Infinite Regress and the Darkness of Reason – Flann O'Brien's The Third Policeman *in the Context of Greek Cosmology*

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Abstract: *Few fictional fates can be as bleak as that of the narrator in Flann O'Brien's* The Third Policeman*. The reader sees it, even if he doesn't. When he (the narrator) reaches the end of his story, he finds only another beginning, a repetition, words used before [...]. The reader can check – can verify the pattern; but for the nameless victim, this is something new, a little strange, a little puzzling. He's no wiser, no better – no older – than before. He's moving, but he's in the same place.*

Infinite regress is the principal postulate of Flann O'Brien's work. The figure is there in the first novel, At Swim-Two-Birds*, through the receding sequence of narratives-within-narratives. It is there in this, his second, suppressed, novel, in the ever-smaller, ever-less-visible boxes of Policeman MacCruiskeen (and much more besides). There is a hint of it too in his image of the Irish artist* sitting fully dressed, innerly locked in the toilet of a locked coach where he has no right to be, resentfully drinking somebody else's whiskey – *the coach in question sitting inside a railway tunnel (from 'A Bash in the Tunnel', his essay on James Joyce).*

Through the copious material relating to de Selby (mostly footnotes), The Third Policeman *brings forward a number of pseudo-rational theories on various aspects of the physical universe (*our *universe). Through the principal narrative, it offers an attempted description of a different universe, where the 'rational' breaks down, and the 'inconceivable' somehow actually happens. The present article is an attempt to show how this double focus of the novel constitutes a formal unity, through an exploration of O'Brien's philosophical debt to such thinkers as Parmenides, Zeno, and Democritus. In their theories, and disputes, may be found the seeds of many of the ideas and episodes present in the work.*

In the *Parmenides* by Plato there is an argument that goes, in a simplified form, as follows: All the members of a set of large objects partake of the single Idea (or Form) of Largeness; but Largeness itself is large; the *Idea* may therefore sit alongside the other

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large objects to make a second set of large objects. All of these share in a single Form also – a 'new' Form of Largeness (it is argued). But given the premise that any Form can be predicated of itself (as above, 'Largeness is large'), this 'new' Form (or Idea) may now join the others to make a third set. And this in turn gives rise to a fourth set; and so on [...].

It is a classic instance of 'infinite regress': this particular example was named by Aristotle the 'Third Man' argument. There are a number of ways, I intend to argue, in which Flann O'Brien's second novel plays with the ideas of Parmenides and his coevals; and infinite regress is a structure of some importance in the work – I would hesitate to suggest, however, that Aristotle's 'Third Man' coinage gave rise to O'Brien's '*Third* Police*man*' (even though all three policemen are, to the narrator, strikingly *large*). Some coincidences are *just* coincidences. Nevertheless, with Flann O'Brien – as we shall see – nothing (almost nothing) is altogether impossible.

> The world of [*The Third Policeman*] 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.

This is the view of Anthony Cronin, in his biography of Flann O'Brien, *No Laughing Matter*.[2] In emphasizing the moral dimension of O'Brien's novel, Cronin acknowledges an aspect of the work sometimes underplayed in critical commentary. It is after all the narrative of a murderer. From a theological point of view, it dramatizes sin and retribution. But most of the comment on *The Third Policeman* – including the present paper – is more interested in its philosophical and scientific aspects.

From this point of view, the idea that the 'world' of the novel 'is a rational and even scientific one, a normal one' for the most part is rather puzzling. There is a room in the policemen's barracks where the various cracks and other marks on the ceiling form a detailed, accurate map of the local surroundings (complete with a road to eternity). 'Did you make it yourself?' asks the narrator. 'I did not and nobody else manufactured it either,' Sergeant Pluck replies. 'It was always there and MacCruiskeen is certain that it was there even before that.' (O'Brien 1974, 107) Many more examples could be cited to make the point: simply stated, this is hardly a 'normal' world. But what is rational and scientific about it is a rather more complicated question.

We should perhaps clarify, initially, which of the novel's 'worlds' we are discussing. For there is, of course, a 'normal' recognisable world – this is the world of Chapter One, and the start of Chapter Two; the world briefly revisited by the narrator at the end of the book. With some reservations, perhaps, we can say it is the world of the novel's many footnotes, as well. But most of the story takes place in a different world – the Policemen's world, where maps exist on ceilings from a time, apparently, before time began [...]. What kind of world is this? It is a fictitious world – that is one answer; and clearly true. But it does not get us very far.

