

The Policeman Masked and Dumb: A Foucauldian Reading of *The Third Policeman*¹

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Abstract:

A Brave New World (Aldous Huxley) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (George Orwell) were two dystopian narratives published in the twilight of modernism, looking back upon the emancipation dreams of modernity as projects that had gone wrong. Although it has never been contextualised among novels of totalitarian plots, Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* does invite a reading in light of Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), where the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in the modern state is described as "descending individualism": those who hold the power withdraw behind the scene of history, pushing the common individual into the foreground, where he is permanently being observed and disciplined so as to fit into the political agenda of the system. Our paper identifies two aspects of power in O'Brien's novel: one visible, bullying, self-sufficient and narrow-minded, represented by Sergeant Pluck, and the other one invisible, cunning and manipulative, who always remains secluded in the dark recesses of actual history, represented by Policeman Fox. The third Policeman looks like the obscure but potent Power of modern societies: policed, intimidated and disciplined, acting on command and ignorant of the whole design of their journey in history.

Keywords: Flann O'Brien, Michel Foucault, faces of power, Panoptic scheme, disciplined modern society, surveillance system.

*"Long have I framed weak phantasies of Thee,
Oh, Willer masked and dumb!"*
Thomas Hardy, *Agnostoi Theoi*

*"... silent, mysterious unperceived vigilance. . .
it is the eye of the government ceaselessly open
and watching without distinction over all citizens . . ."*

Arnould Bonneville de Marsangy,
Essay on the Institutions Complementary to the Penitentiary System

In his nineteenth century poem, Hardy wonders whether the "Willer" has any consciousness of the things he creates and destroys while labouring in his numb reverie. In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in the modern state as "descending" individualization: those who hold the power withdraw behind the scene of history, pushing the common individual into the foreground, where he is permanently being

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observed and disciplined so as to fit into the political agenda of the system. But power does not come from affecting or injuring the physical body but from altering the spirit by restricting will.

The Third Policeman was written between 1939 and 1940, a period marked by the ascension of totalitarian regimes throughout Europe and by the outbreak of World War II. O'Brien wrote his novel in a social context characterized by the failure of the Irish Free State to deal with isolationism and emigration after an exhausting war of independence and a civil war in the 1920s. The novel can be interpreted as an interrogation of the true nature of power and it can be argued that it was intended as a satire of authority and power. O'Brien creates a complicated narrative. To paraphrase Churchill's famous phrase in a 1939 radio broadcast, it is a "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." In constructing his intricate text the author resorts to a complex mix of philosophical and scientific theories taken from modern physics. The reflection of all these serves as an explanation for the unsettling authority crisis associated with the first part of the twentieth century. The image of the policeman may be interpreted as a kind of nostalgic desire to return to the comfort which derives from having to act according to rules and regulations imposed by a superior power as it generally proves less demanding for an individual to act in consonance with certain norms which fall under supervision and organization, according to strict methods, rather than to think for oneself and express individual opinions. As Keith Booker points out, "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 . . . This crisis can be terrifying and unsettling, like the world of O'Brien's text, and one might certainly read in *The Third Policeman* a nostalgic yearning for a return to the security of well-established authority" (Booker 1995: 64)

O'Brien's intention was to associate the notion of freedom with that of choice. The strictness of the Censorship of Publications Act which came into force in 1929, impeded many writers of the time to freely express their opinions on issues that were of interest at the time, and O'Brien himself felt restricted. O'Brien criticized the Irish Free State but, as a civil servant, he never could do it openly. Through de Selby he explains that an individual's transition through life could be compared to that of a man walking on a tight-wire "who must continue walking along the wire or perish, being, however, free in all other respects. Movement in this restricted orbit results in the permanent hallucination known conventionally as 'life' with its innumerable concomitant limitation, affections and anomalies." (O'Brien 1993: 95) Or, in Foucault's words, through discipline, the State can create a mass of "subjected and practised bodies", "docile bodies" which, in turn, can lead to the dissociation of "power from the body" and to a relation of "strict subjection." (Foucault 1995: 138)

It can be argued that people living in totalitarian societies are robbed not only of their privacy, but also of their individuality, becoming alienated. The theme of losing one's stable, unique identity, which O'Brien depicts most persuasively, is emphasised by the narrator's ambivalent 'living-dead' existence and his limited understanding of his surroundings and the actions that the two policemen perform. This leads the reader to believe that the dividing lines between reality and psyche are blurred to the point of dematerialization, leaving behind nothing more than replicas or distorted reflections of the real world.

