fact – or more precisely – read *in and out* of existence. Ultimately, the reader has to make a conscious decision to give up on the attempt to make sense.

Meaning is contingent on familiarity and predictability, both main pillars of the culture industry. Confusion arises when expectations of predictable narratives or characterisations are disappointed, that is to say, if what happens is out of keeping with narrative convention. As we have seen with the example of the bicycle description, O'Nolan frequently achieves an effect of absurd incongruity by upsetting the distinction between the trivial and the sublime. Throughout *The Third Policeman*, meaninglessness and *faux* wisdom are juxtaposed – in sharp contrast to mass culture, which tends to convey the opposite: facile meaning and the absence of true wisdom. Horkheimer and Adorno are clear on this point: 'Words which are not a means seem meaningless, the others seem to be fiction, untruth.'²⁶ Only that which serves a utilitarian purpose carries meaning; everything else must be discarded as a useless distraction.

The enigmatic balloon story narrated by Sergeant Pluck offers a perfect example of this interplay of meaninglessness and pretended wisdom. Standing on the scaffold on which he expects to be hanged, the narrator ruminates on the fact that 'Strange enlightenments are vouchsafed to those who seek the higher places.'²⁷ Thanks to this insight, the reader is suitably prepared for an important disclosure. Of course, since the phrase 'higher places' may refer to the lofty ideas of intrepid thinkers as well as to a physical location, it is not at all certain how enlightening the following will be. While the narrator contemplates the landscape below, the Sergeant launches into the story of a man who, once upon a time, ascended in a balloon to make observations. When the time came to pull the balloon back to earth, it turned out to be empty. The empty balloon was sent up again, and this time it returned with the explorer in it. At this point in the Sergeant's story, the narrator allows his attention to wander and he begins to contemplate what awaits him after his death: the liberation from 'all human perplexity' by way of his corpse's transformation into wind, river, or mountain.²⁸ Meanwhile, oblivious to the narrator's reverie, the Sergeant continues his story which ends with the man going up in the balloon once more, and the village people once more pulling down an empty basket.

What does it all mean? The simple answer is: nothing – or anything. The empty basket gestures at the absence of meaning that the balloon story so skilfully elaborates. In the end, the narrator's solemn conjectures on his afterlife turn out to be irrelevant, since he escapes hanging and promptly goes on to fall in love with a bicycle. The sequel

to the gallows episode thus serves to unmask his wise insights as mere pretence. The reader, desperate to locate and decipher the significance of this incident, is left with the realisation that O'Nolan has again succeeded in disappointing expectations for a semantic signpost. This is in blatant contravention of the culture industry's predilection for offering passive complacency and easy answers. By providing distraction and easy digestibility through predictability and meaning, mass culture seeks to 'ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind,' as Horkheimer and Adorno point out.²⁹ In the balloon anecdote, O'Nolan interweaves a sensational story with the pathetic reflections of a man condemned to death and, in so doing, challenges the reader to become actively engaged in the text.

The Third Policeman does not merely resist the culture industry through unpredictability and meaninglessness. In the figure of the narrator, the novel satirises the individual 'deceived' by the central message of mass culture: dominated nature and fake harmony. Products sanctioned by the culture industry establish a seamless transition from reality to fiction and *vice versa*; in other words, their content needs to make sense from the point of view of the 'real world.' Since mass deception allows the culture industry to shore up the status quo, work and consumption may be expected to play a major role in the cultural products funded and sanctioned for mass distribution. As Shane Gunster explains, 'Mass culture is filled with objects, events, and practices that are intentionally designed to solicit, accommodate, and attract the fantasies of its consumers.'³⁰ Seen through this lens, *The Third Policeman's* treatment of work and utility reveals a strong ambivalence towards the utilitarian conception of purposeful production and consumption. In this sense, the narrator himself may be read as a critique not only of the productionist/consumptionist dialectic that drives the culture industry but also of the commodity fetishism and single-minded pursuit of objects that is such a crucial feature of late capitalism. O'Nolan's satire on the narrator's insatiable quest for knowledge adds a further dimension to the idea of Enlightenment rationality culminating in deception.

Under late capitalism work, consumption, and utility provide the benchmark for the measure of an individual's value. *The Third Policeman* offers an interesting meditation on these themes. To begin with, work seems to have little value in the narrator's earthly life. After losing his mother and father at a young age, he inherits the family inn. But rather than attend to his job, he devotes most of his time to his scholarly work on de Selby, a character who is himself a mere caricature of socially useful work. In the underworld, the situation is scarcely more conventional. Like the narrator's former self, the individuals he encounters evince little concern with doing the work expected of them. Beside the masses that he only glimpses from afar, Sergeant Fox is the only figure in the entire book who at first glance seems to fulfil his purpose.

