The Gothic Art of Edna O'Brien's *Mother Ireland*

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Abstract
This essay examines the accordance to and subversion of the Gothic novel genre by Edna O'Brien's Mother Ireland as a means of understanding the author's motivations for leaving Ireland, while having the country remain as subject matter to much of her literature. I argue that while the text exposes Ireland's 1950s social forces of church and patriarchy as pernicious and necessitating of exile, her memories of these forces – most accessible and potent while abroad – ultimately become valuable to her on account of their continuous role in artistic inspiration and ferment.

Abbreviations:
MI O'Brien, *Edna Mother Ireland* (1976)
JJ O'Brien, *James Joyce* (1999)

Introduction

Edna O'Brien (b.1930), 'the original country girl'[1] from Scariff County Clare, who left Dublin for London in 1959 and shortly thereafter wrote her first novel, *The Country Girls* (1960), is a useful figure for considering the status of the Irish artist living abroad in terms of their reasons for leaving, Ireland as their artistic subject, and their relationship to contemporary Ireland.[2] This essay will argue that O'Brien's memoir-travelogue *Mother Ireland* (1976) plots the memories of the Ireland of her girlhood into a sequence whose form and themes resemble those of the Gothic novel. Through this manoeuvre, I will show that O'Brien casts as a traditional Gothic villain the same patriarchal social and political forces of Ireland that had driven her out. Her narrative's final break-out from the expectations of its Gothic plot will then be read as symbolic of O'Brien's relationship to her writing and to contemporary Ireland.

Gothic Ireland

Hendrik van Gorp and Maurice Lévy have argued that, at least in origin, at the end of the eighteenth century the Gothic novel was an English literary form.[3] According to this lineage it is 'traditional' to attribute Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) as the first Gothic novel (van Gorp, 251). The Gothic did not remain foreign to Ireland for long, but as Jarlath Killeen has argued, the 'tra-

1 RTÉ, dir. *The Original Country Girl*. RTÉ History, 1975. RTÉ Player. https://www.rte.ie/archives/2019/0326/1038765-edna-obrien-returns-to-clare/. Accessed 5th January, 2021.

2 Birth and emigration dates are taken from Greenwood, *Edna O'Brien*, ix.

3 See Lévy, 'Le roman Gothique, genre anglais' quoted in van Gorp, 'The Gothic novel as a Romantic narrative genre' in *Romantic Prose Fiction*, 252 and Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction*, 16.

dition' in Ireland retained an Anglican identity being pioneered by writers from planted Protestant communities (Killeen, 34). Thomas Bartlett argues this was on account of their 'fundamental insecurity' feeling 'under siege and threat of rebellion' by the Catholic population.[4] They belonged to what Killeen terms an 'enclave' and used the Gothic form to construct the world beyond their boundaries as dark and threatening, peopled by the native Catholic monster. (Killeen, 9). These constructions were fed by a longer and wider trend of constructing the native Irish as a dangerous people: John Pinkerton a Scottish antiquarian directly linked the Celts to the Goths in his *Dissertation on the Origins and Progress of the Sythians or Goths* (1787) (ibid, 3). Similarly, within the English Gothic tradition, 'Papist' priests and monks are commonly figured as villains (van Gorp, 253). It is worth noting, however, that while Killeen asserts the essential Anglican nature of the Gothic tradition, he acknowledges that Irish Catholics did and do produce Gothic works, often 'writing back' and subverting their previous representations (Killeen, 20).

4 Bartlett, *Fall and Rise*, 36.

Still, even though O'Brien wrote *Mother Ireland* hundreds of years after the writers Killeen discussed, it is quite apparent that O'Brien is not set on figuring Irish Catholicism in a more positive light. Instead, she casts Catholic social mores, and other Irish social forces, into the role of the Gothic villain, thereby performing a vilifying reproach. To understand this act of literary demonisation more fully, a brief look at the formal conventions of the Gothic genre is helpful.

In terms of plot motivation, Gothic stories normally follow the righting of some wrong levelled against an innocent hero or heroine, by a villain (ibid, 253). This quest generally involves the integration of 'the horrible and the awful' to evoke the reader's feelings of terror (van Gorp, 250). Most Gothic novels are set at a distance from reality, described as involving an 'attitude of escape or remembering, of a flight to the past, or to regions far away, or to forces deep in one's self (ibid).

