

## FANTASTIC LONGINGS: THE MORAL CARTOGRAPHY OF KATE O'BRIEN'S *MARY LAVELLE*

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Writing in *The Bell* in 1942, C. B. Murphy argued 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” (73). Murphy was responding to the banning of Kate O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1941) by the Irish Censorship Board, one of the most controversial decisions in the ignoble history of that institution.<sup>1</sup> Arrayed against this lack of objectivity on the part of the “average” Irish mind Murphy posited the “sane” force of writers like O'Brien. In Murphy's view, O'Brien wrote of life “in a sane and noble tradition of thought and speech,” but he worried that “there are yet unfortunately too few like her for us to feel sure it is a native Irish tradition” (75). Paradoxically, given the context in which he was writing, the other potential source of ‘objectivity’ in relation to Irish sexuality that Murphy identifies is Catholicism, or more specifically, ‘Roman’ Catholicism, which is a term Murphy uses to highlight the need for Irish Catholicism to look outward to European Catholic culture and therefore avoid being co-opted by what he terms “the Victorians.”

This contrast between ‘Irish’ and ‘European’ Catholicism was a characteristic trope used by mid-century Irish intellectuals, pre-eminently O'Brien and Sean O'Faolain. In the sizeable body of critical work on O'Brien that has developed over the last two decades, it has become conventional to conceive of the political and cultural cartography of ‘Ireland’ and ‘Europe’ in O'Brien's fiction as a binary. In this view, Europe represented for O'Brien openness, freedom (intellectual, artistic, sexual), and moral maturity in contrast with the claustrophobia, insularity, repression, and infantilising paternalism of the newly-independent southern Irish state. However, it may be more historically apt to think of O'Brien's use of the Ireland-Europe trope in terms of a triangular relationship. O'Brien, O'Faolain, and other Irish intellectuals of the period were striving after an ideal of a democratic Catholic European worldview. This ideal offered them a sustaining alternative to Irish Catholic nationalism, in which the individual was suffocated by the imperatives of collective development. But this ideal also offered an alternative to Anglo-American secular liberalism, in which the individual was rootless and alienated without the co-ordinates of a collective, historical tradition. In other words, O'Brien's narratives of youthful self-formation, such as *Mary Lavelle* (1936), with their distinctive political and cultural cartography of ‘Ireland’ and ‘Europe,’

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1 For an account of the debate on censorship in the Irish Seanad which was provoked by the banning of O'Brien's novel and two other books, see Adams 84-95; see also Terence Brown 184-186, and Richardson.

offered Irish society a complex attempt at symbolically reconciling liberal individualism with an ethical and collective dimension, provided by Catholicism, within a 'European' frame.

O'Brien's novel begins and ends with the eponymous heroine 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 (xix-xxii). 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" (34). 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 (344). 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, falling in 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" (285). Meanwhile, Mary has met Juanito, the married brother of the girls in her charge, and they have fallen for each other.

With this novel, O'Brien merged the *bildungsroman* with an equally venerable literary form, the romance. As Ann Fogarty observes, "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" (104). 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 insert herself into a 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 as a culturally denigrated genre, and one culturally designated as a feminine form of writing, in the late nineteenth century. This history was shaped through the interaction of the ascendant bourgeois ideology of gender – the radical separation posited between a public sphere gendered as male and a 'feminine' domestic sphere – and technological and economic developments in publishing and the literary marketplace (Holmes 9-14). The history of the romance genre offered a writer of O'Brien's generation an ambiguous inheritance: the opportunities of an achieved and ready readership for a particu-

lar type of women's writing, the constraints imposed by established conventions, and the cultural politics of literary distinction.<sup>2</sup>

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" (87). 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*. One of the salient structural features 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 the principle structuring O'Brien's plots, we can identify three such tests 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 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 (Donoghue 41-47; O'Donnell 84-85). 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 contemporaneous 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, which had brought the novel to popular notice.<sup>3</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. How-

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2 It is also important to note that O'Brien's use of the trope of the journey as enabling or facilitating in complex ways a young woman's quest for autonomy also connects her work to the tradition of women's writing; from Jane Eyre's travels through nineteenth-century England (and Jane is, of course, a governess, like O'Brien's Mary) through to Rachel Vinrace, the youthful creation of O'Brien's Modernist contemporary Virginia Woolf in her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915). For both Mary, who begins the novel on a train at a border crossing between France and Spain, and Rachel, on an ocean-going liner to South America, their quest for autonomy is propelled forward by this experience of being on the move, distant from all that is known and safe, and thus all the more susceptible and receptive to potentially transformative experiences (see Abel et al. and also Penny Brown).

3 On the historical significance of *The Well of Loneliness* in the evolution of twentieth-century lesbian cultural identity, see Doan 1-30.

ever, Agatha describes her own guilt with a cool detachment that places it at a distance from her. 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” (285). 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 emphasises 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 to this theological model for framing her feelings while simultaneously holding fast to those feelings, 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 conducive to her forgetting or abjuring her desires.

