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## **Fantastic Economies: Flann O'Brien and James Stephens**

**R. W. Maslen**

In this essay I shall argue that Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (1940) is (among other things) a radical reimagining of one of the best-loved Irish novels of the twentieth century: James Stephens's *The Crock of Gold* (1912). In reworking Stephens's quirky nationalist fantasy for a later generation, O'Brien arranges elements of the earlier novel into strange new forms adapted to the grim new social and political realities of the 1930s. Stephens conceived his book as an imaginative act of resistance against the unholy alliance of the church and the British state, pitting mutually supportive poverty against the reactionary self-interest of the middle classes, the passionate body against the cultural and religious authorities who sought to suppress it, and predicting a brilliant future for an independent, egalitarian, quasi-pagan Irish nation. O'Brien reconceives the novel as an elaborate trap, in which Ireland, its people and its landscape wholeheartedly participate in the worldwide trend towards totalitarian authoritarianism and its inevitable outcome: self-destruction. The chief components of both novels are a pastoral, often lyric vision of the Irish countryside, a clutch of self-educated philosophers, a man condemned to death and some eccentric but threatening policemen. How and why such similar elements should have been recombined to produce such radically different texts,

each of which issues an equally scathing assessment of the condition of Ireland at its own particular point in history, is the subject of this essay.<sup>1</sup>

O'Brien's debt to Stephens has often been noted. In 1966 an anonymous essayist argued in the *Times Literary Supplement* that O'Brien owed more to the 'tradition of modern Irish fantasy and romance in which the definitive figure is James Stephens' than to Joycean modernism (though there seems no good reason to choose between these debts, since Joyce and Stephens were friends).<sup>2</sup> Thirty years later, Keith Hopper pointed out that Sergeant Pluck is 'a fictional composition of [...] features borrowed from other texts (most notably James Stephens's policemen in *The Crock of Gold*)';<sup>3</sup> while Carol Taaffe has recently contended that the 'nearest predecessor to O'Nolan's fantasy was James Stephens's *The Crock of Gold*'.<sup>4</sup> None of these commentators took their perceptions much further; but the sheer frequency with which O'Brien's debt to Stephens has been affirmed suggests that a close comparison is overdue. And Taaffe's comments in particular open up a number of fruitful avenues of inquiry.

For Taaffe, *The Third Policeman* is a 'resolutely *apolitical* piece of nonsense' (my emphasis), which reflects O'Brien's ambiguous attitude to de Valera's Ireland, caught between anger at and complicity with its oppressive

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<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Paul Fagan for detailed and incisive comments on the first draft of this essay, and to the participants in the Second International Flann O'Brien Conference in Rome, 2013, for their questions and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> 'Tall Talk', *The Times Literary Supplement*, September 7 1967, p. 793. On Stephens's relationship with Joyce see Hilary Pyle, *James Stephens: His Work and an Account of his Life*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 114-5; the detailed account in Lloyd Frankenberg (ed.), *James, Seumas and Jacques: Unpublished Writings of James Stephens* (London: Macmillan and co., 1964), pp. xxiii-xxx; and Stephens's own broadcasts on Joyce in the same book, pp. 147-62.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Hopper, *Flann O'Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), p. 80.

paternalism towards its citizens.<sup>5</sup> It seems to me, though, that O'Brien's evident fascination with *The Crock of Gold* could be read as the key to a decidedly *political* reading of *The Third Policeman*, which reinforces Shelly Brivic's contention that an 'insurrectionary attitude' lurks beneath the surface of O'Brien's masterpiece.<sup>6</sup> Neither *The Crock of Gold* nor James Stephens could be described as in any sense 'apolitical', embroiled as they were in the ferment of nationalist activism that preceded the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>7</sup> O'Brien's decision, then, to redraft Stephens's book in the context of the nationalist ferment that preceded the Second can itself be seen as a political act. That the political outlooks in question are so different can be ascribed to the different class backgrounds of the two writers, as well as to the times in which they wrote. And these differences emerge most clearly in the contrasting imaginative economies of their novels.

Stephens saw himself as having been shaped by the economic conditions of his upbringing. In a fragment of autobiography he represents his early life in terms of a series of transitions from one social milieu to another:

The Dublin I was born to was poor and Protestant and athletic. While very young I extended my range and entered a Dublin that was poor and

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<sup>5</sup> Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, p. 65. For O'Nolan's attitude to de Valera see also John Coyle, 'Flann O'Brien in the Devil Era', Paddy Lyons and Alison O'Malley-Younger (eds.), *No Country for Old Men: Fresh Perspectives on Irish Literature* (London: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 69-85.

<sup>6</sup> Shelly Brivic, 'The Third Policeman as Lacanian Deity: O'Brien's Critique of Language and Subjectivity', *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 16, no. 2 (Summer 2012), pp. 112-132, p. 114.

<sup>7</sup> The best picture of Stephens's politics is painted in the political essays reprinted in Patricia McFate (ed.), *Uncollected Prose of James Stephens*, 2 vols. (New York: St Martin's Press, 1983), vol. 1.

