

The Manichaeian Body in *The Third Policeman*:
or Why Joe's Skin Is Scaly

Did [O'Nolan] fear his books or did he fear the talent that created them? Whatever the case, he, arguably, attempted to protect himself, to shield himself from his own work, at once to own and disown it [...] *The Third Policeman* was, remarkably, repressed by its author during his lifetime (behind the preposterous, trumped-up story of the supposed loss of the supposed single copy of the manuscript), appearing soon after he was safely dead.

-- Gilbert Sorrentino

We may hate evil and want with all our hearts to do good,
but what we find is that we not only continue to do evil,
but even take delight in doing what we hate.

Is it not as though two souls were warring within us?

-- St. Augustine (Contra Fortunatum II. 20-21)

Since the affairs of men rest still uncertain
Let's reason with the worst that may befall

-- Shakespeare

Brian O'Nolan, writing under his most famous pseudonym Flann O'Brien, opens *The Third Policeman* with that last epigraph. It is the novel's second epigraph; a mock one precedes it. The false epigraph is attributed to "de Selby," one of the principal, yet unseen, characters in the novel, and it conveys the "wisdom" that death (along with day and night) is an illusion and to concern oneself with such a phantom is folly. Although it is a much more intriguing quote, the de Selby epigraph primarily serves as an appetizer for the illogical permutations of reality and thought that take place throughout the novel. The quote from Shakespeare strikes a far more resonate tone for the novel as a whole. What is more, it reveals a major theme in its author's personal philosophy.

The lines are from Act V, Scene i of *Julius Caesar*. Brutus and Cassius' forces are about to engage Antony and Octavius' army for the final time. Cassius is speaking to Brutus on the possibility that if they lose the battle they will most likely never

see each other again. In effect, two murder accomplices are coming to grips with their mortality and the justice they will be served for their parts in an assassination. On a strictly literal level, O’Nolan’s choice of this quote is very appropriate. The action in his novel, on a very simplistic level, concerns two murders that also face death as payment for their crime. Likewise, the relationships between the two sets of men are similar. Cassius masterminds the assassination and acts out of a base desire for power. Brutus kills Caesar for the good of the state, an ideal foisted on him by Cassius. As for the murder of Old Mather’s in *The Third Policeman*, Divney is “responsible for the whole idea in the first place” and is motivated solely by lust for a girl the old codger’s money could support (7). Not quite as noble as Brutus, the unnamed narrator of O’Nolan’s novel plays his role in the killing to benefit scholarship with his “badly wanted” index on the works of de Selby’s commentators that his share of the money will help publish (14). So, on a certain level, O’Nolan’s use of the quote from *Julius Caesar* acts as a mock-heroic device meant to denigrate the two hoodlums in his novel.¹ The narrator is no more Brutus than Divney is Cassius, or Mathers is Caesar. However, the quote also serves a more general and considerably darker thematic purpose.

In his biography of the writer, *No Laughing Matter: The Life & Times of Flann O’Brien*, Anthony Cronin affirms that O’Nolan remained a good Catholic, in terms of his religious and philosophical beliefs, his entire life. Unlike Joyce and Beckett, O’Nolan never rejected or despaired of the Christian faith in which he was raised. However, O’Nolan does seem to have reinterpreted those beliefs from a somewhat shadowy viewpoint. Cronin conjectures, “If he had any doubts about the faith in which he was brought up, they were on Manichaeian grounds; somehow perhaps the balance between good and evil in the universe as we know it had been disturbed in favor of evil” (104).

The religion known as Manichaeism survived for over a millennium. Begun

in 242 A.D. by a twenty-six-year-old Persian going under the name Mani, this new religion was something of an overnight sensation. Although Mani himself was executed little more than thirty years later, his faith proved so successful “that within a century, in the midst of the decay of Graeco-Roman paganism and the public triumph of Christianity, it seemed to many observers doubtful whether [Manichaeism] would not overwhelm them both” (Burkitt, 3). Needless to say, the established religions took a hard line against the new upstart. Throughout most of its history, Manichaeism was viewed as a subversive, heretical religion and was persecuted accordingly by Muslims and Christians alike. Nevertheless, Manichaeism thrived as an underground religion, practiced in secret, until the “age when nearly all Asia and much of Europe was devastated by the Tatar hordes under Zenghis Khan and Tamerlane” (ibid).

Mani and his followers maintained that there were two eternal essences: Light and Dark. Although Mani was certainly of the opinion that Light was preferable to Dark, he did not give them the attributes of Good and Evil. The Christian and Muslim faiths associated all “light” with Good and “dark” with Evil; furthermore, Good/Light was primary in these religions with Dark/Evil an unfortunate phenomenon that would eventually be vanquished by Good/Light. Mani, however, preached that both were fundamental and indestructible principles. In the far past, these two elements were kept separate, the dividing line firm and uncontested. This relationship was what Mani termed Good, the demarcation of the two elements. Unfortunately, the Dark breached the boundary at some point and became mixed with the Light. This unfortunate occurrence resulted in the creation of the universe and the germination of Evil. While most major Western religions posited the world as an ideal creation by God that was later botched by humanity, Mani saw it as an inherently evil corruption, a mistake. Mani saw the world and Evil as one and the same thing. Even more radical to Western ears than Buddhism, whose followers sought to

transcend this world into a state of beatific non-being, Manichaeism aimed for “not the improvement of this world, for that is impossible, but its gradual extinction, by the separation of the Light particles from the Dark substance with which they have been mixed” or, more aptly, from within which they have been encased or trapped (4). The Manichees did not celebrate birth because it extended the mistake of life; however, it should not be construed that wholesale murder was the path to the desired extinction of the world either. Just as “to produce fresh life was to perpetuate a state of things that ought never to have been,” to murder “was to cut the Parts of the Light imprisoned in a living body” (23). Rather, asceticism and eternal patience were Mani’s tools of salvation.

Certainly, one does not expect an ascetic near-East religion, extinct for more than seven hundred years, to hold much sway over an Irish novelist writing in the twentieth century. However, Manichaeism does maintain a modern legacy due to its effects upon a temporary Carthaginian convert--the future St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Although his association with the Manichees lasted a mere eleven years, Augustine’s Christian thoughts bear obvious influences from this theological dalliance of his youth. Specifically, Mani’s teachings can be seen in Augustine’s estimations of Good and Evil. Augustine proposes that Good and Evil existed before Man. Although Augustine does not view Evil to be eternal, he believes it did exist before the world. He traces Evil’s birth with God’s separation of the loyal angels from those in confederation with Satan, and he pinpoints this moment with God’s first recorded statement “Let there be Light!” When “He divided between the light and the Darkness He distinguished between the Good and the Bad Angels” (102). Here we see the Augustinian revision conflating the Manichaean cosmic terms “Light” and “Dark” with the Christian moral terms “Good” and “Evil.”

According to Augustine, therefore, Man was formed in a Universe where there were already Two Powers, God and Satan, and in the first battle

between these two principles of Light and Dark the first man came to grief. Is not this the Manichaeian presentation? (103)

So argues Francis Burkitt in his second lecture upon “The Religion of the Manichees” given in Dublin at Trinity College in 1924. Burkitt sees Manichaeism leaving a stark mark upon Augustine’s thought and, subsequently, upon all Christian thought since Augustine’s time.

[Augustine’s] view of human life taught that Man went and still goes wrong because he had always lived in a Dualistic world, a world where the Light and Dark existed in opposition before Man was, and where though the Light is stronger than the Dark it will never quite illuminate it altogether. (103-4)

The dominant trait of Augustinian Manichaeism is a streak of pessimism concerning Man and the world. Certainly, a pessimistic assessment of Evil’s influence upon humanity and the world is a far cry from the belief that all creation is, by definition, Evil. However, Burkitt would argue that this gloomy outlook upon the nature of Man is a residual element of Manichaeian thought that Augustine could never shake.

