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## “Forego the reality of all the simple things”: On Object-Oriented Reality as Metaphorical Vortex in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* in the context of Object-Oriented Ontology, and argues that the novel transports the structural paradigm of reality and being towards a never-ending limbo, highlighting a circular transference of meaning from known toward unknown horizons and vice versa. In so doing, it explores the ways in which *The Third Policeman* engages with the concept of metaphor in its proportionality or analogous nature, revealing a contrapuntal form of narrative that produces an odd reality wherein objects maintain a self-referential position while introducing the subject as that which must oscillate between its metaphorical and literal integrity. The object, therefore, not only enjoys an independent existence in O’Brien’s narrative but also maintains a singular and independent ontological composition inside or outside such circular vortex. The article concludes by presenting the object as the most stable entity with multifarious functionalities that complement the axis of the narrative, cementing its presence as the mature object.

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One year after publishing his first novel *At-Swim-Two-Birds* in 1939, objects with exothermic reactions simply referred to as bombs took control of the fate of Brian O’Nolan’s manuscript when Longman’s London offices were destroyed.<sup>1</sup> O’Nolan, in this article referred to as Flann O’Brien, saw almost no trace of his manuscript until 1960. The second novel, *The Third Policeman* finished in 1940, is oddly structured around how objects, especially the explosive types, can not only reconstruct seemingly synchronous ghost branches of reality but also decentralize the subject in a metaphoric plane of reality by dismantling certain fixed anthropocentric artifacts such as language, and narratorial norms. Objects in O’Brien’s novels have been examined by scholars such as Charles Kemnitz, Andrew Spencer, John Attridge, and M. Keith Booker in the context of classical or quantum physics, Schrödinger’s probability and more, maintaining an objective lens while examining the subject-object state of being. This essay, however, looks at O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman* through an object-oriented rhetoric, and examines a select number of objects such as the bicycle, and the chest box that control the absurd realism of the novel. I will explain how reality in *The Third Policeman* functions like a circular vortex, invoking two asymptotic and parallel planes of existence with the object as its center; one plane involves the known uses of objects in the form of daily tools and equipments, while the other contains a phantasmic projection of the object and its unknown layers.

To account for the objectile reality, this paper engages with Graham Harman’s Object-Oriented philosophy and his understanding of the role that metaphor plays in not only connecting the daily and known with the unknown realities of objects but also revealing the autonomous state of objecthood, hidden behind a facade of diversified functions and references in O’Brien’s novel. Metaphor, according to Jose Ortega y Gasset, becomes a plane that allows the matter to be expressible through “ever-new trajectories” (1975, 127), revealing the unknown or hidden.

### **The Object as Reference**

Harman investigates the referentiality of the object within an anthropocentric domain in his *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, and describes a reality structured around a function-oriented perception of the object. Harman explores a plane that reveals the object’s ontic presence, namely, a profile presence, or an appearance that goes beyond the object’s sum of phenomenological performances; in other words, the object exists, yet its existence contradicts functions that were assigned to it by the subject. The object, in this respect, is irreducible to its ontic or ontological features. By ontic features, Harman evokes the Heideggerian *Vorhandenheit* or the object’s static profile whereas the ontological features highlight the functionality of an object, i.e., *Zuhandenheit*. The latter informs Harman’s appreciation of being, i.e., a functional

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<sup>1</sup>On O’Brien’s publishing history see Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O’Brien*, New York: Fromm, 1998, pp. 85–99. Also see Rob W. Maslen, "Flann O’Brien’s Bombshells: At Swim-Two-Birds and The Third Policeman", *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4, Geimhreadh/Winter 2006, pp. 84-104.

presence which is at the same time hidden and withdrawn. However, it is the object's ontic presence that stretches the existence of the object beyond Anthropocentric ends by masking the functions of the object. For instance, it is the ontic presence of an object like Husserl's knife, Heidegger's hammer, or the narrator's bicycle-pump that hides numerous possible functions of each object, presenting them as mere tools to cut, drive in nails, and inflate tires, respectively. As such, the object becomes a being that oscillates between ontic singularities and hidden multiple ontological appearances; for instance, an apprehension of the bicycle as an object that facilitates transportation and at the same time a wide spectrum of ontic manifestations such as a seductive partner with a "saddle [...] spread invitingly into the most enchanting of all seats" (O'Brien 1974, 149), an object of murder, or a feral entity that solitary prisons cannot contain. In any scenario, the ontic existence of the object disassembles an anthropocentric function-oriented reading of objects.