Catholic and Gaelic – a very wonderworld. Then as a young writer I further extended to a Dublin that was poor and artistic and political. Then I made a Dublin for myself, my Dublin.<sup>8</sup>

The dominant note throughout these transitions is one of poverty. Stephens was educated at the Meath Industrial School for Protestant Boys, for which he qualified by getting himself arrested for begging at the age of six.<sup>9</sup> He left school at sixteen to work for a pittance as a solicitor's clerk, a life from which he was precariously set free by the success of his writing. Brian O'Nolan, by contrast, came from a Catholic middle-class background, took a Master's degree in Irish literature at University College Dublin, and followed his father into the Civil Service.<sup>10</sup> His father's early death left O'Nolan to support eleven siblings, but thanks to O'Nolan's salary the family never experienced poverty. At the same time, as a native Irish speaker O'Nolan was intensely conscious of the quasi-mythical link that had been forged by scholars and patriots between economic deprivation and the Irish language. The association formed the basis of his satire *An Béal Bocht* (1941), where the purest Irish is spoken by starving peasants who are kept artificially segregated from modernity, by government decree, in a fantastic Gaeltacht. Stephens and O'Nolan, then, had radically different experiences of poverty, but shared an intense awareness of the economic basis of relations between classes, between nations, between an author and his readers;

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<sup>8</sup> Pyle, *James Stephens*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Pyle, *James Stephens*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> See Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton, 1989).

and this awareness manifests itself on every page of their strangely linked masterpieces.

The dominant economy of *The Crock of Gold* is a romanticized version of the economics of the working classes, underpinned by the custom of gift exchange among the travellers who throng its rural highways. Men and women in Stephens's Ireland are always sharing bread, as well as advice and information, with random strangers they meet on the road. At one point the protagonist, an elderly Philosopher, generously shares his one small cake with seven large labourers, male and female, and is rewarded with the 'larger part' of a food parcel belonging to one of them.<sup>11</sup> Later, when he is hungry again, he meets a young boy who tells him 'I am bringing you your dinner' and spontaneously hands over another food parcel.<sup>12</sup> The generosity of strangers extends to the courtesies they exchange, verbal equivalents of the material gifts that sustain them on their travels. Having finished the meal donated to him by the boy the Philosopher tells his benefactor, 'I want nothing more in the world [...] except to talk with you', and the two quickly discover there is 'not so much difference' between a child and an old man.<sup>13</sup> And each of these chance encounters – with the boy and with the labourers – concludes with the Philosopher giving the strangers important messages from the Irish god Angus Óg, which serve to bind together the community of the poor in a single purpose: the democratization of the reawakened Irish nation.

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<sup>11</sup> James Stephens, *The Crock of Gold* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1928; f.p. 1912), pp. 172-3.

<sup>12</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 186.

<sup>13</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, pp. 187-9.

*The Third Policeman*, by contrast, is dominated by the economics of the middle classes, based on individual self-advancement, a paranoid concern to protect what they take to be their private property (though in this book property is for the most part theft and the concept of ownership problematic), and a penchant for aggressive competition in all their dealings. The verbal courtesies they exchange are as elaborate as those of Stephens's travellers, but serve the function of a robber's mask as they seek to con conversationalists out of their possessions and even their lives. When the unnamed first person narrator meets a 'poorly dressed' stranger on the road his first reaction is to check that his wallet is safe, after which he decides to 'talk to him genially and civilly' in the hope of coaxing information out of him.<sup>14</sup> The stranger's courteous replies to the narrator's civility ('More power to yourself') lead inexorably to a threat of murder ('Even if you have no money [...] I will take your little life'), which is only averted by the discovery that both men possess an unusual feature in common – each has a wooden left leg.<sup>15</sup> Shortly afterwards the friendly welcome the narrator receives at the local police station rapidly transforms itself into another death threat, when he is arrested and condemned to be hanged for a crime of which there is no evidence that he is guilty.

In O'Brien's world, too, information is guarded jealously as a source of power, not shared as it is in Stephens's Ireland. Policeman Pluck's second and third rules of wisdom – the only rules he follows that have nothing to do with bicycles – are 'Always ask any questions that are to be asked and never answer

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<sup>14</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, in *The Complete Novels*, introd. Keith Donohue (New York etc.: Everyman's Library, 2007), pp. 256-7.

<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, pp. 257-60.

any' and 'Turn everything you hear to your own advantage'.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile the driving motive for the narrator's journey is a quest for gold to finance his pet project: the private printing of his otherwise unpublishable book on the unhinged philosopher de Selby, containing information of no conceivable value to anyone but a few scholarly authorities on the man himself – and to its author, of course, who hopes to join their exalted ranks by virtue of his volume. O'Brien's inversion of Stephens's economy could not be more complete, and the competition between individuals and social classes that underpins it – in contrast to the communal interests that dominate *The Crock of Gold* – can be summed up in the narrator's contempt, as a would-be scholar, for the intellects of the men he meets ('I decided now that he was a simple man and that I would have no difficulty in dealing with him exactly as I desired'), as he kills and lies his way towards the cashbox he requires to fund his project.<sup>17</sup>

Stephens composed *The Crock of Gold* in a ferment of political and personal optimism. The year of its publication, 1912, saw the publication of the other two books that made his name: a quasi-realist novel, *The Charwoman's Daughter*, and the poetry collection that cemented his reputation as one of the finest Irish poets of his generation, *The Hill of Vision*. The immediate success of these volumes prompted him to give up his job as a clerk, acquire an agent, and set off to seek his fortune in Paris.<sup>18</sup> His plans for the future, as the title of his poetry collection suggests, were ambitious. He shared the vision of an independent socialist Ireland with his friends and fellow poets Thomas

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<sup>16</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 272.

