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Being “completely half afraid to think”: Confronting the Absurd in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*

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Abstract

In order to demonstrate an aspect in which the novel is relatable to the canon of absurdism and enrich the view of dimensions in which it functions, the purpose of the following article is a reading of Flann O’Brien’s The Third Policeman in relation to the Absurd as an ontological category of existentialism and absurdism. Firstly, some assumptions already made on account of the novel are introduced. Secondly, the relevant and chosen characteristics of the Absurd are summarized in relation to Kierkegaard’s and Camus’s conceptions of the Absurd. Then, the novel is interpreted in relation to the insufficiency of human knowledge and rational thought in terms of achieving comprehension transcending existence. Lastly, the novel is interpreted in relation to the narrator’s fear of death, with death as an element transcending existence and adding to its irrationality. Overall, the way in which the novel depicts a specific contraction resulting in the Absurd is illustrated.

Introduction

In 1940, Flann O’Brien¹ (1911-1966) finished his great masterpiece *The Third Policeman*, but the novel was published only posthumously a year after his death. Possibly, O’Brien would not appreciate an interpretation of his novel through the optic of absurdist philosophy. Not only does his work involve a lot of Kierkegaardian parodies of academism, but in his personal cor-

respondence he wrote that: "...they look for overtones, undertones, subtones, grunts and 'philosophy'; they assume something very serious is afoot. It's disquieting for a writer who is only, for the moment, clowning" ⁱⁱ (Cosgrove 1976, p. 123). But then, he should not have written a novel which is an astonishingly complex philosophical riddle, despite Cronin's (1998, p. 104) biographical-based assumption that the novel only seemingly displays an "original approach to philosophical question involving the mystery of existence" and that disbelief in Catholic doctrine "is largely an illusion", since O'Brien was a deeply conservative Catholic, an Irish "medieval Thomist", for whom the purpose of existence was clear and given. Cronin rightly evaluates that the novel displays science and philosophy as a mere joke, with secular knowledge having no value (p. 105). However, condemnation of secular knowledge as a means of transcending existence itself is an act of philosophical subjectivism and scepticism, and thus *The Third Policeman* demonstrates a certain approach to the philosophical question involving the mystery of existence; it is a subjectivist response to the Absurd, since its world is an allegorical platform displaying resistance to rational comprehension.

Although O'Brien's reputation suffered from "Gaelic hardships", Booker (1995, p. 122-139) demonstrates that O'Brien's poetics functions also within the global and non-purely Irish contexts, not being distanced from the universal currents and problematics of modernism.

In a godless-modern age marked by moral bedlam, the act of faith has become itself an absurd and philosophical act. For a critical Catholic writer with anti-authoritative temperament who repeatedly criticized religious powers (Borg, Fagan, McCourt, 2017, p. 8), it is natural to confront the absurdity surrounding the irrational and absurd act of faith, associated with the impossibility of faith as an "objective certainty", but at best as a Kierkegaardian "objective uncertainty" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 43). Cronin (1998, p. 58) outlines O'Brien's admiration for Søren Kierkegaard, the so-called "father of existentialism", but does not take into account the possibility of his influence on the novel demonstrating the absurdity of ineffable and irrational existence, which according to Kierkegaard occurs as an outcome of the biblical Fall, though he mentions that the novel displays evil as the "natural order of things" (p. 103).

As pointed out by Booker (1995, p. 152), *The Third Policeman* has an "air of absurdity that immediately suggests (...) the whole modern tradition of existentialism." ⁱⁱⁱ Brian Cosgrove draws a parallel between *The Third Policeman* and Beckett's *Watt* (1953), in which he outlines a contraction resulting in the Absurd: "both novels deal with a pilgrim who, placed in an alien world, strives desperately to relate the absurdities he undergoes to his own limited sense of order and logic" (1976, p. 123). Correspondingly, I will attempt to demonstrate how the text