In the novel we follow the ontological trials and tribulations of an unnamed narrator, whose soul assumes the name Joe later in the narrative, as he and John Divney murder the old Mathers, who is "worth a packet of potato meal" (O'Brien 1974, 17). Searching for Mathers's hidden fortune, the narrator is catapulted into an eerie dimension of reality when the booby-trapped chest-box explodes, unveiling an ontological plane wherein objects such as bicycles benefit from an existential referentiality that transcends their functions. This uncanny plane expands reality by imagining little hidden worlds of objects wherein objects' masked ontologies become visible. In this reality the object's ontic multiplicity confirms an underlying inter-objectile system;<sup>1</sup> the assemblage of such microsystems projects the image of another object of a larger dimension. For instance, a bicycle can be seen as a product of this inter-objectile, indirect dynamism wherein various smaller parts such as pedals, brakes, stem, bolts, spokes, tires, seat, handlebars, and a "pump resting warmly against her rear thigh" (O'Brien, 1974, 149) must function harmoniously to project an emergent image, "a reference" toward that larger final object, "shifting [...] the issue" of being beyond the functions of those smaller objects (Harman, 2002, 25). This referent is what Harman regards as the equipment, with the potential to switch between ontic appearances, and to create realities that relate to the projected image.

The object's ontic presence as a referential terminus is related to Harman's understanding of tool-being as the signifier of meaning. In other words, for Harman referentiality is a synthetic allusion to diverse meanings and systematically complex images; hence, "for the tool, to be is to *mean*" (2002, 25), and to reflect alternative states of being. In chapter 6 of the novel, for instance, the spectral narrator is introduced to 'the Atomic theory' by Sergeant Pluck, who believes in the transformative power of atomism. His example is "Michael Gilhaney," who "is nearly banjaxed from the principle" of this theory as he is "nearly half a bicycle" (O'Brien, 1974, 72). Pluck's

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<sup>1</sup>The term 'objectile' here denotes an object-oriented or object-centric system or structure, reflecting Harman's original taxonomy borrowed from computer languages, and is distinct from the term suggested by Bernard Cache, or Gilles Deleuze.

argument, according to Kemnitz and Spencer, heavily relies on quantum physics, making a Schrodinger case of every possible entity, be it the subject or their objectile companions. However, in the context of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) and the reflexive nature of objects, Gilhaney's banjaxed being is a projection of his bicycle as a mechanical microcosmic reality, which functions as an empire of tools that relies on various micro-objects to work together. In other words, Gilhaney's centaur-like half-bicycle image references a larger reality, albeit absurd, that contains smaller objects such as Gilhaney and his bicycle, and other objectified bodies, intimating 'The behaviour' that has "a high content of humanity." For Pluck, the spectral narrator, and the readers such an imagery "is very cunning and entirely remarkable," since an unimaginable must be imagined to "see a bicycle leaning against the dresser of a warm kitchen when it is pouring outside?" (O'Brien, 1974, 77). As such, Gilhaney's existence is a projection of a state of being that is assigned to him by his bicycle as an ontic chrysalis, one that matures and defines him and other subjects by transferring features that seem unknown to both Pluck as the focalizer and the spectral narrator as the interlocutor. Gilhaney's bicycle functions as an epistemological signifier of not just his being as a pseudo-mechanical organism but also the quality of his being such as walking smartly, never sitting down, or leaning against the wall to rest; the bicycle *is* by way of reflecting and defining others:

He will walk smartly always and never sit down and he will lean against the wall with his elbow out and stay like that all night in his kitchen instead of going to bed. If he walks too slowly or stops in the middle of the road, he will fall down in a heap and will have to be lifted and set in motion again by some extraneous party (O'Brien, 1974, 78).

Although Pluck's understanding of Gilhaney regards him as an uncanny, mechanical half-bicycle, his diegetic machinations against Gilhaney's features exceed logical description of any half-machine; as such, Pluck's diegetic exuberance is a testament to Gilhaney's object-oriented body extraordinaire, the sort that appears, according to Katherine Ebury, as a collection of "absurd bodies" through which O'Brien "dethrone[d]" the subject as not just the authoritative "observer" but also the site of meaning making by "empowering imaginative responses to the cosmos" (2017, 88), especially its hidden layers. In the coming pages, I will examine objectile referentiality in the context of symbiosis, where objectile symbiotic formations point to the composition of a mature object, namely, one that no longer can or will reciprocate with its neighboring objects. The object, therefore, emerges as an entity with an ontological sovereignty to resist or to appropriate the neighboring object partially or in its entirety. Regardless of the action, the end product of such objectile communion can no longer resume its previous ontic and ontological state of being.

