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Bureaucratic Sorceries in *The Third Policeman*: Anthropological Perspectives on Magic and Officialdom

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This article discusses *The Third Policeman* through the lens of a dialectic of enchantment and disenchantment that is firmly anchored in the history of anthropological discourse on bureaucracy (Malinowski, Lévi-Strauss, Tambiah, Herzfeld, Graeber, Jones). From this angle, Flann O'Brien's novel is examined as an aesthetic illustration of an essentially anthropological argument: although bureaucracy has been described as an eminently rational form of social systematisation, regulation, and control (since Weber), it also functions, paradoxically, as a symbolic site for irrationality and supernatural occurrences, haunted by madness, mystery, and delusion. The novel is intriguing partly due to its nonchalant, humorous entwining of seemingly incompatible imageries (in this case, magic and officialdom) – a strategy that proves effective not only for creating fantastic ambiguity, but also for reworking a predilect theme of bureaucratic fiction: the coexistence of rational and irrational modes of thinking, in an infinite circling around the absurd oddities of an incomprehensible Law and the impenetrable opacity of its higher powers.

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‘Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third summons, he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage.’

(Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*)

At first glance, bureaucracy and magic evoke incompatible sets of social practices. They are also different kinds of ‘affective arrangements,’ defined by Jan Slaby as ‘unique constellation[s] of a particular affect-intensive site of social life.’¹ On the one hand, bureaucracy draws its legitimacy from the authority of impersonal and impartial reasoning used to generate and maintain written records that formalise human interactions. Magic, on the other hand, organises the world on mysterious grounds, using a non-positivist logic (magical thinking, arbitrary associations, thwarted causality) that is heavily involved with the occult. It may, thus, seem surprising that the history of anthropological discourse includes scattered evidence that bureaucracy and magic occasionally overlap in their definitions, practices, or functions.

This article draws an inventory of such fragments, looking for points of convergence and divergence between bureaucracy and magic – two apparently incongruous modes of world-systematising agency. In this light, Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* functions as a case study for bureaucratic narratives that play on the tension between unrealistic, supernatural occurrences and the Weberian hypothesis (contested many times over since its first articulation) that administration is an eminently rational endeavour. However, the novel is not singular in this respect within O’Brien’s larger literary output. His fiction dwells, as Joseph Brooker puts it, ‘on the collision of the mundane and the fantastic’² – a tension that has become an integral part of his stylistic signature. Val Nolan makes a similar observation and situates the author in relation to the specificity of his national context: ‘his portrayal of the confrontation between the rational and the irrational [is] a conflict characteristic of much of the Irish fantasy tradition. This tension between logic and lunacy is one of the fundamental aspects of O’Brien’s writing.’³ The vocabulary of ‘confrontation,’ ‘tension,’ and ‘collision,’ frequently deployed in such critical appraisals, attests to the extraordinary narrative potential mobilised by this conflict and the symbolic violence that fuels it.

The main stake of my argument is to introduce an anthropological approach to the already existing landscape of interpretive frameworks for Flann O’Brien’s bureaucratic fiction, looking to provide new critical language for his deployment of non-realistic

¹ Jan Slaby, ‘Affective Arrangement,’ in *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*, eds. Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve (New York: Routledge, 2019), 109.

² Joseph Brooker, *Flann O’Brien* (Devon: Northcote, 2005), 4.

³ Val Nolan, ‘Flann, Fantasy, and Science-Fiction: O’Brien’s Surprising Synthesis,’ *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 179.

elements to articulate real social critique. As hinted above, O'Brien scholars have often addressed his ability to craft worlds 'where basic rules of common sense of logic do not apply.'⁴ Some critics, like Brooker, refer to O'Brien's as a 'fantasy logic,'⁵ in which the 'wildest fancies [...] have their own kind of internal coherence' and are at once 'fascinated by, and parasitic upon' more conventional forms of rationality, like scientific logic.⁶ Herbert Fackler explains the mechanism:

in his construction of hell, O'Brien poses an atmosphere in which natural law is either suspended or reversed. The very diction of the novel mirrors this disjuncture; the normal quasi-logical order of discussion is frequently discarded in favour of antinomy, non-sequitur, and other disorderly rhetorical devices. [...] [R]eality, or at least commonly held conceptions of it, is mangled, but it is done obliquely by using a rational philosophical position in an illogical, irrational, and confusing context.⁷

Elsewhere, Brooker associates O'Brien's use of the irrational with a specific strand of fantastic literature, akin to the paranoid mood of Philip K. Dick's science-fiction or – unsurprisingly – of Kafka's prose.⁸ Robert Maslen also adopts the fantasy hypothesis,⁹ while John Attridge¹⁰ and Carol Taaffe read these manifestations of irrationality as 'nonsense,' in the sense in which 'nonsense writing stretches logic to its illogical ends, exposing the irrationality of rational thinking.'¹¹ Attridge qualifies this component of O'Brien's writing as 'unintelligible realities'¹² used to trigger 'puzzling effects of incomprehension'¹³ with the help of 'incomprehensible objects and stupefying artifacts and contraptions.'¹⁴ Flore Coulouma will later challenge the use of the term 'nonsense'

⁴ Tamara Radak, "Walking Forever on Falling Ground": Closure, Hypertext, and the Textures of Possibility in *The Third Policeman*, in *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, eds. Ruben Borg, Paul Fagan, and John McCourt (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 245.

⁵ Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 52.

⁶ Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 56.

⁷ Herbert V. Fackler, 'Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*: Banjacking Natural Order,' *South Central Bulletin*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Winter 1978): 143.

⁸ Joseph Brooker, 'Do Bicycles Dream of Atomic Sheep? Forms of the Fantastic in Flann O'Brien and Philip K. Dick,' *The Parish Review: Journal of Flann O'Brien Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 16.

⁹ Robert W. Maslen, 'Fantastic Economies: Flann O'Brien and James Stephens,' in Borg, Fagan, and McCourt (eds.), *Flann O'Brien: Problems with Authority*, 136–51.

¹⁰ John Attridge, 'Nonsense, Ordinary language Philosophy, and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*,' *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2 (2014): 298–319.