As Pluck explains, 'we never see him or hear tell of him at all because he is always on his beat and never off it and he signs the book in the middle of the night when even a badger is asleep. He is as mad as a hare, he never interrogates the public and he is always taking notes.'³¹ Elsewhere, Puck chides Fox for wanting 'to get rid of as much as possible undertime and overtime, as quickly as he can so that he can die as soon as possible. MacCruiskeen and I are wiser and we are not yet tired of being ourselves, we save it up.'³² In their case, wisdom consists in manufacturing useless objects (MacCruiskeen) and dabbling in atomic theory (Pluck). They have not yet been fully socialised into the quasi-capitalist underworld of *The Parish* and therefore have retained a kernel of self-determination ('we are not yet tired of being ourselves'). Far from applauding their resistance to domination, the narrator, in good bourgeois fashion, expresses bewilderment at their unorthodox occupations.

To appreciate the novel's critical edge, it is essential to recognise O'Nolan's ambiguous treatment of work. This ambiguous treatment has its roots in his distrust of modernisation, technology, and capitalism, as Andrew V. McFeaters has recently shown.³³ O'Nolan's concern with the American capitalist Henry Ford and with Fordism is evident in all of his novels but perhaps nowhere more pronounced than in *The Third Policeman*. Here, 'real' work, i.e. manual labour and socially useful work are contrasted with work that would be deemed useless from the perspective of profitability. In the underworld the only ones who seem socially useful are the nameless multitudes who, antlike, plod away in the bogs. Theirs is a world of order, symmetry, and cheerfulness – the very image of industrial productivity where everything is animated and has a purpose, from the tiny men and women cutting turf to the hens dutifully manufacturing eggs. Nature itself is virtually at the narrator's beck and call: the wind serves him 'without charge,' and the hill obligingly waits for the road. Everything seems perfectly planned out in this best of all possible worlds.³⁴ The theme of relentless utility is brought out even more sharply in the following passage:

The world rang in my ear like a great workshop. Sublime feats of mechanics and chemistry were evident on every side. The earth was agog with invisible industry. Trees were active where they stood and gave uncompromising evidence of their strength. Incomparable grasses were forever at hand, lending their distinction to the universe. [...] Men who were notable for the whiteness of their shirts worked diminutively in the distant bog, toiling in the brown turf and heather. Patient horses stood near with their useful carts and littered among the boulders on a hill beyond were tiny sheep at pasture.³⁵

Everything serves a purpose. The trees are active and strong, the grasses are present for whatever task may come, and men toil tirelessly. Even the volume of the birdsong is not excessive. All things are put to rational use in this superbly arranged underworld. Rónán McDonald puts it well: 'The bucolic setting is dangerously unmasked: behind it is not the hand of God, but rather the machinations of an industrial complex.'³⁶ The harmony is so blatantly deceptive as to reveal O'Nolan's critical attitude toward capitalist production, particularly in its Fordist mode.

In contrast to the anonymous masses, the narrator is anything but a paragon of productivity, yet he is obsessed with money and monetary value. In the portrayal of his conflicted character, O'Nolan does a masterful job not only at challenging the culture industry but also at satirising one of its stock characters: the shamelessly greedy man. In the course of the story, the narrator emerges as a self-deluded individual, dreaming of becoming the world's expert on de Selby and at the same time steeped in material matters. From the first pages when he comments on the costs of attending school, money provides the stabilising element in a world that is unfathomable and often frightening. This is illustrated nowhere more starkly than in his brief visit to 'eternity.' At first, the ease with which the Sergeant produces a bicycle to the value of 'at least eight pounds ten' out of an oven throws the narrator off. His agitation quickly subsides, however, and he finds himself 'taking an interest in the commercial possibilities of eternity.'³⁷ When the Sergeant informs him that his every wish will be granted in 'eternity,' he immediately concocts a wish list that includes whiskey and bananas, writing materials, clothing and shoes, money, and 'precious stones to the value of £200,000.'³⁸ Together with fifty gold cubes, the value of these objects is 'several million pounds,' as he calculates on the spot. When told that he will not be able to remove the coveted loot from 'eternity,' he plunges into despair. Like a spoiled child, he throws a fit and turns to the wall, sulking. His tantrum stands in stark and disproportionate contrast to the detached calm with which he greets his imminent demise. In the end, he is not very different from the avid underworld cyclists whose obsession has begun to transform their very bodies into bicycles. The conclusion is inescapable: things rather than life dominate the narrator's mental universe. The strange turn his obsessions take is in keeping with the unpredictability and meaninglessness of the text and the laughter his histrionics call forth.

