

Cycling Through Metaphysical Landscapes: A Relativistic Reading of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*

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ABSTRACT:

The works of Flann O'Brien have been difficult to categorize in terms of the literary movement to which they belong. Some researchers have deemed them as postmodern while more recent studies point to a more modernist approach to his work. This paper reads Flann O'Brien's novel The Third Policeman in reference to the topic of real and metaphysical space. The events in this novel take place within a fantastic and bi-

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zarre world, where time stands still and where the characters are entangled in absurd situations and become lost in a warped reality. Many of the concepts presented are paradoxical while the spatial specifications are always relative, thus creating chaos and confusion both for the unnamed main character and the readers. By analysing examples from O'Brien's novel, this paper, therefore, demonstrates that the ambivalence of this work stands as a parable for the absurdity of the human condition in the pursuit of secure knowledge. By drawing parallels with modern physics to illustrate the absurdity of epistemological pursuits, the novel reflects the scepticism of 20th century society and the crisis of authority.

KEYWORDS: Flann O'Brien, metaphysics, relativity, space, *The Third Policeman*.

Pedaleando por paisajes metafísicos: una lectura relativista de la novela *El Tercer Policía*, de Flann O'Brien

RESUMEN:

Las obras de Brian Ó Nualláin, quien escribió bajo el seudónimo de Flann O'Brien, han sido difíciles de categorizar en términos del movimiento literario al que pertenecen. Algunos investigadores las han considerado posmodernos, mientras que estudios más recientes apuntan a un enfoque más modernista de su trabajo. Este artículo lee la novela de Flann O'Brien *The Third Policeman* en referencia al tema del espacio real y metafísico. Los acontecimientos de esta novela tienen lugar dentro de un mundo fantástico y extraño, donde el tiempo se detiene y donde los personajes se enredan en situaciones absurdas y se pierden en una realidad deformada. Muchos de los conceptos presentados son paradójicos, mientras que las especificaciones espaciales son siempre relativas, creando así caos y confusión tanto para el personaje principal anónimo como para los lectores. Por lo tanto, al analizar ejemplos de la novela de O'Brien, este artículo demuestra que la ambivalencia de esta obra constituye una parábola de lo absurdo de la condición humana en la búsqueda del conocimiento absoluto. Al desafiar los sistemas convencionales de comprensión, la novela refleja el escepticismo de la sociedad del siglo XX y la crisis de autoridad.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Flann O'Brien, metafísica, relatividad, espacio, *The Third Policeman*

1. Introduction

Metaphysical spaces have always been the subject of both imaginative speculation and philosophical inquiry and used as conceptual instruments for the comprehension of various aspects of the surrounding reality. However, because these spaces refer to conceptual spheres that exist beyond the observable world, they challenge the understanding of all types of existence and the limits of human knowledge. Since these spaces are not limited by the constraints of physicality or the general laws of the natural world, they also allow for the exploration of more abstract concepts.

This paper aims to investigate how metaphysical spaces are used in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* to explore the nature of human perception and knowledge. The author questions the conventional boundaries of life and death by creating a confusing, paradoxical world. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that the spaces created by O'Brien transcend physicality and the conventional laws of the natural world to describe a type of existential liminality in which the narrator is unable to comprehend both his predicament and the passage that he has made between life and death. By interpreting *The Third Policeman* from a metaphysical perspective, the paper provides a more thorough examination of the novel's philosophical underpinnings. It expands on previous research and analyses as it does not only focus on the surreal nature of the novel but also on connecting the absurd elements it contains with broader concerns about existence and the limitations of human understanding.

The paper pays particular attention to the symbolism and paradoxes used by O'Brien to illustrate metaphysical spaces and to the cyclical nature of the narrative and the repetition of certain absurd theories and inventions. Thus, to frame the novel's exploration of metaphysical spaces, this study draws on a combination of literary analysis, philosophical inquiry, and thematic exploration of the close connection between subjective and objective reality, which derives from the inaccurate perception that the narrator has of the world around him.

Flann O'Brien, born Brian O'Nolan, was an Irish writer whose works are known for blending elements of Irish folklore, absurdist philosophy, and modernist narrative techniques to show that life is nothing more than a series of ridiculous situations. O'Brien wrote his novels while he was working as a civil servant for the Irish government and although his job provided him with a stable income, it left him with little freedom of creativity. He became known as a satirical columnist for the *Irish Times* though he struggled with dissatisfaction regarding his relationship with the established Irish literary circles which often dismissed his experimental style as too avant-garde. Throughout his life, O'Brien battled issues related to alcohol, financial difficulties, and a strained sense of belonging, all of which shaped both his identity and his works.