¹¹ Carol Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na gCopaleen and Irish Cultural Debate* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 69.

¹² Attridge, 'Nonsense,' 311.

¹³ Attridge, 'Nonsense,' 302.

¹⁴ Attridge, 'Nonsense,' 303.

in this context, with an argument inspired by Wittgenstein.¹⁵ Val Nolan emphasises the uniquely Irish aspects of O'Brien's fictional ventures into the unreasonable, pointing to Ireland's rich folkloric tradition as a singular form of speculative literature. Hugh Kenner, too, mentions O'Brien's pagan Irish antecedents,¹⁶ which Nolan sees further combined with a modern 'idiom of science and technology.'¹⁷ The latter also uses explicitly the word 'magic' in relation to O'Brien's writing, paraphrasing Arthur C. Clarke's observation that science is virtually 'indistinguishable from magic'¹⁸ and then drawing a connection with Ireland's own brand of 'systematised' fantasy. He postulates a historical fascination with institutionalised forms of enchantment:

In an Irish context, this term 'magic' is further indistinguishable from that of 'fantasy,' and is apparent not only in the supernatural strain of traditional Irish culture and literature [...] but also through the belief in and in deference to the various characters and dogmas of the Catholic faith, a facet of Irish social history which constitutes systematised fantasy on a grand scale and little more than the practice of magical rites and rituals by another name.¹⁹

Grounding my study in a critical tradition which already takes note of the multiple tensions between bureaucratic rationality and magical thinking in O'Brien's work, I am looking to unpack them further by adopting an anthropological angle.

Before entering the realm of anthropological discourse on magic *per se*, I must briefly introduce the prevalent theoretical framework describing bureaucratic systems. It belongs to the German sociologist Max Weber, who understood bureaucracy as a form of rational organisation of social action. For Weber, the sweeping process of modernisation accompanying the Industrial Revolution brought about tendencies of 'increasing intellectualisation and rationalisation,' which convinced people that 'there are no mysterious incalculable forces' and, therefore, 'one no longer needs to have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits, as did the savage, for whom such mysterious powers existed. Technical means and calculations perform the service.'²⁰ As

¹⁵ Flore Coulouma, 'Making Sense of N/nonsense in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* and *The Third Policeman*: A Wittgensteinian Perspective,' *Corela: Cognition, Representation, Language* 10 (2012): <https://doi.org/10.4000/corela.2449>.

¹⁶ Hugh Kenner, 'The Fourth Policeman,' in *Conjuring Complexities: Essays on Flann O'Brien*, eds. Anne Clune and Tess Hurson (Antrim: W. & G. Baird, 1997).

¹⁷ Nolan, 'Flann, Fantasy, and Science-Fiction,' 178–90.

¹⁸ Arthur C. Clarke, 'Hazards of Prophecy: The Failure of Imagination,' in *Profiles of the Future: An Enquiry into the Limits of the Possible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962, rev. 1973), 36. Cited in Nolan, 'Flann, Fantasy, and Science-Fiction,' 179.

¹⁹ Nolan, 'Flann, Fantasy, and Science-Fiction,' 179.

²⁰ Max Weber, 'Bureaucracy,' in *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978 [1922]), 956–1005.

an eminently rational endeavour inherent to the emancipation of modern societies from the more primitive magical thinking, bureaucracy is, according to Weber, characterised by a set of ideal and immutable principles over which towers impersonal and objective reason. Bureaucracies aim to function impartially, discarding emotions (unpredictable manifestations of subjectivity) and virtually anything that may 'escape calculation.'²¹ To achieve this ideal and thus be able to guarantee the predictability of rules and outcomes, bureaucracies require a stable distribution of authority, strictly delimited by regulations and procedures. Such systems rely on technical, specialised knowledge, often articulated in official jargon that feed into a policy of 'functionally motivated secrecy'²² that advances in direct relation with hierarchical status. Precision, speed, continuity in execution of highly specialised tasks are, according to Weber, other values associated with bureaucratic settings.²³ But this list of traits does not apply exclusively to the work of a bureaucratic agent; indeed, there are countless examples of human activity (including magic) which require trained knowledge and precision, to say nothing of speed. I argue, however, that there is a particular overlap between the workings of bureaucracy and magic in need of closer examination: namely, their reliance on the performativity of procedure, strict rules, and 'functionally motivated secrecy.' Weber himself notes bureaucrats' tendency to isolate themselves and hide away from the public. Even the most ardent champion of bureaucratic rationality admits that 'the concept of the "office secret" is the specific invention of bureaucracy, and few things it defends so fanatically as this attitude which [...], cannot be justified with purely functional arguments.'²⁴ This is the first crack in the Weberian hypothesis according to which everything bureaucratic is necessarily reasonable. The label of fanaticism applied to bureaucratic behaviour has been prolifically unpacked by Benjamin Lewis Robinson with regard to other fictional deployments of administrative scrupulousness bordering on madness.²⁵

Magic would then appear out of place in the reason-driven bureaucratic system described by Weber – if by 'magic' we understand 'the use of ritual activities or observances which are intended to influence the course of events or to manipulate the

²¹ Weber, 'Bureaucracy,' 975.

²² Weber, 'Bureaucracy,' 992.

²³ Weber, 'Bureaucracy,' 973: 'The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organisation has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organisation. The fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organisations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration, and especially in its monocratic form.'

²⁴ Weber, 'Bureaucracy,' 992.

²⁵ Benjamin Lewis Robinson, *Bureaucratic Fanatics: Modern Literature and the Passions of Rationalization* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019).

natural world, usually involving the use of an occult or secret body of knowledge' (*OED*), or a spectacular performance based on a distorted sense of causality, modified through deception and illusion. However, magic and bureaucracy already intersect in their use of repetitiveness, performativity, secrecy, and highly specialised knowledge rendered in incomprehensible jargon. In the light of these similarities, though, can we continue to think of bureaucracy as an eminently reasonable and objective system?