Burkitt’s lectures are not used as a source for Manichaeian history, beliefs and influence upon Augustinian thought because they represent the most current theories in Manichaeian studies; they do not.² Rather, they are utilized because of the time and place they were given, Dublin in 1924. However, the setting for the lecture should not suggest that this author believes O’Nolan attended these lectures. It is extremely doubtful that a thirteen-year-old would have journeyed from Tullamore to hear Burkitt speak. Nor is there any evidence that O’Nolan ever read Burkitt’s lectures or had even heard of them. The material point is that views on Manichaeism and Augustine’s relation to it that were similar to Burkitt’s views would have been current and timely in O’Nolan’s day. In fact, a cursory glance at the first chapters of O’Nolan’s final novel, *The Dalkey Archive* (1964), reveals that he had a general

notion of Manichaeism and Augustine's version of it.

O'Nolan makes proving his acquaintance with Augustine's thought quite simple by giving the Bishop of Hippo a speaking role in the novel. When De Selby—a slightly less fantastic and ridiculous savant than the one referred to in *The Third Policeman* and helpfully distinguished from the former by a capital “d”—employs his chemical D.M.P. in a small underwater cave, St. Augustine appears from eternity to be interviewed. De Selby questions Augustine on his heretical missteps, and the saint replies, “*far preferable to the Manichaeian dualism of light and darkness, good and evil, was Plotinus's dualism of mind and matter*” [italics O'Nolan's]³ (42). Not only does this passage reveal O'Nolan's familiarity with the Manichaeian/ Augustine issue, it is important to note that his Augustine also conflates “light and dark” with “good and evil.” Despite his dismissal of the Manichaeian position, O'Nolan's Augustine is also touched by a deep pessimism. After the fantastic visitation is over, Jim Hackett, one of the two witnesses De Selby invited to the interview, remarks,

[Augustine] didn't seem too happy in heaven. Where was the glorious resurrection we've all been promised? That character underground wouldn't get a job handing out toys at Christmas. He seemed depressed. (44)

St. Augustine is not the only character that seems depressed in O'Nolan's last novel. De Selby is afflicted with a dour opinion of humanity that has a definite Manichaeian flavor. When questioned by Mick Shaughnessy, the novel's protagonist, about whether he sees any good in the world, De Selby answers that “[t]he whole world was corrupt, human society an insufferable abomination” (75). De Selby's solution for this deplorable state of affairs is chillingly Manichaeian as well. He plans on “detonating” all of his D.M.P. at one time, which will remove all oxygen from the Earth's atmosphere.

- In fact, Mick asked, is this a second divine plan for the salvation of

mankind?

- You could call it that.
- Salvation by way of complete destruction?
- There is no other way. All will be called home and judged. (ibid)

Certainly, this is not the gradual extinction that Mani proposed or a choice of free will that Augustine would approve of, yet the De Selby of *The Dalkey Archive* can be seen as aiding such spiritual determinism with a scientific advancement. Much like the atomic bomb, De Selby's D.M.P. is an example of a scientific solution being far worse than the problem it proposes to correct.

In terms of this paper, what *The Dalkey Archive* suggests about O'Nolan's own general attitudes about life is far more important than what the novel specifically says in regards to science and theology. The pessimism of a Manichaeian-influenced Augustine is reflected in the author's general outlook. Cronin states that O'Nolan was given to thoughts as nihilistic as those espoused by his puppets, Augustine and De Selby: "This world was perhaps hell, or part of its empire" (104). An early speech by De Selby can be read as O'Nolan venting these cynical tendencies:

I also accepted as fact the story of the awesome encounter between God and the rebel Lucifer. But I was undecided for many years as to the outcome of that encounter. I had little to corroborate the revelation that God had triumphed and banished Lucifer to hell forever. For if – I repeat if – the decision had gone the other way and God had been vanquished, who but Lucifer would be certain to put about the other and opposite story? (22)

Of course, this novel, like all of O'Nolan's novels, is a comic one. *The Dalkey Archive* is intended to be a collection of jibes, sophisticated and otherwise, and to be read as such. However, Cronin, for one, sees O'Nolan's bleak outlook manifested in the particular sense of humor he employs: "One of the most remarkable things about

Brian O’Nolan’s writing is the way this view of the dominance of evil coincides with and reinforces the innate nihilism of the comic vision” (104).

None of O’Nolan’s novels end well. *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) ends with a ghastly suicide that seems, even in the context of the book’s disjointed structure, wholly unconnected with all that has come before, *The Dalkey Archive* concludes with the disclosing of an unwanted pregnancy, the protagonist of *The Poor Mouth* (1941) begins an interminable jail sentence on the last page, and *The Hard Life* (1961) closes with, in a possible Manichaeian touch, the main character purging himself with “a tidal surge of vomit” (179). However, O’Nolan saved his bleakest ending for *The Third Policeman*. It is morbidly fitting that a novel that ends with the reader’s realization that the main character has been dead throughout most of the text is a novel printed only after its author had died.

It is likely O’Nolan’s comic vision is a defense mechanism against the dark world, his only weapon to combat the evil he perceives festering everywhere. Writing under his journalistic pen-name Myles na Gopaleen, O’Nolan attributes just such a thematic scheme to James Joyce. Joycean comparisons haunted O’Nolan throughout his career, and Myles returned the favor with derisive columns against the “Irish Sphinx” as often as he could. The only artistic merit possessed by Joyce that O’Nolan repeatedly acknowledged was Joyce’s sense of humor, one that O’Nolan read as a necessarily tragic one. “With laughs [Joyce] palliates the sense of doom that is the heritage of the Irish Catholic. True humour needs this background urgency: Rabelais is funny, but his stuff cloyes. His stuff lacks tragedy, ” writes an appreciative Myles in “The Bash in The Tunnel.” As is often the case when O’Nolan chooses Joyce as his subject, it is unclear here whether he is writing about Joyce or himself.

An incident recalled by O’Nolan’s younger brother Kevin may hold a key to the “gallows humor” that haunts nearly all of his writings. As related by Anthony Cronin, some of the O’Nolans’ Strabane relatives were telling how a doctor in the

area had killed himself by falling down the stairs. What was particularly ghastly about his fall was that he tumbled “with such exactitude of trajectory as to have his skull pierced by a solitary nail which projected from the lintel of a door at the end of it” (216). Kevin remembers that his brother reacted to the story with such amusement that “his mother and aunt had severely reproved him” (ibid). Cronin concludes that O’Nolan’s inappropriate response to the story was a “defense against shock.” Although this conclusion certainly fits the case, it only begins to scratch the surface of what such an event might mean for someone of O’Nolan’s temperament and mind set. If one believes that the universe is an amoral chaotic place, the incident is simply a grotesque accident. However, if one believes the universe is ordered and governed by a supreme divinity, the doctor’s “accident” takes on an added ominous dimension. That all these variables came together in just such a perfect manner as to end a person’s life must have struck O’Nolan that the death was a divine—rather than a professional—hit. What type of deity could orchestrate or, at the very least, allow such a grotesque end to a person’s life? Although it must be admitted that O’Nolan’s religious upbringing was not rigidly deterministic in nature, he did harbor the belief that divine forces could seek retribution against miscreants through “accidents.” In fact, he feared it might be happening to him. During the final stages of writing *The Dalkey Archive*, he suffered a rash of ill health and a broken leg. According to Cronin, these mishaps inspired O’Nolan to dedicate the novel to his guardian angel to ward off just such an “accident” as suffered by the Strabane doctor. Not only does the world seem to be inherently bad, it can also be manipulated into an diabolical murder weapon from which there was, of course, no escape.

Cronin suggests that O’Nolan’s fears of divine justice stemmed from what he was writing in his novel. Indeed, there is much off-color humor aimed at religious figures. The depictions of St. Augustine and Jonas as well as the exoneration of Judas Iscariot readily come to mind. However, De Selby’s Manichaeic leanings are

the only sections that seem to support official heresy. To stave off his fear of committing such heresy, O’Nolan’s dedication makes plain that his novel “is only fooling.” Long-time O’Nolan champion Gilbert Sorrentino believes that similar fears may have been behind the author’s suppression of *The Third Policeman*.

I think that such fears that O’Brien may have felt because of the possible religious transgressions of his book of the damned [TP] were, indeed, religious fears. It can be argued, and I would argue it, that the phony disappearance of the text was its author’s penance for its impieties, real or suspected. O’Brien distanced it from himself by refusing to allow it existence. (Sorrentino)

In addition, Sorrentino sees *The Dalkey Archive* as the “non-sinister apologia for the unearthly terrors of *The Third Policeman*,” in fact, he suggests that O’Nolan’s dedication at the start of his last novel is really meant for “the suppressed text, for which *The Dalkey Archive* was but a surrogate” (ibid).

