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## The Land of Spices

KATE O'BRIEN

THIS beautifully written story of an Irish convent school before the first World War is unquestionably Kate O'Brien's finest novel since *Without My Cloak*. As a picture of convent life in an Order beginning to feel the impact of changing times, as the story of a liberal woman whose impulses are often at variance with the rigid precepts of the Order, and as a portrait of an engaging child whose life becomes curiously entwined with that of the Reverend Mother, *THE LAND OF SPICES* is a perfect piece of writing.

As the novel follows the day-to-day and year-to-year routine of the school the author develops in parallel the stories of the Reverend Mother and of little Anna Murphy, who in 1904 is the school's youngest pupil. Gradually the serious, undemonstrative child finds a unique place in the heart of the woman who has always been thought aloof and austere. With the passage of the years each begins to have a profound influence over, and need for, the other. How this almost unexpressed attachment helps to shape their lives is the core of a sincere and tremendously appealing story.

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## The Author



**K**ATE O'BRIEN was born in Limerick. She is southern Irish, raised in the Catholic and Nationalist tradition. Her childhood was passed in the fertile Munster Plain, and she was educated at University College, Dublin. Most of her adult life, however, she has lived out of Ireland; for several years she edited the distinguished *Manchester Guardian's* "foreign press survey."

Her first success was as a dramatist, with the play "Distinguished Villa," but she soon followed with "Without My Cloak," a first novel which was the choice of the English Book Society, which won for the author the Hawthornden and James Tait Black prizes, and which was a great best seller in both England and America.

Miss O'Brien is fond of retreating to country cottages and admits that she is a lazy person. She plays no games, has no hobbies. She does have a cat and a dog, both mongrels, and a car which she says looks like a mongrel.

Title page of first edition of *The Land of Spices*, by Kate O'Brien (Doubleday and Doran, New York, 1941)

# *The Land of Spices*

A NOVEL BY KATE O'BRIEN



<sup>1</sup> Kate O'Brien, *The Land of Spices* (London, 1970 [1941]), 157.

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## Kate O'Brien and the Erotics of Liberal Catholic Dissent

Michael Cronin

1

In November 1942 Kate O'Brien's novel *The Land of Spices*, which had been banned on publication by the Irish Censorship Board the previous year, was the subject of a debate in the Irish Seanad. It had been banned on the basis of one line, 'she saw Etienne and her father, in the embrace of love'. This action re-ignited opposition to literary censorship.<sup>1</sup> The Board had also banned Eric Cross's *The Tailor and Ansty* (1942), a quasi-anthropological biography of two West Cork 'characters', and a book on birth control, Haley Sutherland's *Laws of Life* (1936), which had been approved for publication by the Catholic hierarchy in England. In the Seanad debate, Sir John Keane, a director of the Bank of Ireland and member of the



Kate Thompson as Marie Rose (left) and Fidelma Murphy as Agnes, in a scene from the RTÉ Television adaptation of Kate O'Brien's novel *The Ante Room*, during filming in Studio 1 in 1979. © RTÉ Stills Library

Seanad since 1923, presented the banning of these two books and of O'Brien's novel as evidence that the Censorship Board had lost the confidence of the public and should be reconstituted. After a four-day debate, in which Keane and Senator William Magennis, professor of metaphysics at University College, Dublin, and a member of the Censorship Board, were the chief protagonists, Keane's motion of no confidence in the Board was defeated. However, the controversy initiated a more sustained and organized anti-censorship campaign, which led to the limited reform of the censorship process in 1946.<sup>2</sup>

The literary censorship apparatus set up in 1929 was a product of the intense public morality campaigns of the first decade of the Free State.<sup>3</sup> The basic tenet of those campaigns — that human sexuality and information on sexual matters needed to be tightly regulated by the state — was clearly in evidence in the events that led to the Seanad debate. O'Brien's novel had been deemed obscene because of what Senator Keane termed a 'commendably short' and oblique reference to homosexuality,

while the ribald sexual frankness of the eponymous Tailor and his elderly wife, Ansty, had brought the same judgement down on Cross's book.<sup>4</sup> The Censorship Board judged that *Laws of Life* had broken the interdiction on the promotion of birth control, another element of the censorship legislation. However, the crucial feature of the public morality position was not a puritanical aversion to sexuality as such, but the political claim that there is a link between sexuality and social order. As the historian Alan Hunt demonstrates, moral politics has been a recurring feature of modern Western society since the eighteenth century, and continues to be so.<sup>5</sup> Through the operations of such politics, the anxiety that is endemic to capitalism, due to its structural instability, is transformed into concern about individual behaviour and the mobilization of campaigns to control this. Moral politics comes to the fore during periods of crisis, when the contract between the individual and society that underpins liberal capitalism is perceived to be an inadequate basis for social order. Viewed in this light, the eruption of public morality

- 2 For an account of the Seanad debate in 1942, its historical context and its aftermath, see Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin, 1968), 84–95. See also Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–2002* (London, 2004 [1981]), 184–86, and Caleb Richardson, "They are not Worthy of Themselves": The *Tailor and Ansty* Debates of 1942', *Eire-Ireland*, 42 (2007), 148–72.
- 3 Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands 1922–1939* (Dublin, 2006), 60–91. On various aspects of the Irish public morality campaigns, see Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society 1800–1940* (Cambridge, 2007), 214–219; Sandra L. McAvoy, 'The Regulation of Sexuality in the Irish Free State 1929–1935',

in Greta Jones and Elizabeth Malcolm, eds., *Medicine, Disease and the State in Ireland, 1650–1940* (Cork, 1999), 253–66; James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester, 2007), 5–20; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London, 2009), 100–05; Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, 'Virtuous Mothers and Dutiful Wives: The Politics of Sexuality in the Irish Free State', in Maryann Gialanella Valiulis, ed., *Gender and Power in Irish History* (Dublin, 2009), 100–14.

- 4 Keane's comments on *The Land of Spices* from his Seanad speech are quoted by Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin, 2006), 90.
- 5 Alan Hunt, *Governing Morals: A Social History of Moral Regulation* (Cambridge, 1999). See also, Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Feminism, Sex and Morality*, 2nd edn. (London, 2001 [1995]).
- 6 On modernist literary erotics, see Ian Hunter et al., *On Pornography: Literature, Sexuality and Obscenity Law* (London, 1993), 96–102.
- 7 The Editor, 'Standards and Tastes', *The Bell*, 2, 3 (1941), 5–11, 8.
- 8 'Standards and Tastes'.

campaigns and the consequent passing of legislation in the Irish Free State represented less a quest for sexual purity than a quest for hegemony. After the 1922 settlement and the subsequent civil war, the social order was in a state of flux. The morality campaigns served to construct and cement new class identities and to consolidate the hegemony of the newly empowered Catholic middle class. This regulatory ideal of sexuality allowed the middle classes to define themselves as bearers of stability and order in a new moral economy, while also producing an ideological framework for defining the manifest class divisions of the new state in terms of social delinquency and moral incompetence, rather than in political and economic terms.

O'Brien's real challenge to the public morality discourses did not lie in the explicit depiction of sex in her novels but in her adherence to the idea that sexuality had inescapable moral consequences for the individual and for the social order. Her fiction clearly shares a modernist vision of sexuality as a vital force with the potential radically to transform the self and revolutionize society, one most notably associated with D. H. Lawrence and James Joyce in English literature and, in later decades, with the political thought of Herbert Marcuse.<sup>6</sup> But O'Brien's work also entertains a distinct suspicion of the uncontrollable, disruptive and irrational quality of the libido. More significantly, she retains a pre-Freudian, theological notion of sexuality as a moral problem in her fiction, and she uses this problematic to structure her plots. Her heroines' responses to the moral problem sexuality confronts them with is the defining, and potentially transformative, experience of their development and the pivotal point in an O'Brien plot. Thus, she refuses to cede the ground of sexual morality to the proponents of the public morality discourses. According to them, the control of sexuality had implications for the collective good and the social order, and sexuality must therefore be

regulated by collective action, since it is far too important to be left to individuals alone. O'Brien's work counters by asserting that the collective good can only be guaranteed if it is resolutely founded in the freedom of the individual subject to regulate his or her own moral conduct. Where sexuality, for the adherents of public morality, is the ground on which the ideal of liberal individualism fails, for O'Brien, sexuality is the testing fire in which the ideal of liberal individualism is forged and has its mettle proven.