The Third Policeman was published posthumously, in 1967; although O'Brien had submitted it to various publishers during his lifetime, they found it too bizarre and incomprehensible, and considered it difficult to understand for many contemporary readers. Consequently, O'Brien's manuscript languished in obscurity for more than two decades. This belated publication occurred within a broader context in which O'Brien's literary reputation was finally recognized. Despite the rejection of *The Third Policeman*, O'Brien had previously managed to publish another novel, *At Swim-Two Birds* (1939), with great acclaim which established him as a significant figure in modernist literature. Although *At Swim-Two Birds* stands as O'Brien's *magnus opus* due to its metatextual complexity, *The Third Policeman* has also become highly appreciated and can be regarded as one of the most audacious works produced by the author, mainly because of its ingenious exploration of spaces, identity, and the limits of human perception.

Whether *The Third Policeman* is a modernist or postmodernist work is difficult to determine. Although both labels hold some validity, they can be used to emphasize different aspects of O'Brien's writing. One may argue that the novel falls within the

framework of modernism because it reflects topics that are specific to this literary movement, such as alienation, fragmentation of identity, and the constant questioning of reality. Additionally, individual subjectivity, the collapse of traditional narratives, and the disintegration of stable, coherent meanings are all topics frequently explored by modernist authors. In this sense, O'Brien's use of a disorienting narrative structure and the disintegration of reality around the main character align with modernist themes. Moreover, the author uses modernist literary devices such as symbolism and non-linear time to construct the plot of his novel. These elements reflect the modernist project of questioning conventional forms and representations of reality, aiming to express the subjective and chaotic experience of modern life.

On the other hand, the novel can also be categorized as post-modernist if we consider its playful subversion of narrative expectations and its use of absurdism, irony and intertextuality. *The Third Policeman* deliberately subverts traditional frameworks of meaning and coherence, particularly by emphasizing absurdity over logical consistency and fusing the fantastic with the real. Furthermore, O'Brien's metafictional elements – such as the references to de Selby's invented theories and the novel's circular, self-contained narrative – mirror postmodern tendencies to challenge the rational boundary between fiction and reality. Therefore, it can be argued that the novel is a transitional text that straddles the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism, reflecting the intricate literary transformations that characterize the 20th century.

The Third Policeman narrates the story of an unnamed main character, who is in search of a mysterious black box, which supposedly contains a large sum of money, that he had stolen from a man he had murdered. The story is set in motion by the main character's desire to publish the collected works of a certain de Selby, a scholar whom the narrator has studied for years. As a substantial amount of money is needed to achieve this endeavour, the narrator ends up associating with John Divney to rob an

old rich man named Mathers. The latter is murdered by the two and after they dispossess him of the black box, Divney hides it until things quiet down. Because Divney refuses to tell the narrator where he has put the box, the latter refuses to leave Divney's side for three years. When the narrator is finally allowed to retrieve the box, something happens and from this moment on the narrative shifts from the realistic mode to a bizarre melodrama.

As the story progresses, the narration becomes more and more disorienting while the narrator moves through the Parish, a fantastic and strange landscape that is controlled by three nonsensical bicycle-obsessed policemen. The murderous main character, who has forgotten his name, engages in long conversations and existential debates with his soul, while wandering through bizarre landscapes and struggling both to "make sense of his uncanny surroundings" and "the policemen's impossible inventions" (Borg, 2014: 3). O'Brien's distinctive style originates from his masterful formulation of paradoxes, absurd realities, and parody while the elements that construct the story provide the background for an ontological crisis of the main character. It is only at the end of the book that the readers understand that the sudden change which had occurred at the beginning of the novel happened because Divney had booby-trapped the black box, and the narrator was actually killed in the explosion. The transition between life and death is, in fact, the most subtle one imaginable – he does not even recognize that he is dead. After this, the narrator is left with the heavenly-hellish policemen and his fixation on the alternate scientific system proposed by de Selby.