Let us consider the world of the footnotes for a while. This is essentially a textual world, a parodic scholarly world of documents and commentary concerning the life and theories of the so-called 'savant' de Selby. This is the material base, we are to suppose, for the narrator's never-to-be-published 'De Selby Index'. O'Brien's writing here is rich in comic effects, not the least of which is the way in which all of de Selby's exegetes manage to disavow his theories one by one, whilst nevertheless maintaining (most of them) his genius. As the narrator himself concedes, in considering de Selby's denial of motion (in the body of the main text, this):

> Like most of de Selby's theories, the ultimate outcome is inconclusive. It is a curious enigma that so great a mind would question the most obvious realities and object even to things scientifically demonstrated (such as the sequence of day and night) while believing absolutely in his own fantastic explanations of the same phenomena. (45)

The body of knowledge known as Pre-Socratic Philosophy is also composed of texts – more often fragments of texts – and commentaries on texts (some of the latter non-existent now, some of disputed provenance and import). In this, albeit in another sense than that used up to now, it resembles the 'world' of the novel's footnotes. A useful account of the various positions of leading Greek thinkers is to be found in Friedo Ricken's *Philosophy of the Ancients* (1991), to which I shall refer more than once in what follows. Consider the following summary of a surviving text by the Eleatic philosopher Parmenides (born towards the end of the Sixth Century *BCE*):

> The position that Parmenides develops [...] contradicts everyday experience to such an extent that it is almost tantamount to a religious revelation. That it is placed in the mouth of the goddess underlines its claim to validity and truth. (Ricken 1991, 32)

And, concerning a later section of the work:

> These statements exclude the possibility of attributing to things predicates that characterize our world of experience: coming to be and perishing, change, plurality, capacity for development, and difference. Parmenides' ontology disputes the reality of the world of experience. (33)

De Selby, then, is not historically alone in his 'eccentricities', his denial of empirical 'facts'. His notions may indeed have quite ancient, and quite respectable, roots. We might even note how these particular predicates – coming to be and perishing, change, plurality, capacity for development, and difference – all come into question in the universe of the Three Policemen.

What makes de Selby a ludicrous figure may be less to do with his theories in themselves – or what we know of them, which is often quite shadowy – than with O'Brien's genius for comic invention. Anaximander, a philosopher of the Miletus school, at the very start of the Greek tradition, held that the world was shaped like a cylinder, with its height exactly one third of its diameter (Ricken 1991, 13) – why is de Selby's theory that the earth is sausage-shaped so much less credible, or creditable? In either case, the logic (I suppose) is flawed. (And we have images from space now, confirming the sphere; yet 'flat-earthers' still exist.) But there is an interesting follow-up to this, in connection with de Selby's conviction that 'human existence' – both life and death – is a hallucination.

The narrator puts it thus (O'Brien 1974, 82): 'If a way can be found, says de Selby, of discovering the "second direction", i.e., along the "barrel" of the sausage, a world of entirely new sensation and experience will be open to humanity.' (For de Selby, the four cardinal points of the compass logically reduce to one: the 'second direction' is thus a trans-dimensional corridor.) According to de Selby, the narrator continues, 'death is nearly always present when the new direction is discovered'. In the passage following the narrator's own death – which of course he doesn't recognize as such – we find such details as these:

> It was as if the daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or twice as dense as it had been in the winking of an eye. [...] I heard a cough behind me, soft and natural and yet more disturbing than any sound that could ever come upon the human ear. That I did not die of fright was due, I think, to two things, the fact that my senses were already disarranged and able to interpret to me only gradually what they had perceived and also the fact that the utterance of the cough seemed to bring with it some more awful alteration in everything, just as if it had held the universe standstill for an instant, suspending the planets in their courses, halting the sun and holding in mid-air any falling thing the earth was pulling towards it. (21)