responds to the traumatizing occurrence of the Absurd as a philosophical category, to the Absurd occurring as an outcome of a seemingly or deceptively godless-world hostile to logical and systematic comprehension. Cosgrove believes that “one of the central critical questions with regard to O’Brien concerns the extent to which he is a serious Absurdist, and to what extent an ebullient creator of jeux d’esprit” (1976 p. 124). I argue that the novel functions on a platform of absurdist philosophy by displaying the conflict between the human need for comprehension and a world that is irrational and incomprehensible – an insolvable conflict which is a theme of immense concern for existentialism and absurdism. Despite the “jeux d’esprit” rigged by the author’s manic imagination and drive towards parodic elements, applying the basic concept of absurdist philosophy on the universe of the text enriches our understanding of the dimensions in which the novel functions and which occur when the philosophical category of the Absurd is applied as a thematically ideological base, the central thematic element of the textual structure to which other elements are subordinated (Hrabák, 1973, p. 77).

The Absurd

Just as for Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, for Camus the Absurd is a direct consequence of the emergence of Enlightenment positivism leading to the absence of transcendence and absence of God in the world, proclaimed by Nietzsche as: “*God is dead*” (2003, p. 120). Both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, although divided by their religious and anti-religious positions, predicted the crisis of modernity, the absence of transcendental meaning caused by humanist Reason and philosophical positivism leading to nihilism and existential pessimism. *The Third Policeman* undermines the Enlightenment authorities of science, epistemology and humanism, and does so in order to confront the rationalist thinking which submerged the world into the Absurd in the first place. *The Third Policeman* is not a modernist novel that is nihilistic, but the kind of modernist novel that attempts to confront nihilism (McDonald, 2014, p. 126). The attempt to confront traumatic nihilism leads O’Brien also to a confrontation with the Absurd, the irrational-incomprehensible character of the world, which if not confronted by means of faith or reflection gives birth to nihilism (Dulebová, 2014, p. 35). It is also an attempt to combat nihilism that attaches O’Brien’s text to existentialist tendencies.

Two years after *The Third Policeman* was written, Albert Camus labelled the Absurd as the only acknowledgeable state of interaction between the being and the world. (1975, p. 27) The Absurd is “born out of this conflict of the human need for reason and the unreasonable silence of the world.” (ibid., p. 13) The nature of existence is revealed as objectively meaningless,

temporary, incomprehensible, resisting the wish of human beings for comprehension and meaning. (ibid., p. 19-38) The one who realizes the Absurd feels a traumatic dissonance between existence and being. Everything is temporal and therefore, pointless. Life is a meaningless path towards death. If death is thought into existence, the fact of temporality of life starts to take control over human existence ridding it of its illusory meanings.

The Absurd comes with the realization that the world is not rational. As one strives for meaning, one is driven by one's rational "desire for unity, a longing to solve, a need for clarity and cohesion" (p. 56). Yet one remains surrounded by chaos; the irrational world is always setting itself against the rationalistic need to understand and attain a meaning in unity, a transcending knowledge. One strives to achieve synthesis with the surrounding world; a certain comprehension resulting in a unity with one's surroundings, yet the irrational world remains resistant and hostile to his wishes (Leonova, 2010, pp. 42-45). As in the case of the narrator of *The Third Policeman*, man experiences constant hostility from the surrounding world which always proceeds to carry on its "unreasonable silence", resisting man's rational desire for comprehension and meaning.

Kierkegaard was the first to introduce the category of the Absurd. In contrast with the position of the atheistic Camus, behind the absurdity surrounding Man is an incomprehensible God. Existence created by God who due to the biblical Fall distanced himself from human comprehension is naturally incomprehensible to human logic, because "for God, all things are possible", and in front of God, human beings always remain false (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 74-83). In a fairly Kierkegaardian manner, O'Brien demonstrates a world in which no objective knowledge is possible or comprehensible to a rational mind strongly driven by a desire for comprehension and clarity.