## The Object, Meaning, and an Internal Circular Vortex

In an Object-Oriented context, reality fails as a “total empire of meaning that only humans would be able to break up into individual zones” (Harman, 2002, 34); rather, in an object-oriented understanding of reality it segues into what I call a circular vortex of meaning, namely, a plane of meaning-contexture where objects not only “resist one another” but also maintain their unique identity by exerting their referentiality as the terminal point of meaning (Harman 2002, 34). The plane is translatable as the “horizon within which something”, for instance, the object appears as a daily object yet with hidden features (Žižek, 2021, 37). A classical understanding of the vortex derives from Ezra Pound’s imagined realm of words that functions “like great hollow cones of steel of different dullness and acuteness” (1973, 34), appearing as a bridge that enables “the subject [to] circle [...] back to the object” (Albright, 1997, 175). Conversely, in a circular vortex, as shown in Fig. 1, the object has become the center (F), and dethroned the subject and his linguistic “systematicity” (Phillips & et al, 2016, 1) by interfacing with planes of reality. The suggested vortex is not only cone-like but also forked as it is comprised of two planes of meaning-reality, reflecting the object’s ontological and ontic dimensions, respectively. In this circular vortex (Fig. 1), the object facilitates the mechanical meaning-contexture to become a perceptible reality (A), while containing within its layers a metaphorized, and hidden form of reality (B), which engages with “countless hidden layers of categorial structures” to “gradually draw out” reality (Harman 2002, 26).

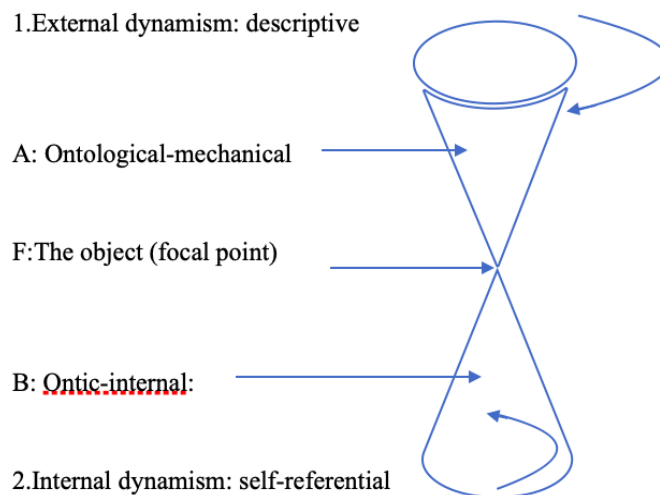


Fig. 1: Reality as an Objectile Circular Vortex

In Fig. 1, '1' represents a mechanical projection of reality channeled through the object's functional dynamism or Tool-Being that materializes within a descriptive resonance of reality wherein the Anthropos appears as a consumer of meaning, hence a clockwise rotation to mark the canniness of an Anthropocentric understanding of temporality and progress. This appears as a transliteration of reality in which existence and realities are but shadows of an objectile ontological presence, namely, a reality in which being is a result of what objects do or are made to do, and a canny relation between the object and the subject. In this literal reality, objects remain as the locus of certain functional references, e.g., bicycles maintain their ontic reference as objects of transportation. However, '2' in Fig. 1 corresponds to an autonomous cryptic empire of infinite possible realities, masked by the object's seemingly static "regime of presence-at-hand" which constructs Harman's core argument vis-à-vis an object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2002, 28). By relying on an inter-objectile regime of presence, the object initiates a departure from anthropocentrism and anthropocentric meaning-making, resulting in a nonsensical extension of reality.

In "Nonsense, Ordinary Language Philosophy, and Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*," Attridge looks at O'Brien's novel through the usual anthropocentric lens, dealing with objects through a discourse that flirts with a Husserlian understanding wherein no object exists outside of the subject's mind. For instance, Attridge examines how the narrator's perception "of a two-dimensional building in a three-dimensional environment" sounds "unintelligible - a kind of nonsense" (2014, 302); or when he analogously analyzes the absurdity and "silliness" of "proclaiming that 'the right is much trickier than the left'" in anthropocentric contexts such as "sense data and language" (2014, 303). His critique that "what is being posited is not wrong but meaningless" (Attridge, 2014, 303), makes sense within a Kantian definition of perception, a "flat ontolog[ical]" analysis would diminish such anthropocentric superiorities,

treat[ing] all objects in the same way, rather than assuming in advance that different types of objects require completely different ontologies (Harman, 2018, 83).