Although this author has doubts concerning Sorrentino’s theory that “religious fears” were solely responsible for O’Nolan’s “misplacing” of *The Third Policeman* MS for over a quarter-century, I do agree that the novel exhibits a more defined and pervasive Manichaeian streak than *The Dalkey Archive*. The term Manichaeianism is never mentioned in *The Third Policeman* nor are Manichaeian-flavored theories espoused by any of the characters. Nevertheless, Manichaeian fatalism shrouds the text like a fog of de Selby’s black air, dense and inflammable to any phosphate-induced flicker of hope. O’Nolan’s dark cynicism is not limited to when the novel’s narrator enters the policemen’s Parish; it is also fully exhibited in the “real” world he and Divney first inhabit. However, O’Nolan’s Manichaeian vision finds its ultimate expression in the relationship between the narrator and Joe, his soul.

To put it simply, the world the narrator of *The Third Policeman* is born into is not a happy place. The story of his early years reads like the proverbial “hard-luck”

story. Like Dave Eggers, author of *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), the narrator is an orphan whose parents die within a short period of each other. The narrator's situation is even more dismal than Eggers' because he is an only child and, in a move of parodic melodrama, O'Nolan kills off the family sheep-dog as well. However, what makes the narrator's childhood years a reflection of a dark and insidious world is not so much the tragedies that befall him as it is his attitude about them. In the first place, when these deaths occur he is completely non-plussed about what is going on. He assumes his parents have gone off on a trip of some sort and feels "sorry and disappointed" when they do not return (O'Nolan, 8). After his father dies leaving him an orphan, two strange men come to the farm to look after him. These men, social workers or executors of the family estate most likely, refer to the narrator as a "poor misfortunate little bastard" (ibid). When he overhears their comments, he mistakingly assumes they are talking about a third man, a priest more than likely, rather than about him. Although the narrator admits that he understood the situation very clearly later, he does not describe how these horrible revelations made him feel.

Here lies the basis of O'Nolan's cynical touch. It is not that the narrator has a tragic childhood; it is the fact that he has no feelings about what has happened to his family whatsoever. It is also not clear that any of these people ever had feelings for one another. Long before he becomes an orphan and long before he enters The Parish, the narrator feels cut off and adrift in the universe. He describes his family life thusly: "We were all happy enough in a queer separate way" (ibid). When the narrator learns that he has been set up in an exclusive boarding school by the terms of his father's will, he feels a mild sense of surprise. Rather than feel the love for him behind his father's final requests, the narrator thinks "he was a generous man to do that for a boy he did not know well" (9). He seems equally unperturbed when his leg "is broken for" him in six places and replaced with a wooden one. This detached

state continues after he returns to the farm. Divney, who was hired in accordance with the father's will to look after the family estate, has run the family farm and public house into the ground and, what's worse, refuses to leave as per the term of the will. The narrator is annoyed, but really doesn't care as long as Divney leaves him alone. Even when he learns that Divney is robbing him and several of the public house's customers blind, he does not complain because "I was satisfied to be left in peace because I knew that my own work was more important than myself" (11). The work he refers to is, of course, his "much needed" index of de Selby commentators. At this point, the narrator might be confused with an eccentric scholar selflessly working for the betterment of his discipline. Later events blot this marginally idyllic portrait.

It takes Divney more than a year to convince the narrator that they must murder Old Mathers for the cash box he always carries on his person. The reason it takes so long has nothing to do with the narrator's scruples on the subject; it simply takes Divney this long to pierce the narrator's obtuse mind to make the plan clear to him. The motive Divney gives the narrator is that his share of the money might get his "powerful" book on de Selby published. Although the narrator bespeaks the utility such a book will have to the world at large, his goal is a purely selfish one. The book will bring him fame and fortune: "I knew that if my name was to be remembered, it would be remembered with de Selby's" (10). Despite Brutus' pretensions, his motives are as base as those of Cassius.

The narrator's murder of Mathers makes O'Nolan's dark vision of the world manifest. As he acted when he stole the copy of de Selby's *Golden Hours* from the school library, the narrator commits this more serious crime "without qualm."

I went forward *mechanically*, swung the spade over my shoulder and smashed the blade of it with all my strength against the protruding chin. I felt and almost heard the fabric of his skull *crumble up crisply like an*

empty eggshell. [Italics mine] (16)

This passage is disturbing for two reasons. On the one hand, O’Nolan’s imagery highlights the fragility of human life at the same time that it wallows in the vileness of the gruesome details of its destruction. On the other hand, he describes the narrator’s movements as mechanical. Like a machine or puppet, the narrator acts mechanically, like a dispassionate tool of unseen forces when he takes Mather’s life. The narrator concludes his description of the murder with a line that Camus’ Meursault could easily relate to: “I do not know how often I struck him after that but I did not stop until I was tired” (ibid). A more cut-and-dried example of cold-blooded murder would be difficult to find.

However, O’Nolan best exhibits his Manichaeian pessimism about the pre-Parish world by casting subtle doubts upon secondary and background characters in his tale. The first example is the narrator’s mother. The initial impression the reader gets is that the narrator feels closer to his mother than to his father. However, when the reader rereads the handful of lines that concern the narrator’s “relationship” to his mother, she discovers that he only *knew* his mother better; there is no indication that he *feels* one way or the other about her (or she, him) at all. Furthermore, one of his observations about her running of the public house suggests that she was not the most faithful of wives. “I was in bed part of the time and it is possible that things happened differently with my mother and the customers late at night” (7). It is crucial to realize who is doing the insinuating in this line. Obtuse as always, the narrator is not making lewd suggestions with this statement. Rather, it is O’Nolan who is insinuating the infidelity. He words the phrase in just such a way as to both highlight the narrator’s lack of observation as well as to hint that the mother is misbehaving with her customers. Keith Hopper has suggested that the father’s reference to Parnell—the only historical reference in the chapter—in the very next sentence also “reinforces, intertextually, the semantic possibility of his mother’s adultery” (204).

O’Nolan’s cynical side-ways glance razes the stock “mother-son” relationship as well as the pure mother figure herself.

Although the narrator and Divney earn an eternity in hell for murder, O’Nolan shows little sympathy for their victim. Divney suggests that Mathers is involved in the “artificial manure ring” and is a corrupt businessman. However, these charges are little more than “blinds” meant to compel the narrator into aiding Divney in the robbery/murder. On the other hand, the neighbors’ apathy concerning Mather’s disappearance does not bode well for his character. “People said he was a queer mean man and that going away without telling anybody or leaving his address was the sort of thing he would do” (18-9). This last quote ill-serves both Mathers and the community at large. On the one hand, Mathers must have done something in the past to have the community automatically assume the worst about him. On the other hand, O’Nolan uses the phrase “[p]eople said,” not “people knew.” The assessment of Mather’s character may simply be unsubstantiated public opinion. And O’Nolan holds very little faith in public opinion.

In fact, public opinion serves as the main target for O’Nolan’s satire in the first chapter of the novel. The same community that labels Mathers “a queer mean man” commends Divney and the narrator as the “best two Christians in all Ireland” (13). They are considered great friends by their neighbors solely because they are never out of each other’s company. However, the narrator reveals their close relationship is based on suspicion rather than love: “I never allowed him to leave my sight for three years [...] I knew that [Divney] was sufficiently dishonest enough to steal my share of Mathers’ money and make off with the box if given the opportunity” (18). The very aspect of their relationship that strikes the community as being the most fraternal and warm—their physical closeness—is, in actuality, a most uncomfortable and loathsome situation for the men to endure.

[T]he peculiar terms of physical intimacy upon which myself and

Divney found ourselves had become more and more intolerable. In latter months I had hoped to force him to capitulate by making my company unbearably close and unrelenting but at the same time I took to carrying a small pistol in case of accidents. (19)

What is crucial as far as O’Nolan’s satire is concerned is that this “friendship” is not a con Divney and the narrator devised to trick the community. They are simply trying to put the “friendliest” face possible on an uneasy and tension-filled situation. The assumption that such behavior is indicative of “the noblest example of [friendship] in the history of the world” is made by the community itself (13). If public opinion can mistake two double-crossing heels for the best of comrades, what else might it be wrong about? Is Mathers a scrooge or simply a lonely man shunned by all because of his wealth? Or is it possible that Mathers is even worse than they assume? Although O’Nolan does not give the reader concrete information about the secondary characters, his hints always point to the worst.