For the present purpose, there are two points to notice here. Firstly, the narrator's consciousness of his senses as a source of knowledge about the world, and his awareness of their inadequacy in this new situation – which becomes a constant of his experience from now on. And secondly, the intriguing echoes of another Milesian philospher, Anaximenes. Anaximenes held that material objects are all formed of air; that their identity is a function of the density of the air that composes them. The difference between fire, wind, cloud, water, earth and stone is a merely a difference of degree, from the most rarified to the least rarified form of air. For Anaximenes (unlike Parmenides) 'coming to be' and perishing is a fact of existence, and the process is one of condensing and rarefying air. When the narrator of *The Third Policeman* perceives instantaneous

changes in the ambient temperature and 'density' of the air, he is, in fact, experiencing the creation of a new universe (a mental universe, arguably – and this too has resonances in terms of the Greek tradition). The same process is taken to be the cause of changes in temperature. As evidence for this, Anaximenes observes that air breathed out through pursed lips is cool, where exhalation from a wide-open mouth is warm. To cite Professor Ricken,

> The earth has come to be through a "felting" of air. [...] [It] "rides" (or floats) on air. The stars proceeded from the earth's moist exhalations that have become more rarefied with increasing distance and have eventually turned into fire. (Ricken 1991, 16)

The cough from old man Mathers (or his ghost), that seems to hold the universe momentarily suspended may be read, perhaps, as a knowing reference to the theory.

The notion of origins – in particular, cosmic origins – is closely associated with the idea of regress. That this was of some interest to the author of *The Third Policeman* is not in doubt. There was a time when the distinguished physicist Erwin Schroedinger, working in Dublin's Institute of Advanced Studies, gave a lecture that offended the Catholic sensibilities of Flann O'Brien's pseudonymous 'other', Myles Na Gopaleen.[3] Myles registered a memorable protest in his *Irish Times* column against the physicist's denial of the necessity of a First Cause or *Primum Mobile* – in other words, of God. It obviously rankled. *The Third Policeman* – at that point entering literary limbo as a rejected manuscript – had, implicitly at least, already approached the issue as part of a cosmic scheme arguably more disturbing even than that revealed by relativity theory, or by Schroedinger's particle physics.

But as we have seen in the reference to the theory of Anaximenes, the metaphysical recourse to a putative 'Prime Mover' is not always deemed to be logical, or necessary. For the early cosmologists, there were a number of contenders for the basic 'stuff' of the universe. (Where this itself came from – the ultimate origin of the underlying material – remains for the most part an open question.) For Anaximenes, as noted above, the basic material was air; for one of his immediate predecessors, Thales, it was water; for the slightly later Empedocles, it was four-fold – consisting of the familiar 'elements' of earth, air, fire and water. The notion of a 'basic element' is also a part of the physics of *The Third Policeman*. Before going more particularly into this area though – the question of origins – I want to return to the structural design of the novel, to consider the relation of its parts to the question of knowledge.

There are two distinct approaches to knowledge manifested in the novel. One is de Selby's, which – for all his madness – is a form of rationalism; the other is the narrator's, which – for all his declared fascination with the theories of 'the sage' – is strongly empirical, based on the evidence of his senses. In the 'normal' recognisable world of the novel's early pages (the world too in which de Selby conducts his hopeless

experiments), empiricism 'works', on the whole – it establishes and explains 'reality' reasonably well. In the world of the narrator after his death – the world of the Three Policemen – it doesn't. What the narrator encounters there is much more congruent with the reality posited by de Selby.

The problems with de Selby's reasoning are frequently linked to faulty premises, or logical gaps: his proof – supposed proof – that the earth is sausage-shaped is based in part on a premise drawn from the fact that it is spherical, for instance; his assertion that an arrangement of opposing mirrors will reflect back an image of one's face increasingly younger overlooks the logical impossibility of going back beyond the starting-point (the age of the viewer on first looking into the mirror) – to cite just one minor flaw in this particular theory.