The readers find O'Brien's unnamed narrator in the grip of self-alienation, unable to cope with the punishment inflicted upon him. The protagonist is condemned to an eternal Sisyphean type of torture, as he has to repeat the same actions over and over again. Maciej Ruczaj suggests that the foundation of this "infernal torture is provided by the assault on his senses and mind rather than body." (Ruczaj 2011: 91) While in the underground Eternity, the narrator finds himself

in front of so bizarre objects that “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). Therefore, it can be said that the policemen act as a coercive apparatus and, as Rock remarks, the reader can finally figure out that “[t]here are no limits to the infinite possibility of transgressive codes the policemen can introduce to the narrator to challenge his notions of empirical and rational sense, and his own senses which he uses to read the world around him.” (Rock 2010: 260) The narrator loses his sense of ordering the sequential time in a chronological order and this is a clear indicator of the loss of his “subjectivity in relation to the world and his ability to describe his surroundings. In particular, the narrator loses a sense of descriptive power as he tries to define his new environment in his narrative.” (Rock 2010: 266)

The narrator tries to re-locate his own sense of self in relation to the new environment he exists in. The life-in-death experiences of the unnamed narrator are the imaginary analogues of the real author’s death-in-life circumstances and inability to freely express his opinions about the Free State.

The protagonist’s loss of his own identity is visible even from the beginning of the novel, when he points out that John Divney quickly took over his house and farm and started to use the words “we” and “our” as indicators of the ownership of what Divney considered common property. The narrator is thus disempowered by Divney who is also the one who advises him to forget everything about the matter of killing Old Mathers. It is the point when the narrator becomes unable to remember his own name, and consequently starts his existence marked by nullity. Because he has no name, he is subjected to a series of limitations. For example, Old Mathers cannot give him a receipt because he has no name to sign it with, while Pluck decides to hang him precisely because of his anonymity:

“If you have no name you possess nothing and you do not exist and even your trousers are not on you although they look as if they were from where I am sitting. On the other separate hand, you can do what you like and the law cannot touch you . . . And on the first hand again you might be charged with theft or common larceny if you were mistaken for somebody else when wearing the watch.” (O’Brien 1993: 61-62)

But, at the same time, the narrator finds a kind of “self-empowerment and resistance” in his nonexistence “which enables him to gain agency over those who wish to define him through his invisibility.” (Rock 2010: 274) Being able to manoeuvre his flexible self, he takes advantage of his nullity in order to attain his main purpose: finding the black box. He does not realize, though, that this hellish world, the lack of a name equals to the absence of one’s identity, which, according to Pluck, is equivalent to non-existence. The Sergeant explains that because he has no name, the narrator’s life is nothing else but a lie and, therefore, “nothing that happens to you is true”. And this is sufficient a reason to charge him with murder and hang him without even bothering to make an entry in the “death papers”, because, as previously explained, the nullity of his existence implies the fact that his death “is not even a death”. As a result, the protagonist’s demise will become “an inferior phenomenon at the best” and will be reduced to a simple “insanitary abstraction in the backyard, a piece of negative nullity.” (O’Brien 1993: 102)

The place where the events happen, known as the “parish”, a mysterious, complicated labyrinth, a heterotopia, is similar enough to O’Brien’s native Irish landscape, but at the same time it is confusing because everything there seems to be “too pleasant, too perfect, too finely made” (O’Brien 1993: 39) or, as Joe puts it, “[a]nything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed.” (O’Brien 1993: 86) The term *heterotopia* was used by Foucault in his essay *Of Other Spaces* to describe certain spaces that have more meanings than it is first apparent.