But this was not how O'Brien's supporters in 1942 understood her position. In an editorial in *The Bell*, Sean O'Faolain contrasted the reviews of *The Land of Spices* in the Irish daily newspapers, which had praised the book for the depth and accuracy of its portrayal of Catholic religious life, with the view of the five-person Censorship Board that it was 'in its general tendency indecent'.<sup>7</sup> This was also the strategy adopted by Senator Keane in the Seanad — by highlighting how a book largely in sympathy with the Catholic perspective of the Censorship Board could be banned for one reference to sexuality exposed the absurdity of the Board's decisions. Thus, for O'Brien's supporters, the problem presented by the Censorship Board was not essentially that a political ideology had to be confronted but that a strain of irrationality and dysfunction in the national project had to be exposed. For O'Faolain, the stark divergence of views, between the newspaper reviewers and the Censorship Board, represented a failure of cultural authority in the new state. It demonstrated that 'standards and tastes' were not properly established in Ireland; this created a cultural situation in which 'one man's opinion is as good as another's, and the Censors, certainly, cannot be taken as authorities'.<sup>8</sup>

In his article 'Sex, Censorship and the Church', which appeared in a subsequent issue of the *The Bell*, C. B. Murphy focused his attention on the irrational, retrograde puritanism and dysfunctional sexual culture

that sustained the apparatus of censorship. In Murphy's view, the perverse decisions of the Censorship Board were not the consequence of its members' Catholicism but were 'the attempt of Victorianism to survive in Ireland long after the English people, including the English Catholics, have very sensibly dropped it'.<sup>9</sup> The only convincing argument Murphy can find for this grim situation is that 'the average Irish mind has not, and perhaps never had, a properly balanced outlook upon sex. Either it runs away from sex, or it runs after it: it never seems able to stand and look at it objectively.'<sup>10</sup> Arrayed against this lack of objectivity on the part of the 'average Irish mind' is the 'sane' force of writers like Kate O'Brien. In Murphy's view, O'Brien writes of life 'in a sane and noble tradition of thought and speech' but he worries that 'there are yet unfortunately too few like her for us to feel sure it is a native Irish tradition'.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, the other potential source of 'objectivity' that Murphy identifies in relation to Irish sexuality is Catholicism or, more specifically, 'Roman' Catholicism. Irish Catholicism, according to Murphy, needed to look outward to European Catholic culture to avoid being co-opted by 'the Victorians'. The contrast between 'Irish' and 'European' Catholicism was a characteristic trope used by mid-century Irish intellectuals, especially O'Faolain, for whom a democratic Catholic European worldview offered a sustaining alternative both to an Irish Catholic nationalism, in which the individual is suffocated by the imperatives of collective development, and to an Anglo-American secular liberalism, in which the individual is rootless and alienated without the co-ordinates of a collective, historical tradition. The political and cultural cartography of 'Ireland' and 'Europe' is also a crucial trope in O'Brien's fiction, although she worries less about the limiting and disabling effects of 'Victorianism' than of Irish nationalism. Her novels symbolically reconcile liberal individualism with an

ethical and collective dimension provided by a 'European' Catholicism. This helps to explain why the banning of her novel relit the censorship debate and why her work took on such totemic value for her fellow Irish intellectuals.

Oddly, this misidentification of the political and historical significance of O'Brien's fiction continues among contemporary critics. Typical of this is the opening assertion by her most recent biographer, Eibhear Walshe, that,

in her fiction, Kate O'Brien was a subversive. She created novels that were deceptively traditional in form but radical in content — each novel a Trojan horse smuggling in forbidden topics, such as adultery, lesbianism and venereal disease through the medium of her civilised, graceful narratives.<sup>12</sup>

An even stronger claim for O'Brien's radicalism was made by Ailbhe Smyth when she declared of O'Brien, 'to write this, of this, like this — to refuse the solutions of the system — is a radically subversive act which undermines the bases of the Establishment, its values and practices'.<sup>13</sup> The evidence for these assertions about the political radicalism of O'Brien's work is partly biographical and partly literary. O'Brien was a lesbian, and illicit sexuality is a salient theme in her fiction. On that account, her novels were banned in Ireland. She was also unquestionably courageous as a writer; her indictment of Franco and the Falangists in her travel book *Farewell Spain* (1937) led to her exclusion from that country for over twenty years.<sup>14</sup> But to describe O'Brien's politics as radical or subversive is seriously to underestimate the strength of her commitment to bourgeois liberalism. What she offered to Irish society in her *Bildungsromane* was an ideal of liberal individualism, and a model of historical development as gradual, progressive change, that could be productively fused with a commitment to a

- 9 C. B. Murphy, 'Sex, Censorship and the Church', *The Bell*, 2, 6 (1941), 65–75, 73. See also his 'Censorship: Principle and Practice', *The Bell*, 3, 4 (1942), 293–301.
- 10 'Sex, Censorship and the Church', 73.
- 11 'Sex, Censorship and the Church', 75.
- 12 Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 2.
- 13 Ailbhe Smyth, 'Counterpoints: A Note (or Two) on Feminism and Kate O'Brien', in Eibhear Walshe, ed., *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork, 1993), 24–35, 33.
- 14 Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 72–75.

- 15 Gerardine Meaney, 'Territory and Transgression: History, Nationality and Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's Fiction', *Irish Journal of Feminist Studies*, 2 (1997), 77–92, 81.
- 16 Terry Eagleton, 'Revisionism Revisited', in his *Crazy John and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork, 1998), 320.
- 17 Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London, 1984 [1936]), xix–xxii.
- 18 *Mary Lavelle*, 34.
- 19 *Mary Lavelle*, 344.
- 20 *Mary Lavelle*, 285.

Catholic worldview. Clearly, the meaning of this political position has altered with time. O'Brien was writing at a time when European politics was dominated by totalitarianism and the struggle against it, and her attachment to an essentially nineteenth-century model of ethical liberal individualism was, in those circumstances, pertinent but also nostalgic. But in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, when the neo-liberal ideology of individualism was and is now dominant, the political significance of O'Brien's model needs to be understood in a historically considered manner rather than merely applauded and seconded as politically correct for the present moment.

I wish neither to dismiss O'Brien as a conservative nor to construct her, in the manner of most recent commentary on her work, as a radical subversive. Instead, I hope to locate O'Brien's narrative aesthetic, and the conception of sexuality that informs it, within the broader historical context of the 1930s and 1940s. In many respects, O'Brien's fiction offered a courageous challenge to the prevailing political orthodoxies of Ireland. But assertions such as Gerardine Meaney's, that O'Brien's 'marginality is almost excessive', underplay the degree to which her fiction was entirely in step with the gradualist, counter-revolutionary value-system shared by many liberal and conservative intellectuals at that time.<sup>15</sup> O'Brien, in this view, cannot be conceived of as a twenty-first century secular lesbian feminist *avant la lettre*, nor even as an entirely dissident anti-establishment figure. Instead, I seek to understand her as a writer who, both in her commitment to the realist aesthetic and to the ethical agon of public morality discourses, is deeply committed to and enmeshed in the value-systems of her epoch. Any comprehensive assessment of her liberal politics needs to register the attractiveness and strengths of her model of self-formation and historical development, while also acknowledging its limitations. Reflecting

on the politics of O'Brien's fiction, one is reminded of Terry Eagleton's argument, that 'what is wrong with middle-class liberalism is not on the whole its values, most of which are entirely admirable, but the fact that it obtusely refuses to recognise the depth of social transformation which would be necessary for those values to be realised in universal form'.<sup>16</sup>

## 2

O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* begins and ends with Mary alone on a train. In the opening pages the young Irish woman is crossing the border into Spain. It is 1922, and she is on her way to take up her post as a governess, or 'Miss', to the three daughters of the Areavaga family.<sup>17</sup> The novel ends with Mary leaving Spain a few months later. Though our last image is of Mary in anguished tears for the recently dead father of her charges, and for her married lover and the friends whom she is leaving behind, we also learn that she now has an entirely new plan for her life. When she arrived there, her year in Spain was intended to be a 'tiny hiatus between her life's two accepted phases. To cease being a daughter without immediately becoming a wife.'<sup>18</sup> Her intention as she leaves Spain is to return only temporarily to Ireland. She will stay long enough to break off her engagement to be married, collect a small inheritance and then leave again.<sup>19</sup> What happens to Mary during her months in Spain that transforms her projected 'tiny hiatus' into this permanent breach between how her life was meant to be and how it will be? To put it simply, love — love that is either unrequited or impossible in some other way. One of the other Irish 'Misses', Agatha Conlon, declares that she loves Mary, 'the way a man would'.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Mary has met Juanito, the married brother of the girls in her charge, and they have fallen for each other.

As Ann Fogarty has observed of this novel, 'by bringing the *bildungsroman*, a literary genre which is a product of

high culture, into contact with women's romance, a form of popular fiction, O'Brien creates an idiosyncratic literary space of her own'.<sup>21</sup> Choosing the romance as the generic raw material out of which to produce a distinctively woman-centred narrative of subject formation was a propitious choice on O'Brien's part. At its most practical, this enabled her to join in a well-established tradition of women novelists and to find a place for her novels in the literary marketplace. In her analysis of the romance in twentieth-century French literature, Diana Holmes offers a succinct history of the emergence of the popular romance in the late nineteenth century as a denigrated genre, characterized as a feminine form of writing. This history was shaped through the interaction of the ascendant bourgeois ideology of gender — the radical separation between a public sphere, gendered as male, and a 'feminine' domestic sphere — with technological and economic developments in publishing and the literary marketplace.<sup>22</sup> The romance genre offered a writer of O'Brien's generation an ambiguous inheritance: the opportunities of an achieved and ready readership for a particular type of women's writing; but also the constraints imposed by established conventions and the cultural politics of literary differentiation.

Though the romance and the *Bildungsroman* can be separated into 'low' and 'high' literary modes, they also share significant conceptual ground. In particular, the popular romance rehearses one of the crucial symbolic operations of the *Bildungsroman*. Both genres give imaginative shape to the problematic relationship between the individual and modern society. The crux of the romance plot is the question of whether and how the lovers can overcome the obstacles to their union. In this view a happy or tragic ending are equally pleasurable for the reader and of equal weight to the balance of the plot. The actual *dénouement* of each story, a joyful union if the obstacles are

overcome or separation and loss if they are not, is less significant than the vividness of the representation of the obstacles. It is the clash between the desires of the protagonists and the demands of social regulation that drives the romance plot. As Holmes argues, 'romance provides a narrative form in which to address the difficult reconciliation of personal desire with social imperatives, and the particular form that this takes for women'.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, the formal aesthetics of modern popular romance allowed O'Brien to situate her narratives of self-formation in relation to the history and politics of gender, and to foreground the specific dimensions of a woman's narrative of development. At the same time, O'Brien was also drawing on an older, pre-modern form of the romance. One of O'Brien's earliest critics, Vivian Mercier, argues that her scrupulous elaboration of 'the conflict between love and Christian duty' made O'Brien 'in our day, the ablest practitioner of Romance in the English language'.<sup>24</sup> Mercier drew on Denis de Rougemont's 1939 work *L'Amour et L'Occident* (*Love in the Western World*) to locate O'Brien's fiction in the long history of the romance form, with its medieval origins in the archetypal 'Tristan and Isolde' legend. A salient structural feature of this romance tradition is the moral test, which the hero or heroine must undergo. Using this formal device allowed O'Brien to introduce an ethical and spiritual dimension to the formation narrative, and to the problematic relationship between individual desire and social conformity that is the crux of the secular *Bildungsroman* and popular romance. In O'Brien's novels this ethical dimension is invariably framed by Catholicism.