In this respect, objects with an independent and withdrawn existence might sound just as 'unintelligible' and nonsensical as the narrative does; for instance, when the space in the form of a two-dimensional structure fluctuates as if it is "watercolor in rain" it can be considered as a product of the second plane of reality in a circular vortex wherein the function and the presence of an object contradict or alienate such fixed anthropocentric apprehensions of the object (Kemnitz, 1985, 58). Such critical readings of meaning as the one proposed by Attridge connects with the external dynamics of reality in Fig. 1, emerging as a mechanically sound realism with objects that are categorically bound by the subject's ideation, either making sense or appearing as those "that are similarly unintelligible" (Attridge, 2014, 302). However, it is the hidden domain of an object that disrupts such fixed readings, inviting an indirect reading of "these incomprehensible objects and

the stupefying artifacts and contraptions” that MacCruiskeen crafts and operates (Attridge, 2014, 302). This is the reality in which objects can preserve their uncanny mask and appear as the site of the unknown, disrupting the canny plane of meaning-contexture known to us as reality.

This form of meaning, shaped by an empire of masked and disruptive objects, signifies the existence of an internal reality that is masked by the object’s withdrawn presence and at the same time its multiple layers of self-referentiality, superimposing these internal structural dynamics of existence. For the narrative, a reversal of geometrical meaning appears for the narrator as objects that “lacked an essential property of all known objects” (O’Brien, 1974, 177); this is represented by a counterclockwise rotation in Fig. 1 to emphasize such internal contradictions, and the inherent non-anthropocentrism of the narrative. The internalized confusion at the core of shapeless objects created at police barracks highlights the object’s departure from anthropocentrism toward self-referential autonomy: these objects are “not square or rectangular or circular” as their geometry adheres to a definitional core hidden by the object; objects, in this respect, appear as “simply irregularly shaped” (O’Brien, 1974, 117). The reality of objects with intelligible shapes and geometrical forms is shown in Fig. 1 as ‘A’ and ‘1’, connecting with Harman’s understanding of “overmining,” namely, perceiving the objects by “reducing [them] to their impact on us or on each other, denying them any excess or surplus beyond such impact” (Harman, 2018, 75). Whereas ‘B’ and ‘2’ portray ‘undermining’ or “smallism,” namely, a perception “central to the natural sciences” that denies objects such as ‘chairs and horses’ the “same degree of reality as their chosen ultimate foundations,” as they are either “too shallow” or too deep and cryptic to be real (Harman, 2018, 69-70, 72); and hence, an object is tantamount to mere static presence-at-hand, irrespective of its hidden layers of reality; a bicycle or a bomb, in this respect, *is* what it does, obscuring the fact that its planes of reality had galvanized the existence of the novel.

### **Metaphor as the Catalyst**

In “Science, Philosophy, and ‘The Third Policeman,’” M. Keith Booker engages O’Brien’s novel as a metaphoric examination of being qua being; in so doing, Booker assays an article by a young Friedrich Nietzsche in which he understood “all knowledge” as “indirect and metaphorical,” finding reality to be “nothing but ‘an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us’” (1991, 37). Booker’s allusion to Nietzsche’s vision that “we possess nothing but metaphors for things” (Booker, 1991, 37) is not only to debunk the nature of language and its seemingly rigid and direct relationship with beings but also to appreciate the bizarre, aloof and non-prescriptive nature of O’Brien’s art.

The non-prescriptive aspect of O’Brien’s novel becomes an asset when we learn that for modernists such as y Gasset real art is created when one engages with hidden aspects of reality. In *Phenomenology and Art*, y Gasset goes as far as to say that “decorative or industrial arts” as representations of daily and monolithic reality are so cognitively exhausted that they barely stand

as art; it is more accurate, therefore, to call it “utility varnished with beauty” (1975, 129-130). The reality that such artworks represent connects with Harman’s reality of overmining, namely, a hidden yet dry, shallow, and function-oriented reality. Through a dialectical engagement with object-oriented vortices, metaphor not only reveals but also brings such hidden vortices to the fore by treating previously unknown meanings and internal realities as, according to y Gasset, “whirlwinds with ever-new trajectories” that can add “novelty to the world, that add ideality to the universe” (1975, 127).

In *Poetics* Part 3 Section XXI, Aristotle introduces two types of words: “current, [and] strange, or metaphorical” whereby current fits our contemporary “general use” and understanding of language while the metaphorical or the strange might be current and contemporary yet within or from a different culture or region. Metaphor is regarded by Aristotle as the “application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion” (Section 3, Part XXI). It is the fourth form, namely the proportionality or the analogous nature of language that brings delicate matters such as reality and ontology to the foreground by creating not only the context of criticism as in the form of two parallel planes, one literal and one imagined and thus critical, but also a necessary mindset that will make reconsidering reality permissible. Metaphor, I suggest, may be considered as a referential threshold that opens to masked realities hidden within objects, and at the same time translates such hidden depths into systematic verbiage by way of “transference,” (Aristotle, 2008, 3: XXI) namely, connecting the known with the unknown through the analogous power of language.