Swartz argues that through metaphysical theories people shape their perception and understanding of the world, not only because they propose a certain approach to the world, but because they are affecting "our actions, our reactions, and our emotions" in various ways (2001: 12). Because metaphysics is such an abstract concept, sometimes people conceive space by resorting to familiar objects or things that can be found in their immediate universe. The space created within the narration of *The Third*

Policeman is based on the subjective perception of the main character, which transforms it from a public to an individual, private space, constructed around the personal experience of the unnamed narrator. As Piñeiro (1998: 377) points out, space becomes the reflecting mirror of the character's particular psychological construction, his struggles, and interior conflicts. Additionally, O'Toole argues that *The Third Policeman* is the result of an eclectic "melange of many theories of time, space, matter, and energy" that are "creating a universe even more incomprehensible and erratic than it would be if only classical and relativistic theories were the basis of the novel." (1988: 216)

2. Navigating absurdity: Intersections of modern physics and metaphysical perception

The spaces presented in O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* seem to be transcendent as they appear to exist beyond the familiar physical universe. The novel creates a vivid atmosphere specific to a fictitious realm that is very similar to Ireland but not quite the same, where the spaces described correspond to an alternative reality that seems to have been the result of a failed divine experiment.

Niels Bohr (1958: 60) observed that there is a necessity of "a radical revision of our attitude toward the problem of physical reality" which is implied by the discoveries of modern physics. Charles Kemnitz has maintained that O'Brien's book is structured on elements that originate from these contemporary scientific beliefs: "It is the fully developed theory of quantum mechanics...that governs the narration in *The Third Policeman*, quantum mechanics is the atomic theory at work and doing untold destruction in the parish patrolled by Sergeant Pluck" (1985: 56). Kemnitz discusses the principles that O'Brien is twisting in *The Third Policeman*, stating that, before the narrator's death, the events are set within a framework that reminds the readers of the principles of classical physics (especially if we take into account the commentaries on de Selby), while after the main character's

death most of the action is constructed on the relativity theory and quantum mechanics.

In a letter to Timothy O’Keeffe, his publisher, dated September 22, 1940, O’Brien writes: “time is a great flat motionless sea. Time does not pass; it is we who pass. With this concept taken as basic, fantastic but coherent situations can easily be devised, and in effect, the whole universe be torn up in a monstrous comic debauch” (cited in Spencer, 1995: 145). Staying true to this assertion, by portraying space as mutable and time as motionless, O’Brien manages to create a novel centred around a hypothetical world, a metaphysical space in which the possibilities are endless. With this concept in mind, one can say that the novel mirrors Einstein’s theory of relativity principles, where space and time are not fixed entities, but they are interconnected. Time passes differently in the Parish, for different characters, highlighting a departure from Newton’s absolute space and time framework and aligning with the fluid, non-linear nature of Einstein’s spacetime continuum.

Many modern scientific theories such as relativity and quantum physics seem to describe a world similar to the one in *The Third Policeman*, where traditional logic is defied. The usage of modern physics ideas is recognizable in a number of aspects of O’Brien’s novel. These include the “Atomic Theory” developed by Sergeant Pluck which contends that cyclists run the risk of exchanging atoms with the bikes they ride to the point where the bicycles become more human than machines while the riders more bicycle than human. This transmutation occurs because many of the people in the Sergeant’s precinct have been riding their bikes on poorly maintained roads and he considers it to be his duty, in the interest of public safety, to put an end to this dangerous situation. Another instance of a physical theory is MacCruiskeen’s elaboration on the existence of the “omnium”, a universal substance that both matter and energy are made of. The concept is not described “in the books”. It is contained in all objects and beings and it “comes in waves”, it is “every colour”

and it is both “high and low”. According to MacCruiskeen’s definition, the *omnium* is also known as *energy* but “there is far more than energy inside of it, whatever it is. Omnium is the essential inherent interior essence which is hidden inside the root of the kernel of everything and is always the same” (O’Brien, 1993: 110). Later in the novel, the narrator ponders over the benefits of owning a box of omnium since it would give him God-like powers: “I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my own imagination. Perhaps I could use it even to extend my imagination. I could destroy, alter and improve the universe at will” (O’Brien, 1993: 189).

At the time that O’Brien was writing his letter to Timothy O’Keeffe, scientific theory was undergoing a serious revolution, thanks to the work of scientists such as Einstein or Planck in the area of relativity theory and quantum mechanics. Nevertheless, some researchers oppose the idea that O’Brien was familiar with Newtonian ontology and relativistic theories, pointing out that he probably had limited knowledge about such concepts, despite the numerous footnotes alluding to de Selby’s scientific theories, which might make the readers believe that the author was conversant with both Einsteinian and Newtonian theories. On the contrary, Kemnitz (1985) suggests that O’Brien was able to put forward the many concepts comprised in quantum mechanics and the relativity theory precisely because he retained language specific to this field which would allow some to speculate that he showed an interest in physics and that he had read some of Einstein’s publications.

