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NATURE DENATURED IN FLANN O'BRIEN'S THE THIRD POLICEMAN

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Abstract: *The Third Policeman, the last and most complex of the major novels of 'Flann O'Brien' – the Irish satirical writer Brian O'Nolan – is a latecomer in a European movement of anti-naturalism begun by Rimbaud, Zola and Huysmans in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In it, O'Nolan subverts an age-old Irish literary tradition of observing, latterly with nostalgia, the Irish rural landscape. Here a prime irritant to him was his own, mercenary M.A. dissertation on Irish nature poetry that secured him employment in the Irish Civil Service and settled him in a powerfully urban environment.*

The presence of nature in Flann O'Brien's first and experimental novel At Swim-Two-Birds is embodied in the adventures of the two characters, no longer seriously heroic, Finn MacCool and king Sweeny; it is explicitly headed "a humorous...excursion into ancient mythology." Similarly, in the author's only extended book in his native Gaelic, englished as The Poor Mouth, the squalor of a small village in the boglands of the Gaeltacht, traditionally treated with reverence, is portrayed with comic glee.

In The Third Policeman itself, Flann O'Brien begins by subverting the natural world via the theme of "unnatural" buildings in the countryside. Then, as his plot – which is in fact an anti-plot – unfolds episodically, the phenomena of the natural world, described with virtuoso hyperbole, are manipulated in order to reflect the vicissitudes of the simple-minded narrator. This runs out in a superb image of nullity and a Viconian recursus. O'Nolan's strategy can fairly be compared to the use of the chorus in a Greek tragedy; it also to some degree prefigures the landscapes of Samuel Beckett.

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