Abstract: The paper discusses Flann O’Brien’s (Brien O’Nolan’s) book *The Third Policeman*. The book, first published in 1967 after the death of its author, is now widely regarded as a post-modern masterpiece. It is written without pre-established rules and creates patterns which make new sense of being, redesign familiarity and proliferate spaces without borders. Spatial and temporal points interlock in a circular or spiral-like fashion and create an intricate and grotesque web of places and identities mirrored multi-dimensionally and kaleidoscopically - as the reader-observer becomes part of the experiment in perceiving the transmutations of the narrator. The self-referential nature of the book becomes evident from the ending; the storyline gradually brings the reader to the point where the book starts.

Key words: Flann O’Brien, post-modernism, fractals, paradox, space, time, body, discourse, identity, humour

The Mysterious Spirals of  Flann O’Brien’s “The Third Policeman”

Flann O’Brien (1911 -1966) was a contemporary of James Joyce, born into an Irish family, who lived most of his life in Dublin. His real name was Brian O’Nolan. The book *The Third Policeman* (TP) was written in 1940 but was first published in 1967 after the death of its author. It is now widely and justly regarded as a post-modern masterpiece. Arguably ironically, it draws upon subjects as diverse as Einstein’s theory of relativity, the chaos theory, quantum physics and the works of J.W. Dunne - to name but a few. The novel may even be viewed as containing a pre-cognition of virtual travel. At the same time it is undoubtedly a comic novel with an incredibly funny dialogue full of famous/notorious Irish humour and intentional spoonerisms and malapropisms, interspersed with spurious legal quotes in Latin. In the words of the author: “Joe had been explaining things in the meantime. He said it was the 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.”

From the view point of a traditional consistently linear and monologous vision and understanding of the world the story is a chaotic tangle of unrelated materials, completely apart from the
reader’s experience of the existing relations and ties. As a post-modern novel, however, written without pre-established rules, it may be regarded as creating patterns which make new sense of being, redesign familiarity and proliferate spaces without borders. As Leotard has it, postmodern works cannot be judged according to a determining judgement, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work but should be interpreted “according to the paradox of the future (post)anterior (modo).”

In terms of its spatial reference the plot may be summarised as follows:
1. the narrator’s life in an ordinary Irish village with his friend/foe John Divney and the murder they both commit;
2. his crossing into a different space dominated by the 3 policemen and his times in this weird space inhabited by people and live bicycles;
3. his meeting with a lovely bicycle which somehow helps him return to the ordinary space;
4. as he is now a ghost, upon his appearance Divney dies of fright and they both are transposed to the policemen’s space. Only in the end does it become clear that the narrator has been dead during the first crossing and after, killed by an explosion arranged by Divney, and the new space is a version of afterlife, hell or purgatory.

These spatial points interlock - to form a kind of a circle or spiral, and to produce an intricate and grotesque web of places and identities mirrored multi-dimensionally and kaleidoscopically - as the reader-observer becomes part of the experiment in perceiving this phantasmogorical transmutation of the narrator – the man who has no name. Thus the self-referential nature of the book becomes evident from the ending; the storyline gradually brings the reader to the point where the book starts.

Apart from those allegedly ‘realistic’ spaces there’s also another level – a sort of virtual space inhabited by the ‘mysterious savant’ de Selby. His commentators – ‘shadowy and credulous Kraus’, ‘mordant Du Garbandier’, ‘invaluable Bassett’, ‘reliable Le Fournier’ and other ‘mild’, ‘lucid’ or ‘little-known characters’ seen through the eyes of the narrator – take on a personality of their own and are a kind of “discourse community” with the narrator – they fit John Swale’s criteria of responding to writings rather than speech from the past, communicating with others in distant places and the functional determinant of pursuing objectives.

De Selby has some interesting views: e.g. the earth is spherical because human being are continually moving in only one known direction and that this one direction is really around the
circular circumference of an earth which is in fact sausage–shaped, and that darkness is simply an
accretion of black air, a staining of the atmosphere too fine to be seen with the naked eye. In his
view, men are indistinguishable from women (some feminists might agree with that!)