<sup>17</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 268.

<sup>18</sup> See Pyle, *James Stephens*, Part One: Dublin – 1880-1925, pp. 3-107. See also A. Norman Jeffares, 'Introduction', *The Poems of James Stephens*, ed. Shirley Stevens Mulligan (Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 2006), pp. xi-xxxiv.



MacDonagh and Patrick Pearce, both of whom died in the Easter Rising; and he dreamed of giving a suitable literary form to this vision by writing a multi-volume epic based on the Ulster Cycle, a work worthy of the richly creative and egalitarian society he expected Ireland to become. But the Free State turned out very different from the Ireland he had imagined, and he completed only fragments of this project. It is therefore his two celebrated prose works of 1912, along with his early lyrics, that best articulate his youthful ambitions for his country.

O’Nolan seems to have been thinking about Stephens a good deal around the time when he was writing *The Third Policeman*. In 1938 he wrote to the older novelist asking permission to translate *The Crock of Gold* into Irish; and as Taaffe points out, if this permission had been forthcoming the translation ‘would have been his next project after *At Swim-Two-Birds*’ – would have taken the place, in fact, of *The Third Policeman* in the chronology of O’Nolan’s major works.<sup>19</sup> Stephens’s refusal denied twentieth-century Irish literature what might have been one of its collaborative masterpieces; but it also enabled his fiction to undergo some unexpected mutations in the crucible of O’Nolan’s imagination. In 1941, for instance, *The Crock of Gold* cropped up in *Cruiskeen Lawn* as one of the prized items on offer to wealthy customers of the Myles na cGopaleen ‘book handling’ service. In the de luxe version of this service, Myles’s team of so-called ‘master handlers’ undertake to upgrade your private book collection (for a suitable fee) by padding it out with classic volumes, their title pages inscribed with ‘forged messages of affection and gratitude from the author of each work’,

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<sup>19</sup> Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, p. 80.

including an expression of esteem from 'Your old friend, James Stephens'.<sup>20</sup> Stephens's influence may also be detected 'in the erudite dialogues of the Pooka and the Good Fairy' in *At Swim-Two-Birds*, as Taafe points out, which recall the dialogues between the Philosopher and his brother in *The Crock of Gold*;<sup>21</sup> and in the many bar-room rhetoricians of *Cruiskeen Lawn*, who resemble the sponging old gentleman-philosopher in Stephens's story collection *Here Are Ladies* (1913).<sup>22</sup> It can be traced in O'Brien's description of Sergeant Pluck, whose 'violent red moustache [...] shot out from his skin far into the air like the antennae of some unusual animal',<sup>23</sup> evoking the red moustache of the equally huge policeman in *The Charwoman's Daughter*, which 'stood out above his lip like wire' so that 'One expected it to crackle when he touched it'.<sup>24</sup> Even the famous multiple personae O'Nolan adopted might remind us of Stephens's many pen-names, from Tiny Tim to the Leprechaun, James Esse, Jacques and Seumas Beg.

In 1940, O'Nolan accomplished his most extended act of translation from the work of Stephens: *The Third Policeman*, which translates *The Crock of Gold* into terms directly applicable to the global situation at the beginning of a second Great War and at the end of the depression. The fact that this *is* a translation of a sort emerges most clearly in the plot of each novel, which links capitalist economics to the crime of murder. In both books the desire for capital leads to violence; but the route from cash to aggression is quite different in each case,

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<sup>20</sup> See Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from 'Cruiskeen Lawn'* (London etc.: Paladin, 1990), pp. 17-24.

<sup>21</sup> Taafe, *Ireland Through the Looking Glass*, p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Stephens, 'There is a Tavern in the Town', *Here Are Ladies* (London: Macmillan, 1914, f.p. October 1913), pp. 277-349.

<sup>23</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 267.

<sup>24</sup> Stephens, *The Charwoman's Daughter* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1912), p. 62.

and the relationship between capital, violence and Ireland differs too, in ways that summarize the different worlds in which the authors found themselves.

The plot of *The Crock of Gold* involves a stock of money, the crock of the title; but the coins it contains play only a marginal role in the lives of their owners. The Leprechauns of Gort na Cloca Mora have accumulated the cash as insurance against the greed of mortal men. As one of them explains, 'a Leprecaun [sic] has to have a crock of gold so that if he's captured by men folk he may be able to ransom himself'.<sup>25</sup> Their traditional work as shoemakers, by contrast, participates in a non-monetary economy: it is remunerated in kind by mortals through the strict preservation of certain customs, such as leaving out a pan of milk for them on Tuesdays, removing one's hat when faced with a dust-twirl, and observing a pact of non-aggression against their special bird, the robin redbreast. The Leprechauns, then, inhabit a world where one economy is pitted against another, where the competitive thirst for accumulated capital which makes the crock necessary is set against a strategy of mutual co-operation within the working class community; and the climax of the novel sees an escalation of the conflict between these two economies, with very nearly fatal consequences for Stephens's Philosopher.