The pre-Parish world of *The Third Policeman* has been given, in contrast to The Parish section, relatively little comment by critics. The chief topic of this criticism has been narrator’s lack of morality; the morality of the world itself has been little discussed. Cronin, for one, finds it particularly disturbing how casually the hero decides to become a murderer “almost without anything that could be called a thought” and that he “exhibits no remorse” (105). Cronin concludes that the world O’Nolan presents in the novel is a slightly skewed version of the “normal” world.

The world of the book is a rational and even scientific one, a normal one except for the pervasive feeling that something has slipped, that the give-and-take of good and evil, which is the normal state, has been somehow disturbed. The plane on which we live has been, as it were, tilted over. (ibid)

This is a superb summary of a world tinged with Manichaeism via St.

Augustine. However, Cronin is speaking of the world of the novel as a whole, both the pre-Parish and Parish sections. Although this author agrees with this contention, he also strongly feels that Cronin's description could just as easily be attributed to the pre-Parish world alone. It is a world populated by "normal" people, types that the reader recognizes from other novels and even her own life experiences. However, these people are estranged from one another, suspicious of all, and utterly blind to their own loathsome natures. Add to this the fact that the Virgil for this world is an obtuse, self-obsessed murderer hungry for fame, and the world view grows even darker. Although this novel's completion predates Camus' *The Stranger* (1942) by two years, O'Nolan's pre-Parish world in *The Third Policeman* is also an alienated wasteland. Unlike Mersault's cosmos, the narrator's world is governed by a moral law, albeit an inverse negative of the one to which readers are accustomed. By the second chapter of *The Third Policeman*, moreover, Meursault has fallen down the rabbit hole.⁴

Like Nighttown in *Ulysses*, The Zone in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and Oz, The Parish is a region that defies most rules that govern "normal" time, space, and geography. However, these "fantastical" lands, through their very excesses, all bring to light truths and hidden realities that the "normal" world has been able to keep tucked safely in the shadows. O'Nolan's Parish is written in broad strokes of satire that cut the fabric of the world into tattered ribbons. The main objects of his satire are modern scientific and philosophical theories. De Selby's theories are lampoons of those by Einstein and J.W. Dunne. It is important to note that the reader does not learn of any of de Selby's mad theories until chapter two, the chapter when the narrator enters The Parish; it is in this chapter that the copious footnotes also begin. The savant's notions of "black air," "journey as hallucination," and others are absurd hyperboles developed from ideas held to be rational and sane by modern science. What's more, the world of The Parish seems to be living out these theories as if they

were true. As Keith Booker observes, these modern theories only seem ridiculous when they play an active role in everyday life.

In short, if the landscape of *The Third Policeman* appears to violate many of the precepts of conventional logic, then so does the real world, especially as described in modern scientific constructions like relativity and quantum mechanics (55).

The most notable and hilarious of these modern theories that O’Nolan satirizes is the “Atomic Theory” as explained by Sergeant Pluck. By constant agitation against one another, the atoms of one object or being can be intermixed with those of another. Over a long period of time, the Sergeant explains, a man may turn into a bicycle or a horse and vice-versa. By showing how limiting such a theory might be upon an individual’s life if taken deadly seriously, O’Nolan is trying to show how patently ridiculous such a theory is. O’Nolan equates the theories of respected scientists with those of the insane de Selby. This scorn has a specific Manichaeian purpose. If the most highly regarded minds in human society are all de Selbys—that is, mad scientists, how could this world not be guided by a malignant force?

The Manichaeian aspect of *The Parish* is very manifest in the “Atomic Theory” scene. Not only does the theory seem to constrain a person’s freedom to move about, it acts like a conspiracy to deform a person or end their life. The smallest parts of this world are acting in collusion against a person. No matter what form of transportation the narrator suggests, he meets the same trouble. Walking, which strikes him as the only atomic-free method of travel, proves to be the most deadly of all. The Sergeant warns,

“walking too far too often too quickly is not safe at all. The continual cracking of your feet on the road makes a certain quality of the road come up into you. When a man dies they say he returns to clay but too much walking fills you up with clay far sooner (or buries bits of you

along the road) and brings your death half-way to meet you.” (90)

Again, this is one of the novel’s most amusing passages for the reader. However, the Sergeant’s revelations produce only the gravest musings in the narrator: “My head was packed tight with fears and miscellaneous apprehensions” (ibid). The world of *The Parish* goes beyond simple Augustinian/Manichaeian pessimism. Not only is the world inherently evil, it is out to get you. Like the doctor from Strabane, several disparate elements are converging upon the narrator to rob him of his little life.

This paper will not deal at great length with all the numerous aspects of *The Parish* that suggest it is a Manichaeian world. It seems rather superfluous to prove that *The Parish* is a world that is intrinsically evil when it is, after all, Hell. However, this paper will touch upon a few aspects of *The Parish* that seem to be blatant Manichaeian signposts. Manichaeian pessimism seems particularly embodied in the figure of Sergeant Pluck. He is the chief of the police barracks and the most constant figure of authority in *The Parish*.⁵ For the most part, he seems to be an affable fellow always mindful of performing his duty. However, there are two instances that call his dedication to duty into question. In chapter seven, Policeman MacCruiskeen tells the narrator about the last hanging in *The Parish*. A man named MacDadd was convicted of murder, but since he traveled “a hundred miles on a solid tyre,” the policemen were obliged to hang the bicycle because most of MacDadd was therein (104). This story is consistent with what the narrator has learned previously about the “Atomic Theory.” MacCruiskeen relates that it was difficult determining where most of MacDadd lay, in himself or in his bicycle. Sergeant Pluck had to make the determination and finally ruled that the bicycle should be hung. Again, this is all in keeping with the Sergeant’s “Atomic Theory.” However, MacCruiskeen also says that Pluck’s “position was painful in the extremity because he was a very close friend of MacDadd after office hours” (105). Like the narrator’s comment about his mother and her customers, the insinuation of this statement is not made or acknowledged by the charac-

ters. It is an insinuation made by O’Nolan for the reader’s benefit. The MacDadd story raises the possibility that the Sergeant is using the “Atomic Theory” to get a close friend—a convicted murderer, no less—off the hook.

Throughout the narrator’s stay at the barracks, Sergeant Pluck has been very concerned to keep his bicycle locked in a cell. Considering his revelations about atomic relativity as it concerns bicycles and people, this does not strike the reader as surprising at first. He keeps it there to prevent anyone from stealing it and somehow mixing up their personalities with the parts of his that are now intermingled in the bike. However, something about the situation is strange. For one thing, the Sergeant seems genuinely embarrassed by the arrangement. When Inspector O’Corky demands to know why the narrator is not in a cell, Pluck is ashamed to admit his “precautionary measure”: “For the first time the Sergeant looked a bit crestfallen and shame-faced. His face got a little redder than it was and he put his eyes on the stone floor” (97). The other odd thing is that the Sergeant never rides his bicycle during the course of the novel. When the narrator attempts to escape the barracks in chapter eleven, he notices that Pluck’s bicycle has wandered from the open cell. The narrator realizes that Pluck has kept the bicycle jailed so it could not escape him. Pluck’s devious machinations become clearer when the narrator realizes that the bicycle has a female personality. This strikes the reader as particularly hypocritical on Pluck’s part because he had earlier decried men riding female bicycles. “Can you appreciate the immorality of that?” he asks the narrator in chapter six (89). However, the depths of Pluck’s depravity are fully revealed when the narrator looks inside the empty cell.

In the back of the small cell was a collection of paint-cans, old ledgers, punctured bicycle tubes, tyre repair outfits and a mass of peculiar brass and leather articles not unlike ornamental horse harness but clearly intended for some wholly different office. (167-8)

The punctured tubes and harnesses give a perverse ambiance to the cell. Shea believes “these brass and leather good would be put to good use by the Marquis de Sade” (135). In fact, it dawns on the reader that the bicycle is being kept as Pluck’s sexual prisoner. Such hypocrisy, perversity, and misuse of power in an authority figure gives credence to Manichaeism. However, one must remember that this is no ordinary policeman; he is, the reader learns, a minion of Hell charged with punishing an impenitent sinner. O’Nolan’s cynicism runs to a new low when he suggests that not even demons from Hell can live up to their own infernal laws.