The Third Policeman seems to pose this very question, 'packed with mysteries' as it is, and having been famously rejected from publication 'on grounds of being unreasonable.'²⁶ O'Brien openly acknowledges his intentional contestation of administrative rationality when he describes the stakes of the novel in a letter to Longman: 'The whole point of my plan will be the perfectly logical and matter-of-fact treatment of the most brain-staggering imponderables of the policemen.'²⁷ Resistant to the expressive forces of language, the imponderable and the brain-staggering are camouflaged by secrecy and the unsayable; to quote Fackler without repeating his detailed examples, 'perhaps the most basic quality of O'Brien's hell is ineffability. Over and over the narrator has ill-defined feelings he cannot adequately express.'²⁸ The novel is filled with facts, characters, and affects that, as Weber would put it, 'escape calculation'²⁹ and, therefore, cannot be properly articulated and domesticated through language. More examples will follow in a later section of the article, but the title of the novel already refers to 'an incontestable character and a man of ungovernable inexactitudes.'³⁰

Proving Weber's point about professionally-motivated secrecy increasing with rank, Policeman Fox, who holds the most authority, is also the most elusive. His spatio-temporal situatedness is as problematic as his identity:

He is down there beyant somewhere during the daytime but we have never seen him there, he might be in a distinctive portion of it that he found from a separate ceiling in a different house and indeed the unreasonable jumps of the lever-reading would put you in mind that there is unauthorised interference with the works. He is as crazy as bedamned.³¹

The only fact that may be determined with certainty about Fox is his constant preoccupation with writing, to which he participates with his entire being:

²⁶ Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 45.

²⁷ Flann O'Brien, *The Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX : Dalkey Archive, 2018), 48.

²⁸ Fackler, 'Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*,' 143.

²⁹ Weber, 'Bureaucracy,' 975.

³⁰ Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002), 152.

³¹ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 152.

The policeman had opened a thick ledger which looked like the half of a longer book which had been sawn in two to fit the narrow table. He put several questions to me about the lamp and wrote down my replies very laboriously in the book, scratching his pen noisily and breathing heavily through his nose, pausing occasionally in his blowing when some letter of the alphabet gave him special difficulty. I surveyed him carefully as he sat absorbed in the task of writing.³²

Focusing exclusively on his writing, Fox becomes 'a pure recording entity.'³³ In this respect, he is not unlike Bartleby, Herman Melville's scrivener, with whom he shares a spectral quality.³⁴ Albeit inconceivable for a real bureaucratic agent who needs to be traceable for accountability reasons, the generalised aura of indeterminacy surrounding Policeman Fox is consistent with the principle of self-effacement, as well as with the secrecy professed by bureaucrats and magicians alike:

'Policeman Fox is the third of us,' said the Sergeant, 'but we never see him or hear tell of him at all because he is always on his beat and never off it and he signs the book in the middle of the night when even a badger is asleep. He is as mad as a hare, he never interrogates the public and he is always taking notes.'³⁵

I agree here with Maslen, who points out that O'Brien's fantastic economies are pervaded by a 'sense of the self-encroaching dissolution or erasure of the self.'³⁶ Although lower in the hierarchy of the barracks, Policeman MacCruiskeen also prides himself on professional secrecy and classified knowledge: 'Only myself has the secret of the thing and the intimate way of it, the confidential knack of circumventing it.'³⁷

The history of anthropological discourse provides a complementary angle for exploring in more detail the overlap between magic and bureaucracy. As early as 1922,³⁸ Bronisław Malinowski described the magical practices of several native tribes in the Western Pacific in Weberian terms, echoing *avant la lettre* his definition of bureaucracy

³² O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 184.

³³ Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

³⁴ Another office worker populating O'Brien's fictional universe, John Duffy's brother (protagonist of the eponymous short story) is sketched just as apophatically, and his secrecy plays a key role in the narrative: 'the man who had the strange experience we are going to talk about never mentioned it to anybody, and the fact that he kept his secret and sealed it up completely in his memory is the whole point of the story.' Flann O'Brien, 'John Duffy's Brother,' in *Stories and Plays* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1991), 75.

³⁵ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 77.

³⁶ Maslen, 'Fantastic Economies,' 148.

³⁷ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 75.

³⁸ It is a telling coincidence that Weber's *Economy and Society* was published for the first time in the same year.

by placing emphasis on concepts such as systematisation, regulation, and control. For Malinowski, magical agency requires forms of seemingly redundant and highly normative specialised labour: ‘magic is a systematising, regulating, and controlling influence’ which ‘also imposes on the tribe a good deal of extra work, of apparently unnecessary, hampering taboos and regulations.’³⁹ In another one of his studies, the founding father of social anthropology continues to unknowingly consolidate this overlap with Weber’s theory of bureaucracy, noting that magic requires precision and the repetitive performance of rituals, as well as unquestioning, impersonal, and objective adhesion to a normative apparatus. According to him, magic implies the ‘exact remembrance of a spell, unimpeachable performance of the rite, unswerving adhesion to the taboos and observances which shackle the magician.’⁴⁰ These similitudes indicate, then, a deeper kinship between the normative character of both magic and bureaucracy. Malinowski’s observations seem to indicate that, given their shared reliance on performative speech acts and behavioural formalisms, bureaucracy may be a modern manifestation of ritualised magic, its historical and secularised descendant in the praxis of exercising authority.

Three decades later, anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss describes in his *Tristes Tropiques* the so-called ‘Nambikwara writing lesson’: the leader of a Brazilian tribe with an exclusively oral culture has an intuition that power may be derived from writing and maintaining administrative records.⁴¹ The chief attributes magical powers to what is, unbeknownst to him, a list – a basic genre of administrative writing. Wishing to appropriate this newly identified power, he begins to fake the acts of reading and writing in front of his tribe, in a performative act meant to increase his political and social authority. The episode would explain MacCruiskeen’s reverence describing Fox’s incessant writing. It is also consistent with Tamara Radak’s observation that, in *The Third Policeman*, ‘claims to authority are [...] inextricably connected to establishing a sense of order and structuring experience.’⁴²

Stanley J. Tambiah is another anthropologist whose work deals extensively with the performative aspects of both language and rituals, be they magical, scientific, or religious. His argument, further developed by Michael Herzfeld in *The Social Production of Indifference*, is that ‘a narrow distinction between pre-bureaucratic and disenchanted states of the world overlooks the rhetorical character of the numerous

³⁹ Bronisław Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2013 [1922]), 60.