On the one hand, it seems that Newton’s theory of “absolute” space can prove convenient in analysing O’Brien’s idea of space. According to Newton (2004: 14), space can exist independently both from matter and the relations among material bodies. On the other hand, the theory of relativity had a tremendous impact on Western popular culture, which could be noted in the numerous narratives featuring time travel or alien encounters with unfamiliar civilizations. According to Einstein’s theory, space is not

three-dimensional, and time does not exist as a separate entity. In fact, there is a four-dimensional attribute, called 'space-time', which indicates that space and time are interconnected, and this is the essential law that governs our universe. The co-ordinates of space and time are the components of a field that represents the physical reality of space. As suggested in the lecture delivered in 1920 at Leiden University, Einstein considers that, for matter to exist and move around, the existence of space is necessary. O'Brien impressively handles multi-dimensional variations of space through a novelistic language that translates both Newtonian physics and Einsteinian theory, thus creating irrational environments and atmospheres. The result is that both the main character and the reader end up wandering through an unstable and incomprehensible space configured according to a mixture of nonsensical theories.

The text poses a continuous challenge to rational comprehension of events since the entire story – including the pre-death days which seem to be governed by logic and rationality more than the other occurrences – is told from the subjective point of view of a dead person. As O'Toole suggests, "O'Nolan has chosen for the extra-terrestrial world of the narrator's immortality multi-dimensional time, uni-dimensional time, and every other possible variation of time and space in between" (1988: 224). The traditional and regulatory logic of everyday reality is thus subverted and our perception of both time and space becomes difficult to quantify and understand. For example, when the dead narrator first arrives at the police station, he realizes that it has both a front and a back but no sides, which throws off both his and the readers' perception of the building's spatial dimensions.

Our typical concept of space is related to a defined area or zone that has visible margins and is usually filled with three-dimensional objects. According to metaphysics, this concept is flawed, and this is mainly because physical objects define a *place* and not *space*. Isaac Newton subscribed to the idea that space was "the sensorium of God", i.e. a kind of a sensory organ that

God used to detect where all things in the universe were located (2004: 138). The interesting thing about Newton's theory is not, by any means, the combination of the Cartesian theory of perception and theological beliefs, but the idea that space *contains* physical objects. An objection to this theory would be that the existence of space derives precisely from our perception of it, as Kant pointed out (1929: 162). Since we can see physical objects, we can also *see* (i.e. *perceive*) the space between them. Hence, space is not a hypothetical entity, but it exists as a real entity.

Kant's theory that space is not an independent entity but a subjective framework through which humans perceive the world is echoed in *The Third Policeman*. Kant proposed the idea that space should not be equated to the objects that we can see in it, but to the way people perceive it. In his novel, O'Brien does not describe familiar spaces, but he somehow manages to guide the readers into sensing the space rather than perceiving it as a distinct object. O'Brien's metaphysical spaces are not merely physical dimensions but reflections of the unnamed narrator's perception. This suggests that all the representations of space in O'Brien's novel are relative to the narrator. The human mind has always been regarded as a metaphysical space because it is not bound by any physical limitations or constraints; it is the place where thoughts, perceptions, and subjective experiences occur, and it allows for an introspective exploration of the self. Each space that the author describes – starting with the barracks and the bi-dimensional aspect of the building itself and ending with the space in which eternity is contained – is nothing more than a result of the narrator's subjective perception. The Kantian idea that space exists relative to human perception rather than as an objective reality underscores O'Brien's attempt to explore epistemological limits and the impossibility of completely understanding the world.

The interstitial spaces in *The Third Policeman* are represented by Policeman Fox's station which was built *inside* the walls of Old Mathers' house. Doherty suggests that the realm that O'Brien

creates is “a curious and self-justifying physical world, like but unlike the one we know, and it is one which the narrator accepts easily, even the oddities like policemen who attend childbirths, yearly delivering gowns until people are big enough to collect their own from the barracks, and the possibility that there are only three policemen” (1989: 56-57). Here we deal with a meta-physical space (the station) which overlaps with a real space; the result is that space acquires dual or ambivalent features:

‘It is a nice station,’ I muttered, ‘but why is it inside the walls of another house?’

