

“Between childhood and night” – The role
of literature and emotion in the writing of
Conor Cruise O’Brien.

-Marion Kelly-



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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on a number of major influences on Conor Cruise O'Brien's writing. It consequently explores how various pressures—literary, emotional and political—shaped the imaginary of this major figure in modern Irish history. An exploration of the impact of certain writers, and intellectuals, such as Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, Sean O'Faolain, Albert Camus, W.B. Yeats and Simone Weil, who were attractive to O'Brien, in terms of satisfying, or sometimes mirroring, different demands, will to some extent lead to a greater understanding of O'Brien's development as a writer. It will also shed light on the complicated literary and emotional mood of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Roy Foster has acknowledged the literary complexity of the period following the Civil War, a period when writing often became a struggle to come to terms with sides taken; a society left questioning 'Did we do that? How did it happen? How did we end up here?'¹

The pattern of thought that emerged from O'Brien's literary engagements illuminated a complex literary inheritance that infiltrated his writing. O'Brien's life, and the polemical nature of his work, provide a rich opportunity for exploring the counter-currents of Irish emotional and intellectual history—'an area that merits deeper exploration', according to the historian Tom Garvin.² Any attempt to understand O'Brien's political and ethical maturation without tracing the formative, and formidable, influence of Owen Sheehy-Skeffington on him is unsatisfactory. This thesis explores that influence, and the related influence of Sean O'Faolain. O'Brien always

¹ Roy, Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890-1923* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. xx.

² Based on private correspondence with Tom Garvin.

maintained that he had been consistent in his thinking despite many claims to the contrary, and if he is approached at the level of imaginative influence, this assertion is credible.

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A sincere thanks to Frank Callanan and Bridget Hourican for a memorable afternoon in Fitzwilliam Square that led to my involvement in the Symposium in Trinity on the centenary of O'Brien's birth. Frank's personal knowledge of O'Brien—and his critical acuity in respect of the trapdoors that can open when dealing with the trajectory of O'Brien's work made for bracing conversation, and confirmed suspicions I had developed in relation to the character, and depth, of O'Brien's imaginative affiliations. A special tribute to Máire Mhac an tSaoi for her insights into her late husband—and their period in New York, Ghana, and elsewhere. This brought imaginative and poetic life into my feeling for the subject. Thanks to O'Brien's family—his grandson Alexander Kearney for insight into his grandfather's early commitments, his daughter Margaret O'Brien for her insight into O'Brien's late intellectual attachments, and his son Patrick Cruise O'Brien for confirming how important Camus was to O'Brien.

At this point, I feel that I have to thank the subject of this study—the late Conor Cruise O'Brien. The intellectual breadth and quality of his writing life is exemplary. The relevance of his voice, and the challenges his later positions present, has kept me engaged throughout. My sense of the importance of so much of his writing deepened my intellectual distress when he wrote in ways that are hard to reconcile with his earlier positions. This thesis has sought to explore why this change came about and the imaginative, and intellectual influences that were pressing on O'Brien's consciousness.

It is in this context that I have to thank my husband Esam Ben Milad—who has been the “guardian of my solitude”. Esam's experience of the Libyan Revolution, and the subsequent civil war, has deepened my sense of what is at stake in literature that deals with the nature of revolution. It has, in part, deepened my sense of the importance of O'Brien's early writing, and simultaneously troubled my engagement with his later writing on the Middle East. This makes, to my mind, the task of understanding O'Brien's imaginative shifts all the more relevant in terms of approaching present discontents.

Finally, and wholeheartedly, I want to dedicate this foray into the difficult questions of influence to two of my main influences, both of whom I have lost to the great beyond in the course of this PhD—My beloved father Jeremiah Kelly and my dear friend Philip Casey. Their voices ring in my ear ... “Sunt Lacrimae Rerum”.

Thanks also to my mother Margaret for her strength and patient understanding of my commitments, my brother Brian for his humour and constancy, and my beloved uncle Brian Joe—who is, and always will be, my North Star.

If some traces of the autocratic pose,
the paternal strictness he distrusted, still
clung to his utterance and features,
it was a protective coloration

for one who'd lived among enemies so long:
if often he was wrong and, at times, absurd,
to us he is no more a person
now but a whole climate of opinion

In Memory of Sigmund Freud

W.H. Auden—1907-1973

Abbreviations

NYU	New York University
UN	United Nations
SSA(A)	The Sheehy-Skeffington Archives (Additional)
CCOBP	Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers
IPP	Irish Parliamentary Party
<i>TLS</i>	<i>Times Literary Supplement</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers</i>
<i>WP</i>	<i>Writers and Politics</i>
<i>UN:SD</i>	<i>The United Nations: Sacred Drama</i>
<i>SI</i>	<i>States of Ireland</i>
<i>SG</i>	<i>The Suspecting Glance</i>
<i>PC</i>	<i>Passion and Cunning: Essays on Nationalism, Terrorism and Revolution</i>
<i>WW1</i>	First World War
<i>WW2</i>	Second World War

Note on abbreviations

In the case of short book titles, repeated throughout the text, no abbreviations have been used, and in the case of long titles, part abbreviations have been used to avoid any confusion within the text. Abbreviations are used in the footnotes for the most frequently cited books after the first entry of the author, and full publication details.

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Introduction

Conor Cruise O'Brien's writing in the period leading up to his re-entry into Irish politics in 1969 deserves serious reflection and examination. This thesis uses correspondence between O'Brien and Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, located in the Sheehy-Skeffington archives in the National Library of Ireland, to reveal new insights into O'Brien's evolving politics. Drawing on O'Brien's extensive writing and on archival research, this thesis demonstrates the recurrence of themes in his work that suggest that what has often been perceived as a volte-face in O'Brien's thinking is, in fact, consistent with longstanding imaginative and intellectual preoccupations. This thesis aims to identify structures of feeling and patterns of thought that grew from his imaginative dialogue with a number of early and critical literary, political and emotional influences in the 1940s, 50s and 60s that shaped his future writing on political and revolutionary violence. O'Brien took this approach when examining the literature of a number of selected writers in his first book *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (1952), and it offers in turn an advantageous approach to dealing with his voluminous body of writing.

Albert Camus, Sean O'Faolain, and Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, in their respective roles, emblemized the figure of the public intellectual for O'Brien and provided models for his developing writing on literature and society.¹ While this thesis is primarily concerned with contextualizing O'Brien's writing from 1969 onwards in the light of his long-standing literary and emotional concerns, it also necessarily deals with

¹ Sean O'Faolain will be presented as is unless an author presents his name otherwise.

the way that O'Brien's position in relation to the Troubles in the North was rooted in his familial and affective experience. Any critical assessment of O'Brien's writing needs to keep in view how the fortunes of O'Brien's immediate family were affected by the traumatic circumstances in the years preceding his birth in 1917. The tension between the historical complexity of his family's role in the evolution of the Irish Free State and his evolving view that the leaders of the 1916 Rising had been sanctified in public memory was a critical fault line in O'Brien's consciousness.² The performative nature of O'Brien's writing and his developing need for an audience is, arguably, linked to the fact that he grew up at a remove from events that had shaped his family's existence. The degree to which O'Brien negotiated his personal experience through literature and the act of writing, particularly at times of stress, is evident in the archives, his published work, and in recorded interviews with family and friends.

This thesis argues that through writing O'Brien was able to gain narrative agency. His compulsion to write was evident from an early age, as will be shown in the chapter dealing with Owen Sheehy-Skeffington's influence. Accordingly, O'Brien represents a fascinating case study of a writer born in the midst of revolutionary events in Ireland who subsequently, in his role as a writer and elected deputy to Dáil Éireann, reshaped the narrative surrounding those very events—most notably in his historical contribution to the intellectual debates surrounding the issue of partition in *States of Ireland* (1972). Tom Garvin classifies this book as O'Brien's 'key text on

² Conor Cruise O'Brien gives his interpretation of this process in "Ireland: The Shirt of Nessus" (1982). He writes that de Valera needed the church's neutrality, 'to be able to get on with the political sanctification of 1916 Republicanism.' This essay was first published in the *New York Review of Books*, 29 April 1982.

O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning: Essays on Nationalism, Terrorism and Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 222.

Ireland' and argues that O'Brien's 'brilliantly written polemics' played a significant role in changing attitudes in the South of Ireland with regard to partition.³ Garvin succinctly describes *States of Ireland* as 'a sustained and powerful attack on the conscious and unconscious collective assumptions that he saw as underlying revanchist Irish Catholic anti-partitionism.'⁴ Stephen Kelly likewise positions O'Brien as a champion of 'revisionist nationalism' and gives a positive appraisal of O'Brien's role in attacking the Irish State's anti-partitionism, 'his rejection of Irish republican terrorism, and his foresight in advancing the 'principle of consent' argument.'⁵

This thesis, while cognizant of the scholarship that has presented and contextualized O'Brien's writing in relation to the Troubles in the North, and elsewhere, is more specifically concerned with how O'Brien expressed his 'feelings' on the North, and the characteristic features of his writing in relation to revolution per se, and revolutionary violence, in particular. O'Brien's intellectual strength in this matter was based on an internalization of the power of literature to shape political reality, and an attunement to the ethical power that literature can bear. O'Brien's decision to write a PhD on Charles Stewart Parnell's political party before the split, with its emphasis on party politics rather than the cult of personality surrounding Parnell, was an early consequence of the tension between the literary and political mode in his writing.

Yet, the conclusion of *Parnell and his Party* (1957) revealed O'Brien's inability to separate Parnell from the literary and the mythological aspects of his legacy. Nathan

³ Tom Garvin "Imaginary Cassandra?: Conor Cruise O'Brien as Public Intellectual in Ireland", *Irish University Review* 37.2 (Autumn-Winter 2007), p. 437.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

⁵ Stephen Kelly, "'I was altogether out of tune with my colleagues': Conor Cruise O'Brien and Northern Ireland, 1969-77", *Irish Historical Studies* 45.167 (2021), p. 101.

Wallace in *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland: From Yeats to Field Day*, explored the paradoxical nature of O'Brien's decision to conclude *Parnell and his Party* with a quotation from Yeats's poem "Parnell's Funeral". The final word of O'Brien's revisionist history was thereby granted, as Wallace observes, 'to the poet most responsible for immortalising the very myth his book was apparently attempting to refute.'⁶

Wallace's study presents a literary genealogy of how the concept of reconciliation was approached, and subsequently represented, by W.B. Yeats, O'Brien, Seamus Heaney, and latterly, Tom Paulin and Seamus Deane, in the *Field Day* cultural and intellectual response to the crisis in the North. Wallace essentially traces how Matthew Arnold's theory of cultural Hellenism manifested in their respective literary responses to the conflict. As such, Wallace contrasts O'Brien's writing which 'espoused Arnoldian Hellenism' in the 1960s, yet ultimately used Antigone as an analogy for explaining why reconciliation in Northern Ireland was impossible, with Heaney's exemplary status as the 'Irish icon of reconciliation.'⁷

This assessment raises some very important questions; not least, the question why O'Brien's literary and political responses to the unfolding conflict evolved from cautious pessimism to marked fatalism in his later writings. How did a writer who inspired the generation that came to be associated with the *Field Day*—with his various exposés of the machinations of international power, intellectual prevarication, and neo-imperialism—come to be viewed as 'a hegemonic cultural and intellectual presence to be overturned.'⁸ Fintan O'Toole epitomises this interpretation of O'Brien's

⁶ Nathan Wallace, *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland: From Yeats to Field Day* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015), p. 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ Wallace, *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland*, p. 15.

political trajectory, as riven with ‘inexplicable contradictions’, and concluded that it had taken O’Brien from ‘the warm glow of international left-wing approbation to the position on the international right that he now occupies.’⁹

This thesis advances the idea that the conclusion of *Parnell and his Party* provides a historical and personal context for O’Brien’s developing interest in the power of language, more specifically literature, to harness collective emotional feeling:

Did this collective emotional explosion of 1890 help to set free the imaginative forces which, for a time in the early 1900’s, made Dublin—the Parnellite city—an important centre of world literature?¹⁰

O’Brien was forthright in stating the literary sources of his agenda to treat a separate historical element—the role of the non-conformists, as opposed to the Irish clergy, in Parnell’s downfall—to counter the dominant narrative in Irish cultural history. According to O’Brien, the notion that the clergy had precipitated Parnell’s downfall ‘became accredited by Parnellites themselves, and as that side is overwhelmingly represented in the literary movement—the two pillars, Yeats and Joyce, are both Parnellites—it is a viewpoint that gets over disproportionately to students. Students of literature.’¹¹

O’Brien’s academic work on Parnell, and his literary forays in *The Bell*, while ostensibly distinct enterprises, both functioned as modes of excavating literary-

⁹ Fintan O’Toole, “The Life and Times of Conor Cruise O’Brien: A Liberal in Chaos”, *Magill*, May 1986, p. 26.

¹⁰ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Parnell and His Party, 1880-’90* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 356.

¹¹ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “An Interview with Conor Cruise O’Brien”, *James Joyce Quarterly* 11.3 (Spring 1974), p. 201.

historical sources for a deeper understanding of the way that individuals, like Parnell and the various writers explored in *Maria Cross*, negotiated the terrain of Catholic orthodoxy, and its complex inter-relationship with nationalism.

This PhD examines critical literary and emotional influences on O'Brien's professional and literary development, which addressed O'Brien's quasi-sacred need to understand the complex social and political 'forces' that had impacted on his family in the years before his birth. It will be argued that the ostensible contradictions in O'Brien's writings and political commitments, particularly from 1969 onwards, can only be understood in the context of his personal, necessarily imaginative, and shifting responses to the notion of revolutionary violence, as they manifested in his literary and political criticism over time. A tension exists in O'Brien's writing around the notion that the imaginative forces which were set free after Parnell's fall had over time gained control of the narrative in ways that relegated the constitutional political tradition of his maternal forebears in the Irish Parliamentary Party.

The Sheehy-Skeffington archives contain a letter from O'Brien to his aunt Mary Kettle, the widow of Tom Kettle, that throws new light on the extent of O'Brien's preoccupation with Kettle's legacy and the revolutionary circumstances that had apparently eclipsed his reputation:

Now that the tumult and the shouting of the post-1916 time have at last clearly died, we have reached a time, I think, in which justice can be done to the brilliant generation whose work ended in 1916.

People are, I believe, more interested in that time now and want to

know more about it than would have been the case certainly
between 1920 and 1950.¹²

O'Brien's sense of duty to his forebears, and his aggrievement that they had not received due recognition, is made very clear. What is striking in hindsight, however, is the stark contrast between O'Brien's notion that the tumult and shouting of the post-1916 period had died down, and the events that were to unfold within a few years.