⁴⁰ Bronisław Malinowski, *Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1992 [1925]), 65.

⁴¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 [1955]), 296.

⁴² Radak, ‘Walking Forever on Falling Ground,’ 246.

ways in which state functionaries conjure up, and conjure with, the very notion of “rationality”.⁴³ Herzfeld adds that luck and sorcery used to be seen as ‘a characteristic of the pre-bureaucratic way of thinking.’⁴⁴ Both agree that the advent of bureaucracy is not necessarily related to modernity’s passage from irrationality to reason, from enchantment to disenchantment. In fact, for Herzfeld, the functioning of modern bureaucracies requires more irrationality than most would be comfortable to admit: ‘the fact that the modern world appears disenchanted in relation to its seemingly reverent forerunners should not lead us to take its rationalist claims 100% literally. It, too, rests on utopian and cosmological foundations.’⁴⁵ He agrees with David Graeber: ‘all bureaucracies are to a certain degree utopian, in the sense that they propose an abstract ideal that real human beings can never live up to.’⁴⁶ Finally, Herzfeld argues that, much like magic,

bureaucratic procedure typically objectifies society as a model made out of language, and then performs certain operations upon that model. Authenticity is a ritualistic system of securing one’s place in the cosmos. This sounds like sorcery. The analogy [...] is not farfetched. Bureaucrats work on the categories of social existence in much the same way as sorcerers are supposed to work on the hair or nail clippings of their intended victims. Their [...] actions, like those of most ritual practitioners, pragmatically aim to draw the powers of the reified cosmos into the pursuit of immediate goals.⁴⁷

The phrase ‘bureaucratic sorceries,’ first coined by Herzfeld and used in the title of one of the subchapters in his book,⁴⁸ refers to the shared grounding of bureaucracy and magic in repetitive, ritualistic performances of speech acts, serving to orient the subject within an artificial order imposed upon the world.

In his 2015 *The Utopia of Rules*, David Graeber speaks of the cult for official papers maintained by societies in which written records gain a status equivalent to that of magical objects, conveying power in their own right and exceeding their own textuality. He also discusses the often-encountered belief in the infallible, ‘magical efficiency’ of

⁴³ Stanley J. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24, and Michael Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), 62.

⁴⁴ Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference*, 53.

⁴⁵ Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference*, 65.

⁴⁶ David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (London: Melville House, 2015), 26.

⁴⁷ Herzfeld, *The Social Production of Indifference*, 65.

⁴⁸ Herzfeld, ‘Bureaucratic and Nationalistic Sorceries,’ in *The Social Production of Indifference*, 62–5.

bureaucratic machinery.⁴⁹ Graeber does not miss the occasion to contradict Weber's ideal of impersonality and objectivity, introducing fictionality and arbitrariness as more realistic determinants of actual bureaucratic processes.⁵⁰ But more interestingly for our reading of *The Third Policeman*, Graeber sees in fantasy literature 'an attempt to imagine a world utterly purged of bureaucracy, which readers enjoy both as a form of vicarious escapism and as reassurance that ultimately, a boring, administered world is probably preferable to any imaginable alternative.'⁵¹ He advances the concept of 'anti-bureaucratic narratives' but dismisses it soon after, admitting that even fantasy worlds are permeated, through the mediation of magic, by bureaucratic principles. This mediation becomes apparent as soon as fantastic literature uses (as it always does) hierarchies, specialised agency, procedures disguised as rites of passage, formulaic language:

For one thing, the old imaginary cosmic administration of the Middle Ages is not entirely negated in most fantasy worlds. [...] the complex logical orders of spells, orders, powers, influences, celestial spheres with their different powers and denominations and areas of administrative responsibility: all these tend to be preserved, in one form or another, as at least one hidden potential form of power within the fabric of the antibureaucratic universe itself.⁵²

Doing away with artificial distinctions between bureaucratic and pre-bureaucratic eras or narratives, *Magic's Reason* by Graham Jones demonstrates that the principles of analogy and disanalogy on which magical thinking was based remain very much at home in modernity, including in bureaucratic settings. They are, in themselves, forms of reasoning that cannot be accurately labelled as entirely irrational.⁵³ Deconstructing the tensions between reason and unreason and questioning the two terms by revealing their interdependence in the specific context of magical practices, Jones brings up another feature shared by both bureaucracy and magic. Following up on a hypothesis formulated by Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert,⁵⁴ he argues that, by emphasising elements of trickery, magic aims to replace reality with an assemblage of representations, whose effectiveness is attributed only to the power of conventions, symbols, and beliefs. In other words, magic can be described as a socially accepted set of conventions, a

⁴⁹ Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 22.

⁵⁰ Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 27.

⁵¹ Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 107.

⁵² Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules*, 107.

⁵³ Graham Jones, *Magic's Reason: An Anthropology of Analogy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017), 26.

⁵⁴ Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, 'Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie,' in *Année sociologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1902–1903), 143.

collectively maintained and curated labour of pure fiction whose coherence is granted by a narrative form: 'It is the domain of pure production, ex nihilo, accomplishing with words and gestures what technique accomplishes through labour [...] [I]t is always the easiest technique. It avoids effort because it successfully replaces reality with images. It does nothing, or next to nothing, but it makes people believe everything.'⁵⁵

The same could be said about bureaucracy: an entire tradition of scholarship deals with the fictional nature of social constructs. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'state magic,' for example, refers to 'bureaucratic manoeuvres that, in one sense, change nothing, and, in another sense, change everything,' being responsible for the ontological transformation of concrete objects and situations into entities with political and symbolic significance.⁵⁶ Cornelius Castoriadis writes extensively on the fictitious character of social institutions.⁵⁷ The plot of *The Third Policeman* increasingly conveys this idea to the narrator, whose encounters with bureaucratic authority move away from realistic and reasonable expectations to a form of magical realism quick to accommodate the most fantastic and irrational of developments. Although the narrator exposes the authority of the three police officers 'as a poorly veiled fiction and acknowledges the constructed nature of their claims to power,' Radak notes that 'he succumbs to their macabre games and questionings for lack of an alternative set of coordinates by which he could measure or structure his experience in The Parish.'⁵⁸ Even when denounced for its artificiality, fictional bureaucracy retains its symbolic power.