The representatives of the capitalist economy in the novel are the policemen, called in by the Leprechauns in the course of a feud with one of their neighbours, Meehawl MacMurrachu, who stole their crock of gold on the Philosopher's advice. In revenge, the Leprechauns frame the Philosopher for the murder of his brother; and the men who come to arrest him bring with them an alien set of values, characterised by a rigid sense of hierarchy and a propensity

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<sup>25</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 76.

for violence. Where the rural people in the book's community – mortals, gods and fairies alike – portion out their food and drink with scrupulous fairness, the policemen divide what they have according to rank, with the sergeant drinking whiskey and his subordinates milk.<sup>26</sup> Where the Philosopher bases his wisdom on the behaviour of birds, beasts and insects, on the assumption that all creatures were created equal – an attitude the book endorses by recording the thoughts of donkeys, cows and spiders – the policemen treat dumb animals with brutality, as if to confirm the brutal nature of their own social function. We hear of a policeman's pet jackdaw whose tongue was split with a coin to make it talk, and which was accidentally trampled to death by its owner's mother;<sup>27</sup> of a dog that got kicked for counting too long;<sup>28</sup> and of a cat that ate her kittens, about which Policeman Shawn informs us: 'I killed it myself one day with a hammer for I couldn't stand the smell it made, so I couldn't'.<sup>29</sup> Soon after saying this, Policeman Shawn treats one of the Leprechauns with equal aggression. 'Tell me where the money is or I'll twist your neck off', he warns, driven half mad by his lust for fairy gold; and later, 'Tell me where the money is or I'll kill you'.<sup>30</sup> The brutality of Stephens's policemen is connected with money in an endless cycle of cause and effect. And when the Philosopher arrives at their barracks he discovers that the citizens they police, as represented by the prisoners in the cell, have been trapped in a similar cycle, body and mind.

Both prisoners were driven to crime by unfair dismissal from jobs in the city. The first was sacked for non-attendance owing to illness, the second

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<sup>26</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 209.

<sup>27</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 206.

<sup>28</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 218.

<sup>29</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, pp. 219-20.

<sup>30</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, pp. 226-7.

summarily dismissed because of his age. Both men experience unemployment as a brutalising loss of identity, expressed in their exclusion from the system of verbal exchanges that define a community. When the Philosopher first enters the cell, neither man returns his greeting – the only time in the book when a courteous gesture is not reciprocated. The prisoners tell their stories in the dark without giving their names, so it is unclear which man is speaking. And the stories they tell identify inarticulacy as the first symptom of their exclusion from social and economic significance. The sickness of one prisoner manifests itself in an inability to write out words (like Stephens he is a clerk): ‘The end of a word seemed [...] like the conclusion of an event – it was a surprising, isolated, individual thing, having no reference to anything else in the world’.<sup>31</sup> Here, the loss of a coherent written language is the cause of his dismissal from his job, while its effect is that speech too fails him. He stops talking to his wife, and eventually leaves his family without a word of explanation or farewell. For the second prisoner, too, the loss of his job is quickly followed by a loss of articulacy: ‘I did not allow my mind to think, but now and again a word swooped from immense distances through my brain, swinging like a comet across a sky and jarring terribly when it struck: “Sacked” was one word, “Old” was another word’.<sup>32</sup> When their income is taken away, each prisoner suffers the concomitant removal of the verbal grammar that binds one term to another, and of the social grammar that links one man to his neighbour or to his sense of his own identity in the past.

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<sup>31</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 246.

<sup>32</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 262.

In the end, it is the improbable intervention of the fairies, gods and heroes of old Ireland that frees these prisoners from the cycle of economic and social exclusion to which they have been condemned. The hosts of the Shee rise up under the leadership of Angus Óg to liberate the Irish workers in a pagan insurrection. And the most striking characteristic of the insurrectionists is their unity-in-diversity, their ability to reconcile individualism with collectivism, exuberance with organisation, as expressed in a universal language:

For these people, though many, were one. Each spoke to the other as to himself, without reservation or subterfuge. They moved freely each in his personal whim, and they moved also with the unity of one being: for when they shouted to the Mother of the gods they shouted with one voice, and they bowed to her as one man bows. Through the many minds there went also one mind, correcting, commanding, so that in a moment the interchangeable and fluid became locked, and organic with a simultaneous understanding, a collective action – which was freedom.<sup>33</sup>

Stephens here represents the host of Angus Óg as practising a form of instantaneous communication, whereby they understand each other completely without discarding what makes them distinctive: precisely the obverse of the prisoners' isolation and anonymity. And this language aspires to be uttered beyond the confines of Stephens's narrative. The chapter in which the insurrection takes place is the only one with its own title, 'The Happy March', as if to ensure that its contents can be detached from the novel and deployed as the

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<sup>33</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 308.

imaginative blueprint, or at least the incidental music, for an actual Irish insurrection of the kind that took place in 1916. Stephens's book, in other words, opens up at the end, offering its contents as common currency to the Irish people in a generously inclusive gesture of the kind with which it is filled, in an attempt to liberate them by example from the prison of their colonised minds.<sup>34</sup>