‘That is a very simple conundrum, I am sure you know the answer of it.’

‘I don’t.’

‘It is a very rudimentary conundrum in any case. It is fixed this way to save the rates because if it was constructed the same as any other barracks it would be rated as a separate hereditament and your astonishment would be flabbergasted if I told you what the rates are in the present year.’ (O’Brien, 1993: 184)

The world that Policeman Fox inhabits is contained within the hellish Eternity but at the same time it is set apart from it. It is a kind of microcosm constructed within the walls of Old Mather’s house and Policeman Fox refuses to provide any kind of logical or metaphysical answer to the narrator’s questions regarding why the tiny police station is constructed as it is.

The references to de Selby’s perspectives are incorporated both in the main body of the text and especially in the numerous in-depth footnotes that are meticulously referenced and that go into great detail on the supposedly scandalous rivalries between the major scientific figures of de Selby’s time. De Selby explains regular phenomena by using a scientific method of his own, developed throughout years of work, through which he manages to stretch any generally reasonable assumption until it becomes ludicrous. De Selby’s theories are nonsense and alter the direct

perception of reality. For him, a row of houses becomes a "row of necessary evils" (O'Brien, 1993: 21) which results from the fact that people started to prefer the interiors to outdoor living. This has led to a continual "softening and degradation" of the human race and has generated a series of interests such as "reading, chess-playing, drinking, marriage and the like, few of which can be satisfactorily conducted in the open" (O'Brien, 1993: 21). He exhibits contempt regarding traditional theories because he despises the confinement of the traditional four walls and a roof; therefore, he offers concrete remedies regarding space such as "habitat" designs that include two types of structures: roofs without walls and walls without roofs. He proposes tarpaulins instead of walls which would make these dwellings look like "foundered sailing-ships". They should be surrounded by "a diminutive moat or pit bearing resemblance to military latrines" (O'Brien, 1993: 21). These fantastic structures defy all theories related to physics that have been known up to our day since they include roofs that rest on a single wall and other mobile elements that make them resemble some science-fiction contraption.

The absurdities of the pseudo-relativistic theories described in O'Brien's novel are explained to the reader at the beginning of Chapter Four, where we are told that the narrator, while wandering around the Parish, comes across a very bizarre building, which resembles an advertisement billboard. Seen from afar, the building seems bi-dimensional, as the narrator could see the back and the front at the same time:

As I came round the bend of the road an extraordinary spectacle was presented to me. About a hundred yards away on the left-hand side was a house which astonished me. It looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and indeed very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child . . . I had no doubt at all that it was the barracks of the policemen. I had never seen with my eyes ever in

my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions was missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder. (O'Brien, 1993:55)

The metaphysical landscapes – such as the police barracks described above – comprise the reinterpretation and reconstruction of conventional spaces by ways of the subjective eye of the observer (the unnamed narrator), thus giving dual connotations to the landscape described. Even more bizarre than the bi-dimensional construction of the barracks is that

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 water. Then it became clear again and I saw that it began to have some back to it, some small space for rooms behind the frontage. I gathered this from the fact that I seemed to see the front and the back of the 'building' simultaneously from my position approaching what should have been the side. As there was no side that I could see I thought the house must be triangular with its apex pointing towards me but when I was only fifteen yards away I saw a small window apparently facing me and I knew from that that there must be some side to it. (O'Brien, 1993: 55)

The police barracks seems amphibological; everything looks unnatural since the barracks is bi-dimensional. The bizarre lack of depth of the building can be analysed in terms of geometrical perspective: the equation of the back with the front of an object seems impossible in a real space. This type of treatment of space becomes very confusing as the reader finds it difficult to create an imagined representation of a 2D space. This strange occurrence is explained by Kemnitz (1985: 64) by means of relativity, thus suggesting that "both the reader and narrator have accelerated into the relative universe where we and the narrator remain,

confused by the paradox at the root of quantum mechanics because of our everyday familiarity with Newtonian laws."