In discussing de Selby's denial of motion, and the fact 'that time can pass as such in the accepted sense', the narrator highlights his own opposing perspective (O'Brien 1974, 44): 'His theory, insofar as I can understand it, seems to discount the testimony of human experience and is at variance with everything I have learnt myself on many a country walk.' The theory, in fact, is a comic variant of the Flying Arrow Paradox of Zeno, deriving in part from an ignorance of the technical process of cinema (oddly enough, de Selby's rationale for our illusory conviction of motion intuits the physiological principle of cinema – persistence of vision – exactly). To paraphrase is unnecessary here – but it is worth quoting the basic premise attributed to de Selby, that human existence is 'a succession of static experiences each infinitely brief', and his account of the numerous 'resting places' which supposedly give rise to the illusion of movement:

> They are not, he warns us, to be taken as arbitrarily determined points on the A-B axis so many inches or feet apart. They are rather to be regarded as points infinitely near each other yet sufficiently far apart to admit of the insertion between them of a series of other 'intermediate' places, between each of which must be imagined a chain of other resting places – not, of course, strictly adjacent but arranged so as to admit of the application of this principle indefinitely. (44-5)

The postulate here is another instance of infinite regress. (The same goes for the receding mirror-images referred to above.) In denying Zeno's assumption that time was composed of moments, of a series of 'indivisible nows', Aristotle[4] was perhaps the first to offer a solution to Zeno's Paradoxes – this, as part of a reaction against what was seen as the extreme rationalism of the Eleatic school, to which Zeno, like Parmenides, belonged. It may not be too much to say that De Selby also belongs in their company.

Discussing Parmenides, Aristotle might almost be referring to certain ideas of the latter-day 'sage' himself: 'Although these opinions appear to follow logically in a dialectical discussion,' he notes,[5] 'yet to believe them seems next door to madness when one considers the facts [...].' But when the facts appear to support a notion like time not passing 'in the accepted sense' – and when this is not a matter of abstruse relativity

theory, but a matter of straightforward observation – one's reason may justifiably totter. In the universe of the Three Policemen, the narrator is continually faced by incontrovertible empirical 'facts' that contradict his reason – his sense of the real, and the possible – utterly. His customary reaction (naturally enough, one might suppose) is fear. The first event for the narrator in this 'world of entirely new sensation and experience' (to refer back to de Selby's hypothesis) is his encounter with the figure of 'old man Mathers', whom he had killed three years earlier In emphasizing his horror at the seeming 'mechanical' quality of the old man's eyes, the narrator offers a classic reaction to 'the uncanny'; he also creates a memorable image of regress, fantasizing a 'real eye' located behind a series of thousands of 'dummy' eyes, each 'with a tiny pinhole in the centre of the "pupil"'. The contradiction between knowing the old man had been killed three years earlier and seeing him apparently alive in the same room is all but irresolvable. 'In the terrible situation I found myself, my reason could give me no assistance,' the narrator reflects. 'I decided in some crooked way that the best thing to do was to believe what my eyes were looking at rather than to place my trust in a memory.' (O'Brien 1974, 22-3). The decision to trust his eyes – and by extension, his other senses too – brings little in the way of understanding, however.

Repetition – multiplication, doubling, mirroring – is a major motif in the novel, as is splitting and division (in fact, in some respects, there is no difference between these operations). Repetition is present also in the basic structure of the novel, down to the numerous redundancies of the style. In the case of much of the Policemen's dialogue, this is parodic perhaps – 'Wait now till I show you and give you an exhibition and a personal inspection individually' (63); but it is present in the narrator's mode of expression also. The most crucial repetition is the one that gave the novel its original American title, *Hell Goes Round and Round*. This, as everyone who has read the book will remember, involves a duplication of the passage describing the narrator's approach to the Policemen's barracks. Here too we find an emphasis on appearance and the process of looking, and an expression of fear in confronting a radical deformation of the 'normal' world (note the redundancies in the opening of this passage, incidentally):

> I had never seen with my eyes ever in my life before anything so unnatural and appalling and my gaze faltered about the thing uncomprehendingly as if at least one of the customary dimensions was missing, leaving no meaning in the remainder [...]. It was momentous and frightening; the whole morning and the whole world seemed to have no purpose at all save to frame it and give it some magnitude and position so that I could find it with my simple senses and pretend to myself that I understood it. (46-7; 171-2)

The hoped-for 'understanding' is an elusive category in this universe. Before long, the nameless narrator is confronted by Policeman MacCruiskeen's ever-diminishing series of elaborately wrought chests. This leads him beyond normal perceptual limits –

close to a conceptual horizon, even. It also brings him close to panic: at a certain point of MacCruiskeen's activities, he comments,

> [...] I became afraid. What he was doing was no longer wonderful but terrible. I shut my eyes and prayed that he would stop while doing things that were at least possible for a man to do.