O'Brien's valedictory lecture in New York University, "What Exhortation?" (1969) provides a fascinating glimpse into what moved O'Brien to leave academia and enter the political fray in the Republic of Ireland in 1969. The lecture was part of a series of public lectures in the Schweitzer Programme at NYU, on the theme of *The Prince*, and O'Brien, in his customary way, made Niccoló Machiavelli's writing a vehicle for his own political and personal concerns. O'Brien's loose and approximate reading of the enduring relevance of Machiavelli's 'dark view of human nature and of its need to be coerced', revealed an emphasis that foreshadowed the marked pessimism, and catastrophizing, that defined much of O'Brien's future writing on political themes.¹³

More specifically, O'Brien delineated the options open to an intellectual who wanted to influence action, asking, 'whom might the modern intellectual exhort, and to do what': which begs the question who was O'Brien exhorting and to do what? This thesis argues that part of the answer is contained in the feelings expressed in O'Brien's letter to his aunt Mary Kettle. These feelings are echoed in O'Brien's valedictory lecture in his reasoning why he rejected the idea of becoming an American citizen:

¹² The Sheehy-Skeffington Archives (Additional), MS 40, 489/8.

¹³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "What Exhortation?", *Irish University Review* 1.1 (Autumn 1970), p. 50.

‘Quisque suos patimur Manes, said Virgil: each of us has to put up with his own ghosts. As an Irishman I had ghosts enough of my own to put up with.’¹⁴

This thesis aims to show that the feelings O’Brien expressed in his letter to Mary Kettle are conveyed elsewhere in his writing and criticism, in a process of literary and emotional transference. This PhD belongs at the intersection of Irish Studies and Irish Intellectual History and intersects with a wide body of knowledge that has made valuable contributions to the accumulating knowledge around O’Brien’s place in Irish, international, political, literary and intellectual history. O’Brien’s posthumous reputation continues to be divisive, particularly in relation to the North, and his refusal to support the Good Friday Agreement.¹⁵ Strong feelings were evident with regard to O’Brien’s legacy in Irish, and international affairs at the symposium to mark the centenary of Conor Cruise O’Brien’s birth on 3 November 2017 in Trinity College Dublin.

Yet, while a great effort was made to cover the various fields O’Brien contributed to as a civil servant, UN representative, University Chancellor, historian, politician, and journalist, the symposium had only one panel that explicitly addressed the intersection of literature and politics in O’Brien’s oeuvre. That panel titled, “Writing and Politics”, consisted of Max McGuinness, who presented a paper on O’Brien’s writing on Albert Camus; David Rieff, who spoke about O’Brien’s time in New York between 1965-69, and his friendship with Robert Silvers; and the present writer’s paper on the literary nature of O’Brien’s politics.¹⁶ The absence of a wider and

¹⁴ O’Brien, “What Exhortation?”, p. 58.

¹⁵ This was notably expressed by O’Brien in “This peace means war”, *Guardian*, 17 October 1998, p. 23.

¹⁶ Robert Silvers was the editor of the *New York Review of Books* between 1963 to 2017. The panel was chaired by W. J. McCormack.

sustained engagement with the mutuality between O'Brien's literary sensibility and his political thought compromises his posthumous reception in a number of fields. This neglect is deeply problematic, not least because his positions on the North lack contextualization if cut off from the literary roots of his political thought.

More significantly, it deprives a new generation of a valuable opportunity to trace the complex development of an Irish writer who negotiated major revolutionary events of the mid to late twentieth century through the lens of Irish revolutionary history, and a very active literary imagination. The Congo Crisis in 1961, the American protests against the Vietnam War between 1965-68, the crisis in Biafra in 1969 and the Troubles in Northern Ireland, are key events in O'Brien's intellectual trajectory, and his evolving politics cannot be fully understood in isolation from these revolutionary events.

O'Brien's literary and political writing was set in a specific relation to his historical consciousness. An examination of the source of this interlinkage, as it was borne out in later political action, and reaction, will provide new insight into the matter of O'Brien's changing political affiliations. This thesis keeps in mind Franco Venturi's phrase the 'quest for origins' in a double sense: on the one hand, the thesis will locate the 'Cassandra voice' of O'Brien's later writing in his earlier critical and literary predilections; and on the other, it will acknowledge O'Brien's own quest for origins, particularly in relation to currents of thought that flowed through the literature of the Enlightenment, more specifically, from the French Revolution. The

latter historical event was implicitly linked to O'Brien's profound interest in literature that responded to revolutionary contexts.

The literary expression of the tensions generated by such an event provided O'Brien with lifelong imaginative sustenance as a device for filtering his own emotional and political experience of revolutionary violence. Judith Shklar's notion that the Enlightenment was 'a state of intellectual tension' is suggestive in a broader sense of O'Brien's attraction to imaginative sites of contest. As such, O'Brien's interest in the Enlightenment, and the patterns of feeling that developed in the aftermath of the French Revolution, specifically those emerging from the reactions to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, provided a fulcrum for O'Brien's evolving thoughts on the legitimacy of violence.¹⁷ Jim Smyth in "Wolfe Tone's Library: The United Irishmen and "Enlightenment"", provides a masterclass in the pitfalls of attempting to trace definitively how reading material influences political thought—and the risks of trying to connect ideas biographically over wide stretches of time. However, Smyth makes a clear and convincing argument that Wolfe Tone's 'imagination is essentially literary.'¹⁸ This thesis makes the same argument in relation to Conor Cruise O'Brien.

The origins of the present thesis grew out of conversations with Tom Garvin on the impact of O'Brien's *States of Ireland* on the former's generation. Garvin's suggestion that an 'emotional history' of post-revolutionary thought, as it emerged in the literature of mid-twentieth-century Ireland, was a rich area for exploration inspired

¹⁷ Judith N. Shklar, "Politics and the Intellect", in Stanley Hoffmann, ed., *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 94.

¹⁸ Jim Smyth, "Wolfe Tone's Library: The United Irishmen and "Enlightenment"", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45.3 (Spring 2012), p. 424.

the present writer's decision to pursue research in the field of English literature, and more broadly that of Irish studies. Nevertheless, the extent and character of O'Brien's writing make it hard to locate in any one discipline. His various writings intersect English literature, intellectual history, both Irish and European, Irish political and cultural history, transnational history, comparative literature, political science, and international relations. The diversity of O'Brien's intellectual interests, and how that was reflected in his writings on subjects that form the core of Irish Studies departments today, prefigured the professional foundation of Irish Studies as a separate and distinct field of study.

This thesis primarily draws on research that has acknowledged the literary and emotional quality of O'Brien's political writing. Diarmuid Whelan's research on the influence of Sean O'Faolain, Owen Sheehy-Skeffington and Albert Camus on O'Brien's intellectual and emotional development prefigures aspects of my own research. Denis Sampson's and Fahmy Farag's observation that O'Brien's identity emerges neither in the writing, taken in isolation, or his public actions, 'viewed exclusively ... but in the tension between both', is the guiding principle of this thesis.¹⁹ Bryan Fanning's identification of the characteristic quality of O'Brien's writing in the aptly titled "The Lonely Passion of Conor Cruise O'Brien", and his excavation of the historical pressures that exercised O'Brien's consciousness, has been at once instructive and generative in relation to the central concerns of my research.

¹⁹ Denis Sampson and Fahmy Farag, "Passion and Suspicion: An Approach to the Writings of Conor Cruise O'Brien", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 2.2 (December 1976), p. 18.

O'Brien's early critical writing is marked by a sense of displacement. Tom Paulin astutely recognized this in his essay on O'Brien, "The Making of a Loyalist" (1980).²⁰ The occasion for Paulin's review was the publication of *Neighbours* (1980), and his disenchantment with what he viewed as O'Brien's conservative turn. While Paulin's essay is an ostensibly negative review of *Neighbours*, his text opens the way for a different reading of O'Brien. In attempting to contextualize what he perceived as O'Brien's move away from the instinctive and intuitive mode towards the 'rational', Paulin wrote, 'Possibly he was disturbed by his use of that metaphor of an explosion and wished to repudiate it by embracing an ideal of eighteenth-century reason.'²¹

The context of Paulin's observation was O'Brien's remark in his essay on François Mauriac, that Jean Paul-Sartre and Camus, 'logical exponents of irrationality that they are', lacked 'just that irrational instinctive force whose explosion made the greatness of Mauriac's prime.'²² Paulin rightly identifies that O'Brien's essay on Mauriac offers an interesting avenue for reflection in respect of O'Brien's developing literary and ideological aesthetic. However, Paulin doesn't develop this theme in his essay. O'Brien, by weighing Mauriac against Sartre and Camus, was analysing a generational shift in French letters, and more specifically, working out his own literary identity. While O'Brien stated categorically that Sartre and Camus were producing far more interesting work, 'more acute moralists, cleverer men altogether', he reserved a deep admiration for Mauriac's process:

²⁰ "The Making of a Loyalist" was originally published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 14 November 1980, p. 1283. Later published in Tom Paulin's collection of essays, *Ireland and the English Crisis*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984), pp. 23-38.

²¹ Paulin, "The Making of a Loyalist", p. 29.

²² [Donat O'Donnell] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers*, p. 36.

the wall of his family property formed ... the boundary of his mental and emotional world. That circumscribed world was not perhaps what Toynbee would call 'an intelligible field of study,' but it was a powerful generator of contradictory passions.²³

O'Brien's description of the source of Mauriac's literary power addressed the rootedness of Mauriac's preoccupations in ways that prefigured both his own future writing and his attraction to Edmund Burke's political writing. His favourable comparison of Mauriac's artistic process over Sartre and Camus, who, in O'Brien's words, 'produce effects of intellectual abstraction rather than of creation', foreshadow his increasing gravitation towards a Burkean hatred of abstractions. An early signal of O'Brien's future obsessions can also be discerned in his comparative analysis of Mauriac and O'Faolain in "The Parnellism of Seán O'Fáolain". O'Brien ascribed a quality of universality to Mauriac's fiction, contrasting him with O'Faolain, who, in O'Brien's words, 'neither affirms nor denies anything of universal importance.'²⁴ The root of O'Brien's negative reaction to O'Faolain's fiction is notionally revealed when he writes that if Mauriac's characters:

revolt it is against God through the family ... They do not usually revolt against the Gironde: they are never frustrated by France ... The piety of place is properly subordinated; man stands in direct relation to the universal affirming or denying God.²⁵

²³ O'Brien, *MC*, pp. 36-37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

Whelan astutely identified the unfair logic of O'Brien's argument in which 'someone else's nationalism becomes tribalism'.²⁶ Yet, what is overlooked is the possibility that O'Brien was reacting at an emotional level to what he viewed as O'Faolain's creative association between the 'separate ideas of national, spiritual and sexual emancipation', labelled by O'Brien as 'Parnellism with a small p.'²⁷ Conor McCarthy commended Whelan for identifying 'O'Brien's inconsistency in requiring of O'Faolain's fiction an aspiration to universality while cheerfully historicising it amidst O'Faolain's other writings.'²⁸ O'Brien was arguably writing towards his own needs and, as such, found it easier to read himself into the universals he finds in Mauriac's literature.

The clue to O'Brien's critical and emotional preference for Mauriac's characters is, I would argue, in the line 'they do not make a cult out of memories of La Vendée or of the death of Mme Roland.'²⁹ The word 'cult', in particular, foreshadows his later denigration of those who, in his view, did 'make a cult out of memories' and demonstrates both his tendency to sublimate his emotional complexity in literature, and his use of the French Revolution as a paradigmatic revolutionary context. O'Brien's 'unfairness' was, arguably, part of his wider pique with writers who had become linked

²⁶ Diarmuid Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien: Violent Notions* (Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 63.

²⁷ O'Brien, *MC*, 103.

²⁸ Conor McCarthy, "Clues to understanding the Cruiser", *Irish Times*, 8 August 2009, section B, p. 10.

²⁹ O'Brien, *MC*, p. 113.

* Madame Roland was a revolutionary figure in the early stages of the French Revolution. She was emblematic of the new rising elite and influenced the policies of the moderate faction of the Girondins. She became a symbol of the power struggle between the Girondins and the more radical Jacobins, and Montagnards, in the period preceding "The Terror". She was guillotined in 1793.

O'Brien's obsession with the various stages of the French Revolution continued right throughout his life and informs his sense of the potential progress of other revolutions. It is evident in *MC*, his correspondence with Sheehy-Skeffington during his period in Ghana and culminated in his intricate review of *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, edited by François Furet and Mona Ozouf, and trans. by Arthur Goldhammer.

creatively with expressions of ‘Parnellism’, but who had not actually been closely linked to the social and political tradition that Parnell ‘belonged’ to—that of O’Brien’s maternal ancestors. This is evidenced in the sentiments O’Brien expressed to Mary Kettle, when he reflected that the Irish pre-revolutionary period:

has been written about almost exclusively in relation to the biographies of people, who, great as they were, were exceptional and in some degree peripheral to the social and political life of the time—Joyce, Yeats, O’ Casey.³⁰

This instinctive and intellectual discontent, related, presumably, to loss of narrative control, explains why O’Brien considered reading Joyce ‘a lacerating affair’—a phenomenon elaborated on in chapter four of this thesis. Fanning astutely cites O’Brien’s evocative introduction to “The Parnellism of Seán O’Faolain”, as indicative of O’Brien’s future tendency to write history in the first person:

There is for all of us a twilight zone of time, stretching back for a generation or two before we were born, which never quite belongs to the rest of history. Our elders have talked their memories into our memories until we come to possess some sense of a continuity exceeding or traversing our own individual being.³¹

Fanning’s observation that O’Brien’s criticism of O’Faolain’s literary sensibility ‘addressed a historical consciousness that permeated O’Brien’s whole existence’ is undoubtedly accurate.³² However, there is a linked argument that O’Brien’s attraction

³⁰ SSA(A), MS 40, 489/8.

³¹ O’Brien, *MC*, p. 95.

³² Bryan Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 190.

to European and British Catholic writers addressed a need that emanated from his sense of how that historical consciousness had pressed on him in particular.

O'Brien's evolving aesthetic preference for a literature that dealt in universals was symptomatic of a need to transcend the local through a process of literary distanciation. When examining his literary criticism retrospectively in 1973, O'Brien stressed his early identification with O'Faolain and Mauriac in a way that made very clear his primary need to excavate language in order to reinterpret the myths of his childhood. O'Brien was interested in 'people who were involved through their imagination and through the myth structure of their childhood, and at the same time pulling apart from it.'³³ This tension, O'Brien claimed, was what interested him most.