If we take this notion of a moral test as structuring O'Brien's plots, we can identify three such in *Mary Lavelle*. One of Mary's tests is her response to being loved by Agatha Conlon. Agatha is one of the older Irish 'Misses', and has been

- 21 Ann Fogarty, "'The Business of Attachment': Romance and Desire in the Novels of Kate O'Brien", in Walshe, ed., *Ordinary People*, 101–19, 104.
- 22 Diana Holmes, *Romance and Readership in Twentieth-Century France* (Oxford, 2006), 9–14. The complex relationship between the ascendancy of bourgeois gender ideology and the history of the English novel is notably analyzed in Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (Oxford, 1987).
- 23 Holmes, *Romance and Readership*, 16.
- 24 Vivian Mercier, 'Kate O'Brien', *Irish Writing*, 1 (1946), 86–100, 87.

- 25 Emma Donoghue, "'Out of Order': Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fictions", in Walshe, ed., *Ordinary People*, 36–58, 41–47. Katherine O'Donnell, "'But Greek ... Usually Knows Greek": Recognising Queer Sexuality in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle*", in Patricia Boyle-Haberstroh and Christine St Peter, eds., *Opening the Field: Irish Women, Texts and Contexts* (Cork, 2007), 74–91, 84–85.
- 26 On the historical significance of *The Well of Loneliness* in the evolution of twentieth-century lesbian cultural identity, see Laura Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism: The Origins of a Modern English Lesbian Culture* (New York, 2001), 1–30.
- 27 *Mary Lavelle*, 285.
- 28 *Mary Lavelle*, 297.
- 29 *Mary Lavelle*, 297.
- 30 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London, 2002 [1981]), 91.
- 31 On the history of the concept of perversion, see Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford, 1991), 103–228, and Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (London, 2001) 35.

living in Spain for twenty years. As Emma Donoghue and Katherine O'Donnell have shown, O'Brien drew on the expanding range of historically available lesbian imagery when shaping her portrayal of Agatha.<sup>25</sup> Agatha's 'queerness' in the eyes of the other 'Misses', her mannishness and her ascetic, nun-like quality would have registered with a 1930s readership conversant with the popular versions of sexology, and more especially with the lesbian figure that was becoming increasingly common in literature. The best-known contemporary example of the literary lesbian was Stephen Gordon, the self-styled 'invert' heroine of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Hall's book had been tried for indecency in England on its publication in 1928 and subsequently banned. This had brought the novel to popular notice.<sup>26</sup> Agatha's expressions of guilt about her sexual feelings should also confirm her status as an example of the anguished and tortured literary lesbian. However, Agatha describes her own guilt with a cool detachment. Having declared that she likes Mary, 'the way a man would ... I can never see you without — without wanting to touch you', she observes that 'it's a sin to feel like that'.<sup>27</sup> She goes on to explain that 'lately I've been told explicitly about it in confession. It's a very ancient and terrible vice.' That she laughs 'softly' while recounting this judgement emphasizes her awareness of the ironic juxtaposition between the delicate, humane scale of her feelings for Mary and the ponderous melodrama of this ascription. Agatha, in other words, draws a subtle distinction between her desires as such and the theological nomination of them as sinful. She acquiesces in this theological model for framing her feelings, while simultaneously holding fast to them, and actively keeping them aflame. When Mary is about to leave for Ireland, Agatha insists that Mary send her back a photograph of herself — a poignantly stoic gesture, yet

hardly one that would help her to forget or abjure her desires.<sup>28</sup>

The crucial factor within Mary's *Bildung* narrative is not whether she does or does not reciprocate Agatha's feelings, but rather her realization of the essential similarity between Agatha's position and her own. As the love between her and Juanito is impossible because he is married, so is Agatha's because it is unrequited. Mary realizes this as she and Agatha sit together outside a church, just after Agatha has declared her feelings. Watching 'the baize door swing and swing again in the porch of San Geronimo', Mary thinks of the people 'going in incessantly to pray, as Agatha did so often, as she did, as Juanito too, perhaps. Seeking strength against the perversions of their hearts and escape from fantastic longings.'<sup>29</sup> As the rhythm of O'Brien's sentence establishes an equivalence between the three characters, the meaning of their common 'perversion' is clearly no longer defined by the logic of heterosexual and homosexual, or natural and unnatural. Instead their desires are perverse in their waywardness, their divergence from, and incompatibility with, reality. It is this perversity that also makes their longings 'fantastic', quixotic and utopian. As Fredric Jameson observes, it is precisely romance's intimation of the fantastical, 'the possibility of sensing other historical rhythms, and of demonic and Utopian transformations of a real now unshakably set in place', that distinguishes this form.<sup>30</sup>

To describe Agatha's, Mary's and Juanito's desires as perverse because they are in conflict with reality is, of course, to invoke the Freudian agon of libido and the reality principle. Strikingly, O'Brien elects not to employ this episteme. She draws instead on a much older theological conception of perversity, not as a psychological or physiological category but as an ethical orientation.<sup>31</sup> Illicit sexual desire is perverse and potentially utopian because it is conceptualized within a moral paradigm, which such desire disrupts and



transcends. But while sexual desire so understood imagines the subversion of this moral framework — hence the utopian potential — it simultaneously affirms that framework. In *Mary Lavelle* this moral framework is specifically denominated as Catholic. Hence, the identification of Mary, Agatha and Juanito is struck through Mary's image of each of them praying. Mary's perception of their 'tangled longings' as a moral problem is framed by her Catholic religion, just as her view of the candlelit interior of the church is framed by the doorway. But while a frame shapes perspective, it does not entirely determine the meaning of what it holds. Agatha's, Mary's and Juanito's longings may be perverse because they are disruptive, disorderly and will cause pain to each of the three, as well as to others. But the perversity of their desires is not limited or contained by this negative quality; the perversity may simultaneously contain some positive, as Mary perceives it, 'fantastical' potential.

Since Agatha's characterization involves a complex oscillation between the categories of 'type' and 'character', she stands as a figure for this doubleness. Her isolation, irascible misanthropy and 'queerness' stem from her figuration as an instance of the literary lesbian 'type'. But it is also her difference from the other 'Misses' that makes her a distinctive character. In comparison with these deracinated expatriates living in a country they hate and refuse to engage with, Agatha has learned the language, knows Spanish history and is passionate about the landscape and, especially, the bullfight. Thus, while Agatha's declaration of love for her produces an opportunity for Mary to develop morally, Agatha also provides Mary with an example of a cultured and sturdy individualism. Hence, Mary too demonstrates an idiosyncratic curiosity about Spain, its language and culture, and is open to being transformed by her experience of the country. But perhaps the most striking similarity between the two

women is their complex negotiation of sexual morality. In her relationship with Juanito, Mary performs a sort of mental acrobatics that allows her inherited moral framework to be placed to one side. As Juanito is making love to her, she

thought of school and home, of John, of God's law and of sin, and did not let herself discard such thoughts. They existed, as real and true as ever, with all their traditional claims on her — but this one claim was his, and she would answer it, taking the consequences.<sup>32</sup>

Like Agatha, Mary wilfully adheres to a religious notion of morality that situates sexual transgression as socially disruptive, while simultaneously recognizing the inadequacy of that framework. For O'Brien, illicit sexual desire is perverse because it overflows the boundaries imposed by that framework and casts those caught up in it out into an uncharted moral territory, where they must, by the exercise of conscience, find their co-ordinates.

Feminist critics have been troubled by Mary's characterization of her decision as a response to Juanito's 'claim' rather than as the pursuit of her own desires and pleasure. If Mary's (not Juanito's) decision to consummate their relationship is to be read as a mark of her developing autonomy, what is the reader to make of this idea of her fulfilling a duty owed to a man? This troubling ambiguity is intensified by O'Brien's description of Mary during sex, 'flung back against the moss ... her set teeth and quivering nostrils, beating eyelids, flowing, flowing tears'.<sup>33</sup> As Patricia Coughlan argues, this description 'dwells in an undeniably sado-masochistic way on images of Mary's specifically feminine vulnerability and pain as themselves erotic and constitutive of Juanito's pleasure'.<sup>34</sup> As a result, O'Brien, Coughlan contends, 'gives far more imaginative energy to the relinquishing of agency to which Mary is moved by her awakened passion for Juanito,

32 *Mary Lavelle*, 308.

33 *Mary Lavelle*, 308.

34 Patricia Coughlan, 'Kate O'Brien: Feminine Beauty, Feminist Writing and Sexual Role', in Walshe, ed., *Ordinary People*, 59–84, 68. Meaney disputes this reading, arguing that 'the text's emphasis on the wilful nature of Mary's passion and her insistence on taking the sexual initiative makes this impossible to characterise as masochistic surrender'. Meaney, 'Territory and Transgression', 90.