In their form, the 'irregular character' of the Gothic novel has always been remarkable and remarked upon. An 1802 essay on an imitation Ann Radcliffe novel likens

the works of its class to 'bad English gardens . . . a confused hotchpotch' (ibid, 255). Yet amidst this apparent mess, Gothic novels have a 'stock of devices' comprising a recognisable battery of themes and motifs.[5] In my reading of *Mother Ireland*, I will show how O'Brien appropriates a number of these 'standard' Gothic devices and themes, in order to tell her coming-of-age story, depicting her young self as an innocent heroine against whom a litany of wrongs are perpetrated by the villainous social and political mores of Ireland.

5 Wellek and Warren quoted in van Gorp, 253.

The typifying Gothic 'attitude of escape' is clearly evoked in *Mother Ireland*. The first chapter is a telling of Irish history from the last Ice Age to the present day. O'Brien employs an epic-like tone, melding Irish myth, the classical world and great chronological jumps: 'Countries are either mothers or fathers . . . Originally a land of woods and thickets, such as Orpheus had seen . . . She is thought to have known invasion from the time when the Ice Age ended . . . St. Patrick, her patron saint . . . fled as a slave from Antrim . . . '. Beyond the obvious reaching back across time, this construction of Ireland through a beguiling narrative style can be seen to build on a pre-existing English Gothic tradition of constructing Ireland as what Linda Colley terms an 'outlandish' fringe space, as a shadow of England: rational, technological and knowable.[6]

6 Colley quoted in Killeen, 9.

Throughout the text, shifts in tense and perspective occur at the suture lines between its three narratives: the first being Irish history as it exists in the collective Irish consciousness, the second being the first-person coming-of-age narrative of the young O'Brien, and the third being a present-tense travelogue commentary by the writer around the time of the writing of the book, focused on Irish visits and her life in exile. This manner has earned it, as put by Amanda Greenwood, a wilfully 'difficult' reputation.[7] This ambivalent label is reminiscent of the 'irregular character' ascribed to the English Gothic novel by Hendrik van Gorp.

7 Greenwood, *Edna O'Brien*, 54.

As established, the plots of Gothic novels are motivated by the righting of some wrong. In *Mother Ireland*, the first harm wrought by 'villainous Ireland' against the young

protagonist is figured through the adaption of another Gothic motif: forbidden love. Namely, her sexuality is forbidden and demonised by the strictures of repressive and patriarchal Catholicism. This incrimination is best understood by viewing the young O'Brien's romantic infatuations in a sequence. Crucially, each passion is accompanied by an externally imposed sense of wrong.

O'Brien's first obsession as a young girl is with Jesus Christ: 'His Passion impinged on every word, deed and omission, and sometimes in the wild fancifulness of childhood it was as if one caught sight of Him on a hill . . . ' (*MI*, 28). Unsurprisingly, church iconography registers with an erotic appeal for the girl: 'His pectoral muscles corrugated and an overflow of blood and serum gushing . . . ' (29). However, the young O'Brien soon discovers the church requires that love of Christ be devoid of human carnality and ardour, a stipulation connoted by the blandness of the quality of 'goodness', contrasted against the alive breathiness of Christ himself: 'He loved one and at times spoke in an urgent whisper about the importance of being good.' With this early example, the young O'Brien already suspects hypocrisy in church teaching: she finds it odd that church prayers, apparently intended to encourage an asexual Christian love, actually 'had the glandular description ascribed to human love' (29).

Confused, O'Brien swiftly moves on, directing her desires onto her own friends, and stealing moments where she can, to act on them: 'now and then one secretively kissed a girl friend.' Yet these intimacies are ever darkly shadowed by O'Brien's awareness of their illicitness: 'A kiss was something dangerous that got born in the back of the throat . . . a sin, as almost everything was' (29).

When, finally, a young pharmacist 'love swain' comes along as a suitor – a would-be stable future husband for O'Brien – he as a budding young patriarch takes on the role of policing her sexuality. Reviled by the outré undergarments he finds beneath her skirts, he demands an explanation: '"why such provocation?"' The implication is that he finds their suggestiveness symbolic of the depth and scope of the young Edna's desires – considerable and threatening. Significantly, this scene marks the end of the teenage O'Brien's time in the countryside: the interaction with the pharmacist brings into focus her conviction that a future there, enclosed by a safe marriage, would never satisfy. Parting from the pharmacist's side, she rushes home and frenziedly demands of her mother that she be fed with the canned peaches kept only for display: 'They had been there for years, an heirloom, they were not for human consumption, they were ornaments to be proud of like the good cups or the good glasses or the plaster of Paris ladies.' (74). O'Brien in this scene is testing her mother, a guardian of the conservative, constraining status quo, to see if the Irish countryside could, possibly, give her what she needs: 'only these sliding down my throat would satisfy my yearning.' (74). Her request is not granted and her mother becomes a villain. The rebuffed heroine thus makes off for the bright lights of Dublin, not without spite, daring herself to 'leave a note saying, "I have gone with the razzle-dazzle gypsies, oh" . . . saying a cruel, haughty goodbye to each landmark . . . ' (75).