O'Brien's initial instinct was to explore this tension through poetry. His writing was motivated by a need to pin down in words the more ineffable aspects of historical developments that had seemingly shaped his existence, and this remained an important element of his writing life. Despite the fact that O'Brien settled on the essay as his primary form of communication, his writing continued to bear the hallmark of a writer decidedly sensitive to images and their relation to what he perceived as 'truth'. Seamus Heaney, in his Oxford lecture "The Redress of Poetry", quoted Wallace Stevens to the effect that poetry's nobility stems from being 'a violence from within that protects us from a violence without.'³⁴ The way in which Heaney encapsulated Stevens notion of 'the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality' provides a creative way of thinking about O'Brien's predicament.

³³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "In Search of Morality—Conor Cruise O'Brien Talks to Brian Inglis," *Listener* 90, 23 August 1973, p. 234.

³⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995, pbk. 1996), p. 1.

O'Brien's sense of the world-making capacity of images was central to his fascination with W.B. Yeats and was born out of his own imaginative proximity to Yeats's life and themes. The development of Yeats's poetry provided a way for O'Brien to approximate the emotional climate of the years before his birth. Yeats's poetic images held for O'Brien an almost religious power, connected as they were with the tumultuous period of history into which he was born. O'Brien's foreword to *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (1960) contained, in this respect, themes that would become magnified after his entry into Irish political life in 1969. O'Brien cited Yeats's lines:

But who can talk of give and take

What should be and what not

While those dead men are loitering there

To stir the boiling pot?³⁵

And followed this citation with the observation that the poet 'had himself done something to bring that pot to the boil.'³⁶ This linkage between the power of Yeats's poetry and revolutionary upheaval, which will be explored in chapter four of this thesis, became a structuring element in O'Brien's thought process in relation to the theme of violence and legitimacy. O'Brien's understanding of the power of the image to shape reality was inseparable, essentially, from the effect that Yeats's poetry had on his imagination. Adrian Frazier astutely observes, in relation to O'Brien's controversial

³⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), pp. 4-5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

essay on Yeats, "Passion and Cunning (1965), that the latter 'felt obligated to make a rational defence against the irrational attractions of (some of) the poems, especially those that praise race, blood, and violence, and those that celebrate the revolutionary.'³⁷ O'Brien's early understanding of Yeats's importance in the shifting emotional and political loyalties in the lead up to the foundation of the Free State, was therefore central to his obsessive attention to the potential of ambivalent language to destabilize democracy in the Republic of Ireland in the 1970s. Paulin noted how O'Brien 'obsessively' returned to Yeats's famous question: 'Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?', arguing that 'the question preys on O'Brien's mind, because as an international communicator and moulder of opinion he must believe in his power to influence history.'³⁸ Yet, Paulin's reading does not exhaust all the available meaning.

In *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* O'Brien cites Yeats's lines: 'What if words of mine sent out/Certain men the English shot?', in the context of how the Irish literary movement had developed 'sacrificial and heroic elements in Irish life and to prepare for 1916'.³⁹ O'Brien continued to develop this theme in "An Unhealthy Intersection" (1975), an extended exploration of the area where literature and politics overlap, concluding that *Cathleen ni Houlihan* was exemplary in showing that 'a real and explosive relation ... can exist between the workings of the imagination and in politics.'⁴⁰

³⁷ Adrian Frazier, review of Jonathan Allison, ed. *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays*, "Essays on Yeats", *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 40.4 (1997), p. 504.

³⁸ Paulin, *Ireland and the English Crisis*, p. 29.

³⁹ O'Brien, *The Shaping of Modern Ireland*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "An Unhealthy Intersection", *New Review* 2.16 (July 1975), p. 6.

This was rooted in O'Brien's concern with the shaping power of literature in the pre-1916 period, a theme he returns to repeatedly, and one addressed throughout this thesis. O'Brien's controversial role in overseeing and defending Section 31, if viewed from this perspective, suggests O'Brien as an anti-Yeats figure—if Yeats, as a poet of extraordinary power, was capable of using language to weave a spell, O'Brien could use his political power to prevent language that, in his view, had the potential to destabilize the Republic of Ireland. The appendix to *States of Ireland* contains a statement O'Brien made in a public debate with Tomás Mac Giolla, the then President of Official Sinn Féin, in which O'Brien refers to the 'forces' he was determined to resist:

If you set out to bring the society you want into existence, through denying the validity of democratic process in the society you actually have; if you set out to win it through a private army, withdrawn from democratic control; if you set out to win it by exploiting the latent forces of romantic nationalism and hatred of foreigners ... if you set out in this way, then I say to you that the forces you hope to use and control will use and control *you*.⁴¹

An appreciation of O'Brien's imaginative linkage between poetry and violence is necessary to fully understand the emotional undertow of this statement. Given his obsessive focus on identifying the political implications of Yeats's poetic images in the mid-1960s, one might discern in this speech the rudiments of his later obsessive attention to 'ambivalent' language. Yeats's influence, as such, was a key aspect in O'Brien's political imaginative and interpretive schema right throughout his varied

⁴¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 320.

career. This was arguably a powerful factor in his decision to write about the UN in terms of sacred drama. It suggests an interesting link between the Irish literary and political imaginary of the pre-WW2 period and the way O'Brien reconfigured certain motifs of Irish cultural experience to bolster his intellectual positions in a number of influential professional roles in the 1960s. O'Brien's criticism and his political writings were defined by a drive to systematize that co-existed with an acknowledgement of the limitations of theory for explaining complex human problems.

This odd conflation of attitudes makes some of his essays read as if written by a mystical-Habermas, specifically in his writings on the UN, which conceptualise the UN as a metaphorical apparatus for world peace, a 'sacred drama' enacted on a world stage. There is a perpetual dilemma in O'Brien's writing, and he continually approaches it by the use of metaphor. In place of theory, we find an abundance of metaphorical writing. Barra Ó Séaghdha wrote of O'Brien's *The United Nations: Sacred Drama* (1968), 'it contains far too much self-consciously elaborate literary allusion and metaphor-spinning to be effective as a call to action.'⁴² Sampson and Farag, likewise, observed that O'Brien's 'sense of human experience continually emerges in metaphors of drama.'⁴³ This element of O'Brien's thought is manifest in his essay "Politics as Drama as Politics" (1969). O'Brien's historical imagination was activated, essentially, by the poetic imagination, and it is surely not coincidental that metaphor is unparalleled at conveying the more numinous and complex aspects of language and meaning that O'Brien was temperamentally drawn towards. This was also symptomatic of an

⁴² Barra Ó Séaghdha, review of *Conor Cruise O'Brien: Violent Notions* by Diarmuid Whelan, "Engaging with an Irish Intellectual", *Saothar* 34 (2009), p. 158.

⁴³ Sampson and Farag, "Passion and Suspicion", p. 22.

ambition to delineate and hold fast that which most resisted clear and effective definition, namely, collective experience.

When O'Brien was formulating a paradigm for the operation of the UN in terms of a sacred drama, he was inspired by Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1938). Huizinga's pioneering work represented 'a landmark in the growing literature on the concept of play, its role in human affairs, and its relevance to the study of history.'⁴⁴ O'Brien remarked in relation to *Homo Ludens* in his bibliography, 'My indebtedness to this seminal work is heavy.'⁴⁵ Huizinga unwittingly provides a suggestive model for O'Brien, when he describes the figure of the archaic poet:

Gradually the poet-seer splits up into the figures of the prophet, the priest, the soothsayer, the mystagogue ... even the philosopher, the legislator, the orator, the demagogue, the sophist and the rhetor spring from that primordial composite type, the *Vates*.⁴⁶

Arguably, O'Brien either saw himself or was perceived, nationally and internationally, as some or other combination of these types. His critics necessarily place the emphasis on 'the legislator, the orator, the demagogue', while his more sympathetic commentators find ways to fuse or rearrange the combinations, according to the period and the subject under scrutiny.

⁴⁴ Robert Anchor, "History and Play: Johan Huizinga and His Critics", *History and Theory* 17.1 (February 1978), p. 63.

⁴⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The United Nations: Sacred Drama* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p. 316.

⁴⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2014), p. 120.

Archival evidence reveals that in the late 1930s, O'Brien was sufficiently conscious of the role of the 'bard' in Irish history, and importantly, the bard's relation to power, or more specifically lost power, to write a poem called "The Bards", and translate several Irish bardic poems. Two copies of the poem exist in a folder dated 1937-41 in O'Brien's papers in University College Dublin. The poem itself is revealing of O'Brien's early, and arguably constant, preoccupation with the relation of the poet, and language in the wider sense, to the society around them:

O'Rahilly died cursing

The tyrants let him down –

No value for his verses

From Valentine Brown.

They failed to make transition

To the princes of the Pale,

Their trade and their tradition

Fell with the ruined Gael.

Their arrogance of breeding

And literary lust

Their hieratic keening

The dryness of their dust

...

From our malignant humour,

The toxins of our hates,

In that gigantic tumour

William Butler Yeats.⁴⁷

This poem reinforces the extraordinary hold that Yeats—as a poet and a public figure—had on O’Brien’s early imagination and shows a continuity of feeling with the critical impulse of “Passion and Cunning”. O’Brien’s book *UN: Sacred Drama* is emblematic of O’Brien’s imaginative and critical reliance on poetic and literary models of interpretation. O’Brien stated explicitly his views that the international model of politics the UN represented was ‘the kind of power that we associate with poetry and religion.’ This was distinct from national systems, which, according to O’Brien, have ‘practical power’.⁴⁸ In addition to this, O’Brien’s writing on the United Nations, particularly *UN: Sacred Drama*, was highly sceptical of the study of international relations, extending to the scientific study of politics per se.

In a critical review of Arnold Beichman’s *The "Other" State Department: The United States Mission to the United Nations: Its Role in the Making of Foreign Policy* (1968), O’Brien calls the author’s methodology, ‘that form of ‘political science’ which consists in formulating, in pretentious language, complicated answers to silly

⁴⁷ Conor Cruise O’Brien Papers, University College Dublin (UCD) Archives, P82/636.

* Valentine Browne, 3rd Viscount Kenmare (1695–1736) was the subject of a poem by the visionary poet-scholar Aogán Ó Rathaille (c.1670–1726). The work became emblematic of the sense of desolation and catastrophe wrought by colonial dispossession.

⁴⁸ O’Brien, *UN:SD*, p. 19.

questions.⁴⁹ O'Brien's aversion to particular kinds of political science in the late 1960s was based on his scepticism about American foreign policy and what he viewed as academic attempts at legitimizing government policy. This scepticism was arguably part of O'Brien's humanist values, which stemmed from his belief that the 'Judaeo-Christian ethic' held in check certain kinds of behaviour. These were the grounds upon which O'Brien condemned Nietzsche in his essay "The Gentle Nietzscheans" (1970), which is explored in chapter four of this thesis.⁵⁰

It was also, arguably, a legacy of his historical awareness of the relationship between 'political science' and strategies of governance in colonial-era Ireland, emblemized by William Petty's final solution for the Irish problem set down in his *Treatise on Ireland: An Essay in Political Arithmetick* (1687). Fanning describes this era of Irish history as 'one where colonialism and ideas of progress went hand in glove, where science was the handmaiden of politics and of the pursuit of wealth.'⁵¹ O'Brien's scepticism in the 1960s with the consensus then forming that the US and 'the rulers of the NATO countries' represented 'the voice of freedom' was rooted in his knowledge of Irish historical experience. He expressed his associated pattern of thought succinctly in *To Katanga and Back* (1962):

I could not help remembering—it was in my bones to remember—that the event which opened in England such a splendid chapter of achievement and growing liberty had imposed, in Ireland, a system of

⁴⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Mission Impossible", *New York Review of Books*, 21 November 1968 <<https://www.nybooks-com.elib.tcd.ie/articles/1968/11/21/mission-impossible/>> [accessed 12 January 2020].

⁵⁰ This essay was first published in the *New York Review of Books* on 5 November 1970, and later republished in *The Suspecting Glance*.

⁵¹ Fanning, *Histories of The Irish Future*, p. 11.

oppression and calculated degradation such as Europe has seldom seen ... Any Irishman who thinks about history and about freedom must be conscious of this puzzle.⁵²

It was this same historical consciousness that underlay O'Brien's imaginative strength in identifying Burke's sympathy with the plight of Irish Catholics in *The Great Melody* (1992). O'Brien struggled for years to write a book on Burke and at a certain point claimed to have given up on the project. His description of how the thematic outline for *The Great Melody* came into being exemplifies the generative power of Yeats's poetic images in O'Brien's historical imagination. O'Brien recounted giving up on Burke when he 'set to work on Israel.' Then, while he was working on his study of Israel, he found that two lines from Yeats's poem kept returning to his mind. The two lines were as follows:

American Colonies, Ireland, France and India

Harried, and Burke's great melody against it.

("It": abuse of power)⁵³

O'Brien claimed that he tried to push away this 'distracting refrain', but then he began to realize 'that Yeats was telling me how to organize my book: along thematic

⁵² Conor Cruise O'Brien, *To Katanga and Back: A UN Case History* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), p. 30. It is worth noting that in a footnote attached to this piece of writing O'Brien reflected that if the Irish had been fighting for their own freedom and if their side had won, they 'would have helped to impose by force on the English a system which most Englishmen would have regarded as tyranny.' [f.n. 2] This moral neutrality has an anti-revolutionary impetus, and, as such, echoes Camus's argument in his introduction to *L'Homme révolté*, which O'Brien likened to Yeats's poem "The Great Day". It also demonstrates a continuity of feeling that is overlooked in the rush to categorize O'Brien according to ideological labels that conceal as much as they reveal.

⁵³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 383.

lines.⁵⁴ There was nothing new about this impulse, however, in O'Brien's writing. Yeats's voice was not the only literary, historical voice competing for attention. This thesis explores a number of voices that compelled O'Brien's creative and political writing, particularly with a view to understanding what has been characterized as a conservative turn in his writing after 1969.

In terms of influence, Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, Sean O'Faolain and Albert Camus, provided the political, emotional and literary models for O'Brien's development as a public intellectual. This thesis partly locates the marked fatalism and catastrophizing of O'Brien's later writings on the Troubles in the absence of Sheehy-Skeffington's influence as a living presence in his writing. Sheehy-Skeffington served as a lifelong ballast for O'Brien—providing both emotional and intellectual support—and this thesis traces that influence, and, as such, demonstrates O'Brien's internalization of his cousin's influence as a political and moral exemplar. O'Brien's expression of how he extricated himself from Sheehy-Skeffington's influence, explored in chapter one, revolves around their mutually incompatible understanding of what constituted great literature. Fintan O'Toole identified this feature of their relationship when he wrote, 'The optimistic progressive socialism of Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, his friend and mentor in Dublin, began to be undermined by a darker vision of chaos, a new pessimism which was not yet explicit in his writings and statements.'⁵⁵ O'Toole's notion that it was not 'yet explicit' is open to question, and this thesis will highlight

⁵⁴ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 383.