The crucial factor within Mary’s formation narrative is not whether she does or does not reciprocate Agatha’s feelings, but rather her realisation of the essential similarity between Agatha’s position and her own. Their love is impossible because of his marriage, and Agatha’s because it is unrequited. Mary realises 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” (297). 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 which 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 unshakeably set in place” that distinguishes this form (91).

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 reality principle. Strikingly, O’Brien elects not to employ this Modernist *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>4</sup> Illicit sexual desire is perverse and potentially utopian because it is conceptualised within a moral paradigm which such desire disrupts and transcends. But while conceptualising sexual desire in this way involves imagining the subversion of this moral framework, hence the utopian potential, such a conceptualisation simultaneously affirms or validates that framework. In *Mary Lavelle* this moral paradigm is specifically denominated as Catholic.

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4 On the history of the concept of perversion, see Dollimore 103-228, and Davidson 35.

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 that which 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, "fantastical" as Mary perceives it, potential.

Since Agatha's characterisation 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 through which her inherited moral framework gets bracketed and 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" (308). Like Agatha, Mary wilfully adheres to a religious notion of morality that situates sexual transgression as socially disruptive, while simultaneously recognising 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 unchartered moral territory where they must ascertain their co-ordinates using their own conscience.

In common with D. H. Lawrence, Joyce, and other Modernist artists, O'Brien assumes that sexuality is productive, in the sense that the experience of sexual desire and sexual pleasure 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 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" (309). Soon the narrator is describing Mary as "no longer Aphrodite, but a broken, tortured Christian, a wounded Saint Sebastian" (309). 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, derived from the Christian notion of martyrdom. As they reach the climax of their lovemaking, 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" (309-310). Notably, O'Brien characterises physical pleasure, the "errant senses," as an unreliable means of achieving intimacy, and this suspicion of sexual pleasure is manifest throughout this episode of the novel. 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 of modernist literary erotics, O'Brien suggests that sexuality threatens to rob us of our humanity and transform us into monstrous, driven monads.<sup>5</sup>

To redeem the errant and always potentially destructive dimensions of sexual experience, in O'Brien's work such experience needs to be converted into a secular form of religious transcendence, and thus 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 ethical 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" (37). She goes on 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 "but the responsibility and integrity they show in the choice." In this regard, Agnes Mulqueen in *The Ante-Room* (1934) and Mary 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 morally scrupulous and 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 (*The Ante-Room* 258-273). Conversely, by choosing to make love to the married Juanito, Mary takes an important step on her path to achieving the eventual autonomy that is the *telos* of the novel. There is no question

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5 On modernist literary erotics, see Hunter et al. 96-102.

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.

With both Agatha and Juanito then, the content of Mary's choice when confronted with sexual desire is of less significance than how she makes the choice. 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 (307). 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 the larger trajectory of the changes she has experienced in herself during her time in Spain. "It's been fantastic, my time in Spain," she tells him, "it's been a mad, impossible thing dropped into my ordinary life" (305-306).

Interestingly, Mary describes her time in Spain in terms similar 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 in the novel as a synecdoche for Spain – or more accurately 'Spain,' the constellation of ideas and values which O'Brien affixes to that word, as O'Faoláin, in a similar vein, was to do with 'Italy' in *A Summer in Italy* (1949) and *An Autumn in Italy* (1953). The bullfight is explicitly recalled 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 as 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 [...] the sword sank where the stud ribbons

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6 For an incisive reading of the disturbingly masochistic current running through this episode of the novel, see Coughlan 59-84.

fluttered, in to the hilt, as bravely driven as if the dealer believed himself to have been dipped in Achilles' river" (114).

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, and thus O'Brien uses the bullfight episode to elaborate her concept of *bildung* as a narrative of ethical development. As Mary enters the bullring before the fight, she "had never felt so much ashamed of herself as she was feeling now" (102). 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" (119). The references to "shame" and "sin" indicate a similarity between the bullfight and illicit sexual desire that O'Brien will seek to create in the rest of the novel. 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 a 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 narrative; it is also chronologically 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" (112). The Spanish setting of *Mary Lavelle* has its origins in biography and in Irish social history. O'Brien had made a journey similar to Mary's when she worked as a 'Miss' and an English literature tutor to the son and daughter of a wealthy family near the Basque city of Bilbao in 1922 and 1923 (Walshe 129). As the 'Prologue' to the novel suggests, it was a journey made by many young Irish Catholic women of her class and generation.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps because of this encounter with the country in her formative years, Spain is the country outside of Ireland to which O'Brien returned most often in her writing. Along with the two novels, *Mary Lavelle* and *That Lady* (1946), which are set there, she also wrote two non-fiction books on Spanish subjects, her

7 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 (Clear 85).