In accordance with Kierkegaard's view, the allegorical universe of the novel is a platform on which no truth is possible: "objectively there is no truth; an objective knowledge about the truth (...) is precisely untruth." (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 224) The Absurd for both Camus and Kierkegaard originates from the fact that the world and existence cannot be subjugated by human logic and knowledge. Kierkegaard (1967, p. 8) writes that: "The absurd is the negative criterion of that which is higher than human understanding and knowledge", while Camus (1975, p. 20) emphasizes that the Absurd originates from the contradiction between the need to transcend existence by means of comprehension and an inability to do so.

The Third Policeman: A human need vs. the unreasonable silence of the world

For Kierkegaard (1941, pp. 28-41), belief in God is an absurd act in a positive sense, a “virtue of the absurd”, because it is not justifiable by logic. On the contrary, belief in Reason, logical positivism and rationalism is absurd in a negative sense, since it does not save one from the absurd condition of human existence but rather submerges one deeper into it by believing in the constructions developed by the epistemologically limited human mind. The positivistic thinker believing in logic submerges himself into an illusion of comprehension and non-authentic existence. The attempt at systematism does not help to overcome the Absurd, on the contrary, as in the case of the unnamed narrator in *The Third Policeman*, drowns one into despair by not accepting the world as not open to objective and universal meaning.

Being on a constant hunt for knowledge, his positivistic belief in the possibilities of science and philosophy submerge him into a state of “non-authentic” existence. When his knowledge fails to explain a world which is not rational, when his drive towards meaning and comprehension confronts the irrationality of the world, out of this contradiction the Absurd arises, condemning the narrator to psychological agony with physical manifestations.

The narrator is a fanatical amateur scholar of the obviously insane scientist and philosopher De Selby, whose absurd constructions are reminiscent of Kierkegaard’s ridicule of positivist philosophers. The narrator wants to publish a “magnum opus”, a book he dreams of becoming the most authoritative collection of commentaries on his idol. Even if the narrator is at times capable of a critical dialogue with De Selby, the latter still represents a source of knowledge which if thoroughly studied enables the transcending comprehension he strives for, leading to “clarity and meaning” and thus satisfying his desire for secular knowledge transcending existence, an impulse which Camus (1975, p. 28) labels as a “human need”. All of De Selby’s thought is only an absurd product of human logic, and thus, the narrator attempts to achieve transcendence by following a thinker fully confident of the epistemological limitlessness of the human mind.

The narrator’s preoccupation with de Selby started at 16 and was catalysed by an unhappy childhood, the early death of his family and usurpation of his farm. Thus, a preoccupation with knowledge and meaning is a psychological response to the absurdity of existence, in which, in accordance with Camus’s conception of the Absurd, death plays a catalysing role. Kierkegaard illustrates that the more one is besieged by the absurdity of existence, the more one attempts to find an answer in abstracted and delusional philosophical constructions (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 31). Thus, it is only natural that the narrator’s drive towards De Selby (human knowledge) is escalated by suffering. The day he becomes familiar with de Selby is, as he claims, “the most

important day in my life and I can remember it more readily than I do my birthday” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 9). Absolutely preoccupied by the hunt for knowledge, he spends four years nearly all of the time in his study, even learning German and French in order to read the commentaries of other authors. His drive towards de Selby theories is displayed as all-consuming and absolute, since as pointed out by Long, De Selby represents an intellectual home, a platform of human knowledge which is the only thing he is able to control. Maebh Long concisely evaluates the narrator’s obsession: “it is not simply a quest for self-knowledge, but a wish to transcend the self” (Long, 2014, p. 87).

From the perspective of Kierkegaardian thought (1941, p. 51), the only kind of knowledge which saves one from the absurdity of existence is self-knowledge, which leads to the authentic human “Self”. However, knowledge which distances one from the “Self”, a knowledge which leads only to the construction of abstract systems with a purpose of transcending the problem of existence, submerges one deeper into the disillusionment caused by the Absurd, since existence does not experience any comprehension from the subjective sphere, and “objectively, there is no truth”. The narrator with his obsession for systematism, his hunt for objective knowledge fails to acknowledge the absurd fact of existence: that the world is not rational, and failure to realize this fact submerges him into the loss of his “Self”, since he forgets his name and his identity, he does not relate to himself through the course of the novel, the Self is no longer a Kierkegaardian relation which relates to itself. The narrator is fully preoccupied with the theories of De Selby, and his “Self” becomes a relation to the illusory constructions of human knowledge driven by Camus’s need to obtain transcendent meaning in an existence which does not undergo transcendence.