The narrator in TP who is defined by O’Brien as a murderer and a heel, is the only person
plugged into all these-multidimensional spaces, accompanied by the reader/observer who sees
everything through the former’s eyes. Crossing doesn’t mean ‘liminal’ crossing. By crossing the
narrator doesn’t cross, as it were. His identity doesn’t change – he is greedy and an individualist
everywhere (cf. ‘A full year had not passed when I noticed that Divney used the word ‘we’ in his
conversation and worse than that, the word ‘our’.5) The relationship with John Divney is not
friendship but a conspiracy after the murder they both committed. The narrator’s only friend is his
soul whom he calls Joe: “I knew that my soul was friendly, was my senior in years and was solely
concerned for my own welfare.”6 His only abiding interest in life is the works of De Selby. As the
story unfolds the reader takes things more or less for granted. Only in the end does the picture
become more or less clear to the reader, and the man without a name (and without memory) is
looked at in his entirety, all threads joined.

The fact that the narrator has no name causes lots of problems: as his nature is the same in all
spaces, he keeps looking for a black box containing (at least initially, the money of old Mathers,
the man killed by the narrator and his friend Divney). However, he cannot get the box because
having no name he cannot sign a receipt. According to the policemen, he cannot die either,
because he has no name and the policemen cannot be answerable for death even if they hang him.
Cf.: “If you have no name you cannot own a watch and the watch that has been stolen does not
exist and when it is found it will have to be restored to its rightful owner. If you have no name
you possess nothing and you do not exist…. On the other separate hand (italics are mine – IP)
you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you.

‘And on the first hand again you might be charged with theft or larceny if you were mistaken for
somebody else when wearing a watch.”7

The spaces in the novel are dominated by different landmarks: 1) the familiar space in an Irish
village with the pub as a centerpiece (after a murky past when the narrator had lost his leg, this
pub is his inheritance) This space is shared with his only friend/foe J.Divney, a cad, a thief and a
murderer, who is one of the central characters in the story); 2) the virtual space inhabited by
mysterious savant De Selby who lived in Bath – the narrator’s lifetime ambition is a definitive
volume on his work. The space is inhabited, apart from De Selby, by different commentators of his works; 3) the place which is a version of hell, according to the author’s comments - both familiar and unfamiliar, where he meets 3 policemen. The centerpiece of this space is the barracks. It is an eerie place: “… as I approached, the house seemed to change its appearance. At first, it did nothing to reconcile itself with the shape of an ordinary house but it became uncertain in outline like a thing glimpsed under ruffled waters. .. It seemed ordinary enough at close quarters except that it was very white and still. It was momentous and frightening; the whole morning and the whole world seemed to have no purpose at all save to frame it and give it some magnitude and position so that I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it. A constabulary crest above the door told me that it was a police station. “

The barracks, as a grotesque epitome of institutional space ramifies into a mini-clone, its mini-replica, with the Third Policeman as the centre figure: “… I found myself in a very surprising apartment. It was slightly wider than the other places and down the middle of it was a table about a foot in width, two yards in length and attached permanently to the floor by two metal legs. … On the walls were pinned many posters and notices dealing with bulls and dogs and regulations about sheep-dipping and school—going and breaches of the Firearms Act. … I had no trouble in knowing I was in a tiny police station.”

Another landmark of the policemen’s space is the entrance to eternity which looked like the porch of a small country church and the lift, a kind of paradise, a place which is has no size and is located out of time – but magic has distinct Einsteinian echoes -before stepping in everybody has to be weighed, because when they get out the weight has to be exactly the same as when they got in (cf. preservation of matter in time travel). All material wishes are fulfilled in the lift; also, it is a place where nobody grows old, nobody gets hungry; a pipe will smoke all day and a glass of whiskey will always be there. It is also a place where replicas of everything appear after a ‘manipulation’ – but, unfortunately, nothing can be taken out. In this space the barracks acquire social centrality and a set of mind-boggling values and beliefs, while bicycles become not just a way to reach other landmarks and transform and transmute personalities but a favourite means of interaction in many (sometimes very unexpected) senses of the word.