Another standout Manichaeism moment occurs in *Eternity*. MacCruiskeen is explaining some of the more interesting contraptions that can be found in the bowels of *The Parish*. They have machines that can disassemble the senses; they can fracture a smell or a feel into all their separate smells and feels. They can “[split] up any smell into its sub- and inter-smells the way you split up a beam of light with a glass instrument,” explains Pluck (139). It soon becomes apparent that pleasant sensations are made up of unpleasant ones. Perfumes are made up of dirty smells. The smoothness of a woman’s back is made up of coarse “feels.” Explaining the machine for tastes, MacCruiskeen comments, “the taste of a friend chop, although you might not think it, is forty percent the taste of...” and then spits upon the floor. These machines seem to indicate that all the pleasures of this world are rotten at their base. O’Nolan is refracting the world and, like Augustine, finding it composed of bitter dross.

The final Manichaeism element of *The Parish* that this paper wishes to discuss is where the policemen sleep at night. Both Sergeant Pluck and Policeman MacCruiskeen sleep in *Eternity*. Since a person does not age when in *Eternity*, the obvious reason for this is so they can live for as long as possible. “Down there you are as young coming out of sleep as you are going into it,” Pluck announces pleasantly to the narrator, whom he intends on hanging that morning (152). Policeman Fox, on the other hand, sleeps in the barracks. The purpose of his sleeping quarters is exactly

the opposite of Pluck and MacCruiskeen's. "His lifetime. He wants to get rid of as much as possible, undertime and overtime, as quickly as he can so that he can die as soon as possible" (153). This is a startling revelation for the narrator, who wishes to live, but the mystery clears, for the reader at least, as Pluck gives his theory for why this is so. Pluck says that Fox believes there is road leading to another Eternity. The policemen's Eternity is on the "left-hand" side of the road, so the other Eternity must be on the "right-hand" side. Fox "thinks the best way to find it is to die and get all the leftness out of his blood" (ibid). Pluck dismisses Fox's contention as madness and concludes that if there were a "right-handed" Eternity it would be much too difficult to maintain. The imagery from the Book of Revelations is obvious. The saved are on the "right-hand" of God and the damned are on the "left-hand." The "left-handed" Eternity that is down an elevator shaft and filled with oven doors is not where anyone would want to end. Policeman Fox, who is the agent that truly serves the narrator his ironic justice, has chosen the "right-handed" Eternity—salvation—and knows that the only way to get there is to remove the sin or "leftness" from himself. O'Nolan drops his moral bombshell when the Sergeant tells the narrator, "*As you are perfectly aware the right is much more tricky than the left*" [italics mine] (ibid). As a liar, thief, and murderer, the narrator is intimately aware that doing evil is far easier than doing good. Augustinian pessimism is fully exhibited in this statement. People and the world lean naturally toward evil; it is difficult to do good because you are working against the grain of the world when you attempt to do so. There is also a sense of Mani's philosophy in this passage as well. The "evil" policemen are trying to attain immortality, to perpetuate life/evil. Policeman Fox, however, is behaving like a devout Manichee by trying to extinguish the flame of his life as quickly as possible. In either Augustine or Mani's vision, death is the only doorway to salvation. Unbeknownst to the narrator, he is already on the wrong side of a bolted door.

One of the most problematic elements of the novel is the relationship the narrator has with Joe, his soul. This is an aspect of the novel with which O’Nolan himself had difficulties. Sue Asbee reports that O’Nolan wrote of his frustration to a publisher to whom he had originally sent the manuscript. O’Nolan claimed that he “intended to kill completely a certain repulsive and obtrusive character called Joe” (62). Asbee speculates that Joe’s sentimentality of speech is what annoyed O’Nolan, and she sees Joe as largely a device rather than a character, adding little to the overall structure of the novel (63). However, as Cronin suggests in *No Laughing Matter*, O’Nolan’s correspondences with publishers should be read with several grains of salt. Unlike Joyce, O’Nolan did not fight to the death to keep his original artistic vision unaltered. Rather, O’Nolan was so obliging that he typically offered to make changes before they were asked of him. After sending *At Swim-Two-Birds* to Longman’s for consideration, O’Nolan quickly made numerous slight changes to avoid offending the editors. He removed words he considered coarse although Cronin maintains “[t]he coarsenesses referred to were rather innocuous” (87). More importantly, O’Nolan changed the name of the “Good Spirit” to the “Good Fairy” (ibid). The Good Fairy is the character that most closely resembles Joe in both body (neither have one) and manner of speech. O’Nolan said he made the change specifically to “[remove] any suggestion of the mock-religious” (86). It is quite possible that the repulsion O’Nolan claimed to have felt for Joe sprang from the same fear of appearing sacrilegious. This author also disagrees with Ms. Asbee that Joe is a relatively unimportant character in the novel. On the contrary, Joe is a central character. He is one of the skeleton keys O’Nolan provides the reader to unlock his novel.

Before examining the narrator’s soul, it is helpful to discuss the most singular element of the narrator’s character, his anonymity. The reader never learns the narrator’s name because the character himself never remembers it. At the end of chapter one, the narrator promises Divney that while he retrieves the cash box from Mathers’

house he will not reveal his name to anyone he meets . O’Nolan then ends his first chapter with one of the great hook paragraphs in modern literature: “This was a very remarkable thing for me to say because the next time I was asked my name I could not answer. I did not know” (20). The next person to ask the narrator’s name is the person he murdered, Mathers. In his attempt to reply, the narrator realizes to his shock that he has no clue what his name is and is unsure about almost everything else. “I found I was sure of nothing save my search for the black box. [...] I had no name” (31). The narrator’s amnesia is an exemplary stroke of poetic justice. As mentioned earlier, the sole reason he is going to publish his de Selby index is so his name “will be remembered.” As Divney cunningly suggests, “[i]t might make your name in the world” (14). Therefore, it is very Dantesque that part of the narrator’s hellish torment is that he has no name. It is also very fitting that the person whose question brings this punishment home for the narrator is his victim. However, O’Nolan utilizes the narrator’s anonymity for a deeper purpose as well.

In addition to the various stories that O’Nolan told friends to explain the manuscript for *The Third Policeman*’s disappearance, he had to make excuses to his wife, who knew very well those stories were not true, as to why he refused to publish it. Per Anthony Cronin, the answer Evelyn O’Nolan received most often was “that [the novel] would have to be recast in the third person, which would be a lot of trouble” (208). As it turns out, O’Nolan did “recast” *The Third Policeman* in the third person, in a way, when he wrote *The Dalkey Archive*. If Sorrentino is correct that the latter novel is an apology of sorts for the first, what role does the person case play? What is so offensive about the first person? Maybe the answer is that the third person allows O’Nolan to hold the heresies and other outrages in the story at arm’s length while the first person makes the evil immanent, too close for comfort.

One of the results of using an unnamed first person narrator is that the reader tends to identify with him. Although this author agrees with Asbee when she con-

cludes that leaving the narrator nameless “prevents overly simple reader sympathy,” he disagrees strongly with her suggestion that O’Nolan’s tactic makes “it less easy to identify” with the narrator (59). The sympathy the reader feels for the narrator is not “simple” in nature; it is insidious. Since the narrator spends the greater course of the novel encountering fantastic and outrageous characters and events that the reader has likewise never experienced, it is very easy for the reader to place herself into his place. They are both in the same boat—experiencing the terrible wonders of hell for the first time. The reader’s reactions, for the most part, mimic those of the narrator. There are, certainly, exceptions to this. Their reactions are obviously at odds when Sergeant Pluck explains the “Atomic Theory.” However, when the narrator watches MacCruiskeen reveal his chests and when he tries to discover the source of light in Mathers’ abandoned house, the reader is very much of the same mind. This author was somewhat jolted when he first read O’Nolan’s reference to the narrator as a “heel” in the Saroyan letter. However, a cursory reflection upon the narrator’s actions quickly proved the validity of O’Nolan’s character assessment. As expanded upon earlier in this paper, the narrator *is*, unmistakably, a heel. How could it be so easy to forget this fact? The adventures the narrator undergoes are so unexpected, bewildering, and, yes, wonderful that O’Nolan’s text lulls the reader into a state of acceptance where the narrator’s relatively “mundane” crimes in chapter one are easily passed over or forgotten. In addition, Roy Hunt suggests that O’Nolan’s refusal to name his character “encourages the reader to see the narrator as the archetypal Everyman—lack of identity, in a sense universalizes him” (64). This set-up might have been too pessimistic for even O’Nolan to stand. The Everyman in this world is the doppelganger of the hero from the great allegory play. Not only is he a despicable creature from a Manichaeian-tinted world, but it is excruciatingly easy to sympathize with him. In a way, the first person is allowing the Manichaeism to leak out of the world of the novel and infect the world of the reader. Of course, there are several

instances in the novel where the reader is taken aback by the narrator's actions (the description of the murder, the weeping fit before the lift in Eternity to name but two). The moralistic benefit these scenes bestow—warning how easy it is to take the left-handed road—only further underscores the Manichaeism O’Nolan saw in the real world. Furthermore, O’Nolan may have thought the notion that readers might overly sympathize with his heel too dangerous a risk to make for what moral it *might* teach them in exchange.