O'Brien's novel, by contrast, affirms the continued entrapment of the Irish people. It reverses the class positions of the police and the novel's protagonist – the first-person narrator – forcing the reader to take the point of view of a petit bourgeois social climber, instead of that selfless if somewhat arrogant servant of the community, Stephens's Philosopher. In contrast to the courteous and curious Philosopher, O'Brien's narrator feels only disdain for those he thinks of as his social inferiors – including the police. He too is a philosopher, but a parasitic one who seeks to accumulate cultural capital by publishing a wholly derivative volume, an index to the works of the incoherent *savant* de Selby. And de Selby himself is the polar opposite of Stephens's genial pedant: a solipsist who refuses to engage in dialogue with other thinkers, and who sees human existence not as a single organic entity but as a series of disconnected moments ('a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief'),<sup>35</sup> each as detached from adjacent moments as he is from the rest of the human species. Where Stephens's Philosopher draws on the collective wisdom of beasts, children and ordinary people to develop his theories, de Selby rejects any form of consensus: he 'would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically

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<sup>34</sup> One writer who took advantage of the detachable quality of 'The Happy March' was C. S. Lewis, who adapted it in the final section of his second Narnia book, *Prince Caspian* (1951).

<sup>35</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 263.

demonstrated'.<sup>36</sup> And his works conduct their readers not to enlightenment but bloodshed. In the last of many footnotes on de Selby in the novel we see one of his commentators set out with bombs and guns to kill his German rival because they disagree on how the great man's writings are to be interpreted.<sup>37</sup> The link between this philosophy of exclusivity and obfuscation and the rise of Nazism is confirmed in an earlier footnote, where de Selby claims to be able to 'state the physiological "group" of any person merely from a brief study of the letters of his name' and avers that 'Certain "groups" [are] universally "repugnant" to other "groups"'.<sup>38</sup> One race or family, then, gets segregated from another in de Selby's thinking, just as one moment in time gets divorced from the next; so it is hardly surprising if the narrator of O'Brien's novel, as the great man's acolyte, finds himself increasingly alienated from other people in the course of the narrative, baffled by their discourse, convinced that his private interests are opposed to theirs, and prepared to kill to assert his own intellectual and economic superiority to those around him.<sup>39</sup>

Where Stephens locates his genial Philosopher in a gift exchange economy, O'Brien ensures that his narrator-philosopher is acutely conscious that he lives in a cutthroat capitalist environment. He knows (as does the reader) exactly how his research on de Selby is funded – through the farm and the failing pub he inherits from his parents – and how the income from these combined

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<sup>36</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 265.

<sup>37</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, pp. 373-6.

<sup>38</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Works*, p. 254, note 3.

<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that one of de Selby's commentators, le Fournier, seems to assign the philosopher a portion of blame for the outbreak of the First World War. See O'Brien, *Complete Works*, p. 246, note 4. For a fuller account of violence in *The Third Policeman* see my 'Flann O'Brien's Bombshells: *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*', *New Hibernia Review*, vol. 10, no. 4 (Winter 2006), pp. 84-104.



resources is not enough to fund the publication of his Index. He imagines the contents of the cashbox for which he kills old Mathers not as gold but as ‘Ten thousand pounds’ worth of negotiable securities’ such as stocks and bonds;<sup>40</sup> so that for all his claim to be absorbed in matters of the mind he knows the market intimately. And he plans to use these assets not for some collective benefit but to enhance his financial and social worth as an individual, despite the fact that neither the cashbox nor the book he has written is his own: the cashbox belongs to Mathers and the book is made up of quotations from other writers, since in it ‘the views of all known commentators on every aspect of the savant and his work had been collated’.<sup>41</sup> The only forms of interaction with the community he undertakes, in fact, are competitive, and even his conversation entails a constant jockeying for position, a quest for the upper hand that merely sinks him deeper and deeper into a self-imposed confinement of body and mind.

In O’Brien’s novel, as in Stephens’s, philosophers set out on journeys across an unspecified Irish landscape made up of rolling hills and bogland and populated by labourers, policemen, beasts and fantastical beings. But where Stephens’s Philosopher, true to his convictions, travels in order to put right the wrong he did when he gave poor advice to Meehawl MacMurrachu, O’Brien’s travels for personal profit. Where Stephens’s Philosopher encounters many women on his journey and engages in conversations with them about male-female companionship, O’Brien’s encounters only men, the closest he comes to female companionship being with an exquisitely-proportioned bicycle (designed for a man, with a cross bar), which he thinks of as utterly compliant – the

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<sup>40</sup> O’Brien, *Complete Works*, p. 251.

<sup>41</sup> O’Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 229.

ultimate patriarchal fantasy. Where Stephens's Philosopher draws abundant conclusions from his experiences on his travels, changing his opinions on many subjects as he walks, O'Brien's narrator constantly fantasizes about people and objects, and has a tendency to forget everything that has just happened. 'If that watch of mine were found you would be welcome to it,' he tells his departing soul at one point, to which his soul answers dryly, 'But you have no watch'.<sup>42</sup> This forgetfulness means he is incapable of reaping enlightenment from his adventures. In any case, with every step he moves further into a world powered by strange machines whose fabrication and functions defy analysis – such as the light boxes constructed by Policeman MacCruiskeen, or the mysterious engines tended by the police beneath the ground – and which therefore fail to illustrate any universal laws.