⁵⁵ Fintan O'Toole, "The Life and Times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: A Liberal in Chaos", *Magill*, May 1986, p. 30.

aspects of O'Brien's early criticism that point in the direction of a certain continuity of vision.

Different scholars have noted the impact of the Arms Crisis on O'Brien's sense of commitment to the defence of constitutional legitimacy in the Republic of Ireland. Whelan acknowledged this when he wrote that the Arms Trial and the activity of the Provisional IRA, violated something 'central' to O'Brien, 'These events in particular invalidate previous interpretations. They are then taken as *the* cause.'⁵⁶ However, few have linked the fact that Sheehy-Skeffington's death coincided with the Arms Trial. The correlation between O'Brien's fervour to discredit unconstitutional elements and the use of ambivalent language in the Fianna Fáil party under Jack Lynch's leadership, and Sheehy-Skeffington's strong feelings on the issue has so far been overlooked. This is somehow magnified by the fact that on the night before Sheehy-Skeffington's sudden death, he wrote a letter to Jack Lynch congratulating him on his handling of the crisis. The letter, dated 5 June 1970, was received by Jack Lynch on 8 June 1970—the day the morning's papers announced Sheehy-Skeffington's sudden death. Sheehy-Skeffington had written:

I have no doubt that there remain wide areas upon which I should disagree with you, but at the present juncture I desire simply to salute the courage and dignity with which you have met a very nasty situation and certain vile and despicable attacks arising therefrom.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Whelan, *Violent Notions*, p. 168.

⁵⁷ John Bowman, "Sheehy Skeffington endorsed North policy in private letter", *Irish Times*, 3 January 2001, p. 6.

Sheehy-Skeffington commended Lynch's 'line on the North' in this letter.⁵⁸ In May 1970, Sheehy-Skeffington had reacted publicly to Jack Lynch's decision to sack Haughey and Neil Blaney and the subsequent resignations of Kevin Boland and Micheál Ó Moráin following allegations of gunrunning. While O'Brien's vilification of Haughey is a matter of record in his own writing, the link with Sheehy-Skeffington's similarly hostile characterization is not usually taken into consideration. O'Brien's caricaturing of Haughey reached its pinnacle with the publication of "GUBU" (1982). O'Brien, in a satirical bout of verbal pummelling, deconstructs Haughey's description of the bizarre events which had recently unfolded.⁵⁹ Haughey had described the 'circumstances surrounding the resignation of the attorney general as "grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented"'⁶⁰

O'Brien's response was laced with literary allusion, not least in the acronym itself, and its clear allusive link to Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, and his invocation of Flaubert, 'not even Gustave Flaubert, could challenge this use of 'unprecedented'; it is unquestionably *le mot juste*.'⁶¹ The article ends by comparing Haughey to Maximilien Robespierre, and true to form, O'Brien creates an analogy with the progress of the French Revolution. O'Brien writes that, at a critical moment in the revolution, it became clear that a majority in the National Convention had had enough of Robespierre, but they were unsure of what to do. In O'Brien's words:

⁵⁸ Bowman, "Sheehy Skeffington endorsed North policy in private letter", p. 6.

⁵⁹ "GUBU" was O'Brien's response to Haughey's public statement after a murder suspect was arrested in the home of the unwitting Attorney-General Patrick Connolly in 1982.

⁶⁰ Patrick Maume, "Haughey, Charles James (C. J.)", [n.d.].

<<https://www.dib.ie/biography/haughey-charles-james-c-j-a9531>> [accessed 16 May 2021]

⁶¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Unsafe at any speed", *Irish Times*, 24 August 1982, p. 10.

Then the Abbé Sieyès, that shrewd politician, suggested the solution.

The Convention should just get rid of Robespierre without giving a reason. The Convention, he said, should pronounce ‘death without phrases—*La mort sans phrases*—and the Convention did just that.⁶²

O’Brien’s forthright criticism of Haughey’s character, which began apace, in 1969 was perfectly in accord with Sheehy-Skeffington’s earlier, outspoken criticism.⁶³

In “They’ll none of them be missed...”, Sheehy-Skeffington wrote:

Intellectually, Mr Charles Haughey is the ablest of the four. His aesthetic sense is perceptibly greater than that of Mr Boland; the competition is not intense ... he can be every bit as intellectually dishonest as Mr Boland; and there the competition is intense.⁶⁴

The accusation of intellectual dishonesty has wider significance here. O’Brien, under the tutelage of Sheehy-Skeffington, and the influence of French currents of thought, exemplified by Sartre and Camus, was primed to respond to the political circumstances unfolding as the Troubles in the North intensified and started to impact on the political life of the Republic. McCormack’s observation that neither of O’Brien’s biographers, Donald Akenson or Anthony Jordan, drew substantially on his correspondence with Owen Sheehy-Skeffington was instructive in terms of the early development of this thesis. McCormack notes, ‘Owen Sheehy Skeffington ... surely must have engaged O’Brien in a thousand conversations, written a score or so of

⁶² O’Brien, “Unsafe at any speed”, p. 10.

⁶³ The UCD archives contain ample material that attest to O’Brien’s deep animosity towards Haughey from 1969 onwards. Notably evident in CCOBP (UCD), P/82 157, P/82 207, P/82 181.

⁶⁴ Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, “They’ll none of them be missed...”, *Irish Times*, 11 May 1970, p.10.

letters which are not drawn upon here.⁶⁵ This thesis addresses this omission in order to shed light on Sheehy-Skeffington's appreciable influence on O'Brien's intellectual development, and chapter one, as such, illuminates the importance of Sheehy-Skeffington to any consideration of the progress of O'Brien's thought.

Sean O'Faolain is another key figure in the context of O'Brien's formative development. This thesis devotes a chapter to exploring how O'Faolain's writing influenced O'Brien. It will establish O'Faolain's centrality to O'Brien's evolution as a public intellectual by providing O'Brien with a crucial platform in *The Bell*. O'Brien's early contributions to this journal signalled the emergence of a voice addressing themes that he would develop further in future writings, such as the highlighting of institutional deference to clerical hypocrisy, and the studied analysis of the relationship between language and power. O'Brien's earliest contributions to *The Bell* set the tone for his later polemical writing and signalled O'Brien's willingness to rile the political, Catholic, and literary establishment. More significant, perhaps, was O'Brien's parodying of O'Faolain; this was arguably modelled on Sartre's pronouncement on François Mauriac: 'God is not an artist; neither is Mr Mauriac.'⁶⁶

O'Brien's essay on Mauriac, published under the pseudonym Donat O'Donnell, "François Mauriac: The Secret Door" (1952), shows the degree to which O'Brien had internalized the literary battle-lines which were being drawn in Paris in the 1940s, and that he was anxious to stage his own arrival in similar terms.⁶⁷ O'Brien was evidently positioning himself as a serious voice in Irish letters, and there is an archetypal quality

⁶⁵ W.J. McCormack, "The Historian as Writer or Critic? Conor Cruise O'Brien and his biographers", *Irish Historical Studies* 30.117 (May 1996), p. 113.

⁶⁶ O'Brien, *MC*, p. 35.

⁶⁷ This essay was first published in *The Kenyon Review* 10.3 (Summer 1948), 454-471.

to O'Brien's denouncement of O'Faolain in "A Rider to the Verdict" (1945), which is explored in chapter two. O'Faolain was, after all, the chief Irish representative of the model of the engaged public intellectual—a figure that O'Brien was primed to take seriously.

O'Faolain's writings exposed nationalist shibboleths that concealed the realities of the Free State in favour of a romanticized presentation of history, which subsequently influenced O'Brien's history-writing and criticism. This is nowhere more marked than in the evident tension in O'Brien's exegesis on the difficulty facing historians who claim objectivity in his essay on Jules Michelet. O'Brien's presentation of the historian as artist in "Michelet Today" (1959), resonates with O'Faolain's imaginative identification with the subjects of his biographical histories, and O'Brien's later writing follows that same pattern of identification with the subject of his inquiry.⁶⁸

O'Faolain's generous and constructive revisionism in *The Irish* (1947) was ideally suited to O'Brien, particularly in a period when those working in external affairs were adapting to new international realignments. O'Faolain's cosmopolitanism, firmly rooted in local realities, provided an ideal template for O'Brien's writings. Observing the development of O'Brien's writing between 1939 and 1966 suggests that he was adapting O'Faolain's themes and developing them in light of his own critical, emotional, and political needs. O'Brien's writing in *The Bell*, and his later contributions

⁶⁸ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Michelet Today", first published in *Non Plus* in October 1959, and subsequently published in *Writers and Politics* in 1965.

in a revisionist vein, notably “The Embers of Easter” (1966), demonstrate how the ambivalence in O’Faolain’s criticism between romance and realism impacted O’Brien.

O’Faolain had identified a critical deficit in the ‘Irish Literary Movement’, which he viewed as uncritical ‘in matters literary, historical and what would nowadays be called sociological’.⁶⁹ Through identifying an ‘absence of a deep-cutting critical objectivity’ in this movement and defining it as ‘a movement of feeling rather than of thought’, O’Faolain created the ideal conditions for O’Brien to assert himself as a writer.⁷⁰ However, O’Brien’s intellectual responses to various circumstances, despite the surface rationalism and assurance, evidence a certain ambivalence in this respect. O’Brien took ‘feelings’ seriously as qualitative phenomena that had the potential to shape political reality. During his time working for Seán MacBride (Irish Minister for External Affairs between 1948-51), O’Brien published an essay in *Revue Générale Belge*. The following passage in relation to Pareto’s notion of residues sheds light on his view of the relationship between ‘feelings’ and political action:

Most Irish-Americans probably do think more often about the cost of living and about housing than they do about the partition of Ireland—just as most Europeans even still think more about their equivalent personal problems than they do about any abstract political problem. But the fact that feeling about partition does not necessarily dominate the day-to-day consciousness of the Irish in America does not mean that it can be neglected. On the contrary, important political consequences can flow from feelings—‘residues’ in Pareto’s

⁶⁹ Seán Ó’Faoláin, “Fifty Years of Irish Writing”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 51.201 (1962), p. 94.

⁷⁰ Ó’Faoláin, “Fifty Years of Irish Writing”, p. 94.

sense—which find little expression in the daily lives of the people concerned. The extent to which these “residues” are active can only be judged by political manifestations.⁷¹

In 1969, O’Brien was still drawing on Pareto, but, by then, he had combined Pareto’s emphasis on the political power of feelings to shape action with Burke’s heightened caution in relation to words. Writing about how Burke responded to his complex background, O’Brien wrote that the former became ‘warier about words, both about their limitations and about their destructive power’. In this sense, O’Brien felt that Burke had been attuned to ‘what Pareto was later to call by the name of ‘residues’.⁷²

O’Brien’s criticism as it developed exemplified Sean O’Faolain’s concept of the ideal Irish writer ‘who thinks World and describes Irish.’⁷³ O’Brien, however, took this a step further by creating a body of writing that came closer to the formulation ‘think World, write myself’. O’Faolain’s writing had set the terms against which O’Brien came to define himself. O’Brien’s editorial and anthologising efforts, *The shaping of Modern Ireland* and *Conor Cruise O’Brien introduces Ireland* (1969), can be seen partly as a cultural response to O’Faolain’s criticism that ‘All our histories are nationalist, patriotic, political, sentimental.’⁷⁴ O’Brien’s intellectual contribution in “The Embers of Easter” was a formalisation of his view that the culture and politics of the Irish State that came

⁷¹ SSA(A), MS 40, 489/7. The essay “L’unité de l’Irlande et les Irlandais d’Amérique” was in the Sheehy-Skeffington Papers in English and French, as O’Brien had asked him to look over it. Conor Cruise O’Brien, “L’unité de l’Irlande et les Irlandais d’Amérique”, *Revue Générale Belge* (Bruxelles: Goemaere, 1950).

⁷² Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Suspecting Glance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 43.

⁷³ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Memorial Address”, *The Cork Review* (1991), 95-96.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43655135>> [Accessed April 16 2021].

This is also referenced in Whelan, *Violent Notions*, p. 58.

⁷⁴ Sean O’Faolain, *The Irish* (London: Penguin, 1947), p.6.

into being in 1922 was at variance with the promises of those who had ‘sacrificed’ their lives in 1916.

By 1966, O’Brien was firmly positioning himself as someone who was disillusioned with the difference between idealised conceptions of the State, which derived a form of cultural legitimacy from those who were executed for their part in the 1916 Rising, and the State as it had actually taken shape. This PhD aims to contextualize this development in relation to Sean O’Faolain’s significant contribution in this vein. *The Times Literary Supplement* review of *1916: The Easter Rising* (1968) observed the new developments in Irish historiography as follows, ‘Now disillusion has set in and the Irish are in a realistic, self-analytical mood.’⁷⁵ O’Brien is portrayed as, ‘Professor Conor Cruise O’Brien, writing as one of the generation which grew up in the shadow of the myth’.⁷⁶

O’Faolain’s proximity to revolutionary violence and his experience of the pervasive mentality—the ‘callous idealism’ of revolutionaries, made subsequent generations aware of the dangers of abstraction and myth-making in relation to political violence, and O’Brien was continually revising these insights. However, Camus’s *L’Homme révolté* (1951), dealing with the former theme in the context of post-WW2 international politics, attracted O’Brien’s criticism. Chapter three explores Camus’s influence on O’Brien’s writing. O’Brien’s criticism of Camus’s writing foreshadows the former’s own future political faultlines and, in this respect, warrants examination. O’Brien was ultimately to reconfigure and repurpose, for Irish political

⁷⁵ “Cult of Martyrs”, review of *1916: The Easter Rising*, eds., Owen Dudley Edwards and Fergus Pyle, *TLS*, p. 746.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 746.

ends, Camus's condemnation of communism as legitimizing violence in the name of a philosophy of history. Diarmuid Whelan has addressed the influence of Camus's *L'Homme révolté* on O'Brien's subsequent articulation of the manner in which republican violence was legitimized by a philosophy of history, which will be explored in detail in chapter three of this thesis.

