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Flawed to Start : The Inconsequence of Action in the Novels of Brian O’Nolan

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Abstract

Brian O’Nolan’s novels *At Swim-Two-Birds*, *The Poor Mouth*, and *The Third Policeman* present worlds where character actions are largely inconsequential. This discussion will focus on reflexive metanarrative elements, criticism of the Irish revivalist movements and authorship and creation as a means to survive these worlds. O’Nolan’s novels will be shown to be largely optimistic in their confrontation of nihilistic concerns. Much of his writing is comedic and playful even when dealing with serious topics. Repetition through both language and story structure are key components of the futility O’Nolan constructs for his characters and readers. This thesis examines the interplay between futility and creativity in O’Nolan’s works.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Flawed to Start: The Inconsequence of Action in the Novels of Brian O’Nolan

by

Christopher M. Mitchell

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Thesis Committee:

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FLAWED TO START:
THE INCONSEQUENCE OF ACTION IN THE NOVELS OF BRIAN O'NOLAN

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts

by

CHRISTOPHER M. MITCHELL

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2018

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Fig. 2. Second-hand smoke bag

Source: Flann O'Brien, *At War*, Dalkey Archive Press, 2003, p. 35 & 57.

Fig. 3. Sea-cat

Source: Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth*, Dalkey Archive Press, 1998, p. 77.

I think that all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a rebirth as something not oneself, something which has no memory and is created in a moment and perpetually renewed.

– W.B. Yeats, “*The Death of Synge*”

This race and this country and this life produced me, he said.

I shall express myself as I am.

– James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*

“If I hear that word ‘Joyce’ again, I will surely froth at the gob!”

– Brian O’Nolan

Brian O’Nolan’s three novels *The Poor Mouth (PM)*, *The Third Policeman (3P)*, and *At Swim-Two-Birds (ASTB)* present nihilistic worlds where characters’ efforts are futile, and they are unable to achieve their goals. Much like Sisyphus, his characters are unable to gain traction or change their environment. Futility and a certain “staticness” in which change cannot come, are ideas at the center of this examination of O’Nolan’s work. His Irelands have the characteristics of Purgatory or Hell, which are most apparent in *The Third Policeman* and used to comedic effect in *The Poor Mouth*. *The Poor Mouth* is a dark comic satire of the Irish Revivalists and the resulting Ireland O’Nolan spent his life in. It is often overlooked by studies of O’Nolan’s work in favor of *At Swim-Two-Birds* or *The Third Policeman*. This is understandable, because it was written in Irish, about specifically Irish topics, such that it was accessible only by a small, domestic

audience. Although he may have wanted the international success of Beckett and Joyce, O’Nolan was firmly planted in Dublin and the Ireland he had inherited from Yeats, Joyce and others.

Nihilistic elements are inherent in the texts at all levels. In O’Nolan’s worlds the laws of physics, time, perception, and the universe are put on hold for part of, or the duration of the novel. The overall plots are often recursive, with the characters no better off than when they started. Nihilistic aspects also extend to the metanarrative plots. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, one of the frame stories is destroyed in its *deus ex machina* ending, annihilating most of what the reader has just read. In *The Third Policeman*, it is revealed in the final three pages that the narrator had died a tenth of the way into the book, and as such most of the novel never “happened.” In *The Poor Mouth*, the Editor in the preface informs the reader that most of the manuscript has been “omitted due to pressure of space and ...[because] improper subjects were included in it” and that its author “is still alive today, safe in jail” (7). The reader is denied the truth of the manuscript and told the ending all on the first page.

Two elements of O’Nolan’s work muddy the concepts of “author” and “literature.” The first is that he utilized two main pen names, Flann O’Brien and Myles na Gopaleen. He believed that “no author should write under his own name nor under one permanent pen name” as this would limit the reader’s expectations of the author (Cronin 225). The second is that he unrepentantly stole from reference books, Irish legends, racing forms, and other sources for *At Swim-Two Birds* and his newspaper column. This thesis will not attempt to analyze the dozens of borrowed fragments that make up *At Swim-Two Birds*’ metafiction other than to say that the effect is to push and question the

boundaries and meaning of art. There is usually no attempt to integrate the stolen material. So not only are mundane bits of writing presented as art but the text is also frequently interrupted by page long non-sequiturs on topics such as how to read a gas meter, even including diagrams. The content of these fragments is deliberately meaningless and irrelevant to the rest of the novel. Part of O’Nolan’s comedic absurdist avant-garde modus operandi is this droning effect and it is this aspect of the fragments that this thesis will focus on. The pedantic showing off by the three wise men of Furriskey and his companions for five pages of entirely asinine facts is a great example of this (206-10). The three men begin what the text refers to as a scholarly “conversation sustained without apparent effort” but after some pleasantries of agreement the novel shirks all pretense of a dialogue eventually devolving into lists of uncommon words and animals. Short excerpts ruin the weight of the effect, but the abrupt transitions remain in the following example. The three wise men’s train of thought recitation of facts includes Lamont’s:

A carbuncle is a fleshy excrescence resembling the wattles of a turkey-cock.

Sphragistics is the study of engraved seals.

Excellent, remarked Mr. Furriskey with that quiet smile which endeared him to everyone who happened to come his way, but do not overlook this, that the velocity of light *in vacuo* is 186,325 miles per second. (208)

“Meaning” in these sections is largely irrelevant as they are there as a joke or the set-up to one. The joke often lies primarily in the length and repetition of the material and not the content.

This droning on and on aspect in O’Nolan’s work can take several forms and he wrote a lot of original material using the same concept. In *The Third Policeman* the footnotes increase in length as the novel goes on, eventually consuming several half pages at a time, becoming a substantial and entirely tangential subplot. The constant repetition in *The Poor Mouth* of the words *potato*, *rain*, *Gaelic* and many of the clichés serve to parody their common occurrence in the biographies from Western Ireland. In the first *feis* speech alone, a form of the word *Gael* is used thirty-five times within half a page. His Keats and Chapman stories from his newspaper column are elaborate, richly detailed set-ups for puns. These long passages and the cumulative effect of the repetitions and divergences can be difficult to summarize. In short there is a sense of futility for the reader and the characters because O’Nolan is toying with them, and with the very process of reading.