These landmarks of the history of anthropological discourse repeatedly contest Weber's theory of bureaucracy as an eminently rational social construct. *The Third Policeman* plays precisely with the rhetorical and performative components demonstrated here to be inherent to the functioning of bureaucracies. It also indirectly advises caution in overinvesting administration with more rationality than it disposes of. When contrasted with the rigor of the idealised pure, impersonal reason, bureaucratic ritualistic performance and fictional social spectacle leaves a lot of room for subjectivity and arbitrariness – hence the novel's absurdist dialogues on the formalities of bike-theft investigations or the sentencing of anonymous legal subjects. Michel Crozier has explicitly assimilated such instances of formalised conduct to ritualist attitudes: 'traditionally, the bureaucratic personality has been viewed as developing around ritualistic behaviour.'⁵⁹ Although rituals may contribute to an increase of symbolic

⁵⁵ Mauss and Hubert, 'Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie,' 143.

⁵⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 374.

⁵⁷ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 372.

⁵⁸ Radak, 'Walking Forever on Falling Ground,' 246.

⁵⁹ Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), 198.

power and authority, they constitute more of a weakness and a hindrance when it comes to the efficiency of the bureaucratic system. As Crozier notes, ‘bureaucrats show ritualist attitudes that make them unable to adjust adequately to the problems they must solve.’⁶⁰ *The Third Policeman* does not refrain from exploiting these formal inadequacies to ends both humorous and serious (social and institutional critique). O’Brien exposes the inadequacy of rigid bureaucratic procedure when applied to irregular realities – something he attempted to fix in his career as well: ‘Simultaneously state employee and critic of national development, he produced an idiosyncratic immanent critique of independent Ireland. [...] It was not only in conjuring a trinity of impossible policemen that Brian O’Nolan set his imagination to work on Ireland’s law.’⁶¹ In his fiction, this critique is taken to extremes with the help of ‘alternative scenarios of law-making and law-enforcement.’⁶² A good illustration of this is the question of names, more specifically the chaos that ensues from their absence – a chaos generated not so much by an ontological loss or a crisis of personal identity, but by the unworkable difficulties anonymity poses to the bureaucratic order:

‘I have no name,’ I replied.

‘Then how could I tell you where the box was if you could not sign a receipt? That would be most irregular. I might as well give it to the west wind or to the smoke from a pipe. How could you execute an important Bank document?’

‘I can always get a name,’ I replied. ‘Doyle or Spaldman is a good name and so is O’Sweeny and Hardiman and O’Gara. I can take my choice. I am not tied down for life to one word like most people.’⁶³

When the arbitrariness of names (and, by extension, of the entire nominal system of language)⁶⁴ is exposed, the gap between the signified and interchangeable empty signifiers swells to grotesque proportions. The unnameable, the unclassifiable, the disordered are, in a bureaucratic logic, monstrosities – accordingly, they generate terrifying horror in *The Third Policeman*. The novel highlights such irregular appearances ‘at the edges of possibility, and tampers with them to disconcerting effect.’⁶⁵ Everything is allowed in its fictional universe: from transcendental agency

⁶⁰ Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, 179.

⁶¹ Joseph Brooker, ‘Estopped by Grand Playsaunce: Flann O’Brien’s Post-Colonial Lore,’ *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2004): 37.

⁶² Brooker, ‘Estopped by Grand Playsaunce,’ 16.

⁶³ O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 31.

⁶⁴ Announced by Ferdinand de Saussure’s *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916).

⁶⁵ Brooker, *Flann O’Brien*, 59–60.

(assuming the action takes place in the narrator's afterlife, where he is punished for his deeds) to the complete suspension of the most basic principles of physics (like the idea that cyclists swap atoms with their vehicles or, indeed, most of de Selby's theories). This radical form of imaginative freedom (obtained by challenging basic assumptions and questioning shared normative regimes) allows for infinite possibilities and wonder. It also inaugurates a terrifyingly ungovernable jurisdiction, one that can become as unpredictable, cruel, and violent as it is good-humoured. At once dreamlike and nightmarish, reassuring and threatening, the order presented in the novel is thoroughly disconcerting and ultimately opaque: 'He now looked so innocent and good natured and so troubled by the writing of simple words. [...] Perhaps I was dreaming or in the grip of some horrible hallucination. There was much I did not understand and possibly could never understand to my dying day.'⁶⁶

Favouring a logic of dreams and mystery, *The Third Policeman* challenges the centrality of reason that Weber grants to bureaucratic systems. In Brooker's words, the novel deploys the 'outlandish imagination of a modern fairy tale' as 'an excuse to tinker with reality.'⁶⁷ O'Brien's deconstruction of bureaucratic categories and principles such as identity, authority, and hierarchy destabilises boundaries between magic and officialdom. As shown above, these boundaries had already been blurred by anthropological and sociological discourse several decades earlier. *The Third Policeman* and the discourse of social sciences thus converge in their (intentional or unintentional) demonstration that Weber's thesis on bureaucracy is not as stable and solid as it may have originally seemed.

The antinomies separating bureaucracy from ritualised magic practices begin to fall apart, leaving the centre stage to numerous similarities in their use of language, rationality, social performativity, symbolic constructs, and material artifacts. Already with Herzfeld, Crozier, and Graeber, anthropology's description of the bureaucratic apparatus recalls the way in which prestidigitation tricks in stage magic is able to call things in and out of being. Moreover, the humour in *The Third Policeman* is often produced by the seamless juxtaposition of fantastic tropes (death-predicting gowns) with 'the comedy of metalanguage ballooning to outperform its ostensible subject'⁶⁸ that is manifest in administrative talk: 'First of all the police refuse to let you have the gowns together on the ground that the general ascertainment of death-days would be contrary to the public interest.'⁶⁹ Supernatural elements and prosaic boilerplate coexist

⁶⁶ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 185.