By the late 1970s, O'Brien's debt to Camus was felt in O'Brien's expostulation on the nature of institutionalised violence. Paulin characterized O'Brien as 'moving well to the right of Camus'. Camus, according to Paulin, had criticized revolutionary violence whereas O'Brien had taken it a step further to criticize non-violence as 'responsible for political terrorism'.⁷⁷ O'Brien's analysis in *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence* (1978), displayed quietist resignation to the realities of institutionalised violence in all organised societies—a by-product, according to O'Brien, of the fact that almost all societies contain 'great inequalities of power, wealth and status'.⁷⁸ This is characteristic of the summary way that O'Brien treated the social and economic aspects of society. It provided a gloss as he rushed towards the emphasis that most concerned him, namely, the denigration of the ideological justifications offered by various individuals and groups for the use of terror. The structure of his argument resembles Camus's denigration of communists who justified killing in the name of a philosophy of history. Built into Camus's thesis in *L'Homme révolté* was the hopelessness of human attempts at realising perfection in political projects that promise to completely eradicate injustice and suffering. O'Brien subsequently developed this theme to delegitimize the I.R.A. campaign as follows:

⁷⁷ Paulin, "The Making of a Loyalist", p. 31.

⁷⁸ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), pp. 20-21.

The existence of institutionalised violence is a fact. The use of that fact to justify terrorism requires an act of faith: the conviction that the society resulting from the terrorist's activities will not merely be better than the existing one, but better by such a margin as to justify the killing of an indefinite number of people.⁷⁹

Paulin astutely observes that *Camus* (1970) was published two years after O'Brien had reflected in the *Listener* that the world would be 'quieter' and 'more realistic' without Antigone.⁸⁰ O'Brien, however, was, to some extent, speaking from a position of intellectual abstraction and idealism when he wrote *Camus*. Paulin reflects that *Camus* displays O'Brien's 'cultivated intelligence at its most joyous pitch.'⁸¹ Whereas, when the subject was Ireland, a different relation to circumstances evidently set in. There is a passage in O'Brien's essay on Burke, "An Anti-Machiavel: Edmund Burke" (1969), that provides an interesting way of viewing the evolution of O'Brien's rhetoric on the legitimacy of political violence. O'Brien drew his readers attention to Burke's essay *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796), which O'Brien, curiously, describes as 'the most reckless and unbalanced of his political writings, but the finest of his prose.'⁸²

I certainly should dread more from a wild cat in my bed-chamber,
than from all the lions that roar in the deserts behind Algiers. But in

⁷⁹ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 21.

⁸⁰ Paulin, "The Making of a Loyalist", p. 31.

Paulin is referring to O'Brien's article "Views", *Listener*, 24 October 1968, p. 526.

⁸¹ Paulin, "The Making of a Loyalist", p. 31.

⁸² This essay was first delivered as one of O'Brien's Eliot Lectures at the University of Kent, Canterbury, in November 1969—later published in *The Suspecting Glance*.

this parallel it is the cat that is at a distance, and the lions and tigers that are in our ante-chambers and our lobbies.⁸³

This thesis thus sets out to contextualize the tone of O'Brien's later writing from the mid-1970s onwards in a literary sensibility that made him suspect of political or literary compromises with revolutionary violence. This intolerance also stemmed partly from O'Brien's increasing identification with Burke, and the former's views on revolutionary violence, and particularly what O'Brien viewed as the prophetic element of Burke's writing. This thesis argues that it is misleading to equate O'Brien's affinity with Burke with a political gravitation towards conservatism in O'Brien's worldview. Rather, O'Brien found in Burke's writings on revolution an emotional tone that triggered in the former a buried resentment towards revolutionaries who upend the status quo.

Whelan, in a chapter titled "Dispossession: O'Brien's family and the Irish Revolution", proposes the idea that O'Brien was writing in a vein that was not dissimilar in feeling to writers like Vladimir Nabokov and 'writers who had been touched by the tumultuous forces of that 'age of extremes'.'⁸⁴ Whelan argued that while it might be a step too far to treat O'Brien's corpus of writing from the perspective that he was driven by a motive to end a perceived dispossession; it was also clear that he felt that the 'Sheehys were stigmatized as political pariahs.'⁸⁵ Building on this observation, Whelan makes the point, which this thesis develops, that O'Brien's increasingly apocalyptic vision—already evident in germ in *States of Ireland*—

⁸³ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 45.

⁸⁴ Whelan, *Violent Notions*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

originated in the fact that it was ‘being written at a time of a particular type of social stress, in which more than once “a terrible beauty” came to many people’s minds.’⁸⁶

The course O’Brien taught on literature and society in New York University between 1965-69 helped him to work through a number of issues that had long pressed on his political and literary imagination, namely, the connection between literature and violence, how power presses on the individual, and the prescient question of the intellectual in relation to power. The confluence of O’Brien’s intellectual ‘obsessions’ in this period, and the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, were subsequently filtered through his own experience of Irish political culture to produce a highly original work in *States of Ireland*.

The originality and impact of the book stemmed from the way that O’Brien wove seminal events in Irish history through his family tree. O’Brien’s introduction to *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* was an early signal that O’Brien’s approach to Irish history in the period between 1886-1918 was filtered through an identification with the politics of the Irish Parliamentary Party—and individuals connected or affiliated with members of his extended family. Addressing how different generations have viewed the revolutionary period in Ireland, O’Brien wrote:

People are apt to look back to the period before the Rising, not in any way nostalgically but with some thoughts of salvage. Thwarted plans, unsuccessful movements, defeated groups and classes go into ‘the

⁸⁶ Whelan, *Violent Notions*, p. 6.

dustbin of history', but may not some objects of value have been dumped there along with them?⁸⁷

The confluence of different strains of political allegiance manifested in the reception of *States of Ireland*. The reactions ran the gamut of political emotions. Michael McDowell, a foreign affairs consultant and former journalist in Washington D.C., recalls his experience of reading the book when it was first published: 'At last, I thought, here was a Southerner who understands the North and the people I come from, who treats their political beliefs with respect and empathy.'⁸⁸ John Hume, on the other hand, considered *States of Ireland* to be 'a more effective and subtle defence of Unionism than any that has come from any Unionist quarter'.⁸⁹

This was to shape the course of Irish intellectual history in ways that are still felt today. O'Brien continued to write, and increasingly polemicize, along an imaginative axis informed by a synthesis of his family's historical experience and the literature he was drawing sustenance from at any given time. A central preoccupation in his writing became the dangers of language that failed to acknowledge a human limit. The role O'Brien cast for himself was already evident in his valedictory lecture in New York University when he stated that, 'Therein the patient must minister to himself ... The advice of the Macbeth family doctor is eminently sound'.⁹⁰ Seamus Kilby noted that the success of *States of Ireland* was partly due to the fact that it was written at a

⁸⁷ O'Brien, *The Shaping of Modern Ireland*, p. 7.

⁸⁸ Michael McDowell, "Cruiser redraw political map to embrace pluralism", *Irish Times*, 24 December 2008, p. 15.

McDowell attended the symposium on O'Brien in Trinity College Dublin in 2017, and recollected in person, with the present writer, the effect SOI had on him in the context of his family background—McDowell's ancestors were Scottish Calvinists and English nonconformists who came to the North in the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries

⁸⁹ John Hume, "Review of *States of Ireland*", *Irish Times*, 9 October 1972, p. 7.

⁹⁰ O'Brien, "What Exhortation", p. 58.

particular ‘phase of the author’s political evolution’, being O’Brien’s ‘only major work on contemporaneous Irish politics written from a standpoint of impartial, ruthlessly objective, intellectual clarity.’⁹¹

One of the remarkable aspects of O’Brien’s various commitments in the 1960s—whether in his role as UN special representative in the Congo (1961), as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana (1962-65), or as Albert Schweitzer chair in New York University (1965-69)—was his ability to turn potentially ruinous situations to his advantage. As a case in point, O’Brien’s family amusingly referred to O’Brien’s time in the Congo as ‘The year the bed fell on father’. This thesis, through examining O’Brien’s literary and intellectual models—and the literature that he was dialoguing with, will show that O’Brien’s shifting discourse in relation to revolutionary violence was less a Pauline conversion from Left to Right, than a renegotiation of literary and political influences in response to a new set of circumstances.

⁹¹ Seamus Kilby, “The Many Incarnations of Conor Cruise O’Brien”, *Fortnight* 464 (2009), p. 20.

1. Owen Sheehy-Skeffington: “The Prospect of Truth”

It is understandable that when Conor Cruise O’Brien sought to illustrate his cousin Owen Sheehy-Skeffington’s influence, he grounded his metaphor in a seismic political, social and cultural event, such as the Enlightenment. When O’Brien’s father, Francis Cruise O’Brien, died in 1927, O’Brien was ten years old. In his *Memoir: My Life and Themes*, and in a moving article in the *New York Times*, he relays the trauma he experienced at the hands of his elders, particularly his mother, who in her grief, ‘seemed entirely to have forgotten’ his existence.¹ He recreated the subsequent emotional turmoil in great detail:

It was as if I had lost both parents, not just one. I remember sitting in the dining-room contemplating the long, shiny mahogany table, and feeling that everything that made life worth living was gone forever. That afternoon was the worst part of my whole life to date.²

It was into this desolate scene that his cousin Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, ‘O’Brien’s lifelong guide,’ and O’Brien’s aunt, Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington entered, bringing ‘considerable relief.’³ O’Brien stressed the way that Owen, ‘in particular’, strove to bring ‘such consolation and comfort as he could,’ putting on a magic lantern show for O’Brien, who remembered laughing, ‘not because the show was particularly funny, but out of gratitude for being alive again, out of the chill of death.’⁴ He recalls

¹ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Memoir: My Life and Themes* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1999), p. 41.

² *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³ Richard Kearney, “Ulysses returns to Ithaca”, review of *Memoir: Life and Themes* in *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 January 1999, p. 6.

O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

being rebuked sharply by his aunt Hanna for ‘keeping the light on and reading in bed’, the latter switching off the light and leaving him ‘in the dark, feeling somewhat stunned.’⁵ Sheehy-Skeffington, in O’Brien’s recollection, arrived in a few minutes later:

Without comment he put the light on again. He said “good night” and closed the door. I waited to see whether Hanna would return. She did not. I now knew that I had a protector, and that he was the strongest personality in the family. I put out the light and slept well that night. Years afterwards when I first heard of “the enlightenment”, I thought gratefully of Owen, turning on that light.⁶

The metaphor serves O’Brien well, and one is reminded of it time and again when going through O’Brien’s correspondence with Owen Sheehy-Skeffington in the National Library. The way in which O’Brien depicts Sheehy-Skeffington’s influence bears his trademark imaginative conjoinment of biographical and historical events. In creating an equivalence between Sheehy-Skeffington’s kindness, which according to O’Brien, prevented him from being ‘psychologically impaired for life’, and the Enlightenment, he betrays a constant pattern in his writing, that of conflating the personal and the historical.⁷ The fact that Sheehy-Skeffington influenced O’Brien is tangibly felt in letters and postcards dating back as far as the 1920s. In his introduction to Andrée Sheehy Skeffington’s biography of her husband, Owen, he wrote:

I knew Owen all my life, at least for that long part of my conscious life which overlapped with his. We were first cousins and we were both

⁵ O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

only children. Owen, nine years older, was more like a brother than a cousin and—after my father's death when I was ten years old—he was something like a father to me⁸

Sheehy-Skeffington's influence on O'Brien is evident in the themes that dominate his seminal book *Writers and Politics* (1965). The dedication to Sheehy-Skeffington is bolstered by O'Brien's focus on issues that were of central emotional and intellectual importance to his cousin. It provides a testament to a continuous dialogue that sustained O'Brien in his early to mid-career. *Writers and Politics* consists of a collection of essays which had been previously published in a number of Irish, British and American publications. In the introduction to the book, O'Brien admitted that 'Such a collection can have no greater degree of unity than is conferred by the continuity of the writer's preoccupations—or obsessions'.⁹

O'Brien claimed he had 'tried to assemble' those 'obsessions' in the introduction to *Writers and Politics*.¹⁰ Consequently, any attempt to understand O'Brien's preoccupations at this period necessitates an exploration of the themes embedded in the introduction. The opening paragraph describes a frequently cited conversation between O'Brien and the leader of newly independent Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah had been following the course of events in the Congo between 1960 and 1961—as documented in O'Brien's book, *To Katanga and Back*—and had invited O'Brien to become Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana. O'Brien, in his account, initially hesitated to accept, but changed his mind after travelling there and

⁸ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff: A Life of Owen Sheehy Skeffington 1909-1970* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991), p. vii.

⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Writers and Politics* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 20.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

realizing that various members of the board of the university supported his appointment. The conversation he recounted with Nkrumah is an ipso facto demonstration of the political and intellectual importance contained in the undertones of Nkrumah's question—notably the first line of *Writers and Politics*:

“Are you a socialist?” asked the African leader

I said, yes. He looked me in the eye. ‘People have been telling me,’ he said lightly, “that you are a liberal...” The statement in its context invited a denial. I said nothing.¹¹

This anecdote provided the occasion for O'Brien's reflections on the word ‘liberalism’ and ‘liberal values’; the former pithily described as a phenomenon which made ‘the rich world yawn and the poor world sick.’¹² O'Brien went to some length to show the hypocrisy which very often lay behind a liberal facade, ‘The Western liberal, of the kind most often and most widely heard from, uniformly displays acute myopia in face of the various forms of Western puppet government which cover so large a part of Africa, Asia and Latin America.’¹³ He singled out Adlai Stevenson as ‘the liberal voice par excellence’, whose face, ‘with its shiftily earnest advocate's expression, is the ingratiating moral mask which a toughly acquisitive society wears before the world it robs.’¹⁴ O'Brien by virtue of his experiences in the Congo was well-positioned to comment on the machinations of figures such as Adlai Stevenson but surprisingly his introduction served not so much to lambaste liberalism, which he did as a matter of

¹¹ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12. Adlai Stevenson was the United States Ambassador to the UN 1961-65.

course, but to express his commitment to it. He candidly tells the reader in a memorable passage:

And yet, as I drove home from my interview with the leader, I had to realize that a liberal, incurably, was what I was. Whatever I might argue, I was more profoundly attached to liberal concepts of freedom—freedom of speech and of the press, academic freedom, independent judgement and independent judges—than I was to the idea of a disciplined party mobilizing all the forces of society for the creation of a social order guaranteeing more real freedom for all instead of just for a few.¹⁵

While it is clear that the experiences he had in the role of Vice-Chancellor at the University of Ghana, Legon, impacted his political views from the mid-1960s onwards—something illustrated clearly in the essays contained in *Writers and Politics*—what is less clear to readers unfamiliar with O’Brien’s background is the role Owen Sheehy-Skeffington played in shaping O’Brien’s conceptual framework.¹⁶ The young O’Brien had been very influenced by Sheehy-Skeffington’s socialist politics, and O’Brien pursued from the outset a complementary political line. O’Brien’s liberalism, therefore, was less a Damascene fall than a late expression of an aspect of his identity that was working itself out in relation to Sheehy-Skeffington’s political worldviews. *Writers and Politics* was published in 1965, soon after he departed, somewhat

¹⁵ O’Brien, *WP*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Cameron Duodu, “Ghana’s western martyr”, *Guardian*, 27 Dec 2008. <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/dec/27/conor-cruise-o-brien-ghana>> [accessed 12 July 2019]. Account also given in O’Brien’s *Memoirs*, pp. 289-300.

chastened, from Ghana. The introduction to *Writers and Politics* is of critical interest in respect of how O'Brien responded intellectually to the practical and intellectual challenges he faced while living and working in Ghana, which was at that time actively building a socialist society.¹⁷ The latter experience was to intensify his commitment to constitutional democracy, and subsequently he sought to shine light on aspects of western liberalism—primarily on its political, literary and cultural expressions, that in his opinion would endanger, or as often as not, mock the ideals it was founded on.