The narrator's perception could be explained through a clear instance of *parallax*. This is a concept that was first put forward in astronomy and it refers to the difference in the position of a celestial object that is seen by the same observer from two separate points. In *De Gravitatione*, Newton also speaks about the structure of space, i.e. the relations that are established among the elements that make up space as individual constituents, which are "individuated by their positions, so that if any of two could change their positions, they would change their individuality at the same time and each would be converted numerically into the other" (Newton, 2004: 25). As the barracks changes aspect and its sides seem to merge together, thus giving the narrator the impression that the building is actually triangular instead of square, Newton's ideas become even clearer. The space contained within the walls of the police station is unstructured because its margins seem to change their position or, as Newton pointed out, their "individuality."

The novel ends cyclically, with the narrator coming back to the same police barracks and displaying the same loss of memory. He cannot remember his name nor that he has already visited the police station. O'Brien inserts an almost identical and eerie description of the barracks as the one at the beginning of the novel, only that this time, instead of being inquisitive about it, the narrator becomes apprehensive:

About a hundred yards away was a house which astonished me. It looked as if it were painted like an advertisement on a board on the roadside and, indeed, very poorly painted. It looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child . . . I had never seen with my eyes ever in my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions were missing, leav-

ing no meaning in the remainder. The appearance of the house was the greatest surprise I had encountered ever, and I felt afraid of it. (O'Brien, 1993: 204)

The police barracks, described as bi-dimensional and surreal, is an example of how space is distorted in the novel and defies traditional physical laws. The narrator perceives this space as both flat and deep, a paradox that suggests the relativity of perception. A possible explanation of this situation can be found in the principles of quantum mechanics. The main character experiences space as something paradoxical, much like the subatomic world in quantum theory, where particles can exist in multiple states simultaneously. Thus, space is no longer a constant but a fluid dimension that shifts constantly.

3. Infinite space, circular time: God, space, and the surreal

Metaphysical spaces in *The Third Policeman* are not only employed as a literary device but also as philosophical tools to question the nature of existence. Drawing from both philosophical and scientific ideas, such as those proposed by Newton and Kant, O'Brien presents space not as an objective reality but as a subjective experience shaped by the human mind.

In the literature on philosophy of space, the dichotomy of substance/relation has been seen as a standard for numerous hypotheses. This means that space has been conceived either as an entity or substance (*substantivisation*) or as a relation among substances/entities (*relativisation*). Newton's spatial ontology contends that space can be regarded as "absolute", meaning that "No being exists or can exist which is not related to space in some way. God is everywhere, created minds are somewhere, and body is in the space that it occupies; and whatever is neither everywhere nor anywhere does not exist. And hence it follows that space is an emanative effect (*effectus emanativus*) of the first existing being, for if any being whatsoever is posited, space is posited" (Newton, 2004: 25). This idea stems from Aristotle's ar-

guments which demonstrate that infinite space is characterized by notions related to eternity and immovability of an original substance (which can be interpreted as God) necessary to ground the mutable and finite substances. In *De Gravitatione*, Newton argues that “we cannot imagine any limit anywhere without at the same time imagining that there is space beyond it” (Newton, 2004: 23).

The exploration of both Newton’s theory of space and the relativity theory provides the necessary framework for a more detailed analysis of O’Brien’s novel and the questions that it generates, and it can be used to explain the author’s idea that science and religion are not contradictory spheres *per se*.

The author bestows labyrinthine characteristics to the spaces he creates, thus imagining a re-interpreted version of hell, where the unnamed narrator moves around in circles without being able to remember his name or to reach his final destination. The landscapes described are very similar to those in Ireland, but at the same time they seem artificial and unnatural: “We were now going through a country full of fine enduring trees where it was always five o’clock in the afternoon. It was a soft corner of the world, free from inquisitions and disputations and very soothing and steepening on the mind. There was no animal there that was bigger than a man’s thumb and no noise superior to that which the Sergeant was making with his nose, an unusual brand of music like wind in the chimney” (O’Brien, 1993: 82). However, the most important thing that the readers ought to know is that “Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed” (O’Brien, 1993: 88).

If we were to relate this idea to Newton’s theory, an interpretation could allow the contention that space represents a sort of surrogate of the Supreme Being. Newton’s physics suggests that the omnipresence of an immaterial primordial *substance* (which may be an active God/high thinking being) supplies the elaborate mechanisms that serve the role of his will. As a deduction, space emanates from God since God is the first existing thing.