As the narrator acknowledges, De Selby offers to “old age, love, sin, death and the other saliences of existence ... only some six lines but this is due to his devastating assertion that they are all “unnecessary” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 93). If the problem of existence is not addressed, than, the notion is indeed devastating because the Absurd cannot be accepted, realized and transcended by means of acceptance, self-knowledge or means of faith, as suggested by Kierkegaard. The narrator’s preoccupation with de Selby is justified by him as a need “to lighten dark places”, yet this human need will not be met, since he is following a thinker whose thought opens “imponderable propositions each of which raised difficulties which spanned many eternities” (ibid., p. 93). Instead of getting closer to one’s Self, De Selby offers a knowledge which distances the narrator from his Self towards another construction followed by another construction, being a thinker who according to Kierkegaard: “has no fear of being under delusion, if only he can get the system completed...by means of delusion” (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 46).

To obtain the finances for publishing his “magnum opus”, the narrator commits a robbery and brutal murder, later returning to the place of the murder and dying from a bomb prepared by his accomplice. His conventional surroundings transform into a surrealistic allegorical universe defying the known laws of logic, in which he still continues his earthly search for the stolen “black-box”. The loss of Self occurs as soon as he enters the allegorical universe: “I did not know my name, did not remember who I was” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 31). His Self is completely replaced by an inauthentic existence driven by a desire to satisfy his “human need” for comprehension and transcending knowledge. Allegorically, it is a desire to transcend his Self by means of secular knowledge, his preoccupation with De Selby and drive towards “meaning” which places him on the platform of the irrational world, in which the conflict of the Absurd, a contradiction between the human desire for comprehension and resistance of the world towards such comprehension, starts to take place. As Camus writes, the absurd originates “between an action and the world that transcends it” (Camus, 1975, p. 33). If the preoccupation with De Selby represents human knowledge, and the drive towards his repeatedly mentioned theories is an “action” – a movement towards comprehension, the irrationality of the allegorical world always and repeatedly transcends the narrators “action” towards comprehension, his relation to De Selby.

During a dialogue with Sergeant Pluck, in which the Sergeant introduces the narrator to the rules of the universe, the narrator responds: “I feel extremely puzzled” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 62). The narrator reflects on his visit to “eternity”: “I understood little except that my plans were vanquished and my visit to eternity unavailing and calamitous” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 140). He responds to the object he has encountered in eternity as to “something I did not understand and had never even heard of (p.72)” and he responds to the fantastic explanations of Sergeant Pluck: “Your talk (...) is surely the handiwork of wisdom because not one word of it do I understand.” (p. 84). The narrator is always in a state of constant incomprehension escalated by interaction with the surrounding world which always transcends his limited understanding. For Kierkegaard, “the absurd, the paradox, is composed in such a way that reason has no power at all to dissolve it in nonsense...no, it is a symbol, a riddle, a compound riddle for which reason must say: I cannot solve it, it cannot be understood...” (Kierkegaard, 1967, p. 5). The narrator is directly confronted with the riddle of the Absurd, which his reason cannot solve, yet the Absurd is not a nonsense but in an allegorical world is depicted as vividly real, causing the narrator anxiety.