Foucault suggests that heterotopias shape people's perception about different aspects of reality while, at the same time, representing a means of eluding authoritarianism. According to the fifth principle of heterotopias explained by Foucault, these places are not easily accessible like the public places, and the individual is either compelled to enter or he must go through certain "rites or purifications" in order to be granted permission. The author further offers the example of a prison or the barracks to illustrate this idea, both acting as spaces of confinement. In the same way, the parish acts as a space of confinement, a prison or a "reformatory" as Hanway calls it, because the narrator enters it but he cannot escape from it. It is a place where individuals undergo transformation in order to be restored to the state. (Foucault 2009: 123)

This new world is confusing due to the fact that everything in it is created according to the idea of parallel universes and alternate dimensions; it is a world in which there are shapes and colours that cannot be named, described or compared to any object that humanity has come to know. Throughout the novel, the policemen remain absorbed by their absurd preoccupations, proving completely ignorant to people and events which are not related to their own interests. Although they have devices that allow them to see and know everything, they understand nothing. By scrupulously controlling meaningless statistics, they manage to enforce their authority over the barracks and the surrounding area.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault traces the history of punishment back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During this time, an execution was a public event therefore it can be argued that the administration of the disciplinary techniques was not limited only to the prison institution, but it became "de-institutionalized" and dispersed throughout the social body, being able to "circulate in a 'free' state." According to Foucault, discipline is disassembled and "broken down into flexible methods of control, which may be transferred and adapted" (Foucault 1995: 227). Thus, the State can accomplish a constant surveillance and the "incessant normalisation of a productive population." (Johnson 2014: 6)

Foucault maintains that the power to punish rests on a set of rules, which can be linked to the unnamed narrator's case:

- "The rule of minimum quantity. A crime is committed because it procures certain advantages." (Foucault 1995: 94) The protagonist murders Mathers hoping that he will acquire a large sum of money so that he could publish his research about an obscure philosopher named de Selby. For his crime, his *amende honorable* consists in a never-ending walk through a circular hell, where he has to take only left turns, in order to get to the same point where he started. What differentiates his punishment from the *amende honorable* described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, is that O'Brien's main character is unable to beg pardon for his deeds and be forgiven because he is incapable of remembering that he has committed a crime in the first place.
- "The rule of sufficient ideality" refers to the fact that if the motive of a crime is the advantage expected of it, then the effectiveness of the penalty is provided by the disadvantages expected of it, i.e., the pain of the punishment is not the actual sensation felt by the body but the idea of pain a punishment could induce. (Foucault 1995: 94)

The protagonist of the novel is actually unaware of the fact that he is doing penance for committing a crime because he does not remember committing it and, as a consequence, his penalty lacks effectiveness. The fear that overcomes him is a result of the fact that he is horrified at the idea of being hanged and by the detailed description of the process of hanging provided by

Sergeant Pluck, during which the narrator will become a “piece of negative nullity neutralised and rendered void by asphyxiation and the fracture of spinal string.” (O’Brien 1993: 102)

The visceral fear the Sergeant induces to the narrator stands as an epitome for the anxiety that the system induces to ordinary individuals through its disciplining and repressive apparatus, or in Foucault’s own words, the effectiveness of punishment “is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime” (Foucault 1995: 9).

- “The rule of perfect certainty” points out that “[w]ith the idea of each crime and the advantages to be expected of it must be associated the idea of a particular punishment with the precise inconveniences that result from it.” (Foucault 1995: 95) The episode when the narrator is taken to eternity and shown a machine that can produce any object he desired is relevant in this respect. When he enters eternity, the narrator is weighted and only after that is he allowed to descend to the lower chambers. Here he encounters a magical machinery which is able to deliver any type of object. The unnamed main character immediately orders himself some gold, a gun, alcohol, precious stones, a suit, banknotes, shoes and other goods and a big bag to carry all his newly acquired commodities. However, his feeling of joy quickly dissipates when he realizes that he cannot take all the wonderful things with him outside this realm because he has to weigh exactly the same as he did when he descended. It can be asserted that this suggests that the governing system wishes to control all individuals by making them to fit into previously established patterns. The narrator bursts into tears as he sees his plans of good fortune shattered into pieces. The system proves to be impassible to human misery and suffering. As Foucault points out, quoting Mably, the system seeks to punish the soul and not the body. The soul thus becomes “the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.” (Foucault 1995: 30)
- “The rule of common truth” indicates that any crimes should be subject to “homogeneous” legal judgement; the crime should be verified according to “the general criteria for all truth” (Foucault 1995: 97). Sergeant Pluck disregards this principle when he decides to hang the narrator without thoroughly looking into the crime he was accused of.