Bakst, Leon (Lev Rosenberg):  
1866–1924.

Ida Rubinstein, 1885–1960  
Russian ballerina, as Saint  
Sebastian. 1911 drawing  
illustrating the ballet by  
Claude Debussy, 1862–1918,  
after the verse play *The  
Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian*  
by Gabriele d'Annunzio,  
1863–1938. © The Art  
Archive / Bibliothèque des  
Arts Décoratifs, Paris



than to the representation of Mary's making of her own life that is the larger concern of the novel'. In Coughlan's view, we can see two kinds of liberationist imperatives colliding in this episode of the novel. One

is what she terms, 'the recognition, after Freud, Havelock Ellis and D. H. Lawrence, of the central importance of sexuality in personality and the determination to speak it, not to let it go unrepresented in novelistic

discourse'. The other is a narrative of specifically female self-development, which, as Coughlan points out, 'comes off worse than the other'.<sup>35</sup>

However, it is not entirely obvious that O'Brien is as wholly invested in the post-Freudian model of sexuality, subjectivity and freedom as Coughlan claims. Clearly, sexuality in her fiction is a libidinal energy rather than a reproductive instinct. And, as in Joyce, sexuality is expected to be productive in the sense that it is expected to generate development and transformation in the individual subject. However, in O'Brien's fiction this experience of transformation through sexual pleasure is not mapped according to the psychoanalytical model of an agon between desire and repression, but according to a theological model of an ethical challenge. It is not so much that O'Brien denies or repudiates Freud's concept of libidinal sexuality, as that she is less convinced than her male modernist literary contemporaries of the liberationist implications of this concept for the individual.

Most obviously, O'Brien uses a pre-Freudian grammar to give imaginative shape to this experience of transformation and she draws this grammar from the realms of classicism, aesthetics and Catholicism. Thus, classical antiquity, aesthetics and the erotic are entwined when Juanito compares Mary's naked beauty to Greek statuary: "Aphrodite!" he said, when she gleamed white and shivered in the moonlight.<sup>36</sup> Soon the narrator is describing Mary as 'no longer Aphrodite, but a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded Saint Sebastian'.<sup>37</sup> Here the sexual masochism of Mary's physical pain at Juanito's hands is overlaid with a notion of violence and pain as purposeful and transformative as in the Christian notion of martyrdom. As they reach the climax of their love-making the two lovers are described as 'emotionally welded, not by their errant senses which might or might not play in unison, but by a brilliant light of sympathy which seemed to

arise from sensuality and to descend from elsewhere to assist and glorify it'.<sup>38</sup> Notably, O'Brien characterizes physical pleasure, the 'errant senses', as an unreliable means of achieving intimacy, and this suspicion of sexual pleasure is manifest throughout the episode. As he looks at Mary in pain while they make love, Juanito thinks 'how grotesquely we are made ... how terrible and insane are our delights and urgencies'.<sup>39</sup> Desire and the pursuit of sexual pleasure are irrational and disruptive. Rather than leading us to the fullest expression of our individual personality, as sexuality is imagined to do in the Lawrentian mode, O'Brien suggests that sexuality threatens to rob us of our humanity and transform us into monstrous, driven monads.

To redeem the errant and always potentially destructive dimensions of sexual experience, it has to be converted into a secular form of religious transcendence. Hence the romantic excess of a moment of orgasm is written as something analogous to a Christian sacrament when a 'brilliant light of sympathy' is felt to 'descend' from 'elsewhere', just as some Christians believe the body of Jesus descends into bread and wine during the Eucharistic service and the Holy Spirit descends on to the married couple during the Christian wedding ceremony. In other words, the merely physical experience of pleasure is invested with a metaphysical and spiritual import. Crucially, the effect of this is to redirect one from the monadic, libidinal pursuit of pleasure towards the attainment of relational connection and solidarity — the achievement of 'sympathy' with another human being. This, for O'Brien, is the decisive question to demand of sexual experience — to what degree does this experience further our moral development? Emma Donoghue has observed that O'Brien's characters can be divided into those 'who take moral responsibility and step back from sin and ... those who are equally morally responsible and walk into sin from motives of love'.<sup>40</sup> She goes on

35 Coughlan, 'Kate O'Brien', 70.

36 *Mary Lavelle*, 308.

37 *Mary Lavelle*, 309.

38 *Mary Lavelle*, 309–10.

39 *Mary Lavelle*, 309.

40 Donoghue, "Out of Order", 37.

41 Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (Dublin, 1980 [1934]), 258–73.

42 *Mary Lavelle*, 307.

43 *Mary Lavelle*, 305–06.

44 Sean O'Faolain, *A Summer in Italy* (London, 1949) and *An Autumn in Italy* (New York, 1953).

to note that there is no great difference between these two types of characters. The point is not whether they commit the sin or not, rather 'but the responsibility and integrity they show in the choice'. In this regard Agnes Mulqueen in O'Brien's *The Ante-Room* (1934) and Mary Lavelle may be thought of as mirror images. By refusing to elope with her sister's husband, with whom she is in love, Agnes makes a decision that is ultimately tragic but for reasons that are scrupulously morally commendable — she does not want to cause pain to her sister. Our sense of her at the novel's end is that she is deeply unhappy but morally strengthened.<sup>41</sup> Conversely, by choosing to make love to the married Juanito, Mary takes an important step on her path to achieving autonomy. There is no question of reading Agnes's choice as an effect of repression, and of Mary's choice as a victory over such repression. Moreover, Mary's decision to embrace sexual desire does not mean she rejects her inherited moral framework, any more than Agnes's refusal of such desire involves an endorsement of that framework. Rather, that system is placed to one side as insufficient to the ethical task at hand.

The content of Mary's choice when confronted with sexual desire is of less significance than how she makes it. She cannot reciprocate Agatha's desire for her, but Agatha's declaration of love elicits from Mary solidarity, an empathetic insight into the perverse and utopian quality of desire. With Juanito, her own desires meet with his, but her decision to consummate their relationship is not cast as the impetuous pursuit of sexual pleasure. It is, instead, a carefully considered decision to take a 'risk', as Mary describes it.<sup>42</sup> She is consciously placing herself outside the bounds of what she knows to be the parameters of her inherited morality, parameters that she still believes in even as she transgresses them, because of what she hopes such an act of estrangement will achieve — namely, that experience of 'sympathy' with another

person and the development of her own moral capacity. As she explains her decision to Juanito, she places it within those other changes she has experienced in herself during her time in Spain. She tells him:

It's been fantastic, my time in Spain, it's been a mad, impossible thing dropped into my ordinary life. Tomorrow it will be over, and although it has changed all my plans, life will have to be ordinary again, in some way that I know nothing about yet. So before it's over — finish it for me, Juanito.<sup>43</sup>

Mary's final demand of Juanito is ambiguous. Does 'finish' mean bring to a conclusion or bring to completion? Will making love to Juanito, submitting to his 'claim', reinsert Mary into patriarchal subordination and negate the small measure of autonomy she has achieved in the last few months? Or will this act of transgression round off and make complete Mary's phase of accelerated self-growth? As O'Brien's description of their actual love-making demonstrates, and as Coughlan has argued, this ambiguity is never resolved.

Interestingly, Mary describes her time in Spain in similar terms to her earlier description of the 'perversions of the heart': it has been 'fantastic' and a 'mad impossible thing'. The equivalence between Mary's experience of Spain and her experience of sexual desire is reiterated throughout the ensuing episode of her love-making with Juanito. This connection is mainly created through the echoes and parallels with the earlier bullfight episode, since the bullfight stands as a synecdoche for Spain — or more accurately 'Spain', the constellation of ideas and values that O'Brien affixes to that word, as O'Faolain, in a similar vein, was to do with 'Italy'.<sup>44</sup> The bullfight gets recalled explicitly by the narrator during the love-making episode. But it is most vividly present metaphorically, and in a particularly troubling form, when the description of Mary's physical pain

invokes the earlier bloody image of the violent death of the bull. The episodes are further linked through O'Brien's use of the same combination of aesthetics, classicism and eroticism in each. The bullfight is, in O'Brien's version, an aesthetic ritual of cathartic violence that gives expression to the human encounter with mortality. She describes a man slowly killing a bull as an elaborate and darkly sensuous dance, and unmistakably erotic:

the matador drew his enemy to his breast, and past it, on the gentle lure; brought him back along his thigh as if for sheer love; let him go and drew him home again ¼the sword sank where the stud ribbons fluttered, in to the hilt, as bravely driven as if the dealer believed himself to have been dipped in Achilles' river.<sup>45</sup>

For Mary, the bullfight is 'more full of news of life's possible pain and senselessness and quixotry and barbarism and glory than anything ever before encountered by this girl ... more symbolic, more dramatic, a more personal and searching arrow to the heart than she had ever dreamt of'.<sup>46</sup> O'Brien's resort to these rather baroque effusions indicates her attempt to convey a sense of the bullfight as a metaphysical and transcendent experience for Mary. More concretely, there is much emphasis in this section of the novel on how Mary is 'growing up fast in this foreign soil'.<sup>47</sup> By the end of the chapter she is in tears, due to her growing awareness of the gulf that is opening up between herself and her fiancé back in Ireland. Clearly, this growing estrangement from John helps to push forward the romance plot as it prepares the ground for Mary's first meeting with Juanito, while also contributing to the plot of woman-centred formation, since it emphasizes how Mary's attainment of autonomy can only take place away from the 'dominating authority' of John and her father.<sup>48</sup> O'Brien also uses the bullfight

episode to elaborate her concept of *Bildung* as a narrative of ethical development. As she enters the bullring before the fight, Mary 'had never felt so much ashamed of herself as she was feeling now'.<sup>49</sup> When they are leaving afterwards, Agatha comments that she wonders why 'the Church doesn't make it a sin to go to the bullfight'. Mary replies, 'I think it is a sin'.<sup>50</sup> The references to 'shame' and 'sin' indicate that similarity between the bullfight and illicit sexual desire that O'Brien seeks to create. Mary's nomination of the bullfight as sinful, although it is not technically so, is a rhetorical equivalent to her original decision to go to the bullfight. It is an assertion that the ultimate arbiter of her moral actions, the authority to nominate what is moral or not, must be Mary herself. It is only through placing herself directly in the midst of potentially sinful or immoral experience that she can reach such decisions. As in her encounters with Agatha and Juanito, the content of Mary's experiences — whether of unrequited or fulfilled sexual desire, or her intense if rather opaque emotional and intellectual response to the bullfight — is less crucial to her development than the moral decisions that she makes around those experiences.