What makes *The Third Policeman* so genuinely funny is its skilful fusion of different kinds of laughter, from scornful to sorrowful. Most often, the text's humour springs from its audacious refusal of reality and the fanciful excursions into the madcap world of the author's imagination. By subverting reality and illusion, sanity and madness, the novel paradoxically achieves a higher level of seriousness.³⁹ Thus, what Adorno had to say about Samuel Beckett's plays applies to O'Nolan's fiction as

well: 'Humour is salvaged [...] because they infect the spectator with laughter about the absurdity of laughter and laughter about despair.'⁴⁰ This kind of humour does not draw its power from cliché and kitsch. In a very real sense, cliché and kitsch, since they are entirely predictable and meaningful according to a predetermined model, are antithetical to 'right laughter.' Parody, in turn, depends too much on that which is given to be subversive.

Though there are elements of parody in *The Third Policeman*, the novel goes much further in exploring the extent of the comic.⁴¹ The laughter it elicits is the 'right' kind in that it is far from uncomplicated. It does not so much soothe as provoke, like a beautiful song sung out of tune ('ab-surdus'): wincing at the dissonance, we are compelled to laugh nonetheless.⁴² O'Nolan was undeniably an expert on humour. In the guise of his journalistic alter ego George Knowall, he reflects on what makes people laugh. 'Humour can be visual, or something written or spoken,' he notes. 'If you have a man who has a certain arrogance of manner and who is impeccably dressed, it is very funny to pour a bucket of dirty water over him, preferably from an upstairs [sic] window. Should we not pity a person subjected to such a plight? No, indeed. We roar laughing.'⁴³ The kind of laughter described here is the laughter elicited by *Schadenfreude*, which serves as the punishment for the other's unwarranted arrogance and class superiority. Though Myles na gCopaleen likewise seems to understand the comedy of the situation, it is not at all clear that he approves of the roaring laughter. In his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column, Myles deliberately distances himself from *Schadenfreude* when asserting that 'Yes, it is a fine thing to make fun. But let the fun be gentle, *gentle*. Gentle and subtle.'⁴⁴ Myles's recommendation is remarkably consistent with Horkheimer and Adorno's view on laughter.

Rather than condemning humour as the handmaiden of the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno railed against the savage laughter that erupts *vis-à-vis* the misfortunes of others, that is to say, laughter springing from *Schadenfreude*. This is a crucial point of Shea Coulson's useful analysis of Adorno's theory of laughter. To quote Coulson: 'Ultimately, Adorno's apparent mirthlessness is actually disdain for an uncritical use of laughter that simply concretises social repression. Laughter, for Adorno, should act violently against reified structures and unhinge the subject from reification.'⁴⁵ To be sure, we cannot automatically assume the voice of Myles na gCopaleen to be identical with that of Flann O'Brien (or either one with Brian O'Nolan), but at the very least Myles's demand for gentle fun rings true when considered in light of some of the more whimsical humour of *The Third Policeman*. There is no question: beside the novel's more sinister aspects, there is much that is playful and just plain fun. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to dismiss the humour that suffuses the text from beginning to end as harmless. With its consistent juxtaposition

of terror and comedy, *The Third Policeman* invites the reader to ponder the grotesque of the familiar and the familiar of the grotesque. The subversive implications of this juxtaposition are undeniable.

Until now, most critics have read *The Third Policeman* as part of the tradition of nonsense writing or in terms of the epistemological concerns it raises.⁴⁶ These interpretations are useful but limited. Whether the novel should be considered an expression of late modernism or a product of post-modernism *avant la lettre*, Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet remind us of the critical thrust of O'Nolan's fictional *œuvre*: 'The anti-modern impulses that everywhere shape the fictional universes of his texts are part of an abiding modernist contempt for any easy or sanguine accommodation with a wider world actively dissolving the connective tissues of a truly social existence.'⁴⁷ In its refusal to abide by conventional genres and themes, *The Third Policeman* may be read as a satire of literary production *tout court*.

Notes & references

¹ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), [hereafter *TP*], 188.

² For a lucid analysis see Shane Gunster, 'Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form,' *Cultural Critique* 45 (Spring 2000): 40–70.

³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, 'The Culture Industry,' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 115.

⁴ Danielle Jacquin, 'Flann O'Brien's Savage Mirth,' in *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O'Brien*, eds. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Belfast: The Queen's University of Belfast, 1997), 7.

⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, 'The Culture Industry,' 112.

⁶ *TP*, 189.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 248.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁰ *TP*, 7.