⁶⁷ Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 53.

⁶⁸ Joseph Brooker, "'That Carrousel Inside and Outside My Head": Flann O'Brien and *Pale Fire*,' *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 127.

⁶⁹ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 34.

in one sentence, so that the contrast between the two registers frustrates expectations of the seriousness and gravity usually attributed to bureaucratic settings. Beyond the mere presence of impossible objects (the gowns, the metaphysical omnium, and other supernatural paraphernalia), the presence of magic is also quite explicit in the novel: the characters are ‘calmly making ribbons of the natural order, inventing intricate and unheard of machinery to delude the other policemen, interfering drastically with time to make them think they had been leading their magical lives for years, bewildering, horrifying and enchanting the whole countryside.’⁷⁰ To deepen the confusion, the presence of magic is also dismissed, at the very moment of its affirmation, by the promise of a simple, all-encompassing reasonable explanation (which, however, never arrives):

‘You thought there was magic in it, not to mention monkey-work of no mean order? [...] But it can all be explained, it was very simple and the way it was all worked will astonish you when I tell you.’ His offer to explain hundreds of miracles in one simple explanation was very tempting.⁷¹

Such fragments acquire meta-fictional resonance, anticipating Tzvetan Todorov’s 1970 theory of the fantastic as a genre born from the hesitation between a rational and an irrational explanation of an ambiguous event.⁷²

This permanent hesitation exceeds the cognitive, epistemic level of the reading experience, and soon spreads to its affective regime: the narrative’s mood shifts abruptly from wonder to horror (‘the murk of doubt and fear and wonder that was anchored on my brain like a raincloud on a hill.’)⁷³ Bureaucracy and supernatural agency may both inflict awe and reverence, but also fears of omnipotent authority. Memorable in this regard is the episode with the chests encased like Russian dolls, where the game of prestidigitation and the endless showcasing of boxes can be deciphered as a sharp critique of precise systematisation, repetition, and infinite, self-referential proliferation (as bureaucratic principles). This critique, again, takes on a metafictional significance, challenging not only administrative authority but also ‘the authority of narrative closure.’⁷⁴ The chests, much like de Selby’s mirrors, are instances of ‘infinitely repeating series’ that echo ‘the repetitive structure of the novel itself’⁷⁵ and its circular logic, ‘hooking the end of the

⁷⁰ O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 188.

⁷¹ O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 187.

⁷² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* [1970], trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973).

⁷³ O’Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 125.

⁷⁴ Radak, ‘Walking Forever on Falling Ground,’ 242.

⁷⁵ Brooker, *Flann O’Brien*, 58.

narrative to its beginning, and dashing any hope of progress.⁷⁶ The infernal undertones of irrationality reigning here are obvious: The Parish is 'an eerie hell in which reason is perpetually thwarted.'⁷⁷ The author himself acknowledges the 'peculiar recursive structure of the novel'⁷⁸ in a note publishers later appended to some editions of the novel: 'Hell goes round and round. In shape it is circular and by nature it is interminable, repetitive, and very nearly unbearable.'⁷⁹

The forces governing this fictional universe are affective, 'escaping calculation,' rather than rational: 'fantastic fears and hopes, inexpressible fancies, intoxicating foreshadowing of creations, changes, annihilations and God-like interferences.'⁸⁰ This makes them not just difficult to comprehend, but also ungovernable through Weberian means. Radak notes 'the narrator's inability to impose any kind of order onto the chaotic (and therefore frightening) world of The Parish,' which goes on to create 'a sense of unstable and oscillating power structures.'⁸¹

In this light, O'Brien creates an atmosphere characteristic of a tradition of bureaucratic mysticism that can be retraced back to Kafka. *The Third Policeman* echoes the sheer terror of infinite bureaucratic deferral experienced by a powerless subject lured by an inaccessible light in Kafka's parable 'Before the Law'⁸² (also cited in *The Trial*, the bureaucratic novel *par excellence*). A gatekeeper prevents Kafka's protagonist, an anonymous man from the countryside, from passing through a door behind which an inviting light indicates the presence of The Law. The gatekeeper reveals that he is only the first and least terrifying in a deployment of guardians of the Law, and that trespassing this first door will only lead to more doors, guarded by increasingly merciless guards who are ready to inflict monstrous punishments for unauthorised access. Aside from the infinite seriality mentioned above, O'Brien's narrator offers an account that is very similar to Kafka's story: 'I felt I was standing within three yards of something unspeakably inhuman and diabolical which was using its trick of light to lure me on to something still more horrible.'⁸³ Figures of authority are not without

⁷⁶ Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 51.

⁷⁷ Jennika Baines, "'Un-Understandable Mystery": Catholic Faith and Revelation in *The Third Policeman*,' *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 31, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 79.

⁷⁸ Baines, 'Un-Understandable Mystery,' 50-1.

⁷⁹ Cited in Brooker, *Flann O'Brien*, 51, who references the 1993 edition of the novel published by Flamingo (London), 270. The note has not been added to the 2002 Dalkey Archive edition I am citing throughout this article.

⁸⁰ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 189.

⁸¹ Radak, 'Walking Forever on Falling Ground,' 244-5.

⁸² Franz Kafka, 'Before the Law,' in *Kafka's Selected Short Stories* (Norton Critical Edition), ed. Stanley Corngold (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 68-9.

⁸³ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 178.

mystical appeal and the obedience they command has been proven to have its origin in ancient religious systems.⁸⁴

Apart from the merciless gatekeeper of the Law in Kafka's parable, the language of trickery and diabolic monstrosity used by O'Brien may also invoke to some readers the silhouette of Mephistopheles in Goethe's eighteenth-century *Faust*. Myles na Gopaleen's *Faustus Kelly* attests to O'Nolan's interest in the Goethean narrative.⁸⁵ The play reframes and reverses the myth, pitting the devil against Irish local government bureaucracy. But already in the original play Mephisto is, himself, a bureaucratic figure of sorts: a scrupulous demon in charge with signing contracts and collecting souls on the stipulated date, acting as an agent on behalf of the devil himself. The revelation that *The Third Policeman* is set in the afterlife of an eternally damned narrator only contributes to a further comparison with the Goethean plot.