The bullfight is therefore one of the three moral tests that structure Mary's formation. It is also the first and sets the pattern for those two erotic tests that are the more familiar and conventional material of the romance. The narrative significance ascribed to the bullfight, combined with its uniquely Hispanic cultural location, inevitably draws our attention to O'Brien's setting of her novel. As her friend and early critic, Lorna Reynolds, points out, O'Brien 'never uses a foreign setting for mere decoration or trimming: it always plays an organic part in the total design'.<sup>51</sup> The Spanish setting of *Mary Lavelle* has its origins in biography, and in Irish social history. O'Brien had made a similar journey to Mary's when she worked as a 'Miss' and an English literature tutor to

45 *Mary Lavelle*, 114.

46 *Mary Lavelle*, 116–17.

47 *Mary Lavelle*, 105–06.

48 *Mary Lavelle*, 106.

49 *Mary Lavelle*, 102.

50 *Mary Lavelle*, 119.

51 Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross, 1987), 112.

- 52 Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 29.
- 53 The cookery writer and novelist Maura Laverty also went to work in Spain as a governess and as a journalist later in the 1920s, and she also wrote a novel, *No More Than Human* (1944), based on those experiences. In her work on the Irish magazine *Women's Life* in the 1930s and 1940s, Caitriona Clear also notes a fiction serial about an Irish girl working in Spain. The serial, 'Girl on Her Own' by Deirdre O'Brien, appeared in the magazine during 1938. See Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922–1961* (Dublin, 2000), 85.
- 54 Kate O'Brien, *Farewell Spain* (London, 1985 [1937]), 221.
- 55 *Farewell Spain*, 2.
- 56 *Mary Lavelle*, xxi.

the son and daughter of a wealthy family near the Basque city of Bilbao in 1922 and 1923.<sup>52</sup> As the Prologue to the novel suggests, it was a journey made by many young Irish Catholic women of her class and generation.<sup>53</sup> Perhaps because of this encounter with the country in her formative years, Spain is the country outside of Ireland that O'Brien returned to most often in her writing. Besides *Mary Lavelle* and *That Lady* (1946), which are set there, she also wrote a biography of the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, *Saint Teresa of Avila* (1951), and a travelogue, *Farewell Spain* (1937).

The choice of Spain as the setting for a novel by an Irish writer in 1936 could not be a politically neutral or innocent decision. O'Brien responded more directly to the Spanish Civil War in *Farewell Spain*, an entertaining and idiosyncratic account of her travels in Spain in the 1930s. It combines architectural and political history with art criticism and personal reminiscences. But there is also a pervasive regret that such travel is no longer possible and a bitter sorrow at what Spain and its people are going through. She expresses her dismay at the attack on the democratically elected Republican government and her fierce opposition to Franco and the Falangists. The book ends with a pungent denunciation of Fascism and a striking defence of democracy. O'Brien distinguishes a war waged 'on the clear insistence that government of the people by the people for the people shall not perish from the earth' from

a war such as General Franco's, openly aimed at the murder of every democratic principle, and for the setting up of his little self as yet another Mussolini — such a war strikes not merely for the death of Spain, but at every decent dream or effort for humanity everywhere.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, O'Brien repeatedly emphasizes that she is not a communist but a pacifist

opposed to all war. Thus she draws back from making any direct commitment to the beleaguered Spanish left. She also opens the book by lamenting the end of, what she terms, 'two thousand years of individualism'. In her view, both right and left in the 1930s were creating a routinized world; the best that could be hoped for after the current crisis in Europe was that the future would be 'uniform and monotonous. That is what the maddened world must now seek, the justice of decent uniformity'.<sup>55</sup> While accepting that this future is 'elementarily necessary', she confesses to having no 'personal desire to see it'. O'Brien's reference to 'two thousand years' sketches an interesting alignment between Christianity and liberal individualism. Moreover, her sense of the individual as being crippled rather than empowered by the forces of modernity — whether of the right or the left, capitalism or communism — was shared by those other Irish intellectuals, such as O'Faolain, who were striving after an ideal of liberal Catholicism.

For O'Brien, then, the crucial issue at stake in the Spanish war appears to be this larger civilizational struggle between 'individualism' and modern political systems of whatever hue. In *Mary Lavelle*, the central journey is into a symbolic rather than a geographical or political 'Spain'. From the outset it is clear that Mary's primary objective in going to Spain to be a governess is not merely to make a living. Her job is described as an 'expedient' that,

however enforced-seeming, reveals her as an individualist ... capable of dream and unfit to march in the column of female breadwinners, or indeed in any column at all. She becomes a miss because not her wits but her intuitional antennae tell her that it is an occupation which will let her personality be.<sup>56</sup>

The distinct note of social disdain and hauteur in the reference to the 'column of female breadwinners' indicates a significant feature of O'Brien's individualist ideal.



Kate O'Brien (1897–1974), by Mary O'Neill. Oil on canvas, 1936. © National Portrait Gallery, London

Despite its highly developed capacity for ethical conduct and the attainment of 'sympathy' with others, political or social solidarity is no part of it. In the travelogue, O'Brien interprets the Spanish Civil War as symptomatic of this conflict between sympathy and political partisanship at a historical level. In *Mary Lavelle*, Spain is contrasted with Ireland, where political and familial commitments make the development of ethical individualism impossible. The novel draws a geo-moral division between those spaces that are fertile for *Bildung*, and those that are not — and the newly independent Irish state comes out the worse in the comparison. The novel opens with Mary leaving Ireland in 1922 and O'Brien's historical setting suggests that Mary must not only escape the confines of family and gender ideology but also the

political demands of nation-building. In the novel, Spain is more 'real' than Ireland, since it is the elaborately realized ground on which Mary's accelerated narrative of formation takes shape. But it is also more symbolically fertile. 'Spain' comes to stand as a geo-political representation of a synthesis of self-fulfilment and ethical choice, autonomy and sympathy, liberal individualism and Catholicism.<sup>57</sup>

3

In *The Land of Spices* O'Brien's major formal innovation was to construct a double narrative of *Bildung* that is dependent on a complex temporal plotting. The novel's setting is an expensive Irish convent boarding school in 1904 to 1914, where we follow the younger of the two

57 It is also worth noting that O'Brien's representation of Spain indicates the absorption of other modes of writing, notably the travelogue, into her fiction. The novel bears the hallmark of Mediterranean orientalism, a mode in which the European 'South' masquerades as the site of desire, the exotic landscape that the European 'North' fantasies as its opposite. There are many examples, including André Gide's *The Immoralist* (1902), E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908) and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1913). Likewise, O'Brien's fascinated account of the bullfight recalls both Ernest Hemingway and D. H. Lawrence, whose *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) opens with an extended description of a Mexican bullfight. See John Premble, *The Mediterranean Passion: Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford, 1987).

58 *The Land of Spices*, 266.

59 *The Land of Spices*, 18.

60 These terms are drawn from Peter Brook, *Reading for the Plot* (New York, 1985), 12.

main protagonists, Anna Murphy, from her arrival at the age of six to when she is about to leave for university. Anna undergoes a number of crucial experiences, 'Some Lessons' — as the title of one of the chapters has it. These include being unfairly punished at the hands of one of the senior nuns, Mother Mary Andrew; witnessing one of her schoolfellows humiliated because of her social background; watching her parent's deeply unhappy marriage disintegrate; and losing her beloved younger brother, Charlie, in a drowning accident.