To say that O’Nolan’s works are nihilistic and that futility is an important concept in them is not meant to imply that they are dark or depressed. His work is far more interested in creating a problem or situation that he can mine for humor than ever resolving the problem. O’Nolan’s worlds in fact have great meaning and freedom in their Nothingness and futility, both for the characters and the reader. Most often, salvation in O’Nolan’s worlds, however slight, takes the form of the creative act or the struggle of the attempt. Anne Clissmann describes O’Nolan in equally optimistic tones:

He believed that satire could make the world better by pricking the bubbles of pomposity, hypocrisy and philistinism which were everywhere in evidence. He wanted people to see straight, but when they found the view intolerable he wanted them to be comforted with laughter and invention. He laughed because laughter

was a defence against horror and because laughter with its side-track, its inversion, convolution and coincidence, was ultimately truthful. Laughter is, O’Nolan implies, an acceptance of chaos and a belief in the miraculous imposition of order. (37)

Anthony Cronin similarly argues for laughter as a “defence against shock” adding that O’Nolan found “the grotesqueries and macabre accidents of human existence funny all his life” but continues that it probably helped O’Nolan to “bear his own ever-present physical misfortunes” (216). This is a bit of a logical stretch as throughout Cronin’s book O’Nolan is portrayed as downplaying the gravity of his medical situations, but he largely avoids self-deprecation regarding his ailments. Cronin often shoehorns in criticism of O’Nolan which strangely is not entirely uncommon in scholarly articles of O’Nolan’s works.

A discouraging aspect of reading O’Nolan criticism is a fairly common pessimistic bias, even in the scholarship that roots for him as the underdog against Joyce and Beckett. The focus is often not on what he created but on what he could have created had bad luck and his drinking not shaped his career. O’Nolan wrote almost exclusively about Ireland and spent most of his life in Dublin. His writing is often seen by critics as a response to or in conversation with *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*. James Joyce cast a considerable shadow that O’Nolan’s career and O’Nolan scholarship have had to contend with. Cronin, O’Nolan’s acquaintance and biographer, wrote:

To an extent it was a misfortune for O’Nolan that Joyce had been there first...

Writers of supreme genius usually do pose problems for their immediate literary

successors, more especially so if they seem to have used up the very life material which one is destined by birth and upbringing to use oneself. (ix)

It is nearly impossible to find O’Nolan scholarship that does not mention Joyce at least in passing. Those few that do, often focus on Beckett to avoid mentioning Joyce. Keith Hopper argues that viewing *The Third Policeman* as a postmodern work helps to free O’Nolan from a “paralysing association with Joyce, and aligns him more with a figure like Samuel Beckett” (15). Beckett defined the distinction between his own work and Joyce’s as, “The more Joyce knew the more he could. He’s tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance” (15). The same could be said of many of O’Nolan’s characters; their inability to change their situation is often because they are ineffective, ignorant, inclined toward sloth, or their world will not allow them to change. This thesis will largely ignore Joyce and Beckett’s influence because it often makes O’Nolan secondary in his own criticism and much has already been written on the subject.

Three Beginnings – Brian, Flann & Myles

Q. Who is Flann O’Brien?

A. Brian Nolan.

Q. Who is Brian Nolan?

A. Myles na Gopaleen.

Q. What did these three men do?

A. They wrote three books called “At Swim-Two-Birds.”

- Brendan Behan, *Irish Times*, 30 July 1960

Brian O’Nolan was born in October 1911 during a period of dramatic change for Ireland as it slowly moved toward independence from England (Cronin ix,1, 9). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries a series of nationalist movements focused politically, artistically, linguistically and even kinesthetically on what it meant to be Irish. The fallout from the language and literature movements shaped the Ireland Brian O’Nolan inherited and by proxy his writing. The Irish Literary Revival, spearheaded by W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory and the Gaelic Revival, which hoped to stimulate the use of, and interest in, the native language of Ireland, Irish/Gaelic, are essential context for examining and understanding *The Poor Mouth*.

Brian O’Nolan used pseudonyms to distort the concepts of “author” but also as a necessity due to his job. As a civil servant he was barred from publicly expressing his political views. He joined the Civil Service in 1935 and served until 1953. Additionally, he wrote the column *The Cruiskeen Lawn* for *The Irish Times* from October 1940 until his death in April 1966 and the penname Myles na gCopaleen helped protect him from lawsuits (Cronin 187). He later simplified gCopaleen to Gopaleen to make it easier for potential international audiences (115). He even wrote letters from “concerned citizens” to his own column to stir up controversy and then more letters in response to the first (Clissmann 20, Jackson 8).

O’Nolan had taken the name Myles na gCopaleen from Dion Boucicault’s play *The Colleen Bawn* which was based on Gerald Griffin’s 1829 novel *The Collegians*. In the earlier iterations, Myles was a stereotypical Stage-Irish character, an “outlaw...peasant storyteller” (Cronin 116). While O’Nolan’s version freed him from his limited earlier forms it made him a bombastic polymath with knowledge of nearly any

subject. The character remained somewhat of a clown because his extensive knowledge often left him ignorant of the fact that his grand plans were based upon faulty premises. Myles, much like de Selby in *The Third Policeman*, is an inventor with solutions for everything. For example, here are drawings that accompanied his columns for a new type of wheel for bad roads (fig. 1) and bags of second hand smoke to deal with a tobacco

Today's Illustration

This interesting wheel is peculiarly suitable for rough potholed roads. The steel tyre is undulated in a way that will give the vehicle a series of *uniform* bumps.

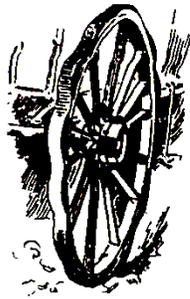


Fig. 1. Wheel

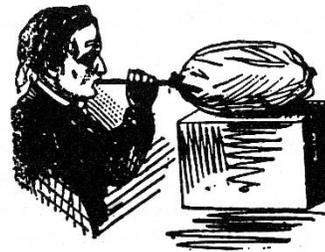


Fig. 2. Smoke bag

shortage during World War II (fig. 2). In perfect conditions the wheel might hypothetically work but it would make riding on all other roads far worse. Much of the “science” of de Selby, Myles and Flann are based on logical premises and concepts taken to absurd levels. O’Nolan acquired Myles’ extensive knowledge by copying directly from encyclopedias and other reference materials. He would also “borrow” for the incorporation of real world artifacts like racing forms into *At Swim-Two-Birds*, and it is the method the Brother uses for making mail-order courses in *The Hard Life*.

The name Flann O’Brien was a mask for necessity’s sake, with no personality attached to it. *At Swim-To-Birds* (1939), *The Third Policeman* (written 1940, published 1967), *The Hard Life* (1961), *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) and the unfinished *Slattery’s Sago Saga* (1964-66) were all written as Flann O’Brien.