The story is centred around a surrealistic police station that the unnamed narrator finds in a Kafkaesque afterlife. Although it seems that the main characters are Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen whom the narrator meets at the police station, it is their enigmatic coworker who is chosen as the title character. This mysterious third police officer, despite seemingly a supporting character, is the one that holds the power to control what happens in this senseless afterworld. Policeman Fox is rarely seen by the others, and he mainly exists by himself; he also has the power to fiddle with both space and time and bend them as he pleases. It is, therefore, plausible to interpret Policeman Fox as an embodiment of God. Space is God's attribute, and, as a result, space is infinite, and it extends in all directions.

This is how one can explain that Policeman Fox tampers with eternity and alters the space confined within the walls of the building that encompasses eternity, acting as a Supreme Being, who not only controls people's lives but also outlines space according to his whim: 'How big is all this place?' 'It has no size at all,' the Sergeant explained, 'because there is no difference anywhere in it and we have no conception of the extent of its unchanging coequality' (O'Brien, 1993:138).

Another metaphysical space that O'Brien masterfully describes in his novel is *Eternity*; this is a Platonic form¹ because it is perfect (both in shape – it is a circular space – and in function, since it has the ability to produce amazing objects that cannot be compared to anything known to the human mind). The reader who enters the warped space in *The Third Policeman* is confronted with a *dubitatio* regarding the representation of space, where Eternity is described as a hellish underground machine that can provide whoever enters it with any material object that the

¹ Plato's philosophy, as explained in both Book 5 and Book 7 of his *The Republic*, holds that, outside of the material world, there resides another realm or the world of perfect forms; compared to the flawed representations that we come across in our sensory experience, these forms are thought to be more genuine and permanent.

person desires. The unnamed narrator descends into the underworld of eternity together with the two policemen; here he encounters a strange universe where unheard-of machines are able to create objects of indeterminate shape, colour, or dimension, which the human perception has never detected before: "Simply their appearance, if even that word is not inadmissible, was not understood by the eye and was in any event indescribable" (O'Brien, 1993: 135).

The description of Eternity becomes baffling: there is a fantastic cabinet with "an opening resembling a chute and another large opening resembling a black hole about a yard below the chute". When one of the policemen presses a button a "rumbling noise" can be heard, "as if thousands of full biscuit-boxes were falling down a stair" (O'Brien, 1993: 135). The narrator could then see a series of objects that he is unable to describe:

But what can I say about them? In colour they were not white or black and certainly bore no intermediate colour; they were far from dark and anything but bright ... It took me hours of thought long afterwards to realise why these articles were astonishing. *They lacked an essential property of all known objects.* I cannot call it shape or configuration since shapelessness is not what I refer to at all. I can only say that these objects, not one of which resembled the other, were of no known dimensions. (O'Brien, 1993: 139-140)

The metaphysical space of Eternity slows down the aging process, as Sergeant Pluck explains to the narrator; while in Eternity, they do not age a bit, and it seems that time stands still. That is why Policeman MacCruiskeen prefers to sleep down there (he does not age, and he is also liberated from the task of shaving his beard since it does not grow anymore). MacCruiskeen explains to the narrator that, if he would walk ahead along the corridors of Eternity, then he would "reach the same place here without coming back". His explanation is very confusing for the narrator, who does not understand how Eternity works: "you can walk on

till you reach the next doorway and you are welcome. But it will do you no good and even if we stay here behind you it is probable that you will find us there to meet you" (O'Brien, 1993: 139).

Einstein (1920: 133) proposed some extended concepts that refined his final theory regarding relativity; these referred to gravity and the way it can "curve" the space-time continuum. Thus, Newtonian mechanics and Euclidian geometry become no longer valid. According to this theory, time flows differently in distinct parts of the universe, and this is possible because the force of gravity affects it, i.e. time flows at a lower rate where gravity is strong and at a faster rate where gravity is weak. The unnamed narrator in *The Third Policeman* is affected by this since the reader is informed that the 16-year period he had been away had passed differently for him and for the other characters in the novel: while the narrator remains unchanged, the others have aged.

The idea that in the novel time is stripped of its conventional forward motion aligns with the concepts comprised in Einstein's theory of relativity according to which time is not absolute and fixed but can stretch under the influence of a series of factors, such as gravity. The metaphysical implications suggest that human beings are bound by an illusion of time, one that collapses in the face of O'Brien's absurdist reality, where time becomes another construct susceptible to distortion.