But the process goes on:

> [T]hrough the agency of the [magnifying] glass I was in a position to report that he had two more [chests] out beside the last ones, the smallest of all being nearly half a size smaller than ordinary invisibility.

And even here, there is no end. MacCruiskeen explains:

> 'Six years ago they began to get invisible, glass or no glass. Nobody has ever seen the last five I made because no glass is strong enough [...]. [M]y little tools are invisible into the same bargain. The one I am making now is nearly as small as nothing. [...] The dear knows where it will stop and terminate.' (64-5)

This is the realm of visual perception. But the chapter ends with MacCruiskeen briefly clarifying the nature of his 'small piano-instrument', previously an object of some curiosity for the narrator: 'It is an indigenous patent of my own,' he explains. 'The vibrations of the true notes are so high in their fine frequencies that they cannot be appreciated by the human earcup.' (65) [...] From the invisible to the inaudible, then. And the chapter begins, more or less, with a spear point so fine that it cannot be *felt*. More:

> 'It is so thin that it could go into your hand and out in the other extremity externally and you would not feel a bit of it and you would see nothing and hear nothing. It is so thin that maybe it does not exist at all and you could spend half an hour trying to think about it and you could put no thought around it in the end.' (60)

The effort to understand these anomalies is constantly emphasized – 'I fastened my fingers around my jaw and started to think with great concentration, calling into play parts of my brain that I rarely used' – and defeat constantly admitted – 'Nevertheless I made no progress at all' (60). Similar formulations are to occur with some frequency – in the circumstances, not surprisingly.

Perception was a process of some interest to the Fifth Century Greek Democritus – the Atomist, the 'father of modern nuclear physics'; a thinker known to his contemporaries as 'the Laughing Philosopher'. In his view, the original 'stuff' of the universe was an

infinite mass of atoms, indivisible units or particles in constant motion in empty space. Perception depended, for Democritus, on the emission or radiation of atoms from the surface of the material object (sometimes he can sound quite like the 'sage' of *The Third Policeman*, as when he says, for instance, that 'whiteness' consists of 'smooth' atoms, and sourness of small, 'sharp-cornered' atoms (Ricken 1991, 44). Objects themselves are formed by the 'binding together' of atoms of various shapes: 'for some of them are uneven, some hooked, some concave, some convex, and others have innumerable other differences' (Cartledge 1997, 12). This commentator, Simplicius, claims to be quoting Aristotle on Democritus. He continues,

He [Democritus] thinks that they hold on to one another and remain together up to the time when some stronger force reaches them from their environment and shakes them and scatters them apart.

Sergeant Pluck's explication of the 'Atomic Theory' is essentially this, if a little more colourful:

> 'Do you happen to know what takes place when you strike a bar of iron with a good coal hammer or with a blunt instrument? [...] When the wallop falls, the atoms are bashed away down to the bottom of the bar and compressed and crowded there like eggs under a good clucker. [...] [I]f you keep hitting the bar long enough and hard enough [...] some of the atoms of the bar will go into the hammer and the other half into the table or the stone or the particular article that is underneath the bottom of the bar.' (O'Brien 1974, 73-4)

Whether this is actually the case, or whether Democritus would concur, it leads to the remarkable theory of the hybrid half-man half-bicycle, a theory which towards the end of the novel becomes quite affectingly convincing to the narrator himself. It also may have something to do with what is referred to at one point as 'the importance of percussion in the de Selby dialectic' (125) – that is, the frequency with which hammering is associated with his experiments. (The absurdity here echoes that of the scholarly apparatus of the footnotes in the novel. But there has to be room for laughter in a work on Flann O'Brien.)