On his journey to put right his mistake in misadvising Meehawl, Stephens's Philosopher makes his way into caves where gods dwell. In the first cave he encounters the Greek god Pan, in the second Angus Óg, the Celtic god of youth; and each deity presents him with something of value. Pan gives him a pleasure in his senses, Angus makes him his messenger to mortals, investing him with a sociability he did not possess before, a consciousness of and a keen interest in his place in the wider community. O'Brien's philosopher, too, enters spaces like caves: an underground 'eternity' and a secret policeman's barracks in a house's walls; but in each he finds only policemen, personifications of an inescapable authority which is repudiated by the gods of Stephens, who ask only that mortals choose between them. Stephens's Philosopher has to negotiate terrifying darkness and discomfort to reach Angus's cave: 'He could not see an

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<sup>42</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 368.

inch in front, and so he went with his hands outstretched like a blind man who stumbles painfully along'.<sup>43</sup> O'Brien's narrator is similarly afflicted as he approaches the entrance to the underground eternity: 'I [...] followed the noisy Sergeant with blind faith till my strength was nearly gone, so that I reeled forward instead of walking and was defenceless against the brutality of the boughs'.<sup>44</sup> But in each of the cave-like spaces the narrator enters, the underground 'eternity' and the secret barracks, he discovers truths about himself which he never acknowledges – in marked contrast to Stephens's protagonist, who not only recognizes the worth of what the gods show him but seeks to share this recognition with strangers on his way home.

What O'Brien's narrator discovers in his two 'caves' is his own anonymity, which arises from his myopic obsession with accumulating financial and cultural capital. When he enters eternity in the wake of Sergeant Pluck he converts everything he sees into financial terms – in contrast with Stephens's Philosopher, who converts what he sees into topics of conversation and quirky aphorisms. For the narrator, eternity is a giant cashbox full of 'safe-deposits such as banks have', 'expensive-looking cabinets' and 'American cash registers'.<sup>45</sup> When he finds he can get what he wants there, he can only think of ordering a 'solid block of gold weighing half a ton', which he afterwards exchanges for a more practical quantity of valuables: 'fifty cubes of solid gold each weighing one pound' and 'precious stones to the value of £200,000'.<sup>46</sup> As he warms to the task of exploiting his miraculous environment, the narrator acquires the accessories of the

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<sup>43</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 140.

<sup>44</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 335.

<sup>45</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, pp. 339-40.

<sup>46</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, pp. 343-4.

ultimate capitalist icon, a futuristic Hollywood gangster robbing a bank vault. Along with the valuables he orders a blue serge suit and a weapon capable of killing 'any man or any million men who try at any time to take my life', thus transforming himself into a feeble imitation of James Cagney – its feebleness confirmed by the fact that he forgets to ask for a bag to hold his loot (Sergeant Pluck obligingly gets him one 'worth at least fifty guineas in the open market').<sup>47</sup> This excursion into cinematic fantasy confirms the link between his capitalist values and an early death; Cagney always dies young in his gangster movies. It confirms too the groundlessness of the narrator's sense of superiority to the rustic police. No Hollywood gangster of the 30s or 40s was permitted to profit from his crimes, and it comes as no surprise when the policemen spring their trap, informing him that he cannot take any of his precious commodities back to the world above. And it also links him, almost incidentally, to the atrocities of global conflict. The weapon he orders can kill a million men as easily as one. The narrator's glib way with numbers, in other words, permits him to gloss mass murder as self-preservation, yoking the capitalist mentality he represents to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The second point in the novel where the narrator shows his true *petit bourgeois* colours comes at the end, when he finally meets the mysterious third policeman of the title. On learning that the cashbox he is looking for contains the substance omnium – the building-material from which anything and everything in the universe may be constructed – and on finding that Policeman Fox has confirmed his ownership of the box and its contents, the narrator launches into an extended series of fantasies about what he will do with it. While dismissing

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<sup>47</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, pp. 344-5.

the pettiness of Policeman Fox's deployment of the omnium (he uses it to make strawberry jam and to decorate his barracks), the narrator dreams of exploiting it to resolve the various more or less petty problems that have arisen in his own narrative, as related in the novel. And while each of his plans begin by sounding benevolent – giving John Divney 'ten million pounds' to make him go away, presenting 'every poor labourer in the world' with a golden bicycle – when he turns to thoughts of revenge on Sergeant Pluck his dreams mutate into nightmares.<sup>48</sup> Once again his thoughts revert to the underground eternity, where his hopes of enriching himself were raised and dashed, and he proceeds to convert this mysterious space in his imagination from an Aladdin's cave to a sadist's cellar, with 'millions of diseased and decayed monsters clawing the inside latches of the ovens to open them and escape' and 'rats with horns walking upside down along the ceiling pipes trailing their leprous tails on the policemen's heads'.<sup>49</sup> His grandiose projects are as limited as Policeman Fox's little ones, and infinitely more damaging, since they are dedicated only to arranging time and space to his own private satisfaction.