Apart from a few flashes of attitude that pop up here and again, Joe is a pretty beneficent soul. He appears right after the narrator dies. The narrator has been confronted with a person he assumes to be Old Mathers' twin brother. A voice quickly corrects this misconception, and the narrator intuits that this someone speaking is his soul.

[These words] came from deep inside of me, from my soul. Never before had I believed or suspected that I had a soul but just then I knew I had. I knew also that my soul was friendly, was my senior in years and was solely concerned for my own welfare. (25)

This passage relays some important information. The revelation that he had never thought he had a soul before paints the narrator as an atheist or agnostic—a definite “heel-like” trait as far as O’Nolan is concerned. The narrator’s hunch that his soul only means him well proves correct for most of the book. However, the passage also presents—to quote Sergeant Pluck—a theological conundrum. In a strict interpretation of Christian doctrine, the body and soul are not distinct: on the Day of Judgement, the dead will be raised body and soul from their graves to be judged. In popular platonian-flavored Christian thought, the body is merely the host for the soul. Once the body dies, the soul journeys immediately to heaven or hell. Neither of these models meshes well with O’Nolan’s cosmos in *The Third Policeman*. Each theory has an aspect or two that does fit well into O’Nolan’s scheme, but both are far from perfect

fits. Moreover, there is one question that neither theory seem capable of answering: if Joe is the narrator's soul and is, at the same time an entity distinct from the narrator, who or what is the narrator supposed to be?

Before revealing the narrator's identity, Joe's beneficence to the narrator should be examined. When he first appears, Joe helps the narrator break through Mathers' monosyllabic discourse. He also urges the narrator to pay heed to the moral value of Mathers' system of always answering "No." Mathers' philosophy seems preposterous at first, and O'Nolan surely meant it to be comical to some extent. On the other hand, it dovetails very nicely into Manichaeism. "No is a better word than Yes," Mathers contends because the vast majority of requests people make of you "are definitely bad and pretty considerable sins as sins go" (29,30). Moreover, in terms of the action in the novel itself, such negative discourse might have proved useful to the narrator.⁶ If the narrator had said "No" to "every request or inquiry whether inward or outward," he never would have stolen *Golden Hours*, never aided Divney in the murder, and never agreed to retrieve the cashbox alone (30). This is also true for his actions in *The Parish*. Practically every shock or misadventure he undergoes results directly from his agreement to a request from the policemen. For example, he learns of the dreadful "Atomic Theory" because he accepts the Sergeant's invitation to go out on patrol. As Joe hears Mathers relate his stratagem for avoiding sin, he remarks, "*This is very wholesome stuff, every word a sermon in itself*" [italics when Joe speaks are always O'Nolan's] (29). Joe only shows reservation when Mathers reveals he can manipulate the system so as to get friends to pour him a glass of whiskey now and again. Later, Joe attempts to provide the narrator with a moral base when he describes the lives of two of his invented aliases for the narrator: Signor Beniamino Bari and Dr. Solway Garr. Although his portraits are ludicrous and overblown, Joe is quick to point out that their excesses originate from the narrator's own lust for fame.⁷ "[I]t is only a hint of the preten -

sions and vanity that you inwardly permit yourself" (41).

Joe's greatest moral stance, however, is when he tries to stop the narrator from entering the policemen's Eternity. As Sergeant Pluck begins to unveil his surprise that Eternity is just up the lane, Joe warns the narrator, "*You're a goner if you listen to much more of this gentleman's talk*" (124). Of course, the narrator is already a goner, but Joe is just as obtuse as the narrator on this point. When the narrator tells Joe flatly that he buys Pluck's story, Joe responds, "*Nonsense. You are becoming demoralized*" (125). The narrator replies that he will be hung tomorrow. This is yet another of O'Nolan's great cynical insinuations. On the one hand, this exchange suggests that the narrator is losing morale because he is scheduled to be executed the next day. If you take Joe's word "*demoralized*" literally, the exchange is saying that since the narrator is being killed on the next day, why shouldn't he ignore his morals or de-moralize himself as much as possible? Joe's hints reinforce the importance of double meanings when he goes into his "*bar the lift*" speech.

Unless the word 'lift' has a special meaning. Like 'drop' when you are talking about a scaffold. I suppose a smash under the chin with a heavy spade could be called a 'lift'. If that is the case you can be certain about eternity and have the whole of it yourself and welcome.
(126)

Joe's definition of "lift" refers precisely to the type the narrator gave Mathers' when he murdered him; his definition of "drop" refers to the type the narrator is scheduled to receive for this murder. As the narrator and the policemen plummet down the lift to the Eternity of everlasting flame, Joe screams out futility, "*Lord save us!*"⁸ (130). Joe's prayer goes unanswered; unbeknownst to him or the narrator it is already much too late for that kind of thing.

Asbee notes that one of O'Nolan's best techniques for hiding the narrator's deceased state for most of the book is to highlight his body as much as possible.

“Use of tactile physical images also encourages us to fail to question [the narrator’s] state” (53). This concentration upon the narrator’s physical presence does more than simply keep the surprise ending secret; it also clues us in on who the narrator is.

Unlike the pre-Parish section of the book, *The Parish* section seems obsessed with the narrator’s feelings of sensations. For instance, although we get details on how the narrator got his wooden leg in chapter one, we get nothing on how it felt to have the leg broken or what it now feels like for the narrator to hobble around on a prosthetic pin. Contrast this with the details the reader receives in chapter eight: “[My left leg’s] woodenness was slowly extending throughout my whole body, a dry timber poison killing me inch by inch” (115). When he learns he is to be hung from the gallows, the intensity of his biological life force is so intense as to be unbearable.

I began to feel intensely every fragment of my equal humanity. The life that was bubbling at the end of my fingers was real and nearly painful in intensity and so was the beauty of my warm face and the loose humanity of my limbs and the racy health of my rich red blood. (102)

The keenness of his senses also seem to be heightened to an almost painful degree as he journeys through *The Parish*. O’Nolan seems to be saying over and over again that the narrator is simply the body that Joe, the soul, is inhabiting. If this is the case, it suggests a tantalizing answer to the narrator’s identity.

In popular Christian belief where the soul is the true person while the body is merely the shell, it follows that the Christian name the person is given is really the name for the soul because the body does not matter in any spiritual sense. The narrator becomes distinct from his soul from the moment he dies and hence loses his name, his identity. He has become mere flesh that is interchangeable with any other flesh under the sun. This theory is given weight by the narrator’s strange reaction when he discovers that he cannot remember his name. “I can always get a name,” he answers Mathers, “I can take my choice. I am not tied down for life to one word

like most people” (31). The narrator decides to name his soul “Joe” for “convenience”; however, does Joe answer to this name simply out of convenience as well or because it truly is his name? (25) O’Nolan may be giving the reader another clue to the narrator’s identity when Sergeant Pluck goes through a list of possible names so he can charge, prosecute and hang him. Midway through this list, the Sergeant does offer a “Joe”–“Joseph Poe” (100). Of course, the narrator denies this is his name just as he does all the other suggestions made throughout the novel. Since the narrator cannot remember his name, none of his negations carry any real weight. However, the name Pluck suggests in tandem with Joseph Poe is significant. It is Nolan.