Writers and Politics is divided into an introduction, followed by seven chapters titled: America, England, France, Ireland, Four Critics, The Cold War, The United Nations and the developing countries. One could surmise as to why they appear in this order and conclude that it symbolized less imaginative dominance than a sense of how O'Brien viewed geo-political and cultural dominance in the mid-1960s. Despite the delineation of *Writers and Politics* into sub-sections dealing with different continents—and the bracketing of the UN and the developing world into one section—the preoccupations that dominated all sections combine to give a steadfast impression of a committed writer in the *engagé* mode. This is perhaps what Christopher Hitchens had in mind when he said 'He is, and always has been, an *engagé*.'¹⁸

This notion of O'Brien as an engaged writer is central to gaining an understanding of his relationship to literature and politics at that period. The present chapter seeks to demonstrate how Owen Sheehy-Skeffington's influence converged with O'Brien's practical experience and wide reading to bring themes pertaining to the challenges they faced in their respective Irish political and cultural lives to bear on the

¹⁷ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 12.

¹⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *Grand Street* 6.3 (Spring 1987), p. 142.

international stage. Christopher Hitchens expressed his debt to O'Brien when he stated that:

I can still remember the excitement with which I discovered a copy of *Writers and Politics*, in a provincial library in Devonshire thirty years ago. Nobody who tries to write about either of those subjects, or about "the bloody crossroads" where they have so often met, can disown a debt to the Cruiser.¹⁹

This study will present the argument that a debt, in turn, is owed to Sheehy-Skeffington as the axis on which many of O'Brien's early 'obsessions' turned. These 'obsessions' can be loosely categorized as, the role and duty of the individual writer and the 'visions of society we have through them', the nature of colonialism and the post-colonial condition. Allied to these concerns was a concern with the fragility of democracy, and the threat posed to it by lies. O'Brien's collection of essays represented a quest for truth in politics, and the pursuit of a liberal world order which secured freedom of expression, and an end to the notion that a lie can be used in the service of peace. The latter notion stemmed from O'Brien's experience of political hypocrisy on an international scale during his period as Dag Hammarskjöld's representative in the Congo. Other themes occurred in the collection that coincided thematically with his move to New York, reflecting the socio-cultural debates of that period, such as a recognition of the way that rampant consumerism eroded civic life,

¹⁹ Christopher Hitchens, "The Cruiser", *London Review of Books* 18.4, 22 February 1996. <<https://www-lrb-co-uk.elib.tcd.ie/the-paper/v18/n04/christopher-hitchens/the-cruiser>> [accessed 15 December 2019].

the implications of the Cold War for intellectual freedom and the legacy of slavery in American culture. The collection is marked by a tendency to see liberalism—despite the many perversions of politics bearing its name—as the best hope humanity had of supporting writers in their duty as upholders of its foundational values—as O’Brien conceived them.

O’Brien provides an interesting example of how ideas of liberalism had come to be understood in the mid-1960s by an Irish writer working in international contexts. Duncan Bell has explored the ‘dizzying’ variety of ways that liberalism has been employed in political thought and social science.²⁰ Bell presents an analysis of liberalism that looks at how the meaning of liberalism shifted in ‘Anglo American political thought between 1850 and 1950, focusing in particular on how Locke came to be characterized as a liberal.’²¹ O’Brien was certainly aware of the contested nature of liberalism and increasingly in his later work dwelt on its relationship to the Enlightenment. O’Brien went to some length ‘to distinguish which Enlightenment’ he identified with, ‘namely the moderate Anglo-Scottish-American Enlightenment of John Locke, David Hume, Edmund Burke, John Adams, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton.’²² Bell’s argument that ‘the scope of the liberal tradition expanded during the middle decades of the twentieth century’, to such an extent, ‘that it came to be

²⁰ Duncan Bell, “What is Liberalism”, *Political Theory* 42.6 (June 2014), p. 682.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 682.

²² Joseph Morrison Skelly, “Outrider of the Enlightenment: A look at the legacy of Conor Cruise O’Brien”, *The National Review*, 17 March 2009.

<<https://www.nationalreview.com/2009/03/outrider-enlightenment-joseph-morrison-skelly/>> [accessed 21 February 2019].

seen by many as the constitutive ideology of the West,' is well illustrated in O'Brien's introduction to *Writers and Politics*.²³

Bell's contention that 'this capacious (and deeply confusing) understanding of liberalism was a product of the ideological wars fought against "totalitarianism" and assorted developments in the social sciences', is convincing when applied to O'Brien given that he was both concerned with the nature of "totalitarianism", and staying abreast of developments in the social sciences at that period.²⁴ Frank Callanan has referred to the mid-1960s as the 'high anti-imperialist phase' in O'Brien's life—a reference in the context of "The Embers of Easter", 'O'Brien's most left-wing piece on Ireland'. Callanan remarks also that O'Brien 'was a critic of imperialism, on his own terms.'²⁵ The proximity of O'Brien's high anti-imperialist phase and his developing view of himself as a liberal in the classical tradition is not as contradictory as it at first seems. This touches on a crucial aspect of O'Brien, his highly personalized, and often emotionally charged, response to political ideology: 'Politically his stance to the left of mainstream liberal intellectuals reflected the complex interrelationship of the unfolding of his own thinking to the international politics of the 1960s.'²⁶

While the lineaments of O'Brien's thinking, and more particularly his intellectual formation, remain elusive, certain patterns, themes and 'obsessions' emerged early in his writing life. One of these was O'Brien's desire to be a writer and

²³ Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism", p. 682.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 682.

²⁵ Frank Callanan, "Conor Cruise Donat O'Brien" in James McGuire and James Quinn eds., *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) Published on the Royal Irish Academy website to mark the centenary of O'Brien's birth, 3 November 1917.

<<https://www.ria.ie/ga/node/96177>> [accessed 15 April 2018].

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Sheehy-Skeffington's guardianship and mentoring of the young O'Brien's early ambitions in this direction. O'Brien's mother, Kathleen Sheehy, in a letter to Sheehy-Skeffington reveals the depth of involvement between O'Brien and his cousin, and aunt Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington:

While Conor is painstakingly hammering out his thoughts on the corona, I take refuge in pen, ink and paper of a past age and enter the race... Your mother took Conor to Dalkey Island yesterday. I gather he is telling you of it. The young runt refuses all assistance with his labours, so I hope it will make a good impression.²⁷

Sheehy-Skeffington's influence went from being instructive—O'Brien wrote letters to Sheehy-Skeffington and requested that he send them back translated into French—to being influential socially and politically, and this became more apparent by the time O'Brien entered Trinity College Dublin in the autumn of 1936. The following letter to Sheehy-Skeffington, dated the 29 July 1928, gives a sense of O'Brien's imaginative life at a young age, and his relationship to Sheehy-Skeffington:

An awful storm came on but Mrs Stevens and I got into the tower before it had begun, the others couldn't climb up so they took cover in a ruined Church at the other end of the Island. It was spiffing inside the tower: first you came to a big room at the bottom then you went up a spiral on to the roof which was flat with a parapet roundit [sic]. We stayed there till the storm began. Then we went down to the

²⁷ SSA(A), MS 40,490 /1.

room underneath and watched out till it stopped and we saw the others signalling ... Please put the above into French and return.²⁸

One of the ways that Sheehy-Skeffington's influence on O'Brien became manifest is evident in the latter's attraction to all things French. O'Brien became a noted Francophile, continuing a longstanding Sheehy tradition of forging connections with France. This is evident in early postcards and letters; their correspondence is littered with French phrases and anecdotes. While Sheehy-Skeffington was recuperating from the onset of tuberculosis in Davos in 1938, O'Brien wrote to him on a wide range of subjects. O'Brien was clearly anxious to demonstrate that he was not just making progress (he lists his examination results) he was also engaged in worthwhile activities like writing, and public engagements: 'I am going to read a paper to the Mod Lang. on "Corneille et la Revolution Irlandaise".'²⁹

The letters reflect both their shared interests and O'Brien's desire to impress his cousin. O'Brien wrote that there was a 'movement on foot to found a College magazine to rival T.C.D.', and stated the intention behind the initiative:

One of the objects and aims of such a paper will be the admission of women into the Societies, and this also will be the object of the newly-recognized Fabian Society of which Flann is secretary. We also hope sometime to get hold of friendly Notes (but this is a dark secret.)³⁰

²⁸ SSA(A), MS 40, 489/3.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

O'Brien and Vivian Mercier sought Sheehy-Skeffington's advice in relation to the proposed magazine. Sheehy-Skeffington replied that they wouldn't get anything from Joyce or Yeats but 'you would from Emma Goldman all right.'³¹ Goldman apparently considered Sheehy-Skeffington a 'dear friend'. O'Brien wrote to Goldman asking for a contribution and she replied on the 23 November 1937 to politely decline, adding that, 'there must be something organically wrong with the male members if they cannot endure the presence of the opposite sex in their midst.'³² O'Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington were both passionate advocates for the admission of women into the College Historical Society—often referred to as the Hist. There were regular debates from 1904 onwards tracing 'the course both of British-Irish relations, Ireland's place in Europe, and other issues such as the role of women in society.'³³

Their maternal grandparents had sent Kathleen, O'Brien's mother, and Mary—later to marry Tom Kettle—to France to be educated. The relationships that were forged on these early trips proved enduring. Here, one also finds the intersection of the political with the personal, and importantly the early germs of internationalism and cosmopolitanism that Sheehy-Skeffington and O'Brien both came to reflect in their respective intellectual careers. The woman who facilitated the exchanges for the young Sheehy girls was Sophie Raffolovovitch, 'daughter of a rich Paris-based Russian Jewish banker, in love with Ireland and married to William O'Brien.'³⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien's affiliation with France was reinforced in a tradition that his father's mother

³¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, University College Dublin (UCD), P82/6.

³² *Ibid.*, P82/7.

³³ Membership of the Hist. was not open to women until 1969.

<<https://www.tcdhist.com/history>> [accessed 12 April 2021]

³⁴ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. 53.

‘was a member of the family of Arthur Lally, famous in the history of France.’³⁵ In personal correspondence Máire Mhac an tSaoi confirmed that ‘the Lally connection was part of the family mythology’.³⁶

The French girl (mother of Owen Sheehy-Skeffington’s future wife) who came to stay with the Sheehys (O’Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington’s maternal grandparents) in 2 Belvedere Place and found a home full of politics and mirth. David Sheehy was a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party and his wife Bessie Sheehy was immortalized in Joyce’s *Ulysses*.³⁷ Joyce was a frequenter of their many “at homes” and Akenson has created a picture of these evenings, reminding the reader that, ‘It is hard to think of Joyce as just another bright undergraduate, taking tea, respectfully asking David Sheehy for his opinion on some political matter, but that is the way it was.’³⁸

The Sheehys appear in different guises in Joyce’s subsequent writings, they appear ‘as the Daniels family in *Stephen Hero* and, less clearly, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*’.³⁹ Andrée movingly describes the changed fortunes of the Sheehy family in the 1930s when Hanna contacted her asking if her son Owen could travel to Amiens. These connections facilitated a rich exchange of culture and Sheehy-Skeffington was to encounter through the Denis family a life and literature that would transform his future thought and political life. His childhood experience of his father’s socialist ideals were reinforced by Mr and Mrs Denis’ humanist socialism.

³⁵ *Weekly Irish Times (1921-1941)* (31 December 1927).

³⁶ Personal correspondence with Margaret Cruise O’Brien.

³⁷ Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O’Brien*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), p. 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

By the time O'Brien entered his teenage years, Sheehy-Skeffington had become a noted Francophile and an expert on French language and literature with a particular interest in the political aspects of French literature. His influence on O'Brien, while constructive, necessarily led to an anxiety of influence. O'Brien deals with this retrospectively in his *Memoir*. The account he gives, while doing nothing to dispel the notion that Sheehy-Skeffington was a key influence in his early interests, sheds light on O'Brien's post factum reasoning as to how he began to cleave his own individual intellectual strength out from under Sheehy-Skeffington's influence. He reflected that by the time he entered Trinity, having secured a scholarship in his first year,⁴⁰ 'sadly, our relationship worsened because of the success he had prepared for me. I now became imbued with the conviction that I was more intelligent than Owen.'⁴¹

The terms in which O'Brien relates this cleavage are definitively literary. O'Brien claimed for himself a more rarefied approach to French literature—one that suggested an art for art's sake approach—as opposed to Sheehy-Skeffington's more politicized approach to literature. In a paragraph that explored whether or not his analysis of Sheehy-Skeffington had its basis in resentment, O'Brien writes:

As a teacher of French language and literature Owen's strength was in relation to the language. He knew and loved the French language and taught it—to me amongst others—with a skill derived from intimate knowledge. But his relation to the literature was always

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 59.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

awkward, and somehow forced. He didn't really think literature was all that important, as compared with all-consuming politics.⁴²

This apparent working out of influence took the shape of a literary duel with O'Brien declaring that 'He didn't much care for Marcel Proust, whom I considered not only the greatest French writer of the 20th century, but one of the greatest writers of all time.' Sheehy-Skeffington favoured André Gide over Proust, leading to O'Brien's conclusion that 'Owen liked Gide's politics, of the late thirties: left-wing but anti-communist. It seemed to me that because of the sympathetic politics, Owen was unconsciously magnifying the significance of Gide's contribution to literature.'⁴³ What makes this worthy of attention here is the fact that despite this criticism of Sheehy-Skeffington's approach to literature, O'Brien never quite cast off the sense of the importance of the political aspect of literature that Sheehy-Skeffington had imparted to him.