biography of the sixteenth-century mystic, *Saint Teresa of Avilla* (1951), and her 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 was to respond more directly to the Spanish Civil War in the travelogue the following year. That book is an entertaining and idiosyncratic account of O'Brien's travels in Spain in the 1930s, which combines architectural and political history with art criticism and personal reminiscences. But there is also a pervasive nostalgia that such travel is no longer possible and bitter sorrow at what Spain and its people are going through. O'Brien 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. Nevertheless, O'Brien repeatedly emphasises that she is not a Communist but a pacifist opposed to all war and thus draws back from articulating any direct commitment to the beleaguered Spanish Left. She also begins the book expressing her regret for, what she terms, "two thousand years of individualism." In her view, both Right and Left in the 1930s were in the process of bringing into creation a routinised, modern world and the best that can 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" (*Farewell Spain* 2). 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" forges an interesting alignment between Christianity and liberal individualism, which eschews the usual historical narrative in which individualism is the offspring of capitalist modernity. 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 an instinct shared by those other Irish intellectuals such as O'Faoláin who were striving after an ideal of liberal Catholicism, while a version of it also features in some strands of European Marxism, notably the Frankfurt School.

For O'Brien, then, the crucial issue at stake in the Spanish war appears to be this larger civilisational struggle between 'individualism' and modern political systems of whatever hue. In the novel, Mary travels into this symbolic 'Spain' as much as the geographical and national entity. From the beginning of the novel it is clear that finding a way of making her living is not Mary's primary objective in going to Spain to be a governess. The narrator describes her choice of job as an "expedient" and this choice, "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" (xxi). The distinct note of social disdain and *hauteur* in the reference to the "column of female breadwinners" indicates one of the significant defects of O'Brien's individualist ideal. While a highly developed capacity for ethical conduct and the attainment of "sympathy" with others

is a defining feature of this ideal, the practice of political or social solidarity is considered entirely inimical to it. In the travelogue, O'Brien interprets the Spanish Civil War as symptomatic of this conflict. In the novel, Spain, in contrast to Ireland where political and familial commitments make such development impossible, is symbolically mapped as the space where a narrative of ethical individual development can unfold unhampered by political commitments. *Mary Lavelle* maps 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 this mapping process. Just as publishing a novel set in Spain in 1936 was politically charged, beginning a novel with an Irish woman leaving the country in 1922 was also symbolically laden. O'Brien's historical setting suggests that it is not only the confines of family and gender ideology from which Mary must escape to develop into an autonomous moral agent. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus before her, she must also escape the political demands of nation-building to guarantee her own autonomy

Clearly, the symbolic meaning of Spain in *Mary Lavelle* is not as an exotic space of freedom where, in contrast to a puritanical or repressive Ireland, sexual desire and pleasure can be freely pursued and enjoyed. Rather, Spain comes to stand in the novel as a geo-political representation of that symbolic synthesis of self-fulfilment and ethics, autonomy and sympathy, liberal individualism and Catholicism, which forms the *telos* of Mary's narrative of self-formation. O'Brien's fiction is enlivened and energised by those divergent, and sometimes contradictory, currents of utopianism, liberalism, and conservatism that run through it. What O'Brien offered to Irish society in her novels, especially her *bildungsromane* written in the 1930s and 1940s, was an ideal of liberal individualism and a liberal model of historical development as gradual, progressive change that could be productively fused with a commitment to a Catholic worldview. Clearly, the meaning of this political position alters as historical conditions change. 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 at once nostalgic but also pertinently resonant. But in a late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century political conjunction where the neo-liberal ideology of individualism is now dominant, the political significance of O'Brien's model needs to be conceived in a historically considered manner rather than merely applauded and seconded by the critic.

Therefore, the objective of critical appraisals of O'Brien's work should not be to dismiss her as a conservative; but neither should it be to construct her, in the manner of most recent commentary on her work, as a radical subversive.<sup>8</sup> Instead, we need to

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8 An exemplary instance of this prominent current in O'Brien criticism is Ailbhe Smyth's declaration about O'Brien, that "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" (33). See also Éibhear Walshe's opening assertion in his biography that "in her fiction, Kate O'Brien was a subversive. She created novels that were deceptively traditional in form but radical in content" (2).

locate O'Brien's narrative aesthetic, as well as the cultural and moral cartography of Ireland and Europe that informs that aesthetic, 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 in that period, but the more recent critical consensus about her radicalism seriously underplays the degree to which her fiction was entirely in step with the gradualist, counter-revolutionary value system shared by many liberal and conservative Irish intellectuals at that time. O'Brien needs to be conceived as an Irish and European intellectual who, both in her literary commitment to the realist aesthetic and her ideological commitment to the hermeneutics of Catholic moral discourse, was deeply committed to, and enmeshed in, the value systems of her epoch and whose work is best understood in this context. In short, any comprehensive assessment of her liberal politics needs to register the attractiveness and strengths of her model of ethical self-formation and of progressive historical development, while also acknowledging its considerable limitations.

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