In the late 1940s as O’Nolan rose in the ranks of the Civil Service, oversight on him decreased and he spent increasingly more time in bars than his office (Cronin 188). In 1953 his two careers collided when one of his columns was thought to insult the Minister of his department. He resigned and negotiated for a pension, but it was only a quarter of his previous salary, and money was a concern for the rest of his life. But even when his later columns were increasingly rejected, O’Nolan never stopped writing. Creation and writing were not only important for O’Nolan but are also the goal and salvation for many of his characters. Anne Clissmann argues that O’Nolan “turned to parody, exaggeration and fantasy, and set out to create a parallel world which allowed free range for man’s limitless imagination; a world in which everything, including disturbing and horrifying things, was possible” (37). O’Nolan succeeds in creating a narrative world where everything is possible with *At Swim* but largely through pastiche. His following book, *The Third Policeman*, transcends the creative limitations of *At Swim* by relying far more on original material. *At Swim*, *Third Policeman*, and *Poor Mouth* all feature O’Nolan’s signature violence, droning text, and metanarrative and authorial convolutions.

Punching Bags and Punchlines

In O’Nolan’s work the attempt of the creative act, not necessarily what is made, is important, especially if it set O’Nolan up with a punchline. In *ASTB* Dermot Trellis’ papers are destroyed, he fails, and everything he has made turns against him, but it does not really matter. He is alive and making jokes about his housekeeper’s buttocks being obscured by her dress: “*Ars est celane [sic] artem*, muttered Trellis, doubtful as to

whether he had made a pun” (237). The line can be translated as “it is (true) art to conceal (the methods of the creation of) art,” but Trellis’ pun focuses on the pronunciation of Ars(e). O’Nolan’s *Cruiskeen Lawn* puns are similarly a mix of high and lowbrow humor which often require readers to know multiple languages to understand the joke.

Trellis’ survival is due in large part to O’Nolan’s cartoon-like aesthetic for his characters, who can take so much punishment that death becomes absurd. They are not killed, however, because that would ruin the joke. Death for the few characters who do die is instantaneous and painless. The narrator’s parents in *The Third Policeman*, for example, are both dead by the second page: they are simply “gone” (8). Bonaparte’s wife and son both die separately within the same short paragraph. Their child, Leonardo, has a cough, Bonaparte goes to consult his wife, finds her dead, and returns to the son to find him dead as well (87). There is nothing that could have been done for any of them. Mather’s death in *The Third Policeman* is the only death in these works that is gruesome and mentioned multiple times, but even he does not suffer. So, it still seems to adhere to the rule of survivable violence or painless death.

Dermot Trellis is violently tortured by the Pooka for twenty pages, resulting in ruptured organs and a strange specificity of injuries: “The thorns...embedded in his person could be ascertained on counting to be no less than 944 in number” (202). The violence is entirely over the top to the point that the reader is effectively numb to it. Trellis is numb to it as well, or at least accepting of his fate:

Say you like it, says [the Pooka] to Trellis quicklike. Certainly I like it, says Trellis through a hole in his head — he had no choice because orders is

orders...Why wouldn't I like it. I think it's grand. We are going to get funnier as we go along, says the Pooka...Is that one of your bones there on the grass? (198).

Dermot Trellis accepts his fate because he is being controlled by far more capable authors than when he was in charge earlier in the novel. His motivation had simply been to make life easier for himself, but the other authors want revenge on him, so they are far more effective. Trellis must also accept his fate because in O'Nolan's reflexive worlds it is futile to attempt to go against authors. The metanarrative and reflexive elements have the characters of all three of the discussed novels acutely aware that they are characters and the reader is constantly reminded of authorship and narrative construction.

Each of O'Nolan's five completed novels features authors and authorship as a main component of the plot and explores the theme of the power of authorship in different ways. For *At Swim-Two-Birds* it is the creation and revision of shared cultural mythology and the boundaries of literature. *The Poor Mouth* is about authors' influence on designing culture and history. In *The Third Policeman* the focus is on the limits and yet the potential of language to define and share perception and experience. These are the larger thematic concepts but on a smaller scale the main characters in *PM*, *ASTB* and *3P* are all authors, as are the secondary characters in *The Hard Life* and *The Dalkey Archive*. O'Nolan's author characters also have in common that they can survive their harrowing experiences – they are immune to death.

Since death is not a threat in the world of *The Third Policeman*, actions and their consequences are largely meaningless. The narrator in *The Third Policeman* brutally kills Mathers, but later when the narrator is killed by Divney he meets Mathers again who merely has bandages on his neck and chin (25). None of his actions are of any

consequence. He is pressured into killing Mathers to get the cashbox so he can publish his book, but then Mathers is alive and well, the cashbox is gone, and the publishing of the book is largely forgotten. The narrator escapes punishment for his nullified crime but ironically, he is then going to be executed for Mather's death at the hands of Martin Finnucane (96). Mathers, the Narrator, and Divney do not even realize they are dead. The narrator kills Divney entirely by accident and Divney nonchalantly joins him a few minutes later unfazed as they begin the second loop through the plot. Elsewhere in a letter O'Nolan described the experience as a "hell which he earned for the killing" that goes "on for ever," but it almost does not seem to be a punishment at all (3P 200). The narrator seems happier in the world of the fantastic science of the policemen than his life of studying de Selby's crackpot theories and having his inheritance slowly stolen by Divney.

Like Dermot Trellis, Bonaparte, the author / narrator of *The Poor Mouth*, is cartoonishly invincible as he suffers and starves until he is "safe in jail" for buying boots and trying to better his life. He is indestructible on his return journey from Mt Hungerstack:

For a while I felt I was in the limitless skies, at another time submerged, for yet another while broken and bruised against the rocks with sharp and heavy objects falling thickly upon, splitting my head and body at yet another time....When I regained consciousness...[a]ll my skin was ripped and torn like an old suit of clothes...Upon me soul! Said I, I'm ravenous for spuds. (110)

Bonaparte is not a full character but merely a caricature created from Revivalist rhetoric. He is blissfully unaware and unfazed because he has been convinced by his uncle that

this is how life is for the Gaels. He writes his own Gaeltacht autobiography during his time in jail, thereby contributing to the same literary / cultural paralysis which shapes his world and has put him in jail in the first place.