In Dublin, free from the surveillance of church and family, she is able to experience more sexual freedom and trespass across new horizons (she goes on dates with hurly players and visits the cinema). Yet her identity as a young unattached woman with wide green eyes, means she cannot but be sexualised by men: 'Men stopped me on the stairs to say "Laudamus te" and come to the tavern'. As so, she is shut out of other spheres such as literary circles, remaining valued only according to her sexual currency: 'In the pub I was the blushing toast of all the men . . . Erudite men talking above my head about spondees . . . They were bidding for me with drinks, gin and tonic . . . and "it".' (83) Thus, even when more sexual liberation is afforded her, the sexism of a patriarchal social order means that the kind of partners who might respect her, don't exist. In the end, it is implied that O'Brien's choice in marriage, significantly couched as an elopement, 'whisked away . . . defied family and friends' (86) is her only means of respite. Through this chain of shame-filled 'romances', which the heroine-Ed-

na tries ever to escape and replace with something better, *Mother Ireland* writes both sexual repression – powered by church conservatism – and unrelenting sexualisation into the role of perpetrating villain.

As an unwanted but unavoidable side-effect of the presence of judgement, O'Brien develops an unshakable need for authority and a natural recourse to passivity. The 'passive female' is widely considered a 'stock figure' of the Gothic novel.[8] The young O'Brien's deepening identification with this role is charted through three separate moments.

Greenwood has identified the first of these as an archetypically Gothic moment (51). This is the young O'Brien's fantasy of escape with the Count Dracula of a travelling theatre troupe: 'Yes Dracula and you would go away and you would revive the saintly side of him.' (*MI*, 32). O'Brien's dream reveals the early onset of her taste for an 'innocent versus corrupt' dichotomy in relationships – Dracula, for the young girl, is the embodiment of the devil (31). The second moment is her statement, amidst a dramatic narration of Irish legends, of her trouble as a young girl, in connecting to the majority of female heroines – because they weren't meek enough: 'One did not identify as much with these ladies since they did not succumb.' The sequence of developing passivity comes to a teleological conclusion with the explanation of her eventual marriage: 'The early mortifications, the visions, endless novenas, the later "crushes" on hurly players . . . the combined need for, and dread of authority had all paved the way and it was in a spirit of expiation and submissiveness that I underwent that metamorphosis from child to bride.' (86) This is an explicit statement that her Catholic religious upbringing was the original cause of her need in relationships to be ruled by a more powerful Other. Rebecca Pelan has noted the 'extraordinary level of intertextuality in her [O'Brien's] writing'[9] which in this case, the motif of a young, impressionable bride invites comparison to Cáit's elopement with the emotionally abusive Eugene Gaillard in *The Girl with Green Eyes.*[10] This allusion is thus a foreboding one that signals the long-term personal harms of Ireland's immanent Catholicism.

8 Klinkert/ Willms, 'Romantic gender and sexuality', in *Romantic Prose Fiction*, 234.

9 Pelan, 'Edna O'Brien's "World of Nora Barnacle"', 52.

10 O'Brien, *The Girl With Green Eyes* (1962) and *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964).

According to van Gorp, 'the Gothic novel is especially characterised by its psychological setting . . . by typical Romantic and sublime loci terribiles . . . which are intended to evoke . . . a deep feeling of terror.' (van Gorp, 255). Born in 1930, O'Brien grew up during the early years of De Valera's Ireland – he became Taoiseach in 1933. Indeed, the young O'Brien is aware of his looming identity, associating him with her vague notion of 'the capital' (*MI*, 42). De Valera promulgated a breed of Irish national identity known as 'national distinctiveness' involving an ideology of self-sufficiency. Key to this vision was the cultivation of an image of 'rural utopianism',[11] which entailed 'a conviction that the life of an Irish small farm represented a purity and decency of life'.[12] The evocation of the reader's deep terror in *Mother Ireland's* description of the perverted underbelly to the Irish pastoral, undermines the veracity of this wholesome ideal (Foster, 538). In O'Brien's retelling, the young girl, on her route home from school passes 'One man [who] used to hide behind hedges lying in wait for girls, curling his forefinger, curling the tip of his tongue, opening his fly and oftener than not dragging some unfortunate girl there.' (49). The more isolated, and perhaps according to De Valera's philosophy, the 'more pure' the landscape becomes, the more dangerous it proves: as the 'the road got lonelier, less houses, then no houses at all' the frequency of the dangers increases, signified by the unstressed followed by stressed syllable of 'onrush' – the word used to preface a list of 'imminent danger . . . kidnappers, the man-woman, the freak, or the man who dropped his trousers' (51).

