

Last night, Tuesday the 16<sup>th</sup> May 2017, I attended “What Goes Around: Fifty Years of *The Third Policeman*” as part of Birkbeck, University of London's Arts Week.

As its name suggests, this event, hosted by Dr Joe Brooker and Tobias Harris, centred around the half-century of the publication of Flann O'Brien's extraordinary novel. Brooker and Harris were joined on-stage by a cast of readers who punctuated the evening with performances from the text (even if some were perhaps rightly reluctant to attempt Irish accents).

The evening was paced in such a way as to be accessible to those coming fresh to O'Brien's work and consisted of a biography, a publication history, and then several passages of close reading and discussion. For instance, Harris began by detailing the strange writerly life of Flann O'Brien (which is, in fact, a pseudonym of Brian O'Nolan, who also wrote under several other aliases, including Myles na gCopaleen). What was particularly interesting here – and that I did not know beforehand – was that all but 240 already-sold copies of O'Nolan's first novel, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, were destroyed due to bombing during World War II. Indeed, over the course of the evening it became clear that World War II was a significant factor in O'Nolan's difficult publishing career.

With the biographical angle covered, Harris and Brooker then moved to give a background to *The Third Policeman*; a novel never published in O'Nolan's own lifetime. This is no mean feat, since the novel features extraordinary twists of logic and physics. In essence, the unnamed narrator is transported to a fantastical realm (a “parish” of sorts) where the police force are obsessed only with recovering stolen bicycles. That the narrator does not possess a bicycle is a source of great concern to them. The narrative features several other curious turns, such as a spear where the point is so sharp that it protrudes invisibly many inches in front of the point we can see. “You're missing the point”, one of the policeman remarks, as though as much at the reader as the spear. Further, it transpires later in the text that the reason the policeman have so many stolen bicycles to investigate is that they are, themselves, stealing the bikes. They do so since they believe that the longer a person spends on the bicycle, the more he or she becomes merged as some kind of cyborg-like hybrid of (wo)man-bicycle. This is, indeed, a most strange novel.

Discussions with the audience ranged from the novel's metafictional implications – that is: how much is this a novel about the acts of reading and writing themselves? – through its resonances with the physical sciences up to an appraisal of its legacy. It was, though, perhaps the latter two areas that received the most attention. For while some aspects of *The Third Policeman* make sense with respect to quantum mechanics (as popularly broadcast and received), other areas do not work so well. For instance, the logic of the bicycle-melding is somewhat flawed. It seems to insist that gravity is stronger than the strong nuclear force whereas, in fact, at very close range, the forces holding matter together are 10 to the power of 38 times stronger than gravity.

On the other hand, we also discussed the ways in which O'Brien's fictional philosopher, De Selby's, parody of Zeno might be a better representation of the debates around quantum mechanics. To briefly recap: in the novel, de Selby is a philosopher who believes patently absurd things. For instance, in a passage we studied on the evening, de Selby argues that motion is an illusion – a “fact” he deduces from observing a cinematograph. So far, the argument is exactly like Zeno's. One can never reach one's final destination, argued Zeno, because every time you travel half the distance to an endpoint, there are an infinite number of half-points still to travel; “inter-intermediate” points, as O'Brien calls them. Yet, in our discussion, we noted, there is a distinction between Zeno and de Selby. Zeno made his propositions while not really believing them; a sophist. De Selby seems to want to put them into practice. In many ways, this parallels the developments in quantum mechanics in the early twentieth century. The formulae seemed to work on paper, but some figures, such as Einstein, could not accept that this was a worldly reality: “God does not play dice”, he wrote, referring to the probabilistic elements of the Copenhagen interpretation.

The evening came to a close all too soon. The audience were engaged and many supplied contexts various and diverse in which we might read *The Third Policeman*. What I was left with, though, was a renewed sense of the novel's humour. I had not read it for many years, yet in just the few pages that we studied, I felt drawn back in with a desire to reread the text and its curious logics and languages. It may be, as with the narrator, that this is a text to which I will have to return, time and time and time again.