The narrator of *The Third Policeman*'s ordeal is more psychological, but he still survives physical death. The limits of his perception are constantly strained, and all his goals remain out of reach. He never publishes his book, learns his name, or finds the blackbox. Eventually he learns that he is dead and doomed to repeat the same loop of days forever. The futility of repetition in the myths of Sisyphus, or Tantalus for example, is tragic because they know their punishment is unending. But due to his partial anterograde amnesia the narrator is destined to repeatedly forget and remain ignorant of his misfortunes. He, even more than Bonaparte or Trellis, can shrug off death and the permanent debilitating effects of his situation. Albert Camus wrote:

War cannot be negated. One must live it or die of it. So, it is with the absurd: It is a question of breathing with it, of recognizing its lessons and recovering their flesh. In this regard the absurd joy par excellence is creation. "Art and nothing but art," said Nietzsche; "we have art in order not to die of the truth." (93)

O'Nolan's characters are often authors who "breathe with" the absurd. Trellis is happy to be alive. Bonaparte is ignorant and accepting of his fate until he meets his "father" and then makes the best of a bad situation and writes his life story while in prison. *The Third Policeman*'s narrator has spent his life studying the absurd works of de Selby which may have helped mentally prepare him for the fantastic world of the Policemen.

Creation is the one thing in O'Nolan's works that makes everything else worthwhile. It is the thing that can free someone for even a moment from the crushing

unknown. While the reader is not witness to the creative process in these three novels, all three narrator characters are authors who are driven to share their stories. They are writing about writing, whether it is about de Selby, “The Good Books,” or Irish Legends. O’Nolan wrote in his column shortly before his death, “[If a man] has the courage to raise his eyes and look sanely at the awful human condition...he must realise finally that tiny periods of temporary release from intolerable suffering is the most that any individual has the right to expect” (Clissmann 36). These characters and arguably O’Nolan himself take power in the act of creation and exert their will against even the most crushing of realities.

The Poor Mouth

Tis no uncommon thing,... for one half of the world to use the other half of it like brutes, and then endeavor to make 'em so.

– Laurence Sterne

Appalled, stupefied, distraught, covered in blood and shaking uncontrollably, Candide said to himself: “If this is the best of all possible worlds, what must the others be like?”

– Voltaire, Candide

The Poor Mouth was originally written in Irish by Myles na gCopaleen and titled *An Béal Bocht* in 1941. O’Nolan’s satire criticizes a literary, political history which had convinced people in Ireland and abroad that true “Irishness” involved speaking Gaelic, wearing kilts, and enduring crushing poverty. It is rife with criticism of the pretensions of

the Celtic Revival and the subsequent hollowing of Irish culture. Specifically, it is critical of the folk hero status of the members of the Gaeltacht and the consequences for all parties involved. The term “Gaeltacht” (sometimes pluralized “Gaeltachtaí”) refers to the areas in Ireland in which Irish has been recognized as a predominant language. Since the beginning of the 20th century these regions have been located exclusively in the west of Ireland. Beginning in the 1890s the movement to revitalize the Irish language started gaining support. Douglas Hyde, who would later be O’Nolan’s Irish professor at University College, Dublin, argued that by “de-Anglicizing” and removing British influence through increased knowledge of Irish and traditional Irish activities, the country would be better poised to become a true Irish State (Hyde 1, Clissmann 7). During this period, the “isolated” Gaeltacht of the Aran and Great Blasket islands came to be viewed as bastions of language and culture unblemished by English influence. Their agrarian “primitive” cultures were celebrated as pre-capitalist societies free from the demands of modernity and English rule, a state of being on which the revivalists wished to base renewed perceptions of Irishness. The influence of the Islander as revivalist role model influenced Irish culture well beyond the abandonment of The Great Blasket in the 1950s and it was not until the late 1970s that these arguments were questioned and dismantled by Irish writers (Hirsch 1116).

The Poor Mouth is O’Nolan’s parody of the numerous autobiographies and other works by residents of or visitors to the Gaeltacht. J.M. Synge’s *The Aran Islands* is representative of the hypocrisies of the revivalist movements. Another main influence on *The Poor Mouth* was Tomás Ó Criomhthain’s (anglicized O’Crohan) *An tOileánach (The Islandman)* which was one of the most popular autobiographies to come out of the

Gaeltacht. O’Nolan was well qualified to take on this satirical task as he had gone on yearly Gaeltacht trips during his childhood and was fluent in Irish.

Although the novel is supposedly authored by the Myles persona, only the two pages by “The Editor” are potentially his writing, as he has received the manuscript from Bonaparte. Myles or the Editor has already performed the first nihilistic act of the novel by removing most of it and denying access under the pretense of “pressure of space.” The rest of the novel contains none of the erudite yet foolish pomposity of the Myles character. Myles here is either a mask wearing a mask, or he has placed himself in the long line of people profiting from and taking credit for the hard work of the Gaels.

Bonaparte O’Coonassa is the main character and narrator/ author. He lives with his grandfather (the Old-Grey-Fellow) and his mother in Corkadoragha, a Gaeltacht made up of clichés popularized in the Gaeltacht autobiographies and biographies. Bonaparte is like Voltaire’s *Candide*, except Bonaparte has the misfortune to live in the worst of all possible worlds and instead of optimism he believes he deserves to be where he is. His world is shaped by outside forces, largely the fictions put forward by the revivalists. Authors have created a world for him by repeating the clichés so often the Gaels have come to believe them. The natural world itself also follows the clichés put forth by the Gaeltacht biographies, although increased to absurd levels. For example, the frequent rain mentioned in Gaeltacht biographies is transformed and exaggerated to the point that characters in *Poor Mouth* drown or are washed away as they sleep. For Bonaparte, like many of O’Nolan’s heroes, escape never for a moment seems achievable or is even considered.

The Revivalists largely ignored the poverty of the Blasket and Aran Islands, thereby allowing the residents to be poetic martyrs for a nationalistic cause instead of providing them with aid. For both the fictional and the real Gaels the focus in these works is more on enduring than escaping. (The term Gael will be used throughout this section in reference to the Aran, Blasket, or Corkadoragha islander. This also helps distance the islander from the difficulties of the term "peasant.")