This possible reference to the German play (and the entire folkloric tradition behind it) points to the novel's wealth of theatrical craft and ingenious artifice. But while in Goethe's *Faust* the demon's occult performance is majestic and impeccably executed, in *The Third Policeman* the dysfunctional bureaucracy resembles a failed magic show. Its falsity and artificial nature are denounced almost on every occasion as unconvincing, in a repeated reminder of the fictional and rhetorical underpinnings of both bureaucracy and magic. Even Sergeant Pluck's monstrosity, for example, fails to be entirely convincing. The overall effect of his appearance is that of a poorly assembled artificial creature: 'ordinary enough as each part of him looked by itself, they all seemed to create together, by some undetectable discrepancy in association or proportion, a very disquieting impression of unnaturalness, amounting almost to what was horrible and monstrous.'⁸⁶ The cheapness of the tricks matches the dilapidated setting and the makeshift stage props: 'it looked completely false and unconvincing. It did not seem to have any depth or breadth and looked as if it would not deceive a child.'⁸⁷ And further: 'I had never seen with my eyes ever in my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions were missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder.'⁸⁸ The entire spectacle is reminiscent of the deceptive use of administrative

⁸⁴ See Vismann's study for a more detailed analysis of the religious origins of the spatial enclosure of bureaucratic chambers. Also, see *Figures of Authority: Contributions towards a Cultural history of Governance from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Peter Becker and Rüdiger von Krosigk (Wien: Peter Lang, 2008).

⁸⁵ Myles na Gopaleen, *Faustus Kelly*, in Flann O'Brien, *Stories and Plays*, 95–166. I am again thankful to Jonathan Foster for this reference.

⁸⁶ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 54.

⁸⁷ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 198.

⁸⁸ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 53.

writing in the episode described by Lévi-Strauss, in the sense that it announces its own artificiality as nothing more than an improvised performance.

The narrator is told that such increasingly 'brain-staggering' scenes are driven by simple logic and causality: 'Like everything that is hard to believe and difficult to comprehend, [...] it is very simple and a neighbour's child could work it all without being trained.'⁸⁹ This remark denounces the essential vacuity ('an astonishing parade of nullity'⁹⁰) of the specialised knowledge that hides the artificiality of the work performed by bureaucrats and prestidigitators alike. Both operate plays of substitutions, generate representations, and produce distorted (or schematic) realities mediated by the sheer symbolic power with which they are endowed through socially accepted conventions and ceremonies: 'Anything can be said in this place and it will be true and will have to be believed.'⁹¹

The narrator's anonymity grants him a magic invisibility in the eyes of the law. The simple absence of a name allows for the discursive performance of a disappearing act phrased in legal terms, whose seriousness is subverted by clownery. The subject is obscured to the eyes of the law, liberated of both rights and obligations:

the law is an extremely intricate phenomenon. If you have no name you cannot own a watch and the watch that has been stolen does not exist and when it is found it will have to be restored to its rightful owner. 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.⁹²

The space of anonymity thus created is one of complete vulnerability, but also one of complete freedom. It is suggested that the narrator's overemphasised namelessness ('He has no personal name at all')⁹³ is not a singular phenomenon, and that the indeterminacy of his individual identity may extend to a collective identity, following an anthropological logic of kinship:

'I was once acquainted with a tall man,' he said to me at last, 'that had no name either and you are certain to be his son and the heir to his nullity and all his nothings.' It

⁸⁹ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 187.

⁹⁰ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 101.

⁹¹ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 86.

⁹² O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 61–62.

⁹³ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 58.

was not, I thought, entirely unreasonable that the son of a man who had no name should have no name also.⁹⁴

This fragment is illustrative for O'Brien's strategy of simulating reason while playing with illogical, distorted causalities. The crisis produced by the narrator's missing name is rapidly matched by a parallel inability to describe the world around him: 'what he showed me was something that I could tell nobody about, there are no suitable words in the world to tell my meaning.'⁹⁵ Continuing the *topos* of the ineffable, he speaks about a synchronous failure of language, knowledge, and perception:

I can make no attempt to describe this quality. It took me hours of thought long afterwards to realise why these articles were astonishing. They lacked an essential property of all known objects. I cannot call it shape or configuration since shapelessness is not what I refer to at all. I can only say that these objects, not one of which resembled the other, were of no known dimensions. They were not square or rectangular or circular...⁹⁶

Such descriptions, often encountered in the novel, are akin to apophatic speech – a form of expression that seeks to define its object in terms of what it is *not*, rather than in terms of what it is. They are not concerned with objects, actions, or states of affairs, but instead with their sheer indescribability ('indescribable articles'⁹⁷), unknowability ('I do not know how he accomplished what did not look possible at all'⁹⁸), and incommunicability ('there was incommunicable earliness in everything,'⁹⁹ 'these unexplainable enjoyments of the world'¹⁰⁰). When confronted with these scandalous ontological and epistemological inconsistencies, language becomes inadequate and futile: 'the tongue could not be troubled to find a noise for anything so nearly not-there.'¹⁰¹ Its overemphasised inadequacy destabilises bureaucracy's reliance on language in the form of written records and ritualistically performed speech acts (also indispensable to magic and other social practices with fewer pretences of rationality, as shown by Malinowski, Tambiah, Crozier, and Herzfeld, among others). Even when words and linguistic functions are deployed to bureaucratic ends in *The Third Policeman*, they may

⁹⁴ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 56–57.

⁹⁵ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 135.

⁹⁶ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 135.

⁹⁷ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 130.

⁹⁸ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 181.

⁹⁹ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 138.

¹⁰⁰ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 125.

