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<th>Kate O'Brien (1897 - 1974)</th>
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<td>Authors(s)</td>
<td>Meaney, Gerardine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publication date</td>
<td>2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication information</td>
<td>Anthony Roche (ed.), The UCD Aesthetic: Celebrating 150 Years of UCD Writers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>New Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link to online version</td>
<td><a href="http://www.newisland.ie">http://www.newisland.ie</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item record/more information</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5518">http://hdl.handle.net/10197/5518</a></td>
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Downloaded 2018-12-27T12:09:19Z

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Kate O’Brien (1897–1974)

Gerardine Meaney

Kate O’Brien is in many ways the emblematic twentieth century Irish woman writer, not least because so much of her work was written and set outside of Ireland. Her writing was inextricably engaged with the politics of her day, starting with her interrogations of Irish identity but moving far beyond it. Just as she drew on a broad European cultural context in her writing, she insisted on understanding Irish politics within the general framework of European history. Her historical fiction ranged from the Spain of Phillip II to late nineteenth-century Ireland.

O’Brien was born in Limerick and educated initially at Laurel Hill convent school. The school epitomised the values of middle class Catholic respectability, but it also gave her a sense of a broader cultural heritage and seems to have helped lay the foundation of her interest in literature. In *The Land of Spices* (1941), a school very obviously based on Laurel Hill provides a haven from family misery and social expectation for its main protagonist, Anna Murphy. Ultimately Anna must leave to fulfil her potential as an artist and a woman, however. ‘Anna was for life now, to make what she could of it’ (281), we are told at the novel’s conclusion. ‘She had been set free to be herself. Her wings were grown and she was for the world. In poverty, in struggle, in indecisiveness – but for some those were good beginnings.’

Her own wings grown, O’Brien herself began attending UCD in 1916. She recollected in an article written for the *University Review* in 1963 that she:
came up to a Dublin still smoking from Easter Week. The first European war was on, and all general conditions were sad and miserable. We were a hungry, untidy, dirty lot – we of 1917–19. But did we enjoy ourselves? Did we read, did we think, did we loaf, did we argue? ... we were witty and wild, or so we thought. (5)

O'Brien wrote fondly of her time at UCD on more than one occasion. It was for her a period of intellectual adventure, of political debate and of unprecedented liberty as she rambled around Dublin with her friends: ‘we lived as students, we were free’. For her, it was the beginning of a life defined by passionate commitment to art and ideas:

Already then the world was a very sad and clouded place – as indeed we knew who walked around burned-out Dublin, and read the news from jails and camps and battlefields of all the earth. Already then the future would be grim and earnest enough, and would be with us very soon; and we were poor and would have to get ourselves somehow equipped to earn our livings. But we were indomitably young; we were in free contact, in all weathers with life as it was carried forward by all varieties of our elders and betters; and in nothing were we being spoon-fed. (9)

For the previously sheltered O'Brien it was a vital part of her education and formation that they were ‘citizens in a cold, living, extremely interesting, tragic and history-flooded town’ (9). That experience fed her lifelong sense of obligation to participate in questioning what Ireland was and what it ought – and ought not – to be. Parallel to this, her courses in modern languages laid the foundation for the lifelong influence of European artists and thinkers on her work. These were eventually to include Marcel Proust and the Spanish philosopher George Santayana.

Her reading interests were too sprawling and too individual to secure her a first-class degree, much to her disappointment at the time. But they gained her rich cultural resources for her fiction and sustained her when Ireland became too insular to accommodate so large an imagination as O'Brien possessed. She loved the ‘unceasing political and patriotic argument’ (6) of her student years and seems to have attended an astonishing number of plays for a poor student. Her impatience with pomposity and distrust of
authority led her to mock 'the Literary and Historical [Society],
where all the grandees, later to be our rulers, showed off'. (6)
O’Brien’s questioning intelligence and her flair for making stories
that challenged perceived wisdoms were repeatedly to put her at
odds with the society those grandees, so apparently foolish and
inconsequential in their youth, were to shape over the next
decades. Looking back in 1963, she retained an irreverence for
UCD’s sacred icons:

poor Newman, how he dreamt! And little did he imagine that
his wonderfully mellifluous evocation of Ireland was to become
a depressingly untrue school text! Untrue, because he was an
unhappy and ill-used stranger who could not but write good
prose, as it happened, but had not head nor tail to [sic] what he
was in fact writing about. Had he been writing in the abstract
about a university his beautiful paragraphs could stand – but by
now their awful topicality can only embarrass all of us who were
nurtured on them as if they were as important a part of English
literature as *Paradise Lost* or *Biographia Literaria*.

O’Brien’s literary tastes and ideas on education were in many
ways the antithesis of Newman’s:

My idea of university life is this: that we arrive, ignorant but
alert, into a society, which will permit us to pursue, along such
avenues as we choose, the difficult quarry, truth … Naturally I
do not speak of absolute truth, but of the approximations and
personal expressions thereof which the individual can strive
towards … Arrival is not the point – all is in the travelling – all
is in what is learnt, said, claimed, discarded and reclaimed on the
way …

In effect her ideas on education were an extension of her ideas on
art and her way of life: ‘A university should be an open porch
where you and I can sit down, and listen, and disagree, and come
back, and disagree again … A place of argument, of silence, of
perplexity.’ She vehemently opposed any dictate in education or
art which sought to impose a criteria of usefulness and publicly
opposed UCD’s move to Belfield in the 1960s on the basis that
‘a university should always live through and in dispute with a city’
(10). She argued that ‘a neat and expensive set of arrangements in
the suburbs’ (9) would cocoon students from the highly
educational experiment of making their own way in the city. 'We must train the young to think – not to learn ... but simply to think ... alone' (5). In many ways a radical individualist, O'Brien understood very well the constraints of upbringing, class, religion and society. Yet her novels return again and again to the point at which those constraints are exceeded.

O'Brien describes mischievously how she and her college friends 'used to track Maud Gonne about, too, when she was out of jail'. The combination of radical politics, cultural ferment and the possibilities of a woman's full participation in both were part of the life they inhaled in war-torn Dublin. *The Land of Spices* gives some indication of this sense of possibility and change and the intellectual and political excitement of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century, as its heroine, Anna, considers her future:

When her father quoted Tim Healy's witticisms at the Irish Bar, she foresaw that shafts of hers would one day hit more deeply and more amazingly. When Father Hogan talked contemptuously of the Irish Party, and expounded the political doctrines of Arthur Griffith, she pondered the value to herself of a patriot's career; and when she talked with Miss Robertson, she felt her own strong ability to out-Pankhurst Mrs. Pankhurst. (208)

This sense of many and exciting possibilities of effecting change explains the intensity of the disappointment O'Brien and many of her intellectual contemporaries felt with the conservatism and stagnation of the state which emerged after independence.

In her most pessimistic novel, *The Ante Room* (1934), O'Brien locates the origins of this failure of opportunity in the late nineteenth century. *The Ante-Room* maps the horizons of an intensely confined society. Like many of O'Brien's novels, it is located in a strictly limited geographical and social space. The novel is set over three days; the characters are physically almost static. Spatial confinement is intense and claustrophobic, comparable with that endured by Ana de Mendoza in her later novel *That Lady* (1946), who is imprisoned by a jealous king in a space that is gradually decreased until she is effectively walled up alive. In *The Ante-Room* enclosure is domestic and considerably more comfortable, but the tantalising glimpses of a freedom they cannot achieve torture the Mulqueen household as surely as the gradual erosion of her
allotted space tortures Ana. Like her, the Mulqueen family wait for death as the only release possible to them. The Mulqueens also occupy the ante-room to twentieth-century Irish history and their story is O’Brien’s analysis of the elements which were to make that history, by 1934, appear a bitter anti-climax. The novel is set during the Land War, though the reader is excluded, with the novel’s female characters, from an extended discussion of these issues, which takes place among the men when the ‘ladies’ have withdrawn. For the *The Ante-Room* evokes, as poet Eavan Boland noted in her preface to the 1980 edition, a forgotten Ireland:

an Ireland between the mortgaged acres of Maria Edgeworth and the strong farms of Mary Lavin’s short stories. It was an Ireland of increasing wealth and uneasy conscience, where the women wore stays and rouged their cheeks, had their clothes made by Dublin dressmakers and tried to forget the haunting of their grandparents.