Reconnecting to a lost culture and history was one of the driving ideas behind the Irish Literary Revival. Folk culture was important to the construction of a modern Irish nation state. By positioning these movements as a return to an "interrupted" culture it provided a way to subvert colonialism. But the Revival also projected the inadequacies associated with English colonialism onto its own people, a phenomenon known as "native colonialism" (Fictions 333). As Edward Hirsch writes, "Because the Protestant intellectuals did not see the peasant as a figure out of their own immediate or historical past they had no trouble in preserving the rural archetype as pagan and primitive rather than as fundamentally Catholic" (Hirsch 1122). The differences between the Revivalists and the Gaels regarding religion, class and genealogy largely account for the Gaels being defined as Other in representations of the Irish West. Synge's *The Aran Islands* is no exception to this.

In *The Aran Islands* Synge relates the people of the Islands in various ways to animals in describing their "uncivilized" manners and beliefs. In *The Poor Mouth* O'Nolan makes the line between man and beast far more absurdly blurred. For example, Synge writes of how the rocky conditions of the Island, along with their footwear "has preserved to these people the agile walk of the wild animal" (21). He somewhat jokingly

writes that “[the birds’] language is easier than Gaelic, and I seem to understand the greater part of their cries,” which places the Irish language further into the realm of the Other. In the scene where the men are loading the horses onto boats, Synge views them for a time as “a mass of struggling centaurs” (35). The men are not simply like the animals but have been fused with them.

The Gaels’ relationship with animals in *The Poor Mouth* is similarly melded and central to many of the stories told. But these Gaels are often far worse off than their animals. In *The Islandman* O’Crohan tells how the people kept their animals in their houses but they had specific spots and were tied up (27). In *The Poor Mouth* it is far more haphazard: “Yonder a bed with pigs upon it; here a bed with people; there a bed with an aged slim cow” (18). The animals enjoy equal status with the Gaels. O’Nolan plays with this lack of delineation several times. The grandfather tells how once a traveler suggested building a small hut in the yard, so they could have more room. He was “full of wonder at all he said because I never thought of the like nor of any other plan...to improve the bad state we were in” (20). They quickly built the hut but were so cold they move back into the house with the animals. These Gaels believe their place is one that is inferior to animals and this mindset sabotages any effort to improve their living conditions. When their foul-smelling pig Ambrose grows too large to get out of the house, Bonaparte’s mother, after suffering for two weeks, “bade us adieu and goodbye quietly and feebly and set her face toward eternity” (25-6). When the grandfather takes the pants off a piglet that had run away, he finds:

a pipe with a good jot of tobacco in one pocket. In another... a shilling and a small bottle of spirits. Upon me soul, said he, if ‘tis hardship that’s always in store

for the Gaels, it's not that way with this creature....where did you get these articles sir?' The pig threw a sharp glance... but did not reply. (42)

Because the prospects for the Gaels always seem so dim, Bonaparte is driven to ask his grandfather, "Are you certain that the Gaels are people?" (100). When Bonaparte returns from Hunger-Stack the grandfather points out that he is stark naked whereas when the pig came back he had clothes and small treasures (111). Sitric is one of the few characters who is able to improve his standard of living, progressing from living in a hole and fighting dogs for bones and being confused for a badger, to basically becoming a seal. In the absurd logic of *The Poor Mouth* this appears to be a vast improvement as opposed to a lateral move.

Much like Synge, the English-speaking outsiders in *The Poor Mouth* have difficulty differentiating between the Gaelic of the Islanders and the sounds of animals. The pig previously mentioned was wearing pants as part of a plot to get money from the English government who are paying, "for every child of ours that speaks English instead of this thieving Gaelic" (35). The old, nearly blind English inspector who "cared not a whit for the Gaels," is disgusted by their living conditions and refuses to enter the house to check the piglets / children. The pig in pants then runs off and fools an expert from Dublin who is collecting folklore:

In came a poor old man, drenched and wet, drunk to the full of his skin and creeping instead of walking upright because of the drunkenness. The creature was lost...in the darkness of the house but wherever he lay on the floor [there was] rapid, complicated, stern speech. [The gentleman] leaped up and set the machine

near the one who was spewing out Gaelic...he understood that good Gaelic is difficult but that the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible. (44)

He puts the pipe and other gifts in the “man’s” pants, goes to Berlin and is given a degree. The “learned ones” who listened to the recording decide that there is “no fear for Gaelic while the like was audible in Ireland” (45). The supposed experts know nothing of Gaelic except to classify it as Other, its key feature being that it is different from European languages.

Around the time of the Revivals, trips to the Gaeltacht become pilgrimages for those who were interested in the revival of Gaelic. Michael Victor O’Nolan, Brian’s father, was a nationalist and took his family on yearly Gaeltacht trips starting when Brian was young (Cronin 37). But observation on such a large scale changed Islander perceptions of self and of the outside world. In *The Aran Islands* Synge tells how, “Most of the strangers they see on the islands are philological students, and the people have been led to conclude that linguistic studies, particularly Gaelic studies, are the chief occupation of the outside world” (15). Pat Mullen, an Aran Islander, who was the go-between for Robert Flaherty during the making of the “documentary” *Man of Aran*, tells in his book that several of the islanders saw themselves as characters. One woman told him how another woman had been walking heavily and had a “touch of that drama thing” (Foster 337). Foster argues that “in this way, Flaherty’s ‘screen islander,’ a filmic version of the stage Irishman, began to walk the real earth” (337). The Gaels, knowing they were being observed, altered themselves. Foster also relates:

Another woman neatly turned art back into life when she wouldn't allow her daughter to appear in the film for fear her relatives in America would consider the islanders' traditional red flannel dress a poor apparel. (338)

The substitution of the fictional for the real regarding Gaeltacht inhabitants' perceptions of self is largely what Brian O'Nolan's *The Poor Mouth* is criticizing.

One of the most pervasive and at the same time sublimely subtle criticisms in *The Poor Mouth* is how the alteration of the perception of the Gael and romantic rural nationalism severed any possible connection or return to authenticity. The danger exposed in the novel is that the main characters, Bonaparte and his grandfather, two "peasants" of the cliché filled uber-Gaeltacht Corkadoragha, have been falsely led to believe that true Gaels act like the stereotypes found in novels. The inhabitants of this Gaeltacht do not recognize the romanticized Gaels as themselves and often feel inadequate in their Gaelic-ness or perform altered customs in accordance with the books written about them. They have been paradoxically labeled as Other and at the same time deemed unable to live up to their Other-ness. The process is cyclical in that the Gaels alter themselves based on the ways they are portrayed in media, which then in turn alters subsequent portrayals, resulting in them slipping further from their true selves every cycle.