Through metaphor not only the object’s self-referential, counterintuitive multiplicity of realities but also its pseudo-ontological presence can be examined. This critical reflexivity of metaphor should not be misunderstood as its function to reduce art to an everyday object with internal and external vortices of reality that are deplorably repetitive and exhausted; rather, by cracking the object’s previously impenetrable carapace and by inviting our assessment of its internal realities, a metaphorical reading of a work of art allows for the hidden planes to be explored and imagined in the face of a fixed Kantian nature of the process wherein understanding and judgment appear as mechanical apparatuses that enable artistic perception possible. To understand the object and its masked vortices of reality we cognitively become an interfacial object, or as y Gasset notes, we become the executant I, namely, a referentiality that becomes meaningful by understanding every dynamic object and event as entities that participate in assigning a frame of mind, a state or an ontological condition to other states of being. The executant ‘I’, connects with the conception of a Sensual Object in Harman’s taxonomy, mediating between the Real Object and its Sensual or Real Qualities on the one hand, and a perceptible reality on the other.

In OOO, a Real Object (RO) is always beyond the grasp of the subject’s structured systematicity since it is host to unique performances that contradict the subject’s original perception of the object. To survive the reality orchestrated by the object’s multifarious ontic being, the subject participates



in various layers of objective reality, which confirms the subject’s role as an interface, or a Sensual Object (SO). An SO can be imagined as a cognitive echo of an object or a structured existence that appears in a physical reality; it is only the “correlate of our acts of consciousness” (Harman, 2018, 233).

In the novel, the narrator finds objects that exist beyond his comprehension: ‘I would have to forego the reality of all the simple things my eyes were looking at’ (O’Brien 1974, 75). What the narrator focalizes is describable through a metaphoric communication of such seemingly canny objects with uncanny ontic shifts; for instance, when Sergeant tells about the “man-charged bicycle[s]” (O’Brien, 1974, 74), namely, a bicycle “that has a high content of humanity”, Joe is troubled by such ontic presence of an object, incredulously investigating the human dimension of “people’s bicycle” or alternatively “bicycles’s people or whatever is the proper name for them - the ones that have two wheels under them and a handlebars” (O’Brien, 1974, 75): “Are you certain about the humanity of the bicycle?” (O’Brien, 1974, 75). In another scene, objects made by MacCruiskeen project a reality that is beyond the narrator’s cognitive semioticity:

simply their appearance, if even that word is not inadmissible, was not understood by the eye and was in any event indescribable (O’Brien, 1974, 131).

The internal plane of reality, or ‘B’ in Fig. 1, challenges Joe’s conception of reality; this is a pattern of reality in which a bicycle appears as an autonomous RO, the stability and multifarious being of which disrupts the narrator’s cognitive and narratorial reign, banishing him to a cognitive exile; yet the withdrawn state of the bicycle as an RO can only be confirmed when we as the audience can experience or relate to one of its aspects or functional presences. To address the issue of mediation, while maintaining its detached autonomy the bicycle indirectly appoints the reader as its intermediary in O’Brien’s narratorial limbo to fill the gap when, for instance, the narrator and the bicycle as an RO are contemplating “an intimate [...] tryst,” as Andrea Bobotis calls it (2002, 242). This is where the reader must form a logic, accommodating an object that can shuffle between its hidden functional presence, moving away from being an object of transportation and transforming into a desirable object. Within this circular vortex, the bicycle is simultaneously an object of desire, devoured by a subject that only sees the object’s presence-at-hand within a metaphoric reality, and a detached, static entity that rejects any form of categorization inside an Anthropocentric reality:

[the bicycle] seems ineffably female and fastidious, posing there like a mannequin [...] resting on its prim flawless tyres (O’Brien 1974, 147).

Although metaphoric transference can expose various layers of reality, the bicycle as an RO remains indifferent to any metaphoric or literal plane, only submitting to its internal ontological dynamism. The object, in other words, can not only be the reference towards a larger reality but also a product of such transference, fostering “a reality that is also somehow an appearance, or a