The novel acutely renders the claustrophobia of this world. Pinioned between Victorian respectability and Catholic scruple, its main character, Agnes, fails to live. Love and desire bring death and destruction in the novel, to the extent that desire seems only to be produced by unbreakable taboos. The relationships that are possible are too limited to be worth pursuing. It is as if this class had failed at the outset, not because of its ambitions for prestige and power, which O’Brien saw fulfilled at the time of the novel’s writing, but by the limitations of those ambitions. Agnes’s mother, close to an animated corpse through most of the novel, clinging on to life until she has found someone to take care of her dreadful son, provides the novel’s most striking metaphor and O’Brien’s caustic response to the myth of mother Ireland.

In the decade after she left college Kate O’Brien came to terms with herself as an artist and as a woman. She tried her hand at journalism, working briefly for the *Manchester Guardian*, and rather successfully at playwriting. She seems to have been able to negotiate a relationship with the Catholic faith in which she had been brought up by regarding it as part of her connection to European culture. Her combination of the secular and the mystical in her life of *Teresa of Avila* (1951) is highly revealing: ‘I
propose to examine Teresa, not by the rules of canonisation, but for what she was – saint or not – a woman of genius.’ (10) Admiring Teresa of Avila ‘as a formidable writer of prose’ (11), O’Brien chronicles both her ‘guile’ and her bravery in her dealings with a church that regarded her mysticism and her visions as possible heresy, at a time when the Inquisition was still zealously torturing and dispatching heretics. In O’Brien’s account, Teresa of Avila becomes a heroine of spiritual audacity:

to advance into the very face and presence of God, and to insist that it is he who invites the audacity … this is mysticism, this is a territory that millions would choose never to glimpse, let alone examine; and it is understandable if some find even Teresa’s unflurried chartings of it alarming. (47)

This is not hagiography in any sense. Teresa’s tendency to hurl ‘Lutheran’ about as a term of abuse annoyed O’Brien intensely – ‘I for one do not excuse it in a woman of genius. Any more than I excuse her lapses into the “I am only a woman and therefore …” line of argument’ (65). The novelist revenges herself on her icon by pointing out that the figure with which Teresa has most in common was Luther himself, ‘passionate, fearless and self-assured’ (65). Teresa of Avila traces the complexity of O’Brien’s relationship with Catholicism. Those elements in it which still attract her are abstract and at odds with its institutional power and its moral blindness, but her assertion of her claim on those elements marks her defiance of that power and those moral strictures.

O’Brien’s lesbian identity undoubtedly contributed to her exasperation and despair at Ireland’s sexual conservatism in this period. It also contributed to her identification with outsiders in her fiction and that fiction’s cool exploration of hidden and forbidden desires. More importantly it helped forge her aesthetic priorities around the persistent exploration of the relationship between sexual, artistic and political freedom. A major factor in O’Brien’s alienation from mainstream Irish society was the censorship of her work in Ireland on the slightest pretext as ‘obscene’. The Land of Spices, set in a convent school and profoundly serious in its exploration of the appropriate relationship of
faith and politics, was banned on the basis of a single sentence which referred to two men ‘in the embrace of love’.