These Corkadoragha Gaels are: sub-human, altered from inside and out, economically stagnant, conspired against by the weather and the land, trapped in cycles of theft and prison. Their only function is as fuel for literature, to be role models. All the men are christened Jams O'Donnell and cut off from their true names, which for Bonaparte and his family are foreign names to begin with. This is a running gag in the

novel: almost every man they meet is Jams O'Donnell, but these other Jamses are just living clichés. The only admittedly tragic Jams is Bonaparte's "Father" at the end of the novel because after so many years in prison and having had so much taken away it is not clear if they are truly related.

In the Gaelic *feis* scene the Gaels' and Bonaparte's acquired feelings of inadequacy are especially prominent. Equally prominent is O'Nolan's parody of Revivalist ideas. In the Revivals' exuberance to rediscover Ireland's Gaelic roots, the distinction between Irish and Scots Gaelic was ignored, and kilts became fashionable among those in the language movement. They were so common that even some Gaeltacht residents started wearing them. Neither group knew that they were foreign (Kiberd 502). O'Nolan parodies this with Bonaparte's insecurity when he notices that:

There were men present wearing a simple unornamented dress – these, I thought, had little Gaelic; others had such nobility, style and elegance in their feminine attire it was evident that their Gaelic was fluent. I felt quite ashamed that there was not even one true Gael among us in Corkadoragha. (51-2)

The opening speech by the President of the *feis* blatantly parodies the desires of the Gaelic Revival:

We are all Gaelic Gaels of Gaelic lineage... I myself have spoken not a word except Gaelic since the day I was born — just like you — and every sentence I've ever uttered has been on the subject of Gaelic.... There is nothing in this life so nice and so Gaelic as truly true Gaelic Gaels who speak in true Gaelic Gaelic about the truly Gaelic language. (54)

Throughout the *feis* Gaels keep dying “most Gaelically” but the feis continues because, as Bonaparte says, “we were ashamed to be considered not strongly in favour of Gaelic while the President’s eye was upon us” (59). Bonaparte and the other Gaels cannot even comfortably exist because they are compared to a fictionalized version of themselves.

When Bonaparte goes “hunting” with his Grandfather, which means stealing from other Gaels, he learns that Gaelic destiny is preordained:

’Tis clear, wee little son, said the Old-Fellow, that you haven’t read the good books. ’Tis now the evening and according to literary fate, there’s a storm down on the seashore, the fishermen are in difficulties on the water, the people are gathered on the strand, the women are crying and one poor mother is screaming: Who’ll save my Mickey? That’s the way the Gaels always had it with the coming of night in the Rosses. (67)

In O’Nolan’s parody world, the good books are law and warp the natural world as needed, dooming these Gaels to repeat the same series of events like an animatronic amusement park show. Shortly after this they witness a scene just as the grandfather had predicted and go to Ferdinand’s house. The scene at Ferdinand’s house is a culmination of clichés, the *shanachee*, the hooves, the five-noggin of whiskey marriage proposal etc. It is the world of *The Poor Mouth* in miniature (68-70).



Fig. 3. *The Sea-cat*

O’Nolan has the character of The Editor intrude on the text only once, to tell the reader directly that the drawing of the Sea-cat is a map of Ireland on its side (fig. 3) (77).

Ireland / the Sea-cat will consume Bonaparte and the Gaels to sustain itself. It will use them up through nationalistic fervor. Similarly, in the stories of the hunting in the Rosses, and the treasure of Hunger-stack, the Gaels must consume each other economically, to survive (62-6, 101). There are no success stories for the Gaels merely “paupers impoverishing each other” in a futile cycle of survival (38).

The Gaels of *The Poor Mouth* cannot break free of the role created for them. Their self-enforced adherence to the “good books,” i.e., the Gaeltacht Autobiographies, is partly to blame, but so are the outsiders changing the Gaels to fit a perceived ideal. Bonaparte is able to acquire the treasure of Hunger-Stack only because he is a true Gael. He can enter the narrow cave entrance only because he is “thin as an oar” and he survives the intense rain due to a lifetime of experience (106). But when he finally spends some of the money he acquires to buy boots, he is promptly arrested for a robbery and murder he did not commit. Since in his world there is no legitimate way to make the money he has in his pocket, he is automatically guilty. Ironically, in trying to better his life and change his destiny, he makes it far worse. But he does fulfill a different destiny, which is to replace his “father” in jail. Similarly, Sitric is another Gael forced to fit a Revivalist mold:

The Gentlemen from Dublin who came in motors to inspect the paupers praised him for his Gaelic poverty and stated that they never saw anyone who appeared so truly Gaelic. One of the gentlemen broke a little bottle of water Sitric had, because, said he, it spoiled the effect. (88)

The Gaels have a role to play that is shaped by many hands and the parts that do not fit expectations are trimmed and changed. O’Brien’s novel continuously returns to the theme

of a staggering loss of identity for the Gael. Declan Kiberd acknowledges the novel as “an attack on the Dublin revivalists of the twentieth century, who could idealize the saintly simplicity of western life, only by ignoring the awful poverty on which it was based” (498).

The relationship between the Revival and the Gaeltacht representations can be condensed into a series of strange dichotomies. At the same time the peasant was idolized he or she was equally degraded. The autobiographies of the Gaels went from being unique to a cliché. The islands that had remained “pure” were tainted during the attempt to learn from them and those who sought to protect them did the most harm. There is a pyrrhic futility in trying to reclaim culture through creating and importing it.

The Third Policeman; or, The Modern Sisyphus

This thesis will focus on three aspects of futility in *The Third Policeman*: The cyclical purgatory setting, the joy and failure of language to communicate perception, and the “science” of de Selby and the policemen.

As previously mentioned in the discussion of Dermot Trellis and Bonaparte, in O’Nolan’s novels a character is often returned to where he started with very little to show for the experience. *The Third Policeman* in this respect is by far the most directly cyclical of the three examined works. O’Nolan described the experience of the unnamed main character in *The Third Policeman*:

Again the beginning of the unfinished, the re-discovery of the familiar, the re-experience of the already suffered, the fresh-forgetting of the unremembered. Hell

goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive and very nearly unbearable. (200)

But this description removes all the humor and describes a resolutely more serious book than it is. Cronin writes of O’Nolan’s frustration in trying to find a publisher, and O’Nolan’s synopsis here sounds more like an attempt to sell the twist of the novel rather than its far more intricate and creative content (97-105). Elsewhere O’Nolan wrote, “the first fellow [is] surprised and frightened at everything just as he was before. It is made clear that this sort of thing goes on forever” (*TP* 200). The eternal punishments of Prometheus, Sisyphus, Arachne, Atlas, and other mythical figures function because they are remembered by the sufferer. While undeniably a pitiable situation for the narrator, it is difficult for the reader to comprehend it as being both eternally horrible and yet instantly forgotten.