The alternative universe operates on the principle of the Absurd as a Kierkegaardian (1967, p. 5) “negative criterion higher than understanding and human knowledge”, reminding the narrator of the limitations of his Reason and uselessness of his knowledge, abstract theories and epistemic judgements. The characters repeatedly remind the narrator that, in this universe, no questions can be answered. By the way the universe operates it condemns the possibility of any truism and thus contradicts objectivism and the possibility of an objective explanation and universal meaning – the possibility of the fulfilment of the narrator’s “human need” for comprehension. Mathers, murder victim of the narrator, explains that: “No is a better word than Yes” and therefore he “decided to say No henceforth to every suggestion, request or inquiry whether inward or outward” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 29). He has “refused more requests and negated more statements than any man living or dead [...] rejected, reneged, disagreed, refused and denied to an extent that is unbelievable” (ibid., p. 30). Mathers presents to the narrator the fact of Kierkegaardian subjectivism, the fact that “objectively, no truth is possible” and since the Absurd rips conclusions of human logic from its firm grounds, any proclaimed truism has to undergo immediate rejection. Secondly, when the narrator enters a barracks with two policeman obsessed by bicycles, Sergeant Pluck explains that: “The first beginning of wisdom (...) is to ask questions but never to answer any” (ibid., p. 59). Later, he explains to the narrator: “Anything you do is a lie and nothing that happens to you is true” (ibid., p. 102). Repeatedly, the position of philosophical subjectivism is emphasized, in an allegorical universe no truism can be achieved, no question might be answered, and thus, the “rational human need” of the narrator to transcend himself by means of knowledge, to achieve order, meaning and a rationalistic comprehension is due to the Absurd never going to obtain fulfilment.

Despite the narrator being repeatedly reminded of the impossibility of an answer, his longing for the by now surely impossible comprehension makes him repeatedly refer to De Selby’s theories. When encountering his surroundings, he observes that De Selby considers a row of houses to be a *row of necessary evils* (ibid., p. 34) or roads *as the most ancient of human monuments* (ibid., p.37). Contemplating his journey, he mentions that for De Selby, human existence *is a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief* and so on (p. 50). References to De Selby are frequent, repetitious; his theories always absurd and overtly-constructed; their absurdity illustrates the Absurd, the inability of the human intellect to comprehend the complexity of the surrounding world. For Camus, subjugating the irrational world to the categories of thought is a projection of the “mind’s deepest desire”, which “even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity” (Camus, 1975, p. 32).

Some commentators posit that the world of *The Third Policeman* operates on the principle of De Selby's theories (Pilný, 2014, p. 160). If De Selby claims that the "journey is a hallucination" (O'Brien, 1996, p. 37), then all movement in the universe is a hallucination as well. This is another aspect in which the universe demonstrates the limits of Reason and human knowledge – the narrator being trapped in a world which is an embodiment of absurdity of logical constructions, and the narrator is a sufferer, who wants in an absurdist manner to escape the world which is a construction of human knowledge, since it is a limitation of Reason which emerges into the Absurd.

Camus claims that "the mind that aims to understand reality can consider itself satisfied only by reducing it to terms of thought" (Camus, 1975, p. 72). Correspondingly, the narrator compares the unexplainable phenomena he encounters with the theories of De Selby in order to reduce irrational reality into the category of the explanatory and to contrast the irrationality of the world with a delusive "clarity" achievable by means of systematizing thinking. But the universe demonstrates the Kierkegaardian belief that system and existence are incapable of being thought together; because "in order to think existence at all a systematic thought must think it as abrogated, and hence as not existing" (Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 107).

Nonetheless, it is not only the narrator's confrontation with the insufficiency of his knowledge which brings him to despair, but mainly an element of immense significance for the Absurd as seen by Camus – the fact of the temporality of existence stripping human existence of its illusory meanings. Death is for him a fate contradicting human reason, a fate which with its definitiveness conquers Reason and logic as the authorities of the Enlightenment. As Camus (1975, p. 63) emphasizes, human reason fails to justify and offers no satisfying method of acceptance of the fact, that after all the suffering, death is there as the only end, and therefore, death remains as "the only reality". When we acknowledge the possible absence of transcendental meaning, as the universe of *The Third Policeman* demonstrates that nothing is certain, a universe without transcendence where death is the "only reality" rips the narrator of his freedom and entraps him in a repetitious anxiety. Camus emphasizes that without transcendental meaning functioning as "an assurance of eternity", freedom cannot exist; death makes everything pointless and adds to the incomprehensibility of the world (p.74).