verb that is also a noun,” Harman writes (2002, 26). In “Many Worlds: The New Physics in Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*” (1995), Spencer explores the ways in which O’Brien’s engagement with objects eventually introduces them as macrocosms that are hosts to hidden cores and at the same time include an infinite number of realities. For Spencer finding “black holes in the text when the narrator is extracting a nameless object from one of the cabinets” functions as a “metaphor[ic]” register “rather than a simile,” finding it evident that O’Brien had “something other than merely a simple aperture in mind” (1995, 155). What Spencer’s scientific examination of the novel fails to appreciate is not the dualistic nature of the narrative and its reality, being founded on two parallel planes, but rather how “this cabinet” with “an opening ... resembling a black hole” can be a signifier of objects hosting other objects by way of cocooning a microcosmic reality within their masked core (O’Brien, 1974, 135). This worlds-within-objects, also appears in the explosion scene in the form of a box that hosts a new, albeit bizarre, form of narrative reality and ontology. The metaphoric plane only comes to be after the box is found and opened by the narrator, facilitating the clash between the literal and metaphorical planes, and beginning a cyclical movement around an object as their point of convergence. Not only does the box, in this respect, reject “indeterminacy” as an added value, as Shelly Brivic notes (2012, 126), but it also confirms its ontic horizon as a reference to a radically different reality by containing various, masked realities. This palimpsestic and world-within-world state of the object can be read as a form of objectile self-referentiality wherein explosive objects can not only cause an ontological metamorphosis but also fracture the plan of reality and create idiosyncratic temporal branches.

In another scene, O’Brien tames the infinite potential of metaphor rooted in a subterranean objectile reality to mock any subject-oriented superiority in appreciating epistemological structures. The scene portrays MacCruiskeen’s chests formed like nesting dolls, each containing a deeper, microcosmic reality, and hence standing as a microcosmic center. The image strikingly resonates with Harman’s concept of a “global tool-empire,” “a homogeneous empire” of macrocosmic ontic presence hosting smaller objects with diverse functions and deeper ontic presences (2002, 33). The contradictory nature of these chests is revealed when MacCruiskeen fails to extract an ultimate chest that would be ontically withdrawn and ontologically independent and contain no other box. The last five he produces out of final chests “began to get invisible, glass or no glass” so much so that “nobody has ever seen” them (O’Brien, 1974, 74). The invisibility signals the emergence of the non-mechanical plane of an objectile reality wherein reality can only be approached indirectly, and hence metaphorically. The disappearance of these chests into a realm that exists perhaps only in MacCruiskeen’s mind echoes one distinct form of objecthood and a concomitant form of reality. According to Booker, these chests are harbingers of an “unknowable” truth, set against the Cartesian backdrop of uncertainty (1991, 45). The chests, I suggest, are SOs that have come to be and remain as a result of an RO; these are mere shadows of ROs that lurk somewhere in the literal dimension of reality that can neither fit the narrator’s traumatized state of

mind nor MacCruiskeen’s phantasmagoric presence. In spite of their objectile core, and due to their purely cognitive presence with no physical equivalent, these SOs as chests are incapable of producing a new reality by subsuming or sharing features with other objects. This objectile subsumption that ends in a metaphoric re-imagination of new shadows will be examined as Object-Oriented symbiosis.

### **Metaphor as symbiosis: Bicycle as a Nonsymmetrical Tool**

Symbiosis can be considered as a structurally binding process that ends in the creation of new beings with independent structure and DNA when two or more entities, i.e., originators exchange features and qualities. The result is a structurally independent, new body which imitates the paired originators and their hidden and active attributes. In an OOO, each object appears as an independent entity with ontological and ontic presences, capable of symbiotic interaction mediated through SOs, namely, their subterranean functional proxies that handle inter-objectile flows. An objectile symbiosis exhibits distinct features: 1. Unlike a biological procedure wherein only “living cells form symbiotic relations with other entities” (Harman, 2018, 133), OOO considers symbiosis as a biographical pattern, hence, objects, and institutions can be included in the process; 2. OOO rejects any obligatory reciprocity and instead permits the object to either exchange or absorb qualities; and finally, 3. the nonsymmetrical nature of symbiosis confirms the autonomous nature of all objects, and allows one object to project features or qualities onto a neighboring object, hence remaining as the focal point in transferring meaning or function.

In the novel, the most stable object with a ghostly and withdrawn presence that transfers feature of its own to other objects as well as subjects is the bicycle. The nonsymmetrical interaction of the feminine bicycle with the narrator results in the latter’s hallucinatory vision of the former as something more than an object of transportation; as such, the bicycle becomes an object of metaphoric desire. Moreover, staying as the focal point of a referential reality, the bicycle enjoys a stable and at the same time multifarious ontology while reciprocating with the subject; it, therefore, remains as a detached object that not only accommodates desires, companionship, and functionality but also objectifies existence. The bicycle as it appears in O’Brien’s novel should not be misunderstood as the Baudrillardian “haunted object” without “referents” that lures the narrator to find it as a metaphysical entity that fills the existential void (Baudrillard 2001, 61-61); rather, the bicycle confirms its functional objecthood as an object of transportation within a literal reality shared with the audience; and simultaneously survives the narrative’s metaphorized realism wherein existence is nothing short of a compound reality. In either case, the bicycle remains as an entity with an objective existence, conversely initiating the subject to search for his lost, spectral roots. Nevertheless, such objectile stability should not be misconstrued as the abnegation of the character, the subject, or the milieu as passive agents. In spite of the absence of inter-objectile interactions in an OO reality, every entity engages the neighboring element through its Sensual