The Sergeant’s decision to hang the protagonist without even inquiring about the circumstances in which the murder was committed and without wondering about the narrator’s innocence, transforms the main character into a scapegoat and reminds us of the opaque criminal procedures specific to most of the European countries in the eighteenth century. Foucault explains that, during this period, the defendant had no knowledge about the charges brought against him or the evidence, which made him very vulnerable. The nameless narrator has no knowledge about the crime he had committed. In addition to forgetting his own name, the author has also forgotten the atrocious crime he was accomplice to and his death. It can be said that his memory loss operates as an act of exculpation. It is only at the end of the novel, when he returns home and sees an aged John Divney, that he realizes he has been dead for quite some time.

Foucault must be acknowledged for associating Bentham’s Panopticon with the policing of the society. The Panopticon is a circular building which is characterised by the existence of a set of double rings: at the centre, there is a tower with windows that open to the inner ring while the peripheral ring is divided into cells that do not communicate with each other; each cell has two windows: one on the inside which coincides with the windows of the tower, and the other on the outside, to let light in. The tower allows the person sitting in it to observe the occupants of the cells without being observed. This form of surveillance is suitable as a method of controlling not

only the members of non-State organizations such as industrial factories, hospitals or schools, but especially the convicts inside a prison, because, as Johnson points out, “[t]he police is a state institution essentially coupled with the prison and one that directly transports disciplinary techniques upon society as a whole.” (Johnson 2014: 7)

The modern society is controlled by a police-state. The panoptic method is a Big Brother type of mechanism characterised by a threefold aspect: surveillance, control, and correction. Foucault uses the theme of the Panopticon to emphasise that surveillance determines the individuals to alter their behaviour. Power can be put to use constantly precisely because individuals apply it to themselves thus converting into “the principle of their own subjection.” (Foucault 1995: 203)

The dyad observer/observed comprised by the panoptic scheme is easily recognizable in *The Third Policeman*, the only difference being that the panoptic device is slightly modified. The people who populate the parish can interact with each other while being under constant surveillance whereas in the Panopticon thick walls divide the cells of the denizens making them invisible to one another. The observer in the central tower is not a single person, as we deal with three policemen who monitor and record all the movements of the inhabitants of this realm.

After escaping the barracks, the narrator reaches Old Mathers’ house, where he sees light coming from one of the windows situated at the upper level. He decides to go in to find out if there was someone inside. Against his expectations, he finds all the rooms empty and gloomy.

This bizarre episode finds its explanation a few pages later, when the unnamed narrator meets Policeman Fox. According to him, he had created his own private police station *inside* the walls of the house, supposedly so that he could keep the costs low. The appearance of this private station is strikingly similar to the architecture proposed by Bentham for the Panopticon, with an observation room situated at a central high point and windows to allow vigilant surveillance:

The dimensions of the place in which I found myself were most unusual. The ceiling seemed extraordinarily high while the floor was so narrow that it would not have been possible for me to pass the policeman ahead if I had desired to do so. He opened a tall door and, walking most awkwardly half-sideways, led the way along a passage still narrower. After passing through another tall door we began to mount an unbelievable square stairs. Each step seemed about a foot in depth, a foot in height and a foot wide . . . We went through another door at the top of the stairs and I found myself in a very surprising apartment . . . Then I saw that there was a small window set deeply in the left wall and that a cold breeze was blowing in through a gaping hole in the lower pane. I walked over and looked out. The lamplight was shining dimly on the foliage of the same tree and I knew that I was standing, not in Mathers' house, *but inside the walls of it.* (O'Brien 1993: 181- 182)

The dissociation of the dyad observer/observed is, therefore, clear: the policeman can see and supervise every movement of those confined on the premises of the parish, record their gestures, locate them at any time, without being seen. The others know he exists, but he cannot be seen. He is “the Willer” since he possesses the *omnium* which, according to MacCruiskeen, is “the essential inherent interior essence which is hidden inside the root of the kernel of everything and it is always the same.” (O'Brien 1993: 110) The *omnium* helps him make things happen according to his own whim; like Thomas Hardy’s Willer, the Third Policeman is insensitive to people’s plight.

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