O'Brien's *Memoir* represents an attempt to understand and come to terms with the various elements of his relationship with Sheehy-Skeffington. O'Brien's narrative recreation illustrates his identification of key moments in his struggle for intellectual independence. O'Brien recounted some memorable incidents with Sheehy-Skeffington, which reveal the former's self-understanding of his intellectual proclivities in the 1930s. O'Brien recalled that one afternoon, after a game of tennis, Sheehy-Skeffington picked up a collection of short stories that O'Brien had been reading and saw that O'Brien had given marks to the stories he had read, 'as boys sometimes do.'⁴⁴

⁴² O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 70.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

O'Brien noted that he had given 'the highest marks' to a story 'by an English Catholic writer.'⁴⁵ O'Brien hereby compared himself in retrospect to other 'disgruntled Catholics' like Seán O'Faolain, who were 'trying to find a more agreeable kind of Catholicism than the Irish kind through the possibly more enlightened writings of Catholics in other countries.'⁴⁶ Sheehy-Skeffington was 'clearly suspicious of the mark assigned, and of the writer who got the mark,' and he started to read the passages O'Brien had marked in a 'heavily sarcastic tone,' before commenting on each marked passage 'again with heavy sarcasm.'⁴⁷ In O'Brien's recollection he 'suffered in silence'.⁴⁸

Soon after the event, O'Brien claimed that he tried to forgive and forget, consciously remembering 'all the kindness Owen had shown' him, but he concludes, that 'in reality I did not forget it, and there was something in me determined to get my own back for the hurt inflicted.'⁴⁹ In the context of these recollections O'Brien describes an occasion when he inflicted a cruelty on Sheehy-Skeffington, of which, in retrospect, O'Brien felt deeply ashamed. O'Brien went to visit Sheehy-Skeffington's home and found the latter face down, while his wife 'Andrée was applying heated tumblers with an internal vacuum, to his bare back: a French remedy.'⁵⁰ At this point, O'Brien produced and began to read aloud a letter his old Latin teacher David Greene had sent him bemoaning Sheehy-Skeffington's 'excessive influence' over him. Greene, O'Brien pronounced, 'didn't believe Owen's causes—pacifism and Socialism—and

⁴⁵ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

thought that this combination of causes was muddling me up.’⁵¹ In describing Sheehy-Skeffington’s response, he revealed both his sense of the latter’s nature, and his understanding of what had taken place:

I think he took the reading of the letter as a kind of awkward declaration of intellectual independence, something of which he would have approved in principle, even if it was a bit painful in practice.⁵²

O’Brien’s *Maria Cross*, consisting of essays he had been working on throughout the 1940s and 1950s, was symbolic of O’Brien’s assertion of intellectual independence—and a harbinger of the idiosyncratic style that would mark him out as a singular writer of note. Yet the essays that succeeded *Maria Cross*, some of which are published in *Writers and Politics*, and elsewhere, clearly treat literature through the lens of political commitment. “Passion and Cunning” (1965), O’Brien’s influential essay on the politics of W. B. Yeats, is a case in point. O’Brien wrote to Sheehy-Skeffington on 14 July 1964: “the fact is that the Yeatsists have consistently played down his involvement in reactionary and fascist politics’.⁵³

The emphasis on Yeats’s involvement in ‘reactionary and fascist politics’ in “Passion and Cunning” was symptomatic of—among other things—O’Brien’s tendency from the late 1950s onwards to pivot his literary arguments around implicit ideological tendencies. His time in the Congo and in Ghana had given him a newfound sense of the

⁵¹ O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 71.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵³ Frank Callanan, “Conor Cruise Donat O’Brien”.

way that ideology, and the battle for narrative domination, underlay much of post-WW2 politics—something that had become even more explicit in the McCarthy years. Sheehy-Skeffington’s role as a key influence on O’Brien’s writing in respect of geopolitics has been understated. Any exploration of O’Brien at this period necessitates asking what readied O’Brien for a remarkable international career as a diplomat, academic, historian, essayist and statesman? Arguably, a significant part of the answer lay with Sheehy-Skeffington’s role as an individual who set an example of what was possible when a writer lived up to his commitments, who put literature in the service of politics. Tom Garvin addressed the influence Sheehy-Skeffington had on O’Brien in a manner that highlights the latter’s moral courageousness:

O’Brien, like many another, admired ‘Skeff’s’ political courage in Irish public affairs. Sheehy-Skeffington correctly predicted the Second World War after a brief visit to Germany in January 1933 in a long letter to his mother on the emergent Nazi Germany. The young Germans thought they had been cheated out of victory in 1918 by the communists and the Jews. The Germans would start a war in 1938 or 1939 and would be defeated again, the Irish student predicted.⁵⁴

On a practical level, Sheehy-Skeffington provided O’Brien with books and access to a world that was meaningful to the young O’Brien, who nurtured ambitions to write. Sheehy-Skeffington embodied worldliness and was a committed

⁵⁴ Bryan Fanning and Tom Garvin, *The Books that Define Ireland* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2014) p.199.

internationalist. Diarmuid Whelan in the context of archiving Sheehy-Skeffington's papers and correspondence observed that:

for all the depth of his commitment to Ireland, these papers throw up a range of interests that went far beyond his little cottage in Terenure. The day-to-day political literature of his library is a fascinating insight into the many debates, ideologies, battles and movements of mid-century Europe from the Spanish Civil War to nuclear disarmament and anti-apartheid.⁵⁵

Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, in her biography of her husband, detailed the extent to which Sheehy-Skeffington's commitment to, 'national and international politics became intertwined with Owen's private life.'⁵⁶ The reader gets a sense of the extent of this when Andrée Sheehy Skeffington writes that 'our happy initiation into parenthood came ten days after peace had been declared in Europe.'⁵⁷ Sheehy-Skeffington was emblematic of the ideal moral intellectual O'Brien had in mind when he wrote the introduction to *Writers and Politics*, something that is reflected in the dedication. However, while Sheehy-Skeffington was busy 'chipping away' at lies in Ireland, his eye was simultaneously trained on events abroad.

Sheehy-Skeffington's marriage to Andrée Denis meant that WW2, a war that was at a remove emotionally for many Irish people, was of urgent and painful concern to him. The Sheehy-Skeffingtons were a family deeply involved with the current of international politics, and O'Brien drew intellectual sustenance from his proximity to

⁵⁵ Diarmuid Whelan, "The Sheehy Skeffington Papers", *Saothar*, 29 (2004), p. 111.

⁵⁶ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. 123.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

them. Sheehy-Skeffington held up a model of the committed public intellectual, something that O'Brien aspired to and became par excellence. Whelan observes that as much as O'Brien 'studied languages and literature in college, and as much as he was consciously building a career for himself as a literary critic, the pull of politics was always stronger for him.'⁵⁸ There are precedents in Sheehy-Skeffington's career for O'Brien's bold and daring rhetorical style. This facet of their political life was nurtured in the TCD Historical Society. Andrew Ganley reflected after Sheehy-Skeffington died that the latter 'was often the only voice to speak out fearlessly on liberal and moral issues, to maintain the rights of even the smallest minorities to hold on to their opinions.'⁵⁹

It was arguably this former commitment that led to Sheehy-Skeffington's early disenchantment with communism. Sheehy-Skeffington found himself between Scylla and Charybdis in respect of the Church and communism. His clerical opponents labelled him a communist and those he encountered in Trinity in the 1940s, who self-identified as communists, would accept nothing less than total unquestioning commitment to communist Russia. To his abiding hatred of all forms of Fascism, he added a deep antipathy to the mentality he experienced among the Prometheans, a group who had fallen under the influence of E.L. Mallalieu, 'a former liberal who had joined the British Labour Party and became an MP in the 1945 Labour government.'⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Diarmuid Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity: Conor Cruise O'Brien and France", *Études Irlandaises*, 34.2 (September 2009), p. 6.

⁵⁹ "Owen Sheehy Skeffington in Retrospect", *Irish Times*, 11 June 1971, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. 129.

Mallalieu had stimulated their interest in politics and they had ‘subsequently read themselves into Marxism’.⁶¹

Andrée Sheehy Skeffington gives an account of Sheehy-Skeffington’s disappointment when some of these students insisted on using the Fabian Society ‘as a platform for Marxist ideas and Stalinist communism propaganda’.⁶² Sheehy-Skeffington had tried to raise awareness about Stalin, but his criticism was ‘resented.’⁶³ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington describes an incident which gives the reader an insight into how deeply Sheehy-Skeffington felt about accurate reporting. Sheehy-Skeffington was asked after one of his trips to France to ‘read a paper on “France-To-Day”.’ *The Promethean*, a small paper the society published, reported on Sheehy-Skeffington’s talk ‘omitting his criticism of the French Communist Party, whose post-war programme he had analysed, and praised only in part.’⁶⁴ Sheehy-Skeffington was perturbed and wrote to the editor of the magazine to complain, and the magazine subsequently published ‘an oddly truncated apology but not his letter.’⁶⁵

Andrée Sheehy Skeffington’s comments in relation to this incident, that ‘Owen’s concern for accurate, truthful reporting applied to all, perhaps even more particularly to a small youthful group which he suspected of taking the road of intellectual totalitarianism’, is indicative of how seriously Sheehy-Skeffington took his role as mentor to those who were forging a political sensibility devoid of responsibility to truth. In this light, the soaring ‘liberal’ rhetoric in O’Brien’s introduction to *Writers*

⁶¹ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. 129.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

and Politics might be seen as the ‘late ripe fruit’ of Sheehy-Skeffington’s moral example.⁶⁶ Sheehy-Skeffington and O’Brien’s correspondence supports the notion of Sheehy-Skeffington’s constant role as moral exemplar. The following letter was written by O’Brien in response to Sheehy-Skeffington—dated the 29 September 1937—and gives an indication of how seriously Sheehy-Skeffington took his responsibility towards O’Brien and by default a sense of the archetypal nature of their relationship:

I fear I am a natural ape and most so when I speak or write to you. I got to-day your letter, and very scholarly taking off. It made me feel pretty lousy, all the more as I had behaved precisely as you guess. I didn’t make my own bed, I didn’t help with the washing up and I didn’t fetch water from the well. All, as you say, because I didn’t think of them. Or rather I did think of some of them but because of some peculiar brand of shyness I didn’t suggest any of them.⁶⁷

What emerges from this, and from the reams of correspondence between O’Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington, is a portrait of two remarkably gifted people enabling each other to act with empathy, humour and in good conscience. What also emerges is Sheehy-Skeffington’s unfailing commitment to O’Brien and others, despite the serious setbacks he faced intermittently due to illness.

O’Brien, after Sheehy-Skeffington’s death, recalled how ‘Owen’s commitment to freedom of expression—and his ample use of all the freedom he could find—got

⁶⁶ Edmund Burke: ‘the late ripe fruit of mere experience.’ Joseph Morrison Skelly, “Outrider of the Enlightenment: A look at the legacy of Conor Cruise O’Brien”, *The National Review*, 17 March 2009. <<https://www.nationalreview.com/2009/03/outrider-enlightenment-joseph-morrison-skelly/>> [accessed 21 February 2019].

⁶⁷ SSA(A), MS 40,489 /4.

him into much more trouble than his socialism did.’⁶⁸ Socialism, according to O’Brien, ‘was an abstract condition, and one unlikely to prevail in a state whose basic ethos has been shaped by small farmers. Freedom of expression was something else.’⁶⁹ O’Brien’s introduction to Andrée Sheehy Skeffington’s biography of her husband gives us a sense of how O’Brien viewed his cousin’s contribution to Irish public life in retrospect. It also illustrated the continuity in O’Brien’s imaginative conception of official Ireland’s attitude to freedom of speech in the period Sheehy-Skeffington was active as a public intellectual and Senator. In O’Brien’s words:

Freedom of expression did exist in Ireland; in a sort of way, and up to a point, which are conditions applicable to much of Irish life. Ireland was—and had inherited from the British the condition of being—a working political democracy, politically speaking. It was correctly understood that democracy entailed wide freedom of expression. But not all *that* wide.⁷⁰

Another element in this desire for alternative voices was the fact that the Republic of Ireland was struggling to find a new accommodation with the Protestant public figures that remained after the Anglo-Irish Treaty had heralded the establishment of the new Free State. Sheehy-Skeffington was at the forefront of the fight to accommodate these minority voices before such arguments gained public traction. It is difficult to understand O’Brien’s later public stances if one fails to consider his early and formative experience of Protestant voices in Southern Ireland

⁶⁸ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. vii.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. vii (original emphasis).

and Sheehy-Skeffington's robust defence of their right to freedom of expression and dissent. For O'Brien, 'Owen's original contribution, which did much to change the character of Irish society, was to invade the taboo area, not on one or two isolated issues, but deliberately, repeatedly and with great effect.'⁷¹ O'Brien stressed that 'Except for some imaginative writers—whose books were banned by a Censorship of Publications established at the demand of the Catholic Hierarchy—no one had done this before', and 'certainly no public representative had done it.'⁷² O'Brien acknowledged that W.B. Yeats had 'spoken out', but despite the former's 'fire and eloquence, against the prohibition of divorce,' it was essentially 'an isolated episode.'⁷³

In the passage that follows, written after Sheehy-Skeffington's death, the reader finds an interesting resonance with O'Brien's introduction to *Writers and Politics*, which suggests that conceptually Sheehy-Skeffington was never far from O'Brien's mind when the issue of a writer's 'quest for truth' was the subject at hand.⁷⁴ In O'Brien's words, 'Owen's method was to keep at it; to continue tapping away at the taboo area, to behave as if no taboo existed.'⁷⁵ O'Brien when struggling, in the 1960s, to define the best way a writer could strive for truth reasoned that 'few critics, few analysts, could give a philosophically respectable answer to the question: what is truth?' They could, however, 'identify lies readily enough, and can reasonably hope that, when we have chipped away at these, what remains will be closer to the

⁷¹ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, pp. viii-ix.

⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. viii-ix.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. viii-ix.

⁷⁴ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 20.

⁷⁵ Andrée Sheehy-Skeffington, *Skeff*, pp. viii-ix.

indefinable truth.⁷⁶ O'Brien concluded his introduction to *Writers and Politics* with a reiteration of this analogy:

My own guess is that the liberation of the communist world and the poor world, from their crude forms of mendacity, will have to proceed from within and that the liberation of the Western World from its subtler and perhaps deadlier forms of mendacity will also have to proceed from within.⁷⁷

O'Brien also argued that 'Ireland was a democracy, politically speaking. But at a deeper level, it was an authoritarian society, dominated by a hierarchy responsible to an individual who claimed to be God's infallible representative on earth.'⁷⁸ In his opinion these conditions were hard to reconcile 'with freedom of expression, which must include freedom of dissent,' and that was not something the Catholic Church in Ireland encouraged to say the least, during 'Owen's lifetime.'⁷⁹ This concern with the role of the Church, and with Catholicism in general, in relation to intellectualism, was an ongoing preoccupation of O'Brien's. It was central to the essays collected in *Maria Cross*, and in the foreword to *Writers and Politics* he drew out the different mentalities that he envisaged in regard to intellectualism found in Catholic and Protestant countries. O'Brien juxtaposed, for point of comparison, the intellectual traditions and tendencies in Catholic countries as opposed to Protestant Anglo-Saxon countries. His assessment notably attributed a certain dignity to 'Catholic tradition':

⁷⁷ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 20.