Soon after the narrator enters the allegorical universe, Martin Funnican explains the problemacy of death's impact on life: "Many a man has spent a hundred years trying to get the dimensions of it and when he understands it at last and entertains the certain pattern of it in his head, by the hokey he takes to his bed and dies! He dies like a poisoned sheepdog. There is nothing so dangerous, you can't smoke it, nobody will give you tuppence-halfpenny for the half

of it and it kills you in the wind up. It is a queer contraption, very dangerous, a certain death trap” (O’Brien, 1996, p.45). The surrounding world reminds the narrator of death being “only reality”; the proclamation outlines the significance of death as an all-consuming force turning life into a “queer contraption”, an illusion turning an attempt at comprehension of existence into a meaningless incapacity, a contradicting drive towards logic and comprehension which have no potential to successfully confront finiteness. The motive of the insufficiency of human knowledge in the face of an absurd universe and the motive of death as an element stripping man of his freedom come into synthesis; the narrator’s anxiety is caused by both factors, his understanding fails to comprehend death.

Paraphrasing Camus (1975, p. 63), it is not death as an act, but rather the thought of death which submerges one into feeling the Absurd. People live without recognition of the Absurd, because they have no experience of death. It’s the recognition of the mathematical aspect of death, the feeling of being trapped in time, which leads to recognition of the Absurd. Trapped in time filled by awaiting the end, “no code of ethics and no effort are justifiable a priori in the face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition” (p. 64). Correspondingly, it is not the act of death, but the all-consuming recognition of its coming that causes the narrator’s anxiety. The narrator is already dead, and yet from the point when he learns that he will be punished for his earthly crime by being hanged, he is constantly haunted by the prospect of his future death. Being tortured by the entrapment between two deaths, the death becomes a platform which is repeatedly realized and thought of; death transcends the narrator’s existence and figures as the “only reality” in his being.

When he learns about his future death, anxiety breaks out all over his being; the cruel mathematics of death, the awaiting of the finite end, leads to both psychological and physiological manifestations of anxiety: “I felt so sad and entirely disappointed that tears came into my eyes and a lump of incommunicable poignancy swelled tragically in my throat. I began to feel intensely every fragment of my equal humanity [...] To leave it all without good reason and to smash the little empire into small fragments was a thing too pitiful even to refuse to think about” (O’Brien, 1996, p. 102). From now on, his anxiety is repeatedly manifested. As an illustration, before entering “eternity”, not the positive eternity assured by transcendental meaning but rather a surreal and torturous place in which he will encounter phenomena not comprehensible to the human mind, he proclaims that: “A large emotion came swelling against my throat and filling my mind with great sorrow and a sadness more remote and desolate than a great strand at evening with the sea far away at its distant turn...I turned down completely and cried like a baby” (p. 140). Or: “Here I cried loudly again, turning to the wall of the lift and giving complete

rein to my misery” (p. 141). Later: “Then I went to bed to try to forget my anxiety” (p. 150), and later: “Here from my throat bounded a sharp cry rising to a scream” (p. 162). The anxiety of the narrator is relatable to Heidegger’s (2010, p. 238-244) view of existential anxiety. If the fear of death and finiteness becomes “conscious of itself”, as in the case of the narrator, the fear becomes a climate in which the “existence is concentrated”. The novel displays the suffering of the narrator tortured by fear of death in a great comicality. Nevertheless, the humorous depiction of the narrator’s anxiety remains an absurdist demonstration of death as a primordial and all-consuming fact, present in every single thought of the narrator. Therefore, the novel demonstrates Heidegger’s position that: “The finite and limited character of human existence is more primordial than man himself” and out of death anxiety is with its thematic dominance displayed as a crucial motive of the problem of existence (Camus, 1975, 19).