There is next to no border between spaces, but the crossings are marked by void-ness: Cf. the 1st crossing: “… 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 …”
See also the following example which describes crossing back into real space:

“My mind was completely void. I did not recall who I was, where I was or what my business was upon earth. I was alone and desolate yet not concerned about myself at all. The eyes in my head were open but they saw nothing because my brain was void. Furthermore, these spaces interlock and merge:

“When I looked carefully at the ceiling I saw that Mr. Mathers’ house and every road and house I knew were marked there, and nets of lanes and neighbourhoods that I did not know also. It was a map of the parish, complete, reliable and astonishing.”

As the story unfolds it becomes apparent that the spaces are not absolutely, but relatively normative: even the barracks becomes home compared to an even weirder place – the lift: ‘I think we might go home now’, the hero says in the lift and the policemen agree readily. Before the narrator crosses the 3rd spatial levels and returns to the first level space he meets a beautiful bicycle and falls in love with her (the pronoun used in the book). The bicycle helps him escape the mind-boggling reality of the policemen’s space.

The critics of the theory of identity as discourse point out a substantial difference between bodies and discourse – bodies are not shared, unlike discourse, or unlike the social (collective, fluid, multiple, flexible, etc.) identities. In TP however, the bodies are shared: the narrator’s soul is named Joe and he is more practical and less of a cad than the narrator. The bodies are shared because of a crazy theory the narrator has - of souls being bodies to other souls who are bodies to still other souls and thus to infinity. In this way, the same space is inhabited by different bodies and objects, with numerous examples of multi-dimensional and protean transmutations and transpositions. The return to the normative space does not evidence any normalcy, and home is not a default value – the hero has no home in the sentimental sense of the word: even the barracks in the alternative space becomes home, as the example above demonstrates.

Moreover, the body is at least partly shared in case of the eponymous Third Policeman: it becomes clear that this mysterious character has the face of Old Mathers killed by the narrator:

“The great fat body in the uniform did not remind me of anybody ... but the face at the top of it belonged to old Mathers (italics are mine – IP). … When he answered me it was the voice of Mathers. “

The proliferation of bodies results in shared spaces: the private police station inhabited by the Third Policeman, Fox, is located within the walls of Old Mather’s house! Thus,
once again, the book is vibrant with fractals, and echoes of the chaos theory reverberate throughout the book.

The relevant identities, such as those of the enigmatic policemen, or the mysterious ‘savant’ De Selby are determined by their spatial specificity.\(^{17}\) The policemen in the novel match the definition of institutional identities. Institutions are commonly associated with physical buildings or organisational setting such as hospitals, schools or law courts and they are intrinsically bound up with power.\(^{18}\) The institutional identity categorisation is setting-specific: in case of a police station the key objects would be questionnaires, forms, ledgers, firearms warnings, etc. All those are in place in TP. The paradoxical institutional talk (IT) exemplifies the principles of genre and languages as masks as described by Bakhtin\(^{19}\). The most important feature of IT is that speech events are treated as artifacts inherited from anterior uses and regularized by ritual public practice i.e. they represent a-priori scripts, rituals and agendas (cf. Bhatia\(^{20}\)). The IT evidences identity alignment with institution, recontextualization and interdiscursiveness.\(^{21}\) In Flann O’Brien’s book the policemen are representatives of an unknown power and their rooms contain many eerie things – boxes with secret insides of unknown shape and colour, infinite chests one inside the other, like Russian folding dolls, which gradually become so small as to become invisible. True to form, the policemen’s discourse may be analysed as institutional talk characterized by the relational pairs, as evidenced in the following example:

“He (the policeman) came over ponderously to the inside of the counter and I advanced meekly from the door until we were face to face”\(^{22}\) (italics are mine - IP). Thus, the identity alignment is obvious and the discourse indicates a definite pride in officialdom typical of the village police: The phrase ‘I went on an official business’ is the policemen’s stock-in-trade. At the same time, the discourse features a range of funny biases and superstitions reminiscent of the Irish village police.