Anna learns some of her most important lessons from the other chief protagonist of the novel, Helen Archer, the Reverend Mother of the convent. She intervenes to help Anna overcome her family's opposition to her attending university, and her 'slow, unhurrying help about Charlie' is the grieving Anna's best support.<sup>58</sup> Along with this practical and emotional help, the Reverend Mother also offers Anna a model of a strong, independent woman exercising authority, and also that of a just, fair-minded liberalism that stands in stark contrast to the narrow-minded vindictiveness of Mother Mary Andrew — the latter is also a passionate advocate of Irish cultural nationalism. Woven through the story of Anna's development are the Reverend Mother's ongoing clashes with zealous Irish nationalists like Mary Andrew, and also incidents from her earlier life. These are framed as Helen's memories, mainly of her girlhood in Brussels in the 1870s and 1880s and, in particular, her relationship with her father, the most significant figure in her early emotional and intellectual formation. From Helen's memories we learn that in the 1860s Henry Archer had suddenly left England, and abandoned his promising academic career to move to the Continent with his wife and baby daughter. It becomes clear that a scandal concerning his sexual relationship with another man may have led to this move. In a pivotal episode, the eighteen-year-old Helen accidentally sees her father

'in the embrace of love' with another man. Thereafter, she had 'turned her back upon herself, upon talents, dreams, emotions — and undertaken the impersonal and active service of God'.<sup>59</sup>

To use the terms developed by the Russian Formalists, we can say that Anna's narrative of development is plotted consistently with the *fabula* of the narrative, the chronological order in which events unfold, while Helen's is revealed within the *sujzet*, the order of events as narrated.<sup>60</sup> So, for instance, Helen's memories of her early years as a nun in her twenties appear at an earlier point than the memories of her childhood, or her memories of the crucial incident with her father. Thus there are various references to some trauma that lies behind Helen's decision to become a nun, but the narrative itself is well advanced before that traumatic formative episode is disclosed to the reader. We also get an interesting contrast between two types of *Bildung* narrative. In Anna's case we see the young protagonist undergoing her formative experiences blindly, as it were, and groping emotionally and intellectually to discern the meaning of events as they unfold. With Helen, we see the protagonist's older self retrospectively organizing her formative experiences into a narrative, while observing and commenting on her younger self. The juxtaposition of the younger woman struggling towards her future and towards maturity with the older woman reflecting maturely on her past allows O'Brien to convey a temporally and emotionally complex sense of the process of female self-definition. Therefore, a significant effect of this temporal plotting is the transmission of educative experiences across generations, as Helen passes on to Anna the lessons she has learned from her relationship with Henry.

On one level, this transmission of experience is pedagogical. Anna first comes to the Reverend Mother's notice when the newly arrived six-year-old recites a poem by Henry Vaughan at a school gathering. Since



Henry Archer was a scholar of seventeenth-century English poetry, the poem evokes in Helen memories of her father. Anna, we are told, 'quicken[ed] something of her father' in Helen, 'something erratic, speculative and quick on the wing'.<sup>61</sup> Under the Reverend Mother's tutelage, little Anna recites a poem for the school every other Sunday night during her first year. In this pedagogical relationship Helen re-creates one of Henry's salient virtues, since he had taught her with 'an exacting vigour, method and love which she received from no other teacher ... he poured imaginative knowledge all about her; he gave her an individualistic, sunny access into life, and so, as she thought, into herself'.<sup>62</sup> With her father's lessons on literature and history, Helen had also imbibed his values, and especially his 'obsession' with 'the beauty of personal freedom, and the human obligation of non-interference'.<sup>63</sup> Helen's encounter with Anna not only reconnects her with a nurturing parent, it also forces her to reconsider her future. On the day when Helen first meets Anna, she had decided to resign her post as Reverend Mother. Weary of her position as the English-born head of an Irish convent, Helen is depressed by what she sees as the inward-looking parochialism of the narrow cultural nationalism displayed by those around her and feels harassed by the bishop, the chaplain and the other nuns who want to modify the school's 'European' style of education so as to bring it into line with local needs. But the urge to watch over Anna, and to protect her from her hopeless parents and the cruelty of Mary Andrew, prompts Helen to destroy her letter of resignation.

However, Helen also passes on to Anna the other legacy of those lessons learned painfully in the years after the incident of seeing her father with his lover. Helen was in her last term at school in Brussels, where the Archers finally settled, and she and her father had plans for her to go to university in the coming autumn. While helping a nun to prepare the altar for a feast-day, Helen offers to run to her father's house

nearby to bring back some roses from his garden. As she passes the window of her father's study she sees that 'two people were there. But neither saw her; neither felt her shadow as it froze across the sun ... she saw Etienne and her father, in the embrace of love'.<sup>64</sup> Helen's reaction is to run away, both immediately by running back to the convent and more permanently by deciding in the following weeks to become a nun. She chooses the highly disciplined and regulated life of a nun over the world of a cultured, free-thinking intellectual offered by her father, because she now sees, or believes she sees, 'the sort of thing the most graceful life could hide ... in her father, in the best person she had known or hoped to know'.<sup>65</sup> As well as rejecting Henry's values and worldview in her decision to become a nun, she also makes a more fundamental rejection of his prized ideals of 'personal freedom' and 'non-interference' by judging him for his sinfulness and, as she painfully realizes, by hating him. She punishes him further by never telling him what she saw on that afternoon or explaining fully her decision to become a nun. Even on his deathbed, years later, he is left still wondering about her reasons. Like her shadow, which 'froze across the sun' on that day, Helen's mind and soul freeze and this 'hardness' remained with her for the next few years as she trained to be a nun in France and worked as a teacher in various convents around Europe.

After eleven years she returns to the convent in Brussels and spends time with her father again. Seeing her father 'visibly happy, guiltless and good — who was guilty and evil, theology said' — poses a challenge to Helen. This challenge 'roused all the Protestant in her — she was a grandchild of English rectories' — and lead her to understand that 'a soul should not take upon itself the impertinence of being frightened for another soul; that God is alone with each creature'.<sup>66</sup> Thus Helen returns to that ideal position of liberal detachment that was her inheritance from

61 *The Land of Spices*, 226.

62 *The Land of Spices*, 142.

63 *The Land of Spices*, 151.

64 *The Land of Spices*, 157.

65 *The Land of Spices*, 159.

66 *The Land of Spices*, 21–22.

67 *The Land of Spices*, 20.

68 *The Land of Spices*, 267.

Henry. The crucial difference is that in the process of having her liberalism so acutely tested, she has learned about the pain, which even the most scrupulously kind and sensitive, such as Henry, can cause to others. She realizes this not only through being aware of the pain which he is ignorant of having caused her, but through retrospectively understanding that the source of her late mother's pervasive melancholy was her marriage to Henry. Helen improves on Henry's liberalism through her development of a more refined ethical understanding of the individual's relationship with, and obligations to, others.

There is, however, a significant ambiguity about the novel's presentation of this process through which an ethical liberal subject is formed. Its complex temporal plotting means that in the *fabula* of the novel we see the second stage of the process happening first. That part of the narrative framed as Helen's memories of her return to Brussels in her late twenties and her reconciliation with her father occupies the second of fourteen chapters. Her memories of her childhood and adolescence, and of the crucial incident of discovering her father's homosexuality and its aftermath, are narrated in the eighth chapter, about two-thirds of the way through the novel. We read this latter incident, and Helen's subsequent descent into a hateful illiberalism, already knowing that she will, as it were, come out the other side. Moreover, the recounting of this incident is followed directly by the very moving and loving last letter from the dying Henry to Helen. All of this works to frame and structure our reading of this incident in Helen's life as being traumatic but ultimately morally strengthening. Nevertheless, the incident of Helen's discovery is given a particular vividness and forcefulness that comes not only from how it is written but also by being withheld from us until this late stage in the narrative. There are, therefore, two competing interpretations available of how Helen fares

in the moral test presented by her discovery of Henry's sexuality. One conclusion would be that she is ultimately successful in achieving moral development, and another is that this incident is a deeply traumatic experience from which she never fully recovers and which would 'always leave her limping, no matter how she strove with wisdom'.<sup>67</sup> The novel is taking a gamble here and it is uncertain which conjecture the reader will find more compelling; a difficult and testing but ultimately constructive formation of an ethical liberal subject, or a more dramatic descent into moralizing hatred to which a liberal subject can easily succumb when confronted by taboo sexuality.

The climax of Anna's formation narrative, an epiphanic moment about her future vocation, serves as a crucial counterpoint to the climactic point of Helen's narrative. Anna is preparing for a series of exams that will guarantee her entry into university and the scholarship that will maintain her. Her maternal grandmother, who has financial control over the family because of Anna's father's alcoholism and who uses this power to bully her daughter and granddaughter, is opposed to Anna's plans. However, the Reverend Mother manipulates the older woman's vanity, her ambitions for her brother who is a priest and the enthusiasm of the local bishop about Anna's educational career, to defuse this opposition successfully. This crisis has come to a head in the preceding chapter and now Anna is looking forward securely to the challenge of the exams and the life at university that awaits her.

As she sits in the garden, ostensibly reading, Anna is reflecting on the tussle with her grandmother and particularly on the character of the Reverend Mother. Anna acknowledges that the common perception of the Reverend Mother as a 'cold fish, dark horse and queer one' has some small element of truth in it. But Anna had also 'noticed originalities which were more interesting than queer'.<sup>68</sup> She observes



13th July 1926: Kate O'Brien (1897–1974). © Photo by Sasha/Getty Images

that the Reverend Mother, unlike the other nuns, never snubbed or lectured the girls and never meted out punishment. She is also capable of unexpected indulgences and kindnesses. Thus we can see the more subtle impact that Helen is having on Anna. This goes beyond the practical help of overcoming family opposition and extends implicitly to providing a model of behaviour. Anna's reflections are interrupted by one of her less assiduous fellow pupils, Pilar, asking for help with her school work. Pilar is reading Milton's *Lycidas*, and struggling to understand it. As they talk about the elegy, which Anna who is still grieving for her brother finds painful to read, Anna experiences what O'Brien describes as a 'translation of the ordinary'. Anna sees Pilar

in a new way. She became aware of her and of the moment on a plane of perception which was strange to her, and which during its visitation she did not understand but could only receive

— delightedly, but without surprise in fact, and as if she had been waiting for the lead it was to give. She saw her, it seemed, in isolation and in a new sphere, yet one made up of broken symbols from their common life ... So Anna beheld her; something that life can be about, something with power to make life compose around it. She stared at her in wonder, hardly seeing her any more, but realising her lustrous potentiality, and feeling that for her, the watcher, this moment was a long-awaited, blessed gift; that in seeing this transience, this grace, this volatility, flung in a sweet summer hour against great ilex-trees, against the evening star, she was encountering, alone and in terms of her secret need, a passage of beauty as revelatory and true as any verse of the great elegy.<sup>69</sup>

Before this, Anna's ambitions for her future have been either glamorously unrealistic or vague and undefined. Through her response to Pilar's 'lustrous potentiality', Anna

69 *The Land of Spices*, 271–72.