Time within the novel is severely disjointed, which adds to the otherworldly atmosphere and the futility of the characters’ actions. Due in large part to the cyclical nature of the plot, the analysis of time in *The Third Policeman* is difficult, as the novel folds back in upon itself with several wrinkles that preclude easy assessment. For example, when the narrator first meets Sergeant Pluck, he says, “I was once acquainted with a tall man...that had no name either and you are certain to be his son and the heir to his nullity and all his nothings” (57). The narrator indulges him and says he is in fact the father, thereby looping this encounter in perpetuity. He will always be the father confused for the son. Similarly, there is no way for the reader to know whether the presented narrative is the narrator’s first time through the loop. The narrator is undoubtedly the author of the text of *The Third Policeman* but the timing of when he writes it either

means he eventually escapes his ordeal or is merely a red herring to hide the twist ending. He writes from a paradoxical state of both knowing and forgetting. At one point the narrator says, “Perhaps it was this lie [about the gold watch] which was responsible for the bad things that happened to me afterwards” but he forgets everything that happens and even forgets that he is lying about the watch (36). This can all become rather convoluted if the reader gets pulled too far into these impossibilities. Suffice to say the narrator is not given a point in time in which he could have written the novel, let alone to go back and write the footnotes. While these aspects deal more with forgetting and the looping plot O’Nolan also creates difficulties for the characters’ perception of the passage of time. For the narrator only three days pass between his death and his reunion with Divney, but sixteen years pass in the “real world.” Additionally, Fox’s use of omnium fools the other policemen into thinking “they had been living their magical lives for years” (188). *The Third Policeman* raises existential questions about human perception and the frailty of memories and language as they engage with reality. The scene in which the narrator meets Mathers for the second time is a struggle for the narrator:

It is hard to write of such a scene or to convey with known words the feelings which came knocking at my numbed mind. How long we sat there, for instance, looking at one another I do not know. Years or minutes could be swallowed up with equal ease in that indescribable and unaccountable interval. (24)

The Mathers scene contains many of the aspects of futility inherent in O’Nolan’s work: the impermanence of death or violent injury, as well as the discussed difficulties regarding perception, language, time, and authorship.

To complicate things even further, the cyclical nature of the plot might not be set in stone. When the events start to repeat at the end of the novel, the narrator does not meet Martin Finnucane before arriving at the Police barracks as he had the first time but instead is joined by Divney, so it can be presumed that events will not play out exactly as before. The narrator's struggle may not free him from the recurrence of events but O'Nolan has allowed him some ability to shape them. All of these convolutions of time and space help give the novel an otherworldly, dreamlike quality especially on second readings and beyond.

The theme of futility also informs the representation of science in *The Third Policeman*. O'Nolan presents science in two different ways. The first is the mad science of de Selby that the narrator devotes his life to and the second is the equally farfetched yet functional science of the policemen. In the narrator's pursuit of the study of de Selby he steals, murders, spends his savings, loses his leg, reads thousands of pages of de Selby and his commentators, learns French and German, lives an unhappy life with Divney for years only to be blown up before he can publish his book. But other than the originality of de Selby's thoughts, the reader is left to question why there is such devotion among his acolytes. His failings are noticed by the narrator and other commentators but are explained away or seen as a momentary lapse (22, 52). As the narrator kindly puts it: "Like most of de Selby's theories, the ultimate outcome is inconclusive" (52). One of the de Selby scholars, du Garbandier, says that "the beauty of reading a page of de Selby is that it leads one inescapably to the happy conviction that one is not, of all nincompoops, the greatest" (92). De Selby has several similarities to Jonathan Swift's educated Laputians. Both have poor designs for houses and clothing, both focus on impractical

knowledge as well as both having an overall inability to function regarding everyday tasks. De Selby would have benefitted from employing a Laputian Flapper due to his habit of falling asleep and being easily distracted (3P 21,50,166, Swift 134-7). Later in the text the footnotes deal almost exclusively with the convoluted murderous intrigue and false identities of de Selby's acolytes. O'Nolan footnotes and de Selby's acolytes are parodying academia that is so esoteric it is irrelevant, except for debating within that same bubble.

O'Nolan uses the footnotes in *The Third Policeman* to disrupt the rest of the text much like the frame stories and non-integrated fragments of *At Swim-Two-Birds*. The footnotes distract instead of illuminate and often raise more questions than they answer. They grow increasingly long until they take up an entire page (145), thereby superseding the text. The short footnotes can be read normally as the reader moves through the text, but as they grow in length the reader is split between being distracted by reading the footnote first or being forced to come back later. They function as a reflexive element making the reader aware of authorial control. The page long footnote is especially fitting with O'Nolan's love of puns, as it is can be read as a passage that bars passage.

The second science is the equally mad science of the policemen, which typically starts with a simple concept that is then extrapolated to extremes regarding the limits of perception and existence. Perception is an important concept in *The Third Policeman* overall but especially so regarding the experiments of the policemen. The narrator typically cannot perceive or describe the things he comes across and yet many aspects of the novel would be possible only with the written word. The serried eyes within eyes of the otherworld Mathers or the strangeness of the police barracks are some of the earliest

examples in the text (24, 52). The narrator's description of the barracks is possible only with the assistance of the reader's imagination to try to envision something that resists being given a physical form:

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 one of the customary dimensions was missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder.... I seemed to see the front and the back of the "building" simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side. (53)

While the narrator may struggle with the strangeness of this world, for the experiments of the policemen, perception ends not in nullity but in imagination. MacCruiskeen often offers to nonchalantly break the Laws of Physics and Reality as if they were party tricks:

"[I will], show you something to tell your friends about." Afterwards I saw that this was one of his rare jokes because what he showed me was something that I could tell nobody about, there are no suitable words in the world to tell my meaning. (135)