In connection with the multitudinous variform atoms of Democritus, too, one might refer to the remarkable passage concerning free-falling, indescribable objects encountered by the narrator in Chapter Eight of *The Third Policeman*:

> In colour they were not white or black and certainly bore no intermediate colour; they were far from dark and anything but bright. [...] It took me hours of thought long afterwards to realize why these articles were astonishing. *They lacked an essential property of all known objects.* I cannot call it shape or configuration since shapelessness is not what I refer to at all. I can only say that these objects, not one of which resembled the other, were of no known dimensions. They

> were not square or rectangular or circular or simply irregularly shaped nor could it be said that their endless variety was due to dimensional dissimilarities. Simply their appearance, if even that word is not inadmissable, was not understood by the eye and was in any event indescribable. (117)

'Not understood by the eye' is a telling phrase, for the present argument. More significantly though, this experience takes place in the deep-lying, humming 'engine-room' of the Three Policemen's universe, 'Eternity' as they call it – where the mysterious but all-important daily 'readings' are determined, and time, in relation to the outside world, stands still. It is a place where anything can be had for the asking, being instantly created (and duplicated, in every duplicate corridor of the place). What more likely visionary sight here, one might ask, than the basic 'building blocks' of creation?

But of course the novel contains an alternative to atoms for the originating 'stuff' of the material universe – the substance referred to as 'Omnium'. This, as Policeman MacCruiskeen explains, is 'the essential inherent interior essence which is hidden inside the root of the kernal of everything and [...] is always the same.' (95) (Another figure of regress, incidentally.) It comes in waves, he adds; some people call it energy, others call it God. 'If you had a sack of it or even the half-full of a small matchbox of it, you could do anything and even do what could not be described by that name.' (96) On the one hand particles; on the other, waves – *The Third Policeman* here seems to be approaching much more recent theoretical territory than that of the Ancient Greeks (indeed, the connections have been explored).[6] The narrator of the book, towards its end, believes Policeman Fox – the Third Policeman himself – when he says that four ounces of omnium await him at home in the black box stolen from old man Mathers (an item on his mind throughout the story). It is interesting to note the details of his excitement here:

> Formless speculations crowded in upon me, fantastic fears and hopes, inexpressible fancies, intoxicating foreshadowing of creations, changes, annihilations and god-like interferences. Sitting at home with my box of omnium I could do anything, see anything and know anything with no limit to my powers save that of my own imagination. Perhaps I could use it even to extend my imagination. I could destroy, alter and improve the universe at will [...]. (O'Brien 1974, 163)

How much less appealing is this Faustian fantasy than his earlier vision, in the moments before his intended execution, of a form of metempsychosis:

> [P]erhaps I would be an influence that prevails in water, something sea-borne and far away, some certain arrangement of sun, light and water unknown and unbeheld, something far from usual. There are in the great world whirls of fluid and vaporous existences obtaining in their own unpassing time, unwatched and uninterrupted, valid only in their essential un-understandable mystery, justified

> only in their actual abstraction; of the inner quality of such a thing I might well in my own time be the true quintessential pith. (138)

As he has just remarked, without knowing why, 'strange enlightenments are vouchsafed to those who seek the higher places.' (137) [...] But if this, again, is a figure of regression – of advanced interiority – it is surely a more tranquil vision than that of his soul ('Joe') and himself, enfolded within a series of enfolded bodies, reaching back to a disturbing last question:

> Why was Joe so disturbed by the suggestion that he had a body? What if he *had* a body? A body with another body inside it in turn, thousands of such bodies within each other like the skins of an onion, receding to some unimaginable ultimatum? Was I in turn merely a link in a vast sequence of imponderable beings, the world I knew merely the interior of the being whose inner voice I myself was? Who or what was the core and what monster in what world was the final uncontained colossus? God? Nothing? (102-3)

This is the abyss, surely – Modernism's 'Heart of Darkness'; and as a culmination of a certain tendency in thought, Reason's too, perhaps. 'There is a limit and a boundary to everything within the scope of reason's garden,' says Sergeant Pluck (117): in the various hopeless attempts of de Selby to 'dissipate the hated and "insanitary" night' (128) we might see an image – ludicrous, misguided and comic, certainly, but perhaps with a particle of the heroic about it – of the 'Enlightenment Project' that began, quite plausibly, in the squares and Academies of Ancient Greece.

Notes

1 See Plato, *Parmenides*, 132a-133a.
2 Cronin, 1989, 105.
3 Cronin, 1989, 177.
4 See http://www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/zeno.htm
5 Russell, 1961, 85
6 See Olivotto, Roberta – 'Epistemology and Science in The Third Policeman' – site reference below.

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