Ironically, the narrator's desire to differentiate himself from the other characters serves only to render him more anonymous – a tissue of financial and filmic clichés of the kind Myles na gCopaleen mocked in Cruiskeen Lawn. Many of Stephens's characters, too, are anonymous, in that they are nameless. But while the namelessness of his two prisoners confirms their exclusion from social discourse, the namelessness of other people in *The Crock of Gold* (the Philosopher, the Thin Woman, the Leprechauns, the women, men and children

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<sup>48</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, pp. 394-5

<sup>49</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 396.

met on the road) identifies them as *representative*: quasi-allegorical symbols of a vibrant nation that is moving towards a new collective identity. The namelessness of the narrator in *The Third Policeman* confirms instead his biddable nature, his tendency to mutate into the person with whom he is currently in conversation, effectively losing himself in the process, to disastrous effect. When working on de Selby the narrator imbibes the selfish, irascible, and amoral personality traits of his subject – with the result that he becomes capable of murder. So, too, he becomes indistinguishable from his devious friend John Divney, locked together with him in a horrifying pastiche of Ciceronian amity whereby each is the other's self, sharing bed and board while steadily winding each other up into an intense mutual hatred.<sup>50</sup> When speaking to Martin Finnucane the narrator becomes the sworn brother of this one-legged murderer, without noticing the moral implications of their casual bonding. And when conversing with Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen he adopts their stylistic eccentricities in his narrative as well as in his conversation. Helplessly driven by the impulses of his chameleon disposition, the narrator mingles his personality with those of everyone else he meets, as if to confirm the tendency of Ireland and Europe in the 1930s to follow disastrous models and totalitarian authorities, large and small, with slavish admiration.

The narrator's namelessness, then, is that of Stephens's prisoners rather than his representative types. Unlike the prisoners, he is not excluded from conversation; but his most honest and satisfactory conversations are with

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<sup>50</sup> For Ciceronian amity see Cicero, 'Laelius de amicitia', *Cicero in Twenty-Eight Volumes*, vol. 20, *De senectute, de amicitia, de divinatione*, trans. W. A. Falconer, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, 1971), xxi. 80: 'est enim is qui est tamquam alter idem'; 'for he is, as it were, another self'.

himself, or rather with his soul, who has a name, Joe, and who is always on the verge of leaving him. Joe's disembodied voice, speaking to the narrator in the gloom of old Mathers's house as the narrator confronts the ghost of the man he murdered, might remind us of the disembodied voices of the prisoners who speak to the Philosopher out of the dark of the cell. In that episode the Philosopher, too, found himself unsure of his identity for the first time in his experience as the boundaries of his mind began to dissolve: "The creatures of the dark invaded him, fantastic terrors were thronging on every side: they came from the darkness into his eyes and beyond into himself, so that his mind as well as his fancy was captured, and he knew he was, indeed, in gaol".<sup>51</sup> This sense of the encroaching dissolution or erasure of the self resonates throughout *The Third Policemen*, especially in moments of darkness: the stormy dawn before the narrator's hanging, for example, or the terrible moment when he wakes from sleep to find himself blind, before recalling that his eyes were bound by Policeman McCruiskeen before he nodded off. The flip side of the narrator's desire to distinguish himself from others is the fear of losing his identity altogether; a fear substantiated on the last page of the novel, where he finds himself recommencing all his adventures – having forgotten them first, as is his wont – in the company of one of his many doubles in the narrative, John Divney, as if there were no difference between him and his friend.

Most striking of O'Brien's inversions of *The Crock of Gold* is what he does to the body. As an athlete – he was a gymnast – Stephens sought in all his work to liberate the body from the constraints imposed on it by the churches, Catholic and Protestant alike. Meehawl MacMurrachu's daughter Caitilin spends most of

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<sup>51</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 244.

the novel in a state of edenic nakedness, and although the Philosopher begins by disapproving he quickly reasons himself into acquiescence with her choice. 'If a person does not desire to be [...] protected who will quarrel with an honourable liberty?' he asks himself; 'Decency is not clothing but Mind'.<sup>52</sup> Soon afterwards he finds himself exulting for the first time in the energy of his own body: 'Years had toppled from his shoulders. He left one pound of solid matter behind at every stride. His very skin grew flexuous, and he found a pleasure in taking long steps such as he could not have accounted for by thought'.<sup>53</sup> O'Brien's characters, too, are defined by their bodies; but in the policemen's case these are grotesquely, massively physical, always on the verge of heart attacks or seizures, brought on by their relentless consuming of candy and jam as well as excessive quantities of the stirabout that sustained the rural poor in *The Crock of Gold*. The narrator, on the other hand, is small and skinny, like the Philosopher; but where the Philosopher's emaciated frame testified to his hunger – the quality that brings the working classes together in solidarity when they share their meals<sup>54</sup> – the narrator's thinness and feeble appetite demonstrates his radical disconnection from people and things. The policemen's delight in food serves only to awake his snobbish disgust, whether at the effect their greed has on their monstrous bodies or at their inability to extend their imaginations beyond the narrow confines of the relative merits of different sweeties, the tastiness of stirabout, or the possibility of making strawberry jam out of the most powerful substance in the universe.