¹¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, 'The Culture Industry,' 98–9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 96–7.

¹³ Anne Clissmann, *Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to his Writings* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd, 1975), 156.

¹⁴ Stephen Jones, ed., *A Flann O'Brien Reader* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 34.

¹⁵ *TP*, 173.

¹⁶ Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995); M. Keith Booker, *Flann O'Brien, Bakhtin, and Menippean Satire* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Val Nolan, 'Flann, Fantasy, and Science Fiction: O'Brien's Surprising Synthesis,' *Review of*

Contemporary Fiction 31, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 178–90; Jack Fennell, 'Myles in Space: Science Fiction and *Cruiskeen Lawn*,' *The Parish Review* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 64–77; Tom Walker, "'A True Story": *The Third Policeman* and the Writing of Terror,' in Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and Werner Huber (eds), *Flann O'Brien: Contested Legacies* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2014): 126–42.

¹⁷ Nolan, 'Flann, Fantasy, and Science Fiction,' 188.

¹⁸ *TP*, 23.

¹⁹ Kimberly Bohman-Kalaja, *Reading Games: An Aesthetics of Play in Flann O'Brien, Samuel Beckett, and Georges Perec* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2007), 50. As Bohman-Kalaja makes clear, dialogue is a more useful term to describe O'Nolan's writing than communication. In her words, O'Nolan's 'texts are intended to challenge readers to think about reading, to be forced to read in different ways, and to find a way of piecing together incompatible styles, languages, and genres: to deal with structural lapses, conspicuous lapses in time, omissions of information, and, ultimately, how to make a text out of chaos.' *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁰ *TP*, 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 42.

²³ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁴ Hopper, 146 (emphasis added). For an interesting analysis of the novel as a pataphysical fiction see Anthony Adams, 'Butter-Spades, Footnotes, and Omnium: *The Third Policeman* as "Pataphysical Fiction",' *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 31, no. 3 (Fall, 2011): 106–19, and Ondřej Pilný, "'Did you put charcoal adroitly in the vent?": Brian O'Nolan and Pataphysics,' in Borg, Fagan, and Huber (eds), 156–65.

²⁵ *TP*, 115–7.

²⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, 'The Culture Industry,' 118.

²⁷ *TP*, 158.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

²⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno, 'The Culture Industry,' 100.

³⁰ Shane Gunster, 'Revisiting the Culture Industry Thesis: Mass Culture and the Commodity Form,' *Cultural Critique* 45 (Spring, 2000): 58.

³¹ *TP*, 77.

³² *Ibid.*, 153.

³³ Andrew V. McFeaters, 'Reassembling Ford: Time is Money in Brian O'Nolan's *Brave New Ireland*,' *The Parish Review* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2014), 42–55.

³⁴ *TP*, 86.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁶ Rónán McDonald, "'An astonishing parade of nullity": Nihilism in *The Third Policeman*,' in *Flann O'Brien & Modernism*, eds. Julian Murphet, Rónán McDonald, and Sascha Morrell (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 145.

³⁷ *TP*, 135–6.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁹ Anne Clissmann puts it well: 'His vision, which at times appears to be darkly insane, is a way to sanity and to balance; it is what O'Nolan himself has called "sane madness".' Clissmann, 37.

⁴⁰ Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, 253.

⁴¹ 'Parody derides its object by miming it in an attempt to displace the fear engendered by it back onto itself,' Shea Coulson explains. 'In this way it flattens the comic relationship, which is then expressed in "wrong laughter." [...] "Reconciled laughter" [...] expresses the tension created by irony as self-critique,

and this tension arises from the inexpressibility of undominated nature.' Shea Coulson, 'Funnier than Unhappiness: Adorno and the Art of Laughter,' *New German Critique* 100 (Winter, 2007): 160–1.

⁴² The subversive elements of the novel cannot be gainsaid, Carol Taaffe's warning to the contrary notwithstanding. According to Taaffe, 'comedy may have the capacity to be subversive, but it is also adept at expressing and enforcing conformity.' Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 4.

⁴³ Flann O'Brien, *Myles Away from Dublin*, ed. Martin Green (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1985), 107.

⁴⁴ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn,'* ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: Picador, 1977), 96.

⁴⁵ Coulson, 143.

⁴⁶ On *The Third Policeman* as nonsense-writing see John Attridge, 'Nonsense, Ordinary Language Philosophy, and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*,' *Modern Fiction Studies* 60, no .2 (Summer 2014): 298–319 and Taaffe, 195–208. On the novel's epistemological concerns see Booker, chapter 4.

⁴⁷ Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet, 'Introduction,' in Murphet, McDonald, and Morrell (eds), 8. For a post-modern view see Hopper.