Underneath all of the author’s pseudonyms lies his real name–O’Nolan. However, things are not clear-cut here, either. Although he was born with the surname O’Nolan, the same cannot be said of his father, Michael, or his father’s father, Donal. As Anthony Cronin attests, they were “not born O’Nolan, but Nolan” (3). The true godhead of *The Parish*, the author himself, is winking at the reader at this point in the text. As he reveals his family’s true name, he also reveals his narrator’s. The narrator’s name is–or rather, was–Joe.

The most tense moment in the relationship between Joe–The–Body and Joe–The–Soul occurs in the middle of chapter eight. As the narrator⁹ lies in bed on the verge of sleep, his mind starts to drift. His thoughts circle around his soul. “I felt, for no reason, that his diminutive body would be horrible to the human touch–scaly or slimy like an eel or with a repelling roughness like a cat’s tongue” (117). Joe’s response is quick and sharp as a knife blade. “*By God I won’t be called scaly.*” (ibid) The narrator tries to pacify Joe by insisting that Joe does not have a body, scaly or otherwise. Then his thoughts drift again around a theory “not unworthy of de Selby” that Joe may have a body and that there may be an infinite series of such inner-bodies within him leading finally to God or the void (118). Joe then gives his own terrifying theory on the nature of the universe and bids the narrator a terse

farewell. The narrator believes he is dead and then awakens to the building noises of the scaffold outside his window. Both Joe and the day seem friendly, and the narrator assumes their fight the previous night to have been a bad dream.¹⁰

There is a lot to unpack in the six very dense pages that make up this episode. Much of what Joe says suggests that the relationship between the soul and the body does not fit into the standard Christian schemes at all. In fact, the ontology suggested by this scene seems deliberately cryptic and contradictory. However, O’Nolan’s system appears clearer if viewed through a dark Manichaeian lens.

The first thing that is underscored in this scene is the narrator’s body. Although his body has been more present since he entered The Parish, it is never more manifest than in this section. The narrator takes a look at his body for the first time, and it is “surprisingly white and thin” (115). As he lies down in the bed, he becomes immensely aware of his body. “Every inch of my person gained weight with every second until the total burden on the bed was approximately five hundred thousand tons” (ibid). The narrator senses that his body is bonding with the rest of creation. As he looks out the window into the dark night sky, he feels that his being is being distilled and dispersed throughout the universe. “Robbing me of the reassurance of my eyesight, [the darkness of night] was disintegrating my bodily personality into a flux of colour, smell, recollection, desire—all the strange uncounted essences of terrestrial and spiritual existence” (116). While his body seems more and more evident, the narrator’s soul seems to be drifting away. When the narrator first becomes aware of Joe in chapter two, he feels that Joe is inside him. He even refers to him in bodily terms: “I felt a click inside me very near my stomach as if Joe had put a finger to his lip and pricked up a pair of limp spaniel ears” (29). However, Joe’s comments do not strike the narrator as coming from inside him anymore; Joe is moving away. The narrator reasons, “I thought that he must be lying beside me in the bed” (117). It is this notion that leads to the scaly comment. What is significant here is that the

narrator's bodily sensations and feelings of unity with the rest of creation are tied to his perception of the night sky outside his window. In Manichaean terms, it is the Dark that awakens these thoughts and his feeling of solidarity with creation. On the other hand, Joe, who can be interpreted as his source of Light, seems to be freeing himself from him. In fact it is the narrator's suggestion that Joe is linked with creation by having a bodily form that sends him flying off the handle. If all of creation is seen in this episode in purely Manichaean terms, inherently evil, Joe-The-Soul is quite right to react petulantly, for it is Joe-The-Body whose skin is scaly.

The tense exchange immediately following the scaly comment also underscores the Manichaeism in the novel. The narrator ponders his "infinite receding Joes" theory and then stops himself to ask whether this theory is coming from "Lower Down" or "Higher Up." "*From Lower Down,*" Joe yells (118). After Joe threatens to clear out, the narrator bewails where he might have gotten the offensive scaly comment. Joe's response is a little surprising. Assuming that a simple duality is at work in the Lower Down/Higher Up scenario, the reader expects that Lower Down is the negative term—perhaps suggestive of the body, and Higher Up is the positive term—possibly associated with the mind or spirit. Therefore the reader suspects this answer should also be Lower Down. However, Joe smashes this simple dichotomy when he shouts, "*Higher Up*" (119). Joe seems to be suggesting that no matter where in the narrator his thoughts might germinate they are wrong-headed and offensive simply because they come from the narrator. The narrator's being is not dissected into the noble and perverse spheres. All the spheres are perverse.

Joe's chilling cosmology has a definitive Manichaean ring to it. There is no humor, even black humor, in this passage.

When I am gone you are dead. Past humanity is not only implicit in each new man born but is contained in him. Humanity is an ever-widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each succeed-

ing ring. All humanity from its beginning to its end is already present but the beam has not yet played beyond you. Your earthly successors await dumbly and trust to your guidance and mine and all my people inside me to preserve them and lead the light further. (ibid)

Although Manichaeism is not named, the duality of light and dark and their relation to creation do resonate within this passage. The “widening spiral” of humanity is reminiscent of the every increasing “error” of life that Mani’s teachings struggle against. Simply replacing the word “humanity” with the word “universe” or “creation” makes this Mani influence come into focus. The word “beam” is certainly used as a synonym for light; it is possible that O’Nolan meant it to be identified with “Light” as well. So when Joe states that “*I am your soul and all your souls*” he may be saying that he is Light personified and that when he does leave, all of humanity and creation will be extinguished. Certainly, this paper’s author is not suggesting that Joe’s cosmology is a perfect fit with strict Manichaeism; it is not. However, it does suggest that more than the relatively tame Manichaeism that is distilled through St. Augustine is at work here. It is fitting with O’Nolan’s dark sensibilities that he might posit a universe based on Mani’s beliefs, yet see the glorious finish the Persian foretold with terror instead of jubilation.

On the other hand, a reader could simply dismiss Joe’s cosmology and his threats of leaving the narrator on the basis that it is all a nightmare. That would be quite easy to do if Joe never leaves the narrator, but the problem is he does. Although this author has been unsuccessful in finding any corresponding critical commentary on the subject, there is a point where Joe simply disappears from the text. This moment goes unnoticed by most readers because the narrator himself does not notice. Nonetheless, Joe is gone by the middle of chapter ten, never to be seen again. The scene is the scaffold where the narrator is waiting to be executed by Sergeant Pluck. Joe is trying to bolster the narrator’s spirits and give him courage.

However, Joe's thoughts start to wander as he considers where he might end up after "all this is over." He does not suppose he will journey to heaven, as popular Christian thought might assume a soul might. Rather, Joe anticipates a pantheistic paradise where he may become part of nature as in "*the smell of a flower*" (162). He lists a handful of such overly romantic possibilities. One of these does seem significant from a Manichaean perspective. Joe quotes a line of verse, "The light that never was on sea or land, the peasant's hope and the poet's dream" (ibid). As the narrator is dragged over the trap door, Joe gives a final note of encouragement and is gone. However, rescue, in the form of the one-legged men and Policeman Fox's tinkering with the readings, appears immediately following Joe's absence. In a peculiar role-reversal, the character has cheated death while his soul has not.

Even if Joe's absence is never acknowledged by the narrator or immediately noted by the reader, it is definitely felt in the remaining chapter of the book. The narrator's escape from the barracks and his journey to the edge of The Parish is a disturbing one. Although everything appears to be going the narrator's way, something seems not right. Once the narrator rides by Mathers' house, the anxiety increases. The fear that creeps into these pages may be due to Joe's absence. Although the narrator finds the bicycle a good companion, the silence Joe leaves behind gives the remaining section of the book a strangely eerie feel. Without Joe as a comforting, if condescending, companion, the narrator's loneliness which has always been under the surface of every moment in the novel, makes itself plain. What is more disturbing is that when the narrator and Divney return to the barracks at the novel's close, there is no evidence to suggest that Joe has also returned to the narrator. It is very likely that Joe-The-Body has forever lost Joe-The-Soul.