The spaces described in the novel are associated with the religious concept of hell or a similar realm where souls reside after death. Roy Hunt points to the fact that even though "the narrator stands both inside and outside the world of *The Third Policeman*, in the privileged position of omniscience, he is, nevertheless, doomed to be forever participating in the world of *The Third Policeman*" (1989: 65). The result is that both the main character and the reader end up wandering through an unstable and incomprehensible space configured according to a mixture of nonsensical theories. Thus, it seems pointless, to aspire to absolute certainty in knowledge. Empiricism, epistemological frameworks,

and our comprehension of time and space ultimately generate nothing but an ever-deepening sense of absurdity. In this sense, Booker points out that "this dense conceptual stew serves as a commentary on the general twentieth-century crisis in authority, on the modern lack of faith in any one approach to knowledge." Because it proposes alternatives to the reality that is known to people by escaping "the limiting confines of traditional systems of knowledge", *The Third Policeman* "enriches our conceptions of the world" (Booker 1991: 51-52).

4. Conclusions

The Third Policeman is constructed on a dual framework: on the one hand, O'Brien presents a real dimension of space and time, based on Newtonian philosophy and Euclidian geometry, as we can see in the first chapter of the novel. On the other hand, the reader is introduced to the basic concepts of relativity, through de Selby's paradoxical theories, the footnotes, and the description of the Parish as the place where everything exists beyond the limits of the dimension of our mundane experiences.

Mary O'Toole accurately synthesizes the essence of the novel as follows:

The hell of *The Third Policeman*, then, is not one temporal and spatial system but many systems, some historically held, others never a part of any known philosophy of time or space [...] the narrator and the reader are unable to grasp any basis for temporal or spatial stability in this queer universe [which] adds to the intellectual, emotional, and even physical disorientation that this novel produces. (1988: 225)

Space and its dimensions are distorted in *The Third Policeman*; the realm through which the unnamed narrator wanders for an indefinite period of time lacks a definite dimensional aspect, as in the case of the building that serves as the headquarters of the police station. O'Brien imbues his metaphysical space with inef-

fability and gives it a cyclical aspect, making it oscillate between beautiful Irish scenery and dark confined spaces. The events described deal with a fantastic and bizarre world, where time does not pass and where the characters are entangled in absurd situations and become lost in a distorted space. O'Brien's narrative is dominated by allusions to both Einstein's theory and quantum mechanics. Space is warped and the main character's perception of it becomes anamorphic. In O'Brien's novel space is existent and non-existent at the same time. Many of the concepts presented are paradoxical while the spatial specifications are always relative, thus creating chaos and confusion for the unnamed main character.

The concept of absolute space and time that is central to Newtonian physics is subtly challenged throughout the novel. As Kemnitz observed, initially the narrator operates within an orderly universe that resembles Newtonian framework; in this universe, space is perceived as fixed and time as linear, and they evolve independently from the narrator's subjective perception. As the main character ventures into the surreal landscapes of the Parish, spatial laws begin to break down, thus echoing Einstein's theory of relativity. Thus, the idea that space and time are interconnected and dependent on the subjective perception of the individual rather than absolute becomes more and more evident as O'Brien expands the depiction of a dimension where time is motionless, and space is mutable.

The Third Policeman aligns with principles of quantum mechanics, particularly the subatomic theory. The paradoxes comprised in Sergeant Pluck's Atomic Theory (according to which humans and bicycles can interchange atoms to the point of becoming indistinguishable) reflects quantum entanglement. Likewise, the concept of *omnium*, a mysterious universal substance that can at the same time create and alter reality, mirrors quantum field theory in which matter and energy exist as fluctuating, indeterminate entities rather than concrete, fixed forms. The reality that the narrator experiences while in Eternity also resonates

with quantum mechanics, as time and space become non-linear, thus challenging the classical understanding of causality.

The world created in *The Third Policeman* is surreal as it allows for the dismantling of the traditional conceptions of reality; in this realm, both scientific and metaphysical concepts fail to provide clarity. O'Brien uses absurdity to write a critique of the human pursuit of knowledge. The cyclical structure of the narration, in which the narrator repeatedly returns to the same distorted police station, and the endless wandering of the characters through nonsensical spaces suggests that both time and space are nothing but illusions and symbolize the futility of human understanding in a universe governed by irrationality. Ultimately, O'Brien's work challenges the reader to accept the paradoxes inherent in both metaphysical and physical inquiry as a means of criticising the limits of human understanding and the ineffectiveness of the quest for absolute knowledge. Whether one subscribes to Newtonian determinism, Einsteinian relativity, or quantum uncertainty, the pursuit of truth remains an exercise in futility.

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