Notes on Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

What is the Genuinely Strange?

Everyone has a theory about this novel. There are at least five commonly cited explanations:

1. Flann O'Brien is the forgotten postmodernist, the one who didn't leave Ireland. The 'Third Policeman' is one of the last books Joyce read, and by implication the 'Third Policeman' is a kind of Doppelgaenger to 'Finnegans Wake.' Its play with language and its reflexivity about the novel form is somehow parallel to Joyce's.

2. Flann O'Brien was an alcoholic, and this is the product of so many unhappy binges and half-remembered delusions. The book is an indirect but eloquent record of that generation in Ireland, when the humor was desperate, when the church was all-powerful, when what's now called 'homosocial' life in crowded dingy pubs had to stand in for wider society.

3. Flann O'Brien is a member of what Hugh Kenner called 'Irish nihilism.' There is no moral sense in the book, which after all begins with someone's head being crushed by a garden spade. This also supposedly explains the absence of contrition or any religious feeling. Denis Donoghue almost asssents to this in his strange and covertly republican Afterword to the Dalkey Archive edition.

4. Flann O'Brien is a minimalist, with deep ties to Beckett. This is one of the lines in Fintan O'Toole's 2009 review in the 'New York Review of Books.'

5. Flann O'Brien's own explanation is that the book is about a dead man, and that the last page shows how the damned suffer their punishments eternally. But that's only an explanation if your idea of hell already includes knives so thin they can't be seen, microscopic carved wooden boxes, and sexually mutable bicycles. Otherwise it doesn't 'explain' anything.

The fact that these are all forced or unhelpful should probably indicate that the book is stranger than its commentators think. But the fact that people keep coming up with these one-line explanations shows how the novel keeps prodding its readers: it is just too strange to be accepted as a mid-century modernist novel, and for many readers a theory, no matter how artificial, helps soothe the discomfort. But what is the avant-garde, if it isn't a thing that is not anticipated? That can't be accommodated? That wasn't asked for, that solves no problem we ever thought we had?

One thing I especially love about the 'Third Policeman' is the sense of Irish landscape that it conjures, in between its many fantasies and concoctions. If you take away the hallucinated
afterlife that occupies most of the book, what remains? A very poor, simple countryside, with farms and a few police stations and pubs, and miles of bumpy roads, sodden fields, muck, brambles, dripping copses, and gorse. There is almost nothing else: people ride bicycles everywhere. When they think they might become rich, they dream of changes of clothes. There is almost no mention of what they eat or drink. It is an impoverished landscape -- and in relation to it, O'Brien's perverse and perfervid inventions are even more desperate, more necessary, and more painful.