However, unlike the form, the content of IT in TP is very different to the usual institutional discourse. The opening of the discourse by the policemen, for example, is very traditional for CA (conversational analysis) or IT, but the use of the key word, ‘bicycle’, is very unusual. ‘Is it about a bicycle?’ - is the opening phrase used by the policemen in the book instead of ‘how can I help you?’ It constitutes part of an ordinary IT discourse in the book: everybody who arrives at the barracks gets “plugged” into this particular frame and has to behave and respond accordingly. The reiterated grotesque question is often preceded by the remark about the teeth being the cause of all sickness.
The two policemen in the barracks only investigate the disappearance of bicycles, and are surprised if it is something else. The third policeman remains even more of a mystery, but bicycles are his abiding interest, as well.

Cf. “‘Tell me,’ he continued, ‘would it be true that you came on a tricycle? ‘It would not,’ I replied.

‘On a patent tandem?’

‘No’. - ‘Dentists are an unpredictable coterie of people,’ he said. ‘Do you tell me it was a velocipede or a penny-farthing?’”

The main hero has no bicycle, an indispensable item in the policemen’s space. Later on he steals the Sergeant’s bicycle, and he falls in love with ‘her’. Apart from bicycles, other ‘official matters’ investigated in the barracks are missing pumps, lamps or timber, ranked in declining importance:

Cf. “Is it about a bicycle? He (the policeman – IP) asked casually. Only about timber,’ said Gilhaney.”

The colonization of the centre stage by bicycles may be viewed as an illustration of the principle of bricolage as a guiding activity of human brain. According to Levi-Strauss, we make meaning out of the most unlikely objects which exist in a different space. The bricolage is a kaleidoscopic actualization of possibilities which is a primal activity of the human mind and people are bricoleurs interrogating all the heterogeneous objects to discover what each of them could signify and contribute to a set which has yet to materialize.

In TP one of the most prominent bricolage patterns are men and bicycles. This is why cyclists are a relevant identity in the novel; which assumes a particular role in a new interactional environment (the term borrowed from Antaki). In fact, being a cyclist or a non-cyclist is one of the major divisions in the policemen’s space. It has been pointed out “ .... that terms, such as ‘cyclist’ can be understood differently according to their particular interactional environment: It can mean a professional sporting cyclist if we are talking about the Tour de France, or a vulnerable kind of road-user, if we are talking about road safety; and so on.” In TP bicycles are alive, part of people’s bodies – male or female, to love, cherish – or steal, as the case may be. The only love story in the novel is that between the narrator and the female bicycle he stole:

“Notwithstanding the sturdy cross-bar it seemed ineffably female and fastidious, posing there like a mannequin rather than leaning idly like a loafer against the wall … .”

“… I knew that I liked that bicycle more than I had ever liked any other bicycle, better even than I had liked some people with two legs. I liked her unassuming competence, her docility, the simple dignity of her quiet way.”
“How can I convey the perfection of my comfort on the bicycle, the completeness of my union with her, the sweet responses she gave me at every particle of her frame? I felt that I had known her for many years and that she had known me and that we understood each other utterly.”

Apart from that of the policemen, there is only one group which may be described as sharing the relevant solidarity in the novel - that of one-legged men whose captain is Martin Finnucane. The one-legged men are a kind of fraternity, “brotherly and loyal” and it is logical that one of them brings a note to Martin to come and save the narrator from hanging. The latter is happy to resort to Martin’s help when he needs it, but there’s no real group loyalty on his part, as in his own words he was only “slightly glad” he had met Martin. John Divney’s use of ‘we’, or even worse, “our” also goes against the grain with the hero.