Before entering eternity, the narrator laments about the possibilities of an afterlife with his soul Joe. Among the many possibilities Joe mentions is that he could become “the wind”, a “peasant’s hope” or “the smell of a flower” (p. 162). The narrator is preoccupied with the insolvable question of the afterlife. An inability to comprehend death by means of intellect causes a feeling of the Absurd. After entering “eternity”, the motive of failure of human reason to comprehend the surrounding world again synthesizes with the motive of death as a catalyser of the absurdity; equally as death is not comprehensible to the human mind, the platform on which the death is supposed to take place is not different. The narrator encounters objects he describes as follows: “They lacked an essential property of all known objects. I cannot call it a shape of configuration since shapelessness is not what I refer to at all” (p. 135) and “my nervousness had been largely reduced to absurdity and nothingness by what I had seen...” (136). On one hand, it is the inability of the narrator to understand the encountered phenomena, allegorically representing death, which leads to his anxiety. On the other hand, it is his fear of death, his entrapment in the cruel mathematics of its awaiting, which leads to his experiencing of frightful terror.

The narrator escapes eternity and the prospect of death on a bicycle, meets his accomplice in the murder who dies from the fear of having seen a ghost; as they both proceed to the afterlife, the narrator forgets everything he has already experienced: “My mind was completely void. I did not recall who I was, where I was or what my business was upon earth” (p. 198). Entering the terrifying police station again, the whole cycle of suffering caused by the inability to achieve comprehension by means of knowledge and by fearing of death is ready to start all over. Thus, the novel demonstrates the fact that it is impossible to escape the absurd without accepting it, from the perspective of Camus, or impossible to escape the absurd without a means of faith, as

suggested by Kierkegaard (1941, p 81). The universe of *The Third Policeman* offers no hint of the presence of a transcendental deity, but Kierkegaard's faith as a "virtue of the absurd" consists exactly of making a "leap of faith" despite the surrounding circumstances contradicting rationality of such an act (Schufreider, 1983, p. 66). The absurdists represent the Absurd as a conflict which cannot be solved nor escaped: Godot is never going to come; the Sisyphus to whom Camus refers will forever push an immense boulder up the hill. Equally, the unnamed narrator will forever experience the torment of existence caused correspondingly by the absurdist philosophy of the impossibility of transcending oneself by means of knowledge and fear of death.

Therefore, the novel with its postmodernist polyphony can easily function as a serious absurdist fiction, since due to its depiction of the irrationality of existence as incomprehensible to the human mind, due to depicting the Absurd as a conflict with no resolution, is compatible with Camus's view of absurdist fiction: "The absurd work illustrates thought's renouncing of its prestige and its resignation to being no more than the intelligence that works up appearances and covers with images what has no reason" (Camus, 1975, p. 90). O'Brien is not only parodying the problem of absurdism. His comicality, his "jeux d'esprit" is in terms of literary-historical context explainable as O'Brien being a timeless early postmodernist, his celebration of "parody, play and pastiche", his anti-Promethean character making *The Third Policeman* a postmodern novel before the rise of postmodernism (Hopper, 2009, p. 16). One month before his death, he referred in his paper column via the words of Myles to anyone who "has the courage to raise his eyes and look sanely at the awful human condition... must realize finally that tiny periods of temporary release from intolerable suffering is the most that any individual has the right to expect" (Cronin, 1998, p. 248). Even if certain parodic elements to the conflict of the Absurd are applied, possibly as the periods of release from intolerable suffering, the novel does not undermine but demonstrates and allegorically embodies the Absurd, the contraction between a human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.

ⁱ Flann O'Brien is the most famous pseudonym of Brian O'Nolan.

ⁱⁱ The letter written in 1964 referred to Gerald Gross and is a complaint about the English attitude to humor. It would be misleading to reduce *The Third Policeman* purely to its humorous dimensions, since the humour of the novel is largely a response to the suffering generated by the Absurd, and may be regarded as a consequence of culture and civilization (Perez, E., Klimkova, S.).

ⁱⁱⁱ Francis Doherty and Rolf Breuer studied parallels and intersections between O'Brien and Beckett/literary absurdism.

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