O’Brien’s political and fictional horizons extended beyond Ireland, however. She had lost her second homeland, Spain, when it fell under the dictatorship of Franco. There is some dispute as to whether she was formally excluded from Spain by the Franco regime or simply feared to return after the publication of *Farewell Spain* (1937). Ostensibly a travel book, the latter presciently regards the Spanish Civil War as the harbinger of a greater conflict to come. O’Brien was disdainful down to her anti-fascist bones of Ireland’s neutrality during that conflict. She saw Franco and de Valera as similar in their politics, particularly in terms of their imposition of Catholic moral and social doctrine and disregard for personal and artistic freedoms.

Inspired by an experience of claustrophobia and disorientation when she ventured out into the London blackout during the blitz, she wrote her striking historical novel *That Lady*. Set in Spain during the reign of Phillip II, the novel centres on one woman’s insistence on her right to personal and sexual freedom and transforms it into a powerful allegory of resistance to fascism and dictatorship. Ana de Mendoza was traditionally seen in Spain as a dangerous woman, a femme fatale and even a traitor. In O’Brien’s version, Ana is a dissident, a heroine in the mould of Antigone. Unlike the Greek heroine however, Ana never repudiates life. Instead she is buried alive precisely because she insists on her right to live to the full on her own terms. Ana chooses prison rather than submission: to maintain her independence, she must lose her freedom. *That Lady* is in part O’Brien’s response to the Second World War, in part a parable of resistance to dictatorship and the price paid for resistance. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, her work seems shaped by a sense of foreboding, where totalitarianism at one extreme and bland social conformity at the other threatens to overwhelm life, freedom and art. For O’Brien these three were inextricable.

In *Farewell Spain*, O’Brien lamented that ‘this Spanish war … is only one ulcer on an ulcered world’. Her book uses personal recollection and intimate descriptions of persons and places to
seek to penetrate the 'self-protective' nature of 'the individual imagination':

no one with a vestige of sanity can be unaware of the universal terrors of nationalisms, dictatorships and race-antipathies, to say nothing of the comic policy of sealed lips ... our protective dullness is only really penetrated, our nerves only really ache when that which we have personally known, that which has touched ourselves, takes the centre of the stage awhile. (6–7)

In many respects the apparently private histories with which O'Brien's fiction concerns itself seek to negotiate this paradox. They make us personally know and really ache for those whom, in the abstract, we would judge, dismiss or ignore. More than that, in keeping with her view of the function of art, they seek to offer 'a source of strength and courage' precisely because of their 'manifest non-utilitarianism'. O'Brien, of all Irish writers, writes 'in praise of personal pleasure' (11) in the surety that writing and pleasure stand obdurately against oppression and conformity. She celebrates: 'a book, a hand, a first-rate joke; a prayer to God, or the birth of a child; an escape into solitude or a wild night out; a fit of hard work, an attack of romantic love or of marital peace; a visit to the play; a glass of good brandy or good beer. Or a trip abroad – away from it all, as we say' (15).

The texture of O'Brien's writing is sensuous, intimate, sometimes startling. Art in her work offers both a way of living and a glimpse of eternity. Her most eloquent statement of her aesthetic comes in Mary Lavelle, a novel in which she adapted her experiences during her year working as a governess in Spain into fiction. Her adulation for bullfighting seems incongruous to contemporary readers. For her, it epitomised the necessarily dangerous nature of art, its strangeness and its ordinariness:

Death, so strangely approached, so grotesquely given and taken, under the summer sky, for the amusement of nonentities, death made into an elaborate play, for money and cheers, and exacting in the course of the show a variety of cruelties and dangers; death, asking for helpless victims as well as for the hazards of courage; death and pain, made comic, petty and relentless, for an afternoon's thrill ... Here was madness, here was blunt brutality, here was money-making swagger – and all made into an eternal
shape, a merciless beauty, by so brief a thing as attitude ... here was art in its least decent form, its least explainable or bearable. But art, unconcerned and lawless. (117)

The bullfight for O'Brien was art as a matter of life and death, but also a matter of making a living. Her description of it is probably her strongest statement of her ambition to create an art that, in the words of Santayana, expressed 'the not-given'. It also makes the point that such sublime art is not incompatible with popular forms and genres. O'Brien was a popular novelist, particularly in England. In the Noel Coward-scripted film of Brief Encounter (1945), for example, Celia Johnston's character is going to the library to get 'the latest Kate O'Brien' when her first illicit romantic encounter occurs. This would have been That Lady and the contrast between Ana de Mendoza's tragic defiance and Johnston's tragic compliance would have been striking to any reader familiar with the novel.