The policemen’s IT may be described as pseudo-officialese. It is characterized by jargon, specialized vocabulary, repetitions, clichéd phrases and legalisms in Latin (res ipsa, sub rosa) which are often hilariously irrelevant. Some examples follow:

a) “It (the box - IP) was found and I entered into complete possession of it _in virtue of Section 16 of the Act of ’87 as extended and amended_. I was waiting for you to call for it because I know _by my own private and official inquiries that you were the party that was at the loss of it_ … .”

b) “… did you recover my American watch for me? ’The matter is under consideration and is receiving attention’, he (the policeman – IP) said officially.”

c) “Will you follow after me till I have a conversation with you privately’, he said. ‘If it was nothing else you have no light on your bicycle and I could take your name and address for the half of that”

The policemen’s IT also features repetition and tautology, which cannot fail but produce a humorous effect: cf. extraneous externality, crazy as tuppence-halfpenny and as cranky as threppence. Cf. also:

a) “Policeman Fox is the third of us,’ said the Sergeant, ‘but we never see him or hear tell of him at all because _he is always on his beat and never off it_.”

b) “But I cannot get over what you confided to me _privately sub-rosa_ about the no-bicycle.”

c) “I was once acquainted with a tall man,’ he said to me at last, ‘that had no name either and you are certain to be his son and the heir to his _nullity and all his nothingness_. What way is your pop today and where is he?”
d) “... give me a description of the article and **tell me all and do not omit anything** because what may seem unimportant to yourself might well give a wonderful clue to the trained investigator.”

Other peculiarities of the policemen’s discourse are represented by numerous **malapropisms**, **spoonerisms** as well as a **deconstruction of idioms**:

Cf. a fascinating pancake and a conundrum of great inconvenience, a phenomenon of the first rarity, unexpected corporality, on the other separate hand, drunker than your own sobriety, circumstantial eventuality, a bad piece of criminality. Cf. also:

a) “Crazy as bedamned, an incontestable character and a man of ungovernable inexactitudes” - a description of Fox, the Third Policeman.

b) “...that is a story that would make your golden “fortune if you wrote it down in a book where people could pursue it literally.”

c) “... I’ll fight for my existence even if I lose my life in the attempt.”

d) “Atomics is a very intricate theorem.”

Another interesting reflection on the metamorphosis of spaces, bodies and objects in the novel is featured by the **interplay between science and literature**, with echoes of different scientific theories reverberating throughout the book. The examples below seem grotesque and are often comical but it doesn’t preclude them from having undoubted parallels in science:

**Quantum physics:**

“Light is the same omnium (the stuff of life in the book – IP) on a short wave but if it comes on a longer wave it is in the form of noise, or sound. With my own patents I can stretch a ray out until it becomes sound.” This description is the reason why the policemen collect noises in summer so that they can have light and heat for “their official life” in the dark winter.

“The gross and the net result of it is that people who spent most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles … get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles.”

There are numerous example of this interchange of atoms – for instance, the postman is 71 per cent bicycle because of his round of thirty eight miles on the bicycle every morning. Cf. also:

a) “Michael Gilhaney,’ said the Sergeant, ’is an example of a man that is nearly banjaxed from the principle of the Atomic Theory. Would it astonish you to hear that he is nearly half a bicycle?’
‘It would surprise me unconditionally,’ I said.

‘Michael Gilhaney,’ said the sergeant, ‘is nearly sixty years of age by plain computation and if he is itself, he has spent no less than thirty-five years riding a bicycle. … If it wasn’t that his bicycle was stolen every Monday he would be sure to be more than half way now.’

‘Half-way to where?’

‘Half-way to being a bicycle himself,’ said the Sergeant’

b) “How would you know that a man has a lot of bicycle in his veins?”

‘If his number is over Fifty you can tell it unmistakably from his walk. He will walk smartly always and never sit down and he will lean against the wall with his elbow out and stay like that all night in his kitchen instead of going to bed.”

c) “I will tell you a secret,’ he said very confidentially. ‘… My great-grandfather was eighty three when he died. For a year before he died he was a horse. … He would spend the day grazing in a field or eating hay in a stall.”’