70 *The Land of Spices*, 273.

71 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (London, 1990), 13–30.

72 On O'Brien's writings on Teresa and another Spanish Catholic mystic, Saint Francis Xavier, see Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 118–19.

finds her vocation, 'something that life can be about'. Her capacity to transform Pilar's beauty into a symbol indicates that this vocation is artistic, and since Anna has been deeply interested in words and language since she was six, we can assume this means a life as a writer. Her response to Pilar's beauty and her 'new way' of seeing is also cathartic, since it leaves her feeling 'emptied of grief'.<sup>70</sup>

In Anna's eyes, Pilar becomes a 'symbol as complicated as any imaginative struggle in verse ... as a motive in art'. In an awkwardly constructed passage, the narrator acknowledges that Anna at this age is wholly unfamiliar with art history, but that if she were to know these things, she would be reminded by reading *Lycidas* of Mantegna's paintings, and of Giorgione's by the summer light in the garden. Above all, she would see the beautiful young Pilar, who is from South America, as the girl in Goya's *La Vida Española*. But Anna's experience is also an annuncatory 'visitation' and 'revelatory'. She 'receives' her vocation without rationally understanding it; her experience of seeing Pilar's beauty in a new light and the glimpse into her future as an artist this vision offers is a 'blessed gift' and a 'grace'. By combining these two types of rhetoric, O'Brien is also invoking two distinct models of individual development. One is a secular concept of art as 'improving', which is central to the liberal theory of culture, and which can be traced back through figures like Matthew Arnold in the nineteenth century to the related origins of *Bildung* and aesthetics in eighteenth-century Enlightenment and Romantic thought.<sup>71</sup> The second is a notion of spiritual transformation occasioned by violence or ecstasy drawn from the Catholic tradition of martyrology and mysticism. O'Brien's fascination with this tradition is manifest throughout her work; we will recall the image of Mary Lavelle as Saint Sebastian and also O'Brien's biography of Saint Teresa.<sup>72</sup> While these distinct models are being rhetorically and conceptually

merged in the narration of Anna's epiphany, Helen's double identity likewise provides her with a dual, merging role. As 'Helen Archer', she is the offspring and pupil of the prototypically Arnoldian figure of Henry. But as 'Reverend Mother', and a member of a French Catholic order of nuns, she is immersed in a historical tradition of Catholic religious life.

Anna's epiphany is the lynchpin of her own formation, but this episode also gives structural cohesion to the story of Helen and Henry. Anna's musings on the Reverend Mother directly before she is interrupted by Pilar and the strategic place of the Milton poem mean that the presence of father and daughter hover over her transformative experience. Inevitably, this suggests that Anna's capacity to respond imaginatively to Pilar's beauty, and her emergent creative powers that are signalled by this, are due to the influence of Helen and, through her, of Henry. Anna is the flower of all that is best about the cultured bourgeois life embodied by Helen and Henry. But Anna's response to Pilar's eroticism also signals an improvement on the moral capacity of the Archers. Helen's encounter with sexual desire precipitated a moral and emotional collapse. The moral test provided by this painful experience ultimately strengthened Helen's liberalism and gave it an ethical dimension. But the novel suggests that the real beneficiary of this experience was Anna, rather than Helen herself, and the most compelling evidence for this is that electrifying spark that erotic desire gives to Anna's creativity and ambition. The aesthetico-spiritual and vocational quality of Anna's erotic encounter also stands in contrast to Henry's relationship with Etienne. Henry's absorption in his sexual relationship, oblivious to his daughter outside the window, wreaks painful havoc in both his and Helen's lives. Thus Anna's exhilarated transformation by an erotic encounter demonstrates that she can successfully evade the polar extremes of Henry's

unthinkingly selfish sensuality and Helen's damaging recoil from human sexuality.

As O'Brien's critics have observed, *The Land of Spices* can be read as a portrait of the artist as a young woman.<sup>73</sup> Anna Murphy, like Stephen Dedalus, is from the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie and is formed in the same social, religious and educational milieu. These are also similarities shared by their respective creators. James Cahalan has identified gender as the key difference between what he considers to be the two foremost *Bildungsromane* in twentieth-century Irish literature. He contrasts Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a 'glorification of separation and individuality — ideals which are peculiarly Western and male, but which are taken to be normative and universal', with the 'attention to how Anna and Helen depend on each other for their mutual growth' in O'Brien's *The Land of Spices*.<sup>74</sup> He concludes that the two novels 'provide bipolar models for coming of age: male versus female'.<sup>75</sup> One clear problem here is that an interpretation like Cahalan's that starts from a fairly solid feminist base, starts to veer perilously close to essentialism. There is rather a fine line between arguing that the two novels capture something specific about the experience of growing up male or female, and the idea that the authors' gender in some way determined the type of narratives they created. The implication that mutuality and nurturing are significant features in novels by and about women because these are in some way innately female characteristics is equally problematic.

An alternative is to see these novels as employing two ways of narrating history. The temporality of *Bildung* in *Portrait* appears to be analogous to that of revolution. It requires a wholesale rejection of the existing state of things and of the pervading social and political formations. However, this is ultimately illusory, as the revolutionary impulse in the novel is defused by Joyce's structuring

of the narrative within the parameters of the Freudian model of psycho-sexual development. This casts history as a trauma to be resolved rather than a set of conditions with which to engage dynamically. O'Brien's formation narrative in *The Land of Spices* suggests a more Whiggish model of historical development. Through her painful experiences, and her ability to learn from them, Helen Archer improves on the model of the ideal liberal subject offered by her father. In her shock at discovering his homosexuality, Helen rejects both Henry and the valuable, cultured, liberal inheritance she has received from him. Learning to see him in a more forgiving and appreciative light involves more than reconciliation between daughter and father. It is a story of how liberal subjectivity can be placed in peril by illicit sexual desire, but can then be reassembled in a more ethically robust manner by having undergone, but then worked through, that near-shattering experience. By the novel's end, we are left with the impression that Anna, absorbing by example and osmosis those lessons learned by Helen, will be an even further improved liberal subject. Anna takes into the future all that is best of the Archers' liberalism, but her liberalism is refined and made ethically stronger by the lessons drawn from their mistakes.

That the Archers happen to be English and Anna, the soil on which their lessons in how to be a civilized liberal subject bear fruit, happens to be Irish means that geography *and* history are at play here. Helen's attainment of an ethical liberalism in the wake of the crisis precipitated by Henry's sexuality is mapped as the fusion of nineteenth-century English liberalism, with its Protestant roots, and the purposeful collectivism offered by the Catholic faith, and especially by the religious life. It is the merger of rectory and convent that, paradoxically, makes Helen such a good nun.<sup>76</sup> As the plot of the Reverend Mother's ongoing clashes with her Irish nuns and the local bishop

73 Adele M. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin, 1990), 59–72, and James M. Cahalan, *Double Visions: Women and Men in Modern and Contemporary Irish Fiction* (Syracuse, 1999), 105–08.

74 Cahalan, *Double Visions*, 106.

75 *Double Visions*, 108.

76 *The Land of Spices*, 21.

77 *The Land of Spices*, 75. O'Brien's critics have been entirely sympathetic and unquestioning in their reading of O'Brien's critique of Irish nationalism. Adele Dalsimer, for instance, describes Helen's position thus: 'in her confrontations with the Irish, she loses the generosity of spirit she felt for her father. Her soul withers, her humanity dissolves, and having known the fullness of human acceptance, she cannot tolerate losing it again'. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, 67.

78 *The Land of Spices*, 75.

79 *The Land of Spices*, 74.

80 Terry Eagleton, 'Home and Away: Internal Émigrés in the Irish Novel', in *Crazy John and the Bishop*, 242.

reiterates, this 'European' Catholicism is not the Catholicism of the Irish. Unlike her defender in *The Bell*, C. B. Murphy, O'Brien does not believe that Irish Catholicism has been corrupted by 'Victorianism' (on the contrary, her characterization of Henry Archer suggests a very positive valuation of a certain kind of 'Victorian' liberalism) but by Irish nationalism. It is her opponents' commitment to the politics of cultural nationalism, to introducing the Irish language into the curriculum of the school, for instance, that Helen finds so objectionable. She can find a productive reconciliation between her commitment to the liberal values of personal freedom and 'detachment', inherited from Henry, and the collective commitment of being part of a religious order. Yet she finds the idea of commitment to a project of national development entirely anathema to her liberal values. For the Irish, 'about Ireland there was no appeal to the comparative method; no detachment was regarded as just'. But for Helen this is intolerable, since she could 'no more forgo the latter in her thought as undertake to live without sleep'.<sup>77</sup>

After writing her letter of resignation in a mood of frustration with the clerical supporters of cultural nationalism around her, Helen considers that she has 'given them up to that narrowing future of their own'.<sup>78</sup> This 'narrowing future' prophesized in the novel's narrative is clearly the 'narrowed present' of the novel's publication. As in *Mary Lavelle*, O'Brien uses her historical setting to articulate the radical counter-revolutionary position that the roots of Ireland's failures in the 1930s and 1940s do not lie in a 'wrong turning' sometime after 1922, but were inherent in cultural nationalism from the outset. The characterization of Mary Andrew indicates more precisely the class dimension of this historical error. Along with her commitment to cultural nationalism and the Irish language, Mary Andrew's other distinguishing feature is that she is the daughter of a shopkeeper, unlike the other

nuns who are of more stoutly bourgeois or Catholic gentry stock. Mary Andrew's 'erratic and cruel' behaviour is explicitly linked to her 'status-uneasiness' within the convent.<sup>79</sup> This suggests that the origins of post-independence failure lie in the earlier eclipsing of the Catholic bourgeoisie, either Unionist or Irish Parliamentary Party in their politics, by the *arriviste* lower middle-class supporters of Sinn Féin. Interestingly, Mary Andrew is also from Tyrone — which suggests that southern Irish liberal repugnance at the innate 'extremism' of northerners pre-dated 1968.