¹⁰¹ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 155.

be quickly integrated into a regime of endless negation: 'I have refused more requests and negated more statements than any man living or dead. I have rejected, reneged, disagreed, refused and denied to an extent that is unbelievable.'¹⁰² In these instances, the bureaucrat turns from a 'pure recording entity' into what could be called a 'pure negating entity' – a logical operator, an impersonal and indiscriminating machine for mindless, automatic refusal. O'Brien engages explicitly with metaphors that compare bureaucracy to a mechanism, an apparatus (in the sense proposed by Agamben),¹⁰³ a machinery: 'All these are what are called Examples of the Machine Age.'¹⁰⁴ The metaphor is reminiscent of Weber's thesis: bureaucracy gained traction along with the mechanisation brought about by the Industrial Revolution. Like a machine, O'Brien's bureaucrat is not living, but merely 'operating'¹⁰⁵ in realms beyond the reach of common intelligibility and even perception, where extraordinary phenomena challenge nothing less than the very limits that separate being from non-being:

It is so thin that it could go into your hand and out in the other extremity externally and you would not feel a bit of it and you would see nothing and hear nothing. It is so thin that maybe it does not exist at all and you could spend half an hour trying to think about it and you could put no thought around it in the end.¹⁰⁶

The ontological destabilisation of objects and subjects alike is the real authority at work in *The Parish*. Through a casual use of the rhetoric appeal of propositional logic and sophistry, death itself is 'neutralised and rendered void,' diminished, and finally negated:

The particular death you die is not even a death (which is an inferior phenomenon at the best), only an insanitary abstraction in the backyard, a piece of negative nullity neutralised and rendered void by asphyxiation and the fracture of the spinal string. If it is not a lie to say that you have been given the final hammer behind the barrack, equally it is true to say that nothing has happened to you.¹⁰⁷

There is something uncanny about the painstaking precision and meticulousness involved in the policeman's imperceptible, yet incredibly powerful world-shaping acts:

¹⁰² O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 30.

¹⁰³ Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁴ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 71. See also page 130.

¹⁰⁵ See the first description the narrator makes of the three policemen: 'they must be operating on a very rare colour, something that ordinary eyes could not see at all.' O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 35.

¹⁰⁶ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 68–69.

¹⁰⁷ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 102.

He took a something from his pocket that was too small for me to see and started working with the tiny black thing on the table beside the bigger thing which was itself too small to be described. At this point I became afraid. What he was doing was no longer wonderful but terrible.¹⁰⁸

The complexity of bureaucracy as both a rational practice of systematisation and an irrational affective arrangement is comically represented by the novel's mixing of the wonderful with the terrible. As Paul du Gay notes in his study of contemporary forms of bureaucratic ethos, 'at the very least these somewhat contradictory representations suggest that bureaucracy is not a simple phenomenon, and that "popular" conceptions of it are confused and paradoxical.'¹⁰⁹ Simultaneously a bureaucratic and anti-bureaucratic narrative, *The Third Policeman* is preoccupied by the very confusion and paradox described by du Gay. Or, to use O'Brien's own words, the internal tensions at work in the novel would signal the existence of such 'miscellaneous apprehensions.'¹¹⁰

Ambiguity and unsolvable contradictions are instrumented here as rhetoric devices, primarily for their aesthetic value in generating humour and the atmosphere specific to fantastic narratives. However, one could not – and should not – ignore the fact that their stylistic efficacy is doubled by a sharper, more subtle potential for subversion. O'Brien makes use of this potential in his own blend of critique directed against bureaucratic systems at large, and in particular against the Irish Civil Service. According to Attridge: 'as Seamus Deane and Carol Taaffe point out, O'Brien's nonsense can plausibly be read as a satire of bureaucratic jargon, aimed at the pettifogging pedantry of the Free State civil service.'¹¹¹ However, as Brooker notes, O'Brien's own employment in the institution 'gave him a proximity to the business of the state, which he found both intriguing and appalling. [...] [T]o regard him simply as disdainful of the machinery of legislation is to miss his fascination with government.'¹¹²

To conclude, an analogy between the disparate worlds of bureaucracy and magic is legitimised by the fact that both are performative in nature and rely heavily on linguistic and symbolic grounds, staging social spectacles which oscillate between gravity and mockery. The ritualistic repetition of speech and writing acts, identifiable in both bureaucratic and magical settings, is used to summon a hierarchy of invisible and unpredictable powers. The efficacy of this summoning is increased when the

¹⁰⁸ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 73.

¹⁰⁹ Paul du Gay, *In Praise of Bureaucracy: Weber, Organization, Ethics* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 2.

¹¹⁰ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 90.

¹¹¹ Attridge, 'Nonsense,' 309, referencing Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 161, and Taaffe, *Ireland Through the Looking-glass*, 73, 79–80.

¹¹² Brooker, 'Estopped by Grand Playsaunce,' 20.

repetition is accompanied by a specific decorum, imagery, and formalised behaviour, as indeed is the case in *The Third Policeman*. By virtue of strict normative regimes that do not necessarily correspond to those of the real world, these supernatural authorities are able to control and manipulate beings, objects, and affective intensities to world-transforming ends, often with unpredictable results.

When applying the magic/bureaucracy analogy to a fictional narrative such as *The Third Policeman*, a theoretical framework of anthropological and sociological import proves useful in conciliating the apparent contradiction implied by the figure of a bureaucrat mastering supernatural powers, or of a recordkeeping sorcerer. Paradoxical bewilderment, which seems to be the general affective regime of the novel, comes from the enigmatic and often explicit tension between reason and unreason: 'It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated (such as the sequence of day and night) while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena.'¹¹³ The confusion resulting from this paradox is, in O'Brien's words, 'a phenomenon of great charm and intensity,' but also 'a very dangerous article.'¹¹⁴ Its danger consists in having the power to destabilise ontological categories, to undermine accepted conventions (linguistic, as well as political), and to trouble the self-assured arrogance of positivist epistemologies (in humanities and natural sciences alike). The meta-narrative circularity of *The Third Policeman*, its complex rhetorical and pseudo-scientific sophistry, as well as the fast-paced sequence of spectacular, unrealistic events – all add to the sense of confusion resulted from blending the imaginative promises of a fantasy world with the terrifying dryness of administration.

¹¹³ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 52.

¹¹⁴ O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 87.

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