The last example undoubtedly throws an extraordinary new light on horse-riding as an interchange of atoms between people and horses.

*Relativity:*

In the entrance to eternity magnifying glasses magnify to invisibility; mirrors reflect younger faces because of light travel; time flows in a different way for travellers in the lift:

“… a strange thing had happened. It was two or three hours since the Sergeant and I had started on our journey yet the country and the trees and all the voices of every thing around still wore an air of early morning.”

*Infinity and the chaos theory (fractals):*

The novel features a Protean variety of fractal-like replicas - chests like folding dolls containing smaller and smaller boxes – till they become invisible, a replica of a police station located within the walls of old Mathers’ house, Mathers’ face and voice combined with the body of Fox, the Third Policeman. See also the transformations of the black box in different spaces – first as containing old Mather’s cash (the reason for the crime) and then into a nightmarish scenario of omnium, similar to nuclear power, and an explosive material. Souls have bodies, which have other souls and thus to infinity – possibly, the best description of fractals:

“What if he (Joe, the soul –IP) had a body? A body with another body inside it in turn, thousands of such bodies within each other like the skins of an onion, receding to some unimaginable ultimatum. Was I in turn merely a link in a vast sequence of imponderable beings, the world I knew merely the interior of the being whose inner voice I myself was?”
It should be noted that all these replicas of different models or their parts, are not simulacra but originals.

**To conclude:** The Third Policeman reveals the tapestry of the merging time and space with the weft warped by this unique human quality – humour. The best conclusion, in my view, would be this quotation from the novel. Joe, the soul, says:” … **Humanity is an ever widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each succeeding ring. All humanity from its beginning to its end is already present but the beam has not yet played beyond you. Your earthly successors await dumbly and trust to your guidance and mine and all my people inside me to preserve them and lead the light further.**”

**References**

2 Flann O’Brien, 200.

5 O’Brien, 11.
6 O’Brien, 25.
7 O’Brien, 61-62.
8 O’Brien, 53.
9 O’Brien, 182.
10 The description of weighing is reminiscent of the Bible: come and be weighed; he was weighed and found wanting.
11 Conversely, intermediate places in De Selby’s space are strangely similar to Marc Auge’s non-lieux as a philosophical concept. See, for example *Non-Places – An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London:Verso 1995). Cf. De Selby’s theory of travel as non- motion, motion an illusion and a journey as a hallucination. Thus when one is en-route it means one is resting in one or other of the intermediate spaces as a chain of resting spaces.
12 O’Brien, 23.
14 O’Brien, 123.
16 O’Brien, 183.
17 It should be noted that the concept of relevant identities, or relationship identities comes from CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis). For a discussion refer to Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe, *Discourse and Identity* (Edinburgh University Press, 2006).
18 Benwell and Stokoe, 88.
21 “An assumption that discourse is an element of social practice interconnected with other elements has led to CDA’a emphasis on intertextuality (the quotation’ of one text by another), interdiscursivity (the movement of particular registers, styles and discourses), and recontextualisation (where textual or stylistic elements associated with particular speech events are seen to be ‘relocated’ in new contexts” (Benwell and Stokoe, 106).

22 O’Brien, 54.
23 O’Brien, 55.
24 O’Brien, 112.
27 Benwell and Stokoe, 67.
28 O’Brien, 169.
29 O’Brien, 170.
30 O’Brien, 173.
31 O’Brien, 187.
32 O’Brien, 99.
33 O’Brien, 180.
34 O’Brien 77.
35 O’Brien, 69.
36 O’Brien, 56.
37 O’Brien, 184.
38 O’Brien, 153.
39 O’Brien, 69.
40 O’Brien, 98.
41 O’Brien, 84.
42 O’Brien, 110.
43 O’Brien, 85.
44 O’Brien, 83.
45 O’Brien, 90.
46 O’Brien, 91.
47 O’Brien, 142.
48 O’Brien, 118.
49 O’Brien, 119.