## 4

O'Brien's fiction is enlivened and energized by those divergent currents of utopianism, liberalism and conservatism that run through it. For her, it is not sensual and emotional pleasure that makes sexual desire so thrilling and exciting but that such desire is 'fantastical'. Desire disrupts and confounds those parameters that order the world as one finds it. As Eagleton observes of O'Brien, 'sexual love for her is a kind of delicious insanity, a wayward, unmanageable, implacable force which disrupts all settlement and involves an ecstatic casting loose of one's moorings'.<sup>80</sup> In O'Brien's fiction, sexuality is so disruptive because it throws us onto an ethical plane where our inherited criteria prove of only limited use. The only adequate resource available is one's own conscience, and one must draw on this to adjudicate between competing desires, demands and obligations. A potential reward for plunging bravely into this uncharted space full of challenges and risks is the attainment of 'sympathy'. Wrestling with the demanding ethical challenges of sexual desire generates bonds of understanding, attachment and solidarity. These bonds may be erotic, as they are with Mary and Juanito and with Anna's response to Pilar, but are not necessarily so, as with Mary's feelings towards Agatha, or the relationships between Helen and Henry,

and Helen and Anna. The other potential reward for such ethical risk-taking is growth, development, and new, exhilarating possibilities: Mary leaves Spain with her future transformed; Anna has attained a vocation that will fulfil her talents.

Sexual desire is utopian in O'Brien's fiction, then, since it suggests the possibility of ordering the world differently — if morality can be remade anew, why not political and economic systems as well? Sexual desire is a means by which more sustaining and less atomized relationships are made possible, and better futures are glimpsed. But O'Brien draws back from these radical suggestions as soon as she raises them. The utopian potential of sexual desire is simultaneously revealed and then contained within the milder limits of liberal pluralism. Mary glimpses the 'fantastical' quality of the 'perversions' she, Agatha and Juanito share. But this is then dissipated by the lesson she takes from this insight, which is an understanding of the common humanity that subtends their apparent differences. Directly after the narration of Anna's encounter with Pilar, *The Land of Spices* concludes with a conversation in which Helen advises Anna to 'be the judge of your own soul; but never for a second, I implore you, set up as judge of another. Commentator, annotator, if you like, but never judge.'<sup>81</sup> There is a striking contrast between the exhilaration and exuberance of Anna's eroticized epiphany and this elegantly phrased reiteration of the gospel injunction about throwing the first stone. O'Brien's fiction exhibits a paradoxical drive to give birth to radical suggestions just before cloaking them in liberal aspirations.

O'Brien believes in the possibility of historical change and progress. Her plots are driven by her heroines' search for moral growth and autonomy, as well as for cultural refinement and educational accomplishment. These different forms of development are distinct but entwined with each other and with the heroines' sexual experiences. The trans-generational

narrative of the Archers and Anna Murphy expands the scope of such development beyond the span of the individual subject, and suggests a trajectory of continual improvement that lends itself to being read as an allegory of history as progress. But if O'Brien's narration of how an ideal liberal individualism can be cultivated suggests that historical change is possible and welcome, this narrative is simultaneously predicated on the impossibility of achieving such change. Her novels contrast two kinds of relationship. There are those relationships of 'sympathy' — composed of love, of nurturing and of understanding — that can unite lovers, but can equally unite friends, parents and children, siblings, mentor and pupil, and so on. The quality of such relationships is evidence of one's capacity to attain an ethically well-formed individualism. But then there are those relationships based on the bonds of solidarity that have the potential to become the fuel of political commitment, such as anti-colonial nationalism, socialism or feminism. By contrast, these relationships are toxic to the ethical individual ideal, since they make it impossible to achieve that 'detachment of spirit' that is so crucial to its attainment.<sup>82</sup> Hence, Mary's moral development in the course of the narrative is predicated on maintaining her distance from that bleakly homogenizing column of female breadwinners mentioned at the beginning. From a feminist perspective, this fissure between the ideal of ethical individualism and solidarity based on gender is deeply problematic.

In addition, O'Brien's plots invariably distribute the desire for *Bildung* and autonomy unevenly across class lines among her female characters. Her central female and middle-class characters are usually surrounded by lower-class women, whose physical labour sustains these women materially and whose emotional labour sustains them psychologically. These women are represented as unfailingly devoted to their mistresses and their employing

81 *The Land of Spices*, 284.

82 *The Land of Spices*, 210. Ironically, this phrase is coined by Miss Robertson, the English suffragist whom Anna meets on holiday. It comes up in her conversation with the bishop, when Miss Robertson criticizes Irish nationalism for being inimical to this spirit. When the bishop retorts that she has not displayed that spirit in her own political activism, Miss Robertson describes her politics as 'an accident of time and place'. Some critics, such as Elizabeth Cullingford, read this set-piece dialogue between an Irish nationalist bishop and an English suffragist as O'Brien contrasting the narrow limitations of nationalism with the broader, internationalist scope of feminism. However, Miss Robertson's belief in the 'accidental' quality of her politics would appear to undermine feminist as much as anti-colonial nationalist politics, since both are emancipatory interventions to change history rather than accept its 'accidents'. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, "Our Nuns are not a Nation": Politicizing the Convent in Irish Literature and Film', *Eire-Ireland*, 41 (2006), 9–39, 26.

- 83 Murphy, 'Sex, Censorship and the Church', *The Bell*, 2, 6 (1941), 65–75; Murphy, 'Censorship: Principle and Practice', *The Bell*, 3, 4 (1942), 293–301; Walshe, *Kate O'Brien*, 77.
- 84 John Jordan, 'Kate O'Brien — A Note on Her Themes', *The Bell*, 19, 2 (1954), 53–59, 57. [Original emphasis.]

families, and to the hierarchical structure of the convent in the case of the lay sisters. Neither they, nor the narrative voice of the novels, questions their role and place within a highly stratified social order. Paradoxically then, while the attainment of O'Brien's ideal of ethical individualism is imperilled by commitments of gender, class and nation, achieving the ideal is equally impossible without belonging to a quite narrowly defined class formation. The values of tolerant detachment and ethical courage always coexist with an aesthetic sensibility that is dependent on being immersed in a specific type of cultural knowledge and value-system. Being an ethical liberal individual in the O'Brien mode requires the prior accumulation of extensive quantities of cultural capital.

If O'Brien's model of *Bildung* suggests that historical progress is desirable but impossible to achieve, her post-independence Ireland suffers particularly acutely from this condition. O'Brien launches an assault from within on the prevailing public morality discourses with her narratives of sexual moral tests and her ideal of ethical liberal individualism. The historical setting and geo-moral cartography of the novels locate the public morality discourses within the larger project of anti-colonial nationalism. Public morality is a symptom of how the prevailing model of national development has failed and, crucially, was always constitutionally destined to fail. But if this model of national development is a failure, what are the alternatives? From C. B. Murphy to Eibhear Walshe, it has been a shibboleth of O'Brien criticism that her fiction posited a sophisticated, enlightened European Catholicism as an ideal contrast to the insularity of the Irish Free State.<sup>83</sup> The deference shown to O'Brien's imaginative construction of an idealized European Catholic bourgeoisie has occluded a number of flaws in that construction. The most banal of these flaws is timing. O'Brien was articulating this European ideal in her

fiction just as Europe was in the depths of an unprecedented barbarity, to which many members of the European bourgeoisie actively contributed. O'Brien's construction is also structurally unsound since it is not entirely clear if her liberal bourgeois ideal is actually 'European' or 'Catholic' at all. In a review of O'Brien's *The Flower of May* (1953), John Jordan argued that 'however Catholic may be the world in which they move, Miss O'Brien's heroines, without exception, may more easily be described as *protestants*'.<sup>84</sup> O'Brien takes great delight in evoking textually the sensual experience of Catholic religious practice, and was especially interested in the potential empowerment and fulfilment that religious life offered to women. Her *Bildung* narratives are fundamentally shaped by the conception of sexuality as a moral problem, and her characters view this problem through the prism of Catholicism. Nevertheless, the resolution of these moral problems, and the ethical individualist ideal projected in the narrative through this resolution, is fundamentally underpinned by nineteenth-century bourgeois liberalism. As the characters of Henry and Helen Archer particularly illustrate, O'Brien primarily associates this political position with Protestantism and with the cultured English middle classes. O'Brien's vision of Irish modernization involves looking outwards to a narrowly defined sphere of metropolitan culture. But along with going outwards, the culture must also go backwards. The 'wrong turn' of independence must somehow be undone and the hegemony of an idealized bourgeoisie — Catholic in formal religious adherence but politically and philosophically liberal and Protestant — must be restored. Since the gracefully elegiac tone of O'Brien's fiction admits that this return is impossible, Irish culture is stuck fast — incapable of reversing so that it can go forward.