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<sup>52</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 100.

<sup>53</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 106.

<sup>54</sup> See Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 91: 'Every person who is hungry is a good person, and every person who is not hungry is a bad person. It is better to be hungry than rich'.



All of O'Brien's bodies are ill-constructed machines, whose capacity to harbour sympathy or affection has been compromised by the discoveries of science. Sergeant Pluck's atomic theory depicts the world as a concatenation of samenesses, an arrangement of particles which merely get rearranged when a person dies, so that executing an acquaintance is no more problematic than devouring a bowlful of porridge.<sup>55</sup> The narrator's leg is a symptom of this loss of affect in O'Brien's universe. At one point he is afraid its woodenness is spreading through his torso, just as the atoms of bicycles spread into the bottoms of their riders. In *The Crock of Gold*, the goat-god Pan's half-bestial body insists on the animal sensuality which is part of our heritage as human beings, and which enjoins us to delight in the sentient donkeys, cows, and flies with whom the Philosopher comes in contact. But in *The Third Policeman*, John Divney's innocent, cow-like eyes conceal a vicious disposition,<sup>56</sup> and human beings have more in common with machines than animals. The Parish policed by Sergeant Pluck is populated with half-human, half-bicycle cyborgs, though none of these hybrids are as bereft of fellow-feeling as the narrator, who has become fused with de Selby's books, his mind stocked, like de Selby's pages, with useless inventions of no conceivable benefit to anyone but the ego of the inventor and his adoring commentators. As a result of this fusion, the narrator's substantial funds of pity are reserved for himself, and he sheds abundant tears over his own predicament. The only close relationship he forges (if one discounts his friendship with Joe, who is an aspect of himself) is with a bicycle, which he converts into a fantasy of female acquiescence, a willing, voiceless servant that

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<sup>55</sup> See O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 293ff.

<sup>56</sup> See O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 226: '[Divney] had a quiet civil face with eyes like cow's eyes, brooding, brown, and patient'.

mechanically submits to his every whim. Stephens's collaborative Ireland has been left far behind, a vision that has been outpaced by the speed of scientific and technological progress, hurtling the world towards conflict.

Nowhere is the difference between the books more evident than in their endings. O'Brien's version of Stephens's 'The Happy March' involves an apparent liberation, in which the nameless narrator sails off into the night astride the Sergeant's bicycle, a metal goddess in total harmony with her environment: 'all the time she was under me in a flawless racing onwards, touching the road with the lightest touches, surefooted, straight and faultless, each of her metal bars like spear-shafts superbly cast by angels'.<sup>57</sup> Together man and bicycle liberate themselves first from Sergeant Pluck's barracks, then from the smaller police station presided over by Policeman Fox; and in the final section they even free Divney from the constraints of his grotesque mortal body, as if in imitation of Angus Óg's liberation of the Irish workers in *The Crock of Gold* ('Come away! come away! from the loom and the desk, from the shop where the carcasses are hung, from the place where raiment is sold and the place where it is sewn in darkness').<sup>58</sup> But this chain of liberations is an illusion. Unlike the Philosopher, the narrator and John Divney are guilty of the crimes for which they were incarcerated, and both are dead rather than exuberantly alive by the end of the novel, trapped for all time in the cyclical jail of their forward momentum. As a result, where Stephens ends his book not so much with a march – happy or otherwise – as with a dance ('they returned again, dancing and singing, to the

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<sup>57</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 380.

<sup>58</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 311.

country of the gods'),<sup>59</sup> *The Third Policeman* ends with the narrator and Divney 'marching' in unison into Sergeant Pluck's police station – the place from which the narrator 'escaped' only pages before. Their mechanical, quasi-military return to the barracks aligns the novel as a whole with those 'adventure books' mentioned by the narrator in his conversations with Policeman Fox 'in which every extravagance was mechanical and lethal and solely concerned with bringing about somebody's death in the most elaborate way imaginable'.<sup>60</sup> It would hardly have escaped O'Brien's readers that Europe in 1940 could have been described in similar terms.

The comparison of the 'metal bars' of Sergeant Pluck's winsome bicycle to the 'spear-shafts superbly cast by angels' recalls the spears flung down by stars in Blake's revolutionary poem *The Tyger*, from the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. James Stephens was a self-professed Blakean visionary,<sup>61</sup> who sought in his poetry to adapt the Londoner's proto-socialist vision to the needs of an Irish insurrection (*Insurrections* was the title of his first collection). Brian O'Nolan, on the other hand, was a Swiftian satirist, for whom experience had long blotted out the possibility of recapturing or even celebrating innocence. But it is the memory of innocence, I would like to suggest – the beautifully crafted innocence of *The Crock of Gold* – that gives *The Third Policeman* its astonishing vitality and poignancy. The two books should be read in tandem.

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<sup>59</sup> Stephens, *Crock of Gold*, p. 312.

<sup>60</sup> O'Brien, *Complete Novels*, p. 395.

<sup>61</sup> See Pyle, *James Stephens*, Chapters 3 and 4 (pp. 31-76).

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