O'Brien's most extended exploration of the relationship between life, art, sex and politics is undertaken in a novel concerned with two artists in a form which explodes the boundary between high and popular art, opera. As Music and Splendour (1958) traces the development of two Irish singers, Clare Halvey and Rose Lennane, from disorientated scholarship girls to mature artists. 'Supposing we'd been left where we were,' Clare speculates as they sit drinking wine and discussing their lovers and careers and the prospect of La Scala:

You'd still be Rose Lennane, your exact, born self, the very girl who was sent to France ... And I'd be Clare Halvey, as sure as I am Clare Halvey. But that Rose Lennane and Clare Halvey there at home, our identical twins, wouldn't be recognisable to us now; to us, I mean, who are trying to imagine them, here in Rome at this minute. (189)

Rose, less introspective and more comfortable with her role as diva-in-the-making, responds, 'but that's true about anyone who, well, who was once definitely parted from herself, her obvious self, at any kind of crossroads. Isn't it?' (189)

Remade into 'Chiara Alve' and 'La Rosa d'Irlanda' respectively by their training and profession, the two women also remake
themselves and, especially in Clare's case, their art. Clare is, for
much of the novel, defined both artistically and sexually by her
performance in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* with her lover Luisa:

The music they both loved had carried them far tonight, together
and above themselves. Their descent was slow and reluctant, and
their hands did not fall apart when they paused in Clare's
doorway. Still Orpheus and Eurydice, their brilliantly made-up
eyes swept for each the other's face, as if to insist that this disguise
of myth in which they stood was their mutual reality, their own
true dress wherein they recognised each other, and were free of
that full recognition and could sing it as if their very singing was
a kind of Greek, immortal light, not singing at all. (113)

*Orfeo ed Euridice* is generally regarded as a milestone in the
reform of opera and the shift towards greater dramatic realism
and lyrical intensity in the eighteenth century, a reform Clare
seeks to emulate in the nineteenth. (The novel opens in 1886.)
Even at sixteen, 'cross, uncertain and at bay', she wonders: 'Why
can we only sing about what isn't true?' (24)

The contrast between the two singers could be described as
that between the sublime Clare and the beautiful Rose. O'Brien's
own work is consistently concerned with the aesthetics of the
sublime. As John McGahern has astutely commented, she was 'a
poet working in prose'. This suggests that Clare is an author
surrogate. Yet Rose, the 'absolutely honest artist' (155) who
manages to live life to the full, is in some ways closer to O'Brien's
own artistic practice. Indeed, O'Brien's novels, employing the
conventions of popular genres of women's fiction and the realist
mode, are closer to Rose's operatic preferences than the poetic
and mythic preferences of Clare. When Clare complains that
their pampered operatic existences have nothing to do with life,
Rose is robust in contradicting her: 'We have to do with life –
that's why we sing. Singing is about life. And we can't help
having stomachs and senses' (139).

Possibly because it contains O'Brien's only extended treatment
of a mature lesbian relationship, *As Music and Splendour* has only
returned to print in 2005. Her reputation and popularity as a
novelist had already declined by the time of its writing. When I
first chanced on a couple of battered and elderly copies of *The
Ante-Room and Mary Lavelle in the UCD library in the early 1980s she was, however, already returning to print, thanks to two feminist publishing houses, Arlen House in Dublin and Virago in London. Her critical stock as part of the canon of Irish twentieth-century fiction has been rising ever since. She is now widely taught and once again widely read. Nonetheless I think she would have appreciated that many of the writers and critics she has influenced, including this one, first read her work as an uncontained and lawless pleasure, unexamined, unsupervised, to help us think, alone.

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