Again, perception fails the narrator but these dead spaces in language and perception are juxtaposed with moments of poetic inspiration and valiant attempts at descriptions of the world around him. The fantastic machines of the policemen which O'Nolan created in 1940 are still in the realm of science fiction and yet in the way they are presented they do not seem entirely farfetched. They have created machines that divide smells, tastes and feels into their smaller components (139) a magnifying glass that is so strong it cannot show anything (137), a mangle that makes light from sound and machines that can make light into sound or heat (107-10), as well as a color that is so difficult for the mind to

process that it will drive someone mad (154). MacCruiskeen's spear and chests push the limits of perception and existence. The spear "is so thin it could go into your hand and out ...and you would not feel a bit of it and you would see nothing and hear nothing. It is so thin that maybe it does not exist at all" (68). The chest is well crafted but pointless in that the only thing MacCruiskeen thinks is proper to put in it is another identical smaller chest and a smaller chest inside that and so on: "Six years ago they began to get invisible...Nobody has ever seen the last five I made...the one I am making now is nearly the size of nothing...I will have to buy spectacles with gold ear claws. My eyes are crippled with the small print in the newspapers" (74). These supernatural policemen can perform miracles like creating these wonders but struggle with simple tasks like reading newspapers. Later when one of these chests gets knocked onto the ground the narrator's soul Joe examines the irony, futility and impossibility of the situation:

We crawled feebly about the floor, peering and feeling for something that could not be felt or seen and that was really too small to be lost at all.

This is amusing. You are going to be hung for murdering a man you did not murder and now you will be shot for not finding a tiny thing that probably does not exist at all and in any event you did not lose.

Somewhere beyond perception is nothingness but at the same time imagination and belief. O'Nolan keeps pushing the narrator and the reader to reconsider the superlative form regarding "smallest." The de Selby acolytes want to believe in de Selby just as much as MacCruiskeen believes the last few chests exist but proving either side right or wrong is futile as long as they insist on belief. Out of all of O'Nolan's works *The Third Policeman* best supports Clissmann's previously mentioned argument that O'Nolan

wanted to create “a world which allowed free range for man’s limitless imagination” (37). The novel progresses from the freedom of de Selby’s ideas, to the world of the dead, then the beyant and finally at the center of everything is omnium a substance of pure creation.

Eternity or the “beyant” is a place outside of time in the novel where anything can be created but nothing can be taken away. It is a place of stasis where “A glass of whiskey will still be there no matter how much of it you drink and it does not matter in any case because it will not make you drunker than your own sobriety” (133). The narrator seizes the opportunity to try to better his situation by asking for riches and a weapon to protect his escape (138). It is the one time in the novel where he acts of his own accord, not listening to Joe or Divney, to physically improve his life. But the beyant is a realm of futility that Policeman Fox created, or at least manipulated, to keep the other policemen busy. It is a place of equilibrium where everyone must leave the exact same weight as how he or she came in or they will die. Much like Bonaparte, acquired wealth is taken from the narrator quickly. O’Nolan’s characters’ status must return to where they started. In Sisyphean terms their boulder must roll back down the hill. The beyant and all of the magical happenings and inventions throughout the novel were powered by omnium, a substance created by O’Nolan to give him creative freedom.

MacCruiskeen explains his unified theory of existence in which all things are omnium after he demonstrates the mangle:

Omnium is the essential inherent interior essence which is hidden inside the root of the kernel of everything and it is always the same... Some people call it God and there are other names for something that is identically resembling it and that

thing is omnium also into the same bargain. If you had a sack of it or even the half full of a small matchbox of it, you could do anything and even do what could not be described by that name. (110-111)

Maebh Long focuses her analysis of omnium as being a crystallization of absence. She quotes Shelly Brivic's argument that omnium is "the unsatisfiable margin that drives all desire" (65). She quotes from when the narrator learns from Policeman Fox that he has four ounces of omnium:

I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my imagination. Perhaps I could use it even to extend my imagination. I could destroy, alter and improve the universe at will. [Emphasis Long's] (66)

But she views it with a pessimistic bias as being the "very force of desire...he is kept alive by the absence of life, driven by the cycles of drive /desire" (66). This ignores the fact that the narrator often forgets the box even exists and quickly forgets even after learning that it contains omnium and not merely cash (111, 188, 198). Omnium is pure imagination; it is the power of authors to create entire worlds from nothing. It has no definite shape or form not because it is the "infinite regress concretized as a substance," as Brivic puts it, but because it is beyond perception and it has to be infinitely neutral to allow for creation. The narrator is a creative problem solver. When Fox tells how this omnipotent substance can be used for the asinine tasks of removing muck from socks the narrator suggests using it to prevent the muck or "to have no muck anywhere at any time?" (190). Since the narrator believes the only limit to his power is his imagination, then the sensible thing is to improve his imagination. He has spent his life as a scholar of

impossible things and he is drawn to de Selby because de Selby is infinitely creative, even if none of his inventions and theories work.

The narrator's actions in the novel are of no consequence but neither are the actions of de Selby or Pluck. What saves the narrator from his execution isn't his scholarship or actions, but his wooden leg. His non-human part completely by chance allows him camaraderie with Finnucane (165). It is also possible that it was just luck that Fox pushed up the numbers and saved him by accident (190). Pluck's concerns about his Atomic Theory cause him to spend his days hiding bike parts and investigating the same missing bike parts. He also religiously monitored the lever, beam and pilot which, unbeknownst to him, Fox controlled. Both de Selby and his related scholarship are the epitome of inanity.

Even more so than *At Swim* or *Poor Mouth*, *The Third Policeman* ends with a feeling that little has been accomplished since it resets its outer narrative frame. But keeping with what this thesis has argued is the most important aspect of *The Third Policeman*, creativity, it is also the most open ended. *At Swim*'s student narrator passes his exams and comes to appreciate his uncle, while Dermot Trellis learns his lesson without permanent damage and Bonaparte writes his story and spends many years stuck in jail. But the addition of Divney and removal of Finnucane along with minor changes in punctuation and word choice allow the reader to decide how the outcome may be different the second time through *The Third Policeman*. The open-ended nature allows the reader to engage in creation themselves choosing whether or not to free the characters.

Brian O’Nolan’s novels and columns resist easy interpretation and raise unanswerable questions about authorship and existence. In the vastness of reality and the universe, human attempts at control are entirely meaningless. But paradoxically, this meaninglessness does not have to be bleak. Clissmann asserts that O’Nolan’s work promotes laughing into the void and thereby accepting the absurd aspects of life. O’Nolan’s novels are playful and tend to lean optimistic, as dark as they may be, yet critics often skew his novels pessimistically based on his personal history. Futility is an important concept in O’Nolan’s work that he uses, both comedically and artistically, to force characters and readers to derive meaning from the meaningless. His characters struggle and cannot escape but relief is found through creative endeavors.

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