Qualities (SQ), that may affect the opposing entity but may or may not be similarly marked by the other object. For instance, in chapter 11, the narrator shares with us the “perfection of [his] comfort on the bicycle,” and his “union” with it, as well as the “sweet responses” the it gave him at “every particle of her frame” (O’Brien, 1974, 150). We witness two indirect inter-objectile interactions: between the bicycle and the “stony tracks”, and how the bicycle is capable of “finding smooth ways” (O’Brien, 1974, 150); and between the bicycle as the tool with agency and the narrator’s ‘wooden leg’ as it “accommodat[es] her left pedal patiently” to lessen the awkward image of his wooden leg (O’Brien, 1974, 150). The projected image sympathizes with a role reversal whereby the bicycle becomes the dominant element, taking care of the narrator and comforting his mood swing by “swaying and bending skillfully” (O’Brien, 1974, 150). The interaction, albeit indirect, is taking place at the extreme edge of objecthood, involving the object’s SQ; nevertheless, such SQs are projected by the bicycle as an agential tool, rendering the narrator as a mere receiver whose ultimate engagement is his expression of the “completeness” of his pleasures (O’Brien, 1974, 150). He becomes a Sensual Object, or an intermediary whose presence only confirms the stability but more importantly the referentiality of the bicycle as the dominant equipment.

The bicycle as a reference addresses two concerns under OOO: first, as a reference the object’s existence confirms a larger objectile construct and simultaneously hides its functional presence within the macrocosmic confines of that construct; more importantly, the existence of this macrocosmic structure confirms an objectile symbiotic formation; second, the more an object such as the bicycle expands its domain of ontic presence by incorporating other objects or their features, the faster it reaches a level of saturation from which point onward only a fixed image of the bicycle remains in both the metaphoric and literal planes of reality. The stable and non-metamorphic image of the bicycle as a product of functional as well as ontic symbiosis confirms the nonsymmetrical and non-reciprocal nature of symbiosis in OOO: the bicycle has been indifferent to incorporating images that were heterogenous to its inner reality, and projected an illusion of itself that appropriates such functions in a metaphoric reality.

The novel assimilates the superfluity of human presence within not only an objectile reality but also any symbiotic relationship by examining Gilhaney’s symbiotic ontology as a bicycle that is more human than machine. Gilhaney’s half-bicycle physique shows how an objectile symbiosis has affected not just the object-subject binary but also the very concept of being *qua* being by instrumentalizing the analogous dimension of metaphor; Gilhaney appears as an SO who “is always going to a particular destination [...] on” his bicycle, which is an RO, and “if it wasn’t that his bicycle was stolen every Monday” he would be more than “half-way to being a bicycle himself” (O’Brien, 1974, 72). The novel creates a reality in which the object can either reciprocate or only project features to the neighboring entity, be it an object or a subject like Gilhaney. This objectile transubstantiation evinces a new conception of the object, introducing a new ontological rather than an ontic incarnation that only absorbs features while interacting with the subject, at the same time

maintaining its original structure and formative body as a bicycle. “Resting before” the narrator, for instance, the bicycle appears “like a tame domestic pony, [which] seemed [...] low in relation to the Sergeant” (O’Brien, 1974, 146). This new form of objecthood connects with Harman’s nonsymmetricality of symbiosis wherein the bicycle either assigns or transfers attributes to other objects, as a result inculcating certain images in the mind of the observer, signaling the centralization of the object as the ontological interface. This is why the narrator perceives the object, namely, the bicycle as “a thing of surpassing grace and elegance, transcending all standards of size and reality and existing only in the absolute validity of its own unexceptionable dimensions” (O’Brien, 1974, 147).