In addition to the threatening, affective nature of these anecdotes, O'Brien highlights the economic failure beneath the illusion of 'self-sufficiency' through her mention of unemployment: 'Might the men undo their breeches, especially the man on the dole . . . ' (MI, 50) . As Terence Foster puts it 'The fundamental reality behind the image of [1930s] rural Ireland remained that of an emigrating population.' (ibid). In showing supposed idyllic *loci amoeni* to really be *loci terribiles*, O'Brien subverts the decency of De Valera's rural utopic Ireland, revealing a lecherous and monstrous reality beneath the façade.

11 Foster, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, 547.

12 Brown, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, 134.

The devil you know

If, as I have attempted to show, *Mother Ireland* can be read as a text that appropriates elements of the Gothic novel, and the young Edna is seen as an innocent heroine persecuted by the injuries of the villainous culture of Ireland, then the plot, motivated by her search for a way out, should conclude with her escape. This is satisfied; in the final chapter 'Escape to England', O'Brien boards a mail boat and starts a life in London.

Yet, the heroine's escape 'proves only partial': young Edna soon discovers that, owing to the psychological imprint of her upbringing, she cannot transcend the hold of the past:'The real quarrel with Ireland began to burgeon in me then . . . leaving is only conditional. The person you are, is anathema to the person you would like to be.' (87). In this pronouncement, the past tense coming-of-age narrative of the young O'Brien merges with the present tense narrative of O'Brien the writer. The continuity between each narrative is the presence of Ireland. Like a spirit (the supernatural being another common Gothic motif) memories of Ireland follow O'Brien into exile, meaning true escape is never achieved. The villainy of Ireland wins out.

However, O'Brien's frustration with her ensnarement subsides: over time her submission to the past loses its negative connotation, and she begins to view the strength of her connection as a capability: 'There is no such thing as a perpetual hatred . . . Hour after hour I *can* think of Ireland' (88, emphasis added). Indeed, a 1984 interview with Philip Roth reveals how O'Brien, in time, begins to actively privilege the preservation of her memories, over the vividness of the present:

> Roth: 'I wonder if you haven't chosen the way you live – living by yourself to prevent anything emotionally too powerful from separating you from that past' [?]
> O'Brien: 'I'm sure I have. I rail against my loneliness but it is as dear to me as the thought of unity with a man'[13]

13 Hughes Kersnowski, *Conversations with Edna O'Brien*, 43.

Thus, in the last chapter of *Mother Ireland* we witness a reversal of expectation: the Ireland of her youth is written out of its role as a villain. Instead it becomes a cherished partner. The shift provides the key into understanding O'Brien's purpose in – up to this point in the text – appropriating a traditionally English and Anglo-Irish form, conforming to its classic vilification of Catholic Ireland. The final lines of *Mother Ireland* help to illuminate O'Brien's change of heart responsible for her highly original way of 'writing back':

> I live out of Ireland because . . . I want for indefinable reasons to trace that same route, that trenchant childhood route, in the hope of finding some clue that will, or would, or could, make possible the leap that would restore one to one's original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth.

In this O'Brien asserts her commitment to preserving the memories of the Ireland of her youth, but it is the phrase, 'in the hope of finding . . . the radical innocence' that provides the explanation of why. 'Radical innocence' is a line from W.B. Yeats' poem 'A Prayer for My Daughter', and O'Brien's citation can be seen as her statement of belonging to the tradition of Irish writing. Thus, all this 'tracing' of childhood in monstrous Ireland, is really the attempt to excavate raw material to write with – a cause she counts herself predestined for 'before birth'.