If the reader connects Joe with light (Light?) from either his cosmology or from his last wishes on the gallows, then some of the events that occur during the second visit to Mathers' house make more sense. The narrator feels compelled to

find the source of the light in Mathers' house. Even after he has forgotten his plan to have the owner of the light relinquish the black box, he cannot stop his search. It is almost as if he needs the light itself. When Policeman Fox first apprehends the narrator, it is because he has no light on his bicycle. The narrator stammers that his lamp "was stolen" (184). Fortunately, Policeman Fox promises, "you can be certain I will find the [narrator's] stolen lamp because they cost one and sixpence and you would want to be made of money to keep buying them" (192). Although Policeman Fox says it good-naturally, his parting statement has a diabolical edge when the reader sees all lights in terms of Joe.

Susan Asbee states that like the narrator, Joe "is equally doomed, for death has failed to release him from the body and character of his host" (63). Although this author obviously disagrees that Joe is never "freed" from his host, he does agree with Asbee that Joe is equally doomed. If the reader assumes that Joe's notions about his paradise are right and that he does become a part of nature, this is not necessarily a good thing. From the Manichaeian perspective, this means he is still trapped in the evil that is creation. What is worse, he has most likely become a part of the nature within The Parish. If he has become "the light that was never on sea or land" within The Parish, Joe is certainly doomed. In chapter seven, Policeman MacCruiskeen reveals a contraption that tortures light "for diversion and scientific truth" (106). The device twists light until it lets out "a sound not unlike the call of rats yet far shriller than any sound which could be made by man or animal" (108). MacCruiskeen then tries to decipher the shriek the light made before it disintegrates. When the terrified narrator asks MacCruiskeen what he has been doing, he answers "Stretching the light" (109). This is an ominous statement because earlier in the chapter, MacCruiskeen has used the same term to describe the execution of the narrator: "I believe they are going to stretch you," he said pleasantly" (104). Therefore, what MacCruiskeen is doing is killing the light. The reader can only wonder how

many trips to The Parish the narrator must make before he hears his Joe's death shriek from MacCruiskeen's mangle.

Indeed, Brian O'Nolan's *The Third Policeman* is a dark novel. In the pre-Parish section, he has created a world where Augustinian pessimism is perfectly validated. Once the reader crosses over into The Parish, she has entered an even darker realm. Mired in a strain of Manichaeism that goes beyond Augustine's distilled version, creation removes its pessimistic mask to reveal a genuinely malignant aspect. What is more, O'Nolan proves to be even more fatalistic than Mani himself. The heretic at least saw a light—extinction—at the end of the tunnel. O'Nolan sees the same light, but he knows it is an oncoming train. The Parish is O'Nolan's darkest creation, a dark and shadowy land from which nothing can escape evil, not even light. The worst that may befall, indeed.

Notes

1. The quotation also serves another ironic function. In *Julius Caesar*, Cassius' fear when he says these lines is that Brutus and he will never see each other again. In *The Third Policeman* Divney and the narrator will see each other again, and again, and again ...
2. Jason David BeDuhn's *The Manichaean Body* (2000) is a prime example of contemporary Manichaean studies. However, this work primarily deals with the daily practices of the devout Manichee and has little bearing on the focus of this paper. The similarity between its title and that of this paper is merely an example of synchronicity as the title of this paper was chosen before the author discovered BeDuhn's book.
3. O'Nolan places all of St. Augustine's utterances in italics. Another character whose words are always italicized is Joe in *The Third Policeman*. This grammatical distinction may be used by O'Nolan to show both characters' divinity or sacredness. It cannot be construed that it only demonstrates supernaturalness. The Good Fairy and the Pooka in *At Swim-Two-Birds* are supernatural, yet their dialogue is rendered without italics.
4. Where this "rabbit hole" lies exactly is a point of contention. One would assume that the narrator enters The Parish at the point he reaches for the cash box and discovers it is gone—at the point when he is, in fact, killed. However, something quite odd happens before this moment. When he enters Mathers' house through a window, he finds himself "crawling along the deepest window-ledge I have ever seen" (22). Once the narrator finally reaches the room and looks back the way he came, he notices "the open window seemed very far away and much too small to have admitted me" (ibid). What is specifically strange about this instance is that it is the only weird occurrence—to the narrator's mind—that happens before he enters The Parish. Thomas Shea has made the connection between the Mathers' window-ledge and the rabbit hole to Wonderland, but he offers no explanation for its placement before the narrator's death (121). O'Nolan may have intended just this allusion. On the page just prior to this scene, the narrator quotes de Selby's *Country Album* where the savant defines a house as "a warren" (21). Of course, the way into a rabbit den is through a rabbit hole. Roy Hunt, on the other hand, sees the window-ledge as a metaphor for the birth canal and "[t]he narrator's entry through such an opening marks his figurative birth and the beginning of his quest" (66). Both of these critics seem to suggest that the narrator's strange adventure begins at this moment even if he has not yet been killed. As Shea suggests, the journey through the window-ledge may simply be an omen "[promising] peculiar proceedings" (121). However, there might be yet another way to look at the narrator's entrance into the house. Several critics have referred to Mathers' house as a haunted house. Certainly, the narrator meets ghosts in the house. Both Mathers and Policeman Fox with Mathers' head can be seen as ghosts haunting the narrator, and he only sees them when he is in the house. However, the house can be seen to be haunted in another way. In many traditions, ghosts are said to haunt the locations in which their earthly lives came to an end. If the reader strictly follows this tradition, she would expect to see Mathers' ghost wandering on the road where he was killed, rather than in his house. Furthermore, the only person who is killed in Mathers' house is the narrator when Divney's mine blows up both him and the house itself. So if the house is haunted, it is haunted by the narrator himself. Taking this train of thought even further past the station, the house *itself* is a ghost because it has been utterly destroyed, yet the narrator sees it plainly. The house is the gateway between the "real" world and The Parish. The narrator has to enter it before he can pass into and out of The Parish. In a very real sense, the house is the narrator's coffin. O'Nolan says as much when he has the narrator quote de Selby's definition that a house is "a large coffin" (21). Mathers' house is a coffin the narrator climbs into when he is about to die and one he has to climb out of when he returns to scare Divney to death. The window-ledge scene would substantiate this theory very nicely if O'Nolan had been helpful enough to give the window-ledge an exact length—say, about six feet.
5. Roy Hunt has suggested that the title of the novel suggests an identification of The Parish's police

force with the Trinity. However, “the triumvirate of this particular ‘force,’ who make and uphold the laws and guard eternity, prove to be more akin to the guardians of purgatory than to the deity of a heavenly realm” (65). One could speculate that since he is the commander of the post, Sergeant Pluck is the God figure. With his “miraculous” inventions, Policeman MacCruiskeen could be a stand-in for Christ, the ultimate “miracle-worker.” Finally, since he has a dead man’s head between his shoulders, Policeman Fox could be the Holy Ghost. However, there are many holes in this construction. Since he is secretly running the show via omnium, one could argue that Fox is God. Pluck’s deference to Inspector O’Corky and his powerlessness against the County Council also undercut his authority. It is very likely that any religious association in the title is merely a blind alley O’Nolan hopes critics will get lost down.

6. It may have also proved useful for Mathers himself. To get Mathers to turn around so he can knock him down with the bicycle pump, Divney asks him, “Would that be your parcel on the road?” (16) If Mathers had simply replied “No” without looking back, Divney may not have had the courage to strike him down. One could also see the parade of “No’s” Mathers gives the narrator as the repeated answer to the last question put to him before he was killed.

7. If there is any aspect of this novel that strikes the reader as Joycean, it is these overblown set pieces for Signor Bari and Dr. Garr. The style of these passages suggests the gargantuan-style of the “Cyclopes” episode of *Ulysses*.

8. Although Eternity does not have pits of burning sulphur, matches and cigarettes do burn there forever.

9. This paper’s author reverts back to identifying Joe-The-Body as “the narrator” and Joe-The-Soul as “Joe” for the majority of the pages left for “convenience.”

10. O’Nolan shows real skill in this “nightmare” scene. Like Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* when he describes Svidrigaïlov’s bad dreams the night before he shoots himself, the reader is not aware that she is reading a dream sequence until it is over. Also similar to Dostoevsky’s example, it is unclear where exactly O’Nolan’s nightmare begins.

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