Similar to symbiosis, as Harman explains, “metaphor results in [...] compound entities” and realities, with new features constantly being attributed to objects by way of transference (2018, 144), creating a vortex of reality or objecthood with two planes: one that is independent of its actual ‘socio-political’ context, while the other shares structures or formative semblances with its socio-historical setting. A metaphorical engagement with a bicycle, a spade, or bicycle-pump creates a new perception of that tool with features or qualities that are assigned to the old image of the object, while rejecting any form of reciprocity. As a result, the bicycle as the focal point of both realities appears as a concept which only seemingly shares features with an actual bicycle in the metaphorical, compound reality; the bicycle, therefore, appears as a familiar object but with notable differences in function and quality. For instance, while the bicycle ontically appears as an object of transportation its “leaning against the dresser of a warm kitchen when it is pouring outside” can be read only metaphorically; or seeing “crumbs at the front wheels of some of these gentlemen” functions as a marker of such metaphoric transformation (O’Brien, 1974, 75). The bicycle as a compound object, half-bicycle, transcends its objective limitation by reciprocating with its human counterpart, and remains as the most metaphorically diverse entity with a meaningful and self-referential presence; whereas the narrator appears as a marionette lost in the persistent reverberations of an explosive event initiated by a tool like a bicycle-pump and then a cash-box. Characters such as Gilhaney appear as just static observers looking at reality through the dynamic, multi-mirrored kaleidoscope of the object, while the bicycle as an equipment can either project the image of a non-binary partner in its metaphoric plane, or inculcate desire in the subject in other planes.

A metaphorized depiction of reality is a mere reversed projection of the context. What we witness in the novel is O’Brien’s reversal of the literal reality, projecting a state of being wherein objects are not only agential but also multi-functional; whereas the narrator is treated as a decentralized being, who is imprisoned by a repetitive temporal void. Nevertheless, the object’s resistant nature, especially as the focal point that connects external and internal planes of reality, superimposes another reversal on the narrative, creating a reversal of a reversal, or as Coulouma suggests, a “criterion for meaningful or nonsensical” reality (2012, 6). The object’s referentiality,

therefore, within this circular vortex of reality becomes the central agent of narrativity with stable and diverse functionality, and imposes a second reversal so that, firstly the core of such objectile reality could dismantle any trace of anthropocentric reality by treating it as an allusion to an alternative plane of reality wherein the object confirms meaning; and secondly, an RO's authoritative qualities could emerge as replacement to human systematicity, at the same time peripheralising the subject as a flexible actor hovering around an objectile vortex of reality.

The first reversal of reality is what Harman first refers to in *Guerrilla Metaphysics* as "allure" (2005, 50), namely, appreciating the core of an objectile reality, founded on a split between the object and its qualities; the split as the nucleus of this reality is inaccessible to the subject, and hence understanding the internal layer of the bicycle as an object with protean functional presence as an instance of a silly or meaningless reality. At the heart of this vortex of reality rests a rare and momentary rift between an RO and its SQ, which reveals the difference between a literal and a metaphoric reading of an object. For instance, the bicycle with a sturdy cross-bar can represent durability and mechanical stamina within a literal context, and simultaneously attracts the narrator who sees in the saddle of the bicycle an attractive object with gentle skin, durability and "honourable suffering and honest duty," and a partner whose geometric shape is nothing but alluring, seemingly ignoring the sturdy cross-bar (O'Brien, 1974, 147). The second reversal superimposed by the object in the narrative, I suggest, is that moment of allure, when we as the audience can see the two planes of reality projected by the bicycle, caused by a tension between what it actually is in the literal world, and what it becomes in the phantasmic realm of the narrative.

The second reversal can be justified, according to Baylee Brits et al., as an intermediary between inter-objectile realities, or as that which "resides at the heart of every object and necessarily withdraws from access" (Brits & et al 2016, 15) such as the communion between the bicycle, and "a mass of peculiar brass," provoking an image of a real prison (O'Brien, 1974, 145). In this instance, however, the only convict is an object that is alternating between echoing its ontic presence, and exchanging and projecting human qualities, appearing as an object that is half-human and half-machine, or simply "a verb that is also a noun" (Harman, 2002, 26).

### **Conclusion: Is it not about a bicycle?**

The ontological dissonance at the heart of the novel leads to a world of metaphorical existence deeply entrenched in transcendental layers of reality and meaning, embracing a state of being in which objects as central ontological agents define existence. In the novel, characters such as Mathers can be considered as mere artifacts manipulated by objects such as the gown as an RO, and time as the its SQ; it is the gown that defines the temporal limits of other SOs such as Mathers when he remembers his childhood mediated through the SQs of the object, namely, the color of the gown: "In a word the colour gradually deepens gown by gown and year by year until it appears to be black. Finally, a day will come when the addition of one further gown will actually achieve real

and full blackness. On that day I will die” (O’Brien, 1974, 30). This is a conception of the object that regards it as a temporally dominant construct, projecting time as a byproduct of its ontological and ontic presence. Time, in this respect, is neither a mere product of the object’s *zuhandenheit* nor a projection of its *vorhandenheit*, but rather an SQ of the object. The gown or the bicycle embody Harman’s understanding of the mature object: an object that has reached an irreversible level of symbiotic saturation, connecting the known with the unknown, creating a plethora of possibilities.

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