However, Amanda Greenwood has read the phrase very differently, deeming 'the radical innocence of the moment just before birth' to imply O'Brien's 'express desire' to return to a kind of neutral, pre-natal space; what Luce Irigray calls 'a maternal imaginary', a state that precedes 'patriarchal definition and control.' (Greenwood, 58). However, this seems misled given that 'A Prayer for My Daughter', the literary reference that O'Brien places in such an emphatic position in her text, is a good example of a work that defines and controls a young woman. The poem is a highly defined wish-list of the attributes Yeats wants his daughter to have: 'May she be granted beauty and yet not/Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught'; 'In courtesy I'd have her chiefly learned'.[14] Yet, most significant to interpretation is that the key phrase

14 Yeats, 'A Prayer for My Daughter' (1919).

'radical innocence' is defined by Yeats, elsewhere in the poem as meaning freedom from 'intellectual hatred'.[15] Thus, O'Brien's ultimate aim of 'radical innocence' indicates her desire for a place within a world of the intellect and of literature – even if she sees this place as a male jurisdiction – not neutral ground.

15 Ibid, ll. 57-64

If O'Brien comes to value the static memories of her youth, then how does she relate to contemporary Ireland? An answer is found in *Mother Ireland's* present-tense travelogue of Irish visits. In these episodes O'Brien still finds the forces and kinds of characters familiar in childhood: her driver is a sexually threatening man – "They drive like they fuck, any old way," so [he] tells you, ignoring his own inconsistency . . . ' The Church is still all-powerful: 'Most Reverend Dr Lucey, Bishop of Cork' still censors the 'books, papers and films circulating' (21). The loci terribiles exist but have a new iteration of county-wide 'jerry building' (20). Female sexuality is allowed more outward expression of exuberance, but O'Brien still sees her simultaneously limited yet escape-seeking younger-self in girls 'in plastic hair rollers [who] parade up and down the small toy-like concrete paths, looking for a Mister Right' (14). The implication of these correspondences is that though Ireland is changing through its surfaces and levels of materialism, the fundamental forces that exiled her still exist, prompting her to feel: 'Suddenly you must get away . . . you feel they will pinion you down with their beliefs' (23). Discernible too, is how the present-tense travelogue-commentary has a critical force against Ireland's failings that registers as harsher than the indirect, Gothic-allusions of the retrospective childhood narrative, which have a Romantic tone. Thus, O'Brien's unpredictable blend of tense and styles, is at once formally Gothic, or 'irregular' to the conclusion of the memoir, while as we have seen, it is also experimental in its narrative reinventions.

In the last section of *Mother Ireland*, O'Brien betrays the anxiety, that if too much time were spent in Ireland, it would soften her: 'I live out of Ireland because something in me warns me that I might stop if I lived there . . . might grow placid' (89). Thus, the intensified reproaches

of the travelogue are explained as a 'muscling up' to contemporary Ireland, a loud assertion that she has got out and is no longer in thrall to its orders. A parallel can be drawn to Joyce's temporary return to Dublin from European exile which O'Brien writes of in *James Joyce* (1999) her biography of him. On the explicit letters he wrote to his lover Nora Barnacle from Dublin, she writes: 'These letters are about more than smut. . . . why did he never destroy them? He who was so obsessed with secrecy . . . [he didn't destroy them] to convince himself that he was free of every vestige of Roman Catholic guilt.' (*JJ*, 75). Both examples show that when on return to Ireland both writers display a hyper-paranoia of falling beneath its moral and cultural hegemony, and in reaction vehemently defend their freedom through artistic autonomy and leaving again.

Conclusion

Using the central figure of Edna O'Brien and her memoir-travelogue *Mother Ireland* this essay considered the Irish artist living abroad in terms of their reasons for leaving; Ireland as their subject matter; and their relationship to contemporary Ireland. Initially casting Ireland's faults as a Gothic villain in her story, necessitating her escape, O'Brien in exile feeds on the images of home she took with her, and comes to appreciate her furious past on account of its role as material for her literature. When O'Brien returns to contemporary Ireland she finds that although the referents for the images she left with have new iterations, Ireland is still fundamentally the same place. Thus her reasons for having left remain, with an additional one: she fears that were she to stay in Ireland she would not be able to make art – her boundless, shameless passion – because Ireland and its culture up-close, would lose its terror.

Harry Clarke (1889-1931), *On a road like this men droop and drivel, while woman goes fearless and fast to the devil,* 1925
Section of interior art for Goethe's *Faust* | Pen and Ink, 28.6 x 44 cm
© Estate of Harry Clarke

Harry Clarke (1889-1931), *I'll fly from this place, with one bound to Hell, or anywhere to leave 'em,* 1925 | Watercolour on Bristol board, 31 x 22.5 cm
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