⁷⁸ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. vii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

It is both the weakness and the strength of the intellectual brought up in a Catholic tradition, that he finds it peculiarly hard to accept ... pragmatic intimations. On the contrary he finds it only too easy to say, *ruat caelum*.⁸⁰

O'Brien insisted that for intellectuals brought up in 'Catholic communities', whether or not they actually agree with 'the teaching and standards of these communities—the truth or falsehood of a given proposition is far more important than its social implications.'⁸¹ O'Brien acknowledged that while 'a great deal of dishonesty' still existed among Catholic intellectuals, they would still 'think of truth, not utility, as the essential criterion of all propositions.'⁸²

This approach to understanding intellectual essence would appear to be a form of Christian existentialism, something that was reflective of his exploration of the imaginative patterns of a number of Catholic writers in *Maria Cross*, and latterly, in *States of Ireland*, how these imaginative patterns manifested in political life. In the introduction to *Writers and Politics* O'Brien wrote that:

Outsiders and some insiders, have discerned in the Irish mind, as in the Polish and the Spanish, a tendency to anarchism, to rebellion for rebellion's sake. Where it exists, and it does among intellectuals, this tendency derives, I believe, from the necessities of individual intellectual survival in communities where correct thinking is assumed to be the province of a specialized caste. If we take an intellectual to

⁸⁰ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 16.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

be a person who prefers to try to do his thinking for himself, even badly, rather than delegate it to specialists trained to discharge this function with considerable subtlety, then we see that the intellectual in a priest-led community, must develop strengthened means of defending himself. He acquires in the process special capabilities and special limitations, different from those affecting intellectuals in Protestant/agnostic countries.⁸³

There are a few things that stand out in that statement, notably, O'Brien's contention that intellectuals whose formative environment is Catholic differ in some tangible way from those in Protestant/agnostic countries. The emotional compulsion behind this feeling would continue to inform his thought right through his life. His interest originated in a desire to understand the emotional, moral and intellectual predicament of the intellectual at that period in time. In *Maria Cross* O'Brien drew out what he meant by this: 'the moral and emotional style of our suffering has been so formed by our Christian history that the distinction between "feeling" and "language" is not absolute; the "language" has formed the "feelings" to such an extent that it can convey, from the deep levels of one mind to those of others, whole systems of emotion which might astonish their conscious hosts.'⁸⁴ Terms such as 'patterns of feeling', and 'whole systems of emotion' betray a concerted attempt to systematically understand the condition of the Catholic writer at that period. This kind of writing betrayed a philosophical sensibility, sensitive to the ambivalence of language as it

⁸³ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 15.

⁸⁴ [Donat O'Donnell] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 259.

emerged in political, religious and social contexts. *States of Ireland* demonstrated the continuity of this preoccupation when O'Brien stated that he wrote from, 'the Catholic, specifically Southern Catholic, side of the fence.' Here, he is repeating the pattern of thought that led to his interest in the writers discussed in *Maria Cross*. In this vein, O'Brien expressed his motivations as follows: 'I have tried to understand some of the feelings shared by most Ulster Protestants and to communicate some notion of these feelings to Catholics in the Republic.'⁸⁵

O'Brien and O'Faolain were central figures in twentieth-century Irish literary history in terms of their contribution to what might be seen as an emotional and cultural understanding of the 'predicament' of the Irish Catholic intellectual of that period. Interestingly, despite having referenced others use of the term, 'the Irish mind', O'Brien himself preferred to think of it as the Irish 'predicament'. This comes to light on the occasion of his review, in the *New Statesman*, of Vivian Mercier's book, *The Irish Comic Tradition*. O'Brien found 'implausible', the idea that 'there is "an Irish Mind"', continuing with its own peculiar quirks, not shared even by other Europeans, from medieval times to the days of Samuel Beckett.'⁸⁶ O'Brien suggested that rather than the presence of a distinct 'Irish mind', there has been 'since the seventeenth century at least an Irish predicament: a predicament which has produced common characteristics in a number of those who have been involved in it.'⁸⁷ O'Brien pursued this idea to explain why irony, 'the weapon of the disarmed' took off in Ireland. The lineaments of O'Brien's thought processes in this short piece, firmly located in his post-

⁸⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 315.

⁸⁶ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 139.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

colonial understanding of Irish history, prefigure his later strengths as a commentator on the cultural Cold War, and his foray into drama after his traumatic departure from the UN: 'For some Irishmen, including some who were not themselves directly oppressed, the masks of power and the paradoxes of oppression were lessons in drama and in wit.'⁸⁸

Sheehy-Skeffington's senatorial virtue is vaunted in O'Brien's introduction to *Writers and Politics*. The context is O'Brien's comparison of Irish intellectuals 'peculiar relation to liberal thought and practice' to that of Polish and Spanish intellectuals 'between the wars'.⁸⁹ In O'Brien's view, 'in these Catholic and time-lagging countries the liberal tradition, the tradition of 1848, got less lip-service, and was taken more seriously, than was the case in the industrially advanced countries.'⁹⁰ This was, according to O'Brien, 'because the battle of 1848 had not been won.'⁹¹ This highlighted O'Brien's ambivalence in respect of modernity; on the one hand these countries are time-lagging, which suggests they are backward, that is, not modern, lagging behind other supposedly advanced countries, yet, in these 'time-lagging' countries, the liberal tradition was, according to O'Brien, 'taken more seriously.'

The social force of the Catholic Church had foreclosed the liberal current in the 'national-revolutionary' tradition. Freedom of speech existed in ample measure for politicians and businessmen, as long as they refrained from using it in relation to Church matters, or in the realm of education, 'which the Church claimed as its own.'⁹²

⁸⁸ O'Brien, *WP*, pp. 140-141.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

To emphasize the control the Church had over politicians in the Irish context, O'Brien cited one Senator's efforts to highlight that children were 'being beaten in the primary schools for failure at lessons,' contrary to the regulations set out by the Department of Education.⁹³ The moral courage of the Senator in question, Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, was met with denial, 'and the critic found no support at all.'⁹⁴

O'Brien's intervention at the Labour Party conference, in 1936, on behalf of the Republican side in Spain was representative of Sheehy-Skeffington's influence. Sheehy-Skeffington was responsible for the foreign policy editorial of *Ireland To-Day*. Under Sheehy-Skeffington's stewardship the magazine followed a pro-Spanish Republican line, which, 'lasted until March 1938, when its foreign commentary was written by Captain John Lucy.'⁹⁵ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington gives a flavour of the controversy and passions which, 'already kindled before 1936, had been whipped up in Ireland by the Spanish Civil War.' The rise of Fascism on the continent was overshadowed in Ireland by the frenzied passions of those who feared the red scare and the 'word communist came to mean anything which was not orthodox and Catholic, from progressive liberal to socialist to anti-clerical, and was used particularly readily of those who pointed out the inconsistencies and ultra-conservatism of the Catholic Church.'⁹⁶

In O'Brien's *Memoir* he recounted his own role in generating opposition to Franco's campaign. O'Brien claimed that having 'spent the previous summer in France', he 'clipped a number of anti-Franco stories from the anti-clerical left-wing French

⁹³ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹⁵ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, pp. 82-83.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

press.⁹⁷ This, O'Brien claimed, was something he later felt ashamed of, but at that time he was operating as a polemicist as opposed to a historian. Yet, the fact that his first polemical intervention was staged on an issue that Sheehy-Skeffington had deep convictions about is reflective of how Sheehy-Skeffington played a formative role in O'Brien's political development. The depth of O'Brien's sensitivity to Sheehy-Skeffington's judgement is shown in his refusal to pursue an oratorical line that might have won him the 'Gold Medal' as a student in Trinity College Dublin. O'Brien and his friend and rival, Peter Allt, were involved in the College Historical Society; Allt had won the Gold Medal before O'Brien and had suggested that O'Brien 'follow a pro-fascist line' which would attract attention, and hence, secure the award: 'I rejected that suggestion because it would mean a break with Owen; otherwise I might have been tempted, though I believe I would eventually have rejected it.'⁹⁸ This is typical in terms of O'Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington's relationship as it demonstrates O'Brien's internalization of Sheehy-Skeffington's moral authority.

The complexities of this period, and O'Brien's experience of them through Sheehy-Skeffington, had a deep influence on the development of his later understanding of the Cold War, particularly McCarthyism. O'Brien's experience of the way that truth could be manipulated in the interest of power had its roots in 1930s Ireland. This was a theme that ran through his writings, from his early speech on Franco at a Labour Party conference in 1936, to his pedantic and Jesuitical analysis of the Whitaker Chambers and Alger Hiss affair, explored in a review of *Cold Friday*,

⁹⁷ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 74.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Whittaker Chambers's account of the period, titled, "The Perjured Saint."⁹⁹ O'Brien's experience of Sheehy-Skeffington's treatment as a result of clerical pressure had been instructive. It had become apparent to Sheehy-Skeffington, and subsequently O'Brien, that 'the relative fair-mindedness at government level could be counteracted by behind-the-scene whispering campaigns, and that firms or individuals could be the victims of Catholic pressure.'¹⁰⁰ O'Brien had experienced his cousin being labelled a communist for taking stands against clerical intolerance and speaking truth to power, at a time when being labelled a communist was 'damaging.' These smear campaigns emboldened Sheehy-Skeffington and he retaliated relentlessly, in one instance taking legal advice against the magazine *Cavalcade*, 'as a result of which the paper withdrew the libellous reference and apologized.'¹⁰¹

These affairs foreshadowed O'Brien's long campaign in the late 1960s exposing the involvement of the CIA, under the umbrella of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, in the literary magazine *Encounter*. This culminated in a successful lawsuit against *Encounter*. *The Irish Times* on 8 September 1966 carried the headline "Conor Cruise O'Brien sues literary magazine".¹⁰² The matter was eventually settled outside of court. Frank Kermode had, at that time, taken over from Stephen Spender as joint editor of *Encounter* and has written about his experience of that crisis coinciding with his mother's death, and O'Brien's reaction to events:

⁹⁹ Essay included in *Writers and Politics*.

¹⁰⁰ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, pp. 82-83.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁰² "Conor Cruise O'Brien sues literary magazine", *Irish Times*, 8 September 1966, p. 1.

I only took four days off, before flying back to the *Encounter* crisis. I should have said to hell with Conor Cruise O'Brien. In the end he was good-natured about the whole thing. He knew it wasn't my fault.¹⁰³

This victory for truth in relation to transparency, and CIA meddling in cultural affairs was a significant and hard-won achievement for O'Brien. His essay "Journal de Combat" contained many traces of Sheehy-Skeffington's influence.

The central argument of the piece hinges on Sir Denis Brogan's claim in the introduction to *Encounters*, an anthology drawn from the journal's first ten years in existence, that '*Encounter* from its foundation has been a *journal de combat*. It has been the organ of protest against that *trahison dec clerics*.'¹⁰⁴ Brogan's invocation of Benda was singularly provocative for O'Brien, who had internalized, through Sheehy-Skeffington's influence, the gravity of Benda's message. Brogan, therefore, was touching on something of profound emotional and intellectual significance to O'Brien, namely, the duty of the intellectual to resist partisanship. O'Brien, rightly as it turned out, identified the opposite tendency on the pages of *Encounter*. In "Journal de Combat", O'Brien is very clear as to the source of his grievance, and it clearly revolved around *Encounter's* misappropriation of Julien Benda. Benda, and the phrase *trahison dec clerics* are repeatedly referred to for the purposes of undermining the feigned neutrality of *Encounter*. O'Brien conceded that 'communists have often in speech and writing shown contempt for truth', and that it would be fair to say, 'as Sir Denis says',

¹⁰³ Katie Donovan, "The Sense of an Ending: With a Lifetime of Illuminating Literacy Criticism Behind Him, Frank Kermode has a New Book about Shakespeare's Language. Katie Donovan Talks to Him in His Cambridge Home", *Irish Times*, 22 April 2000.

<<https://www-proquest-com.elib.tcd.ie/historical-newspapers/sense-ending/docview/526614141/se-2?accountid=14404>> [accessed 7 October 2017].

¹⁰⁴ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 216.

that it would constitute a case of *trahison dec clerics* to ignore this fact. However, O'Brien is not concerned here with communists, or the Soviet Union, he is concerned with the betrayal of Benda's message, and what that entailed. O'Brien in this sense is writing as an engagé—a committed writer, who saw *Encounter* as a threat to the sovereignty of intellectual neutrality. O'Brien phrased it thus:

Clerks can betray in more than one way, and in our culture the communist way is neither the most tempting nor the most rewarding. A clerk who says, for example, that he 'seeks to promote no line' and goes on over ten years to promote a most definite and consistent line, may not yet have "betrayed"—for it is possible to argue about definitions—but he would seem, to me at least, to be something of an intellectual security-risk.¹⁰⁵

In a characteristic manner, O'Brien's analysis inveighed heavily against what he perceived as editorial silences and omissions: 'Silence about oppression has been, if possible, total where the oppressors were believed to be identified with the interests of the United States.'¹⁰⁶ O'Brien's argument is defined by a strong emphasis on the way that power utilised language for dishonest ends and the duty of the intellectual to fight back against this encroachment. In that sense it is no coincidence that O'Brien concluded his argument with a condemnation of *Encounter's* invocation of Benda, whose point was in fact 'that writers were not to cheat, for any side.'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 217.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

O'Brien's insistence on the nature of *Encounter's* complicity was based on a close reading of the magazine's content, where he found 'several examples, in *Encounter's* own practice, of the intellectual vices against which Benda warned us.'¹⁰⁸ This had led O'Brien to what, in his view, seemed an obvious conclusion:

Encounter cannot be *both* basically and permanently preoccupied with "the designs of a great power"—one great power—and also 'the organ of protest against the trahison des clerics'. This would make nonsense of Benda, for it would assert that all intellectual dishonesty is, and must permanently be, an import from the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁹

Another factor in this was O'Brien's attunement to the nature of infiltration of institutions, a result of his experience of clerical interference in Irish politics and the bureaucracy, ignorance and cynicism of censorship in Ireland. O'Brien's accusations that *Encounter* was a CIA front under the cover of the Congress of Cultural Freedom is a great example of how O'Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington's experience calling out cant and doublespeak, in Irish political and religious affairs, had prepared O'Brien to make a positive contribution to key debates around ethics and politics on the international stage.

O'Brien's outspoken resistance to *Encounter's* agenda emanated from a particular set of social and historical experiences. O'Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington had, by the 1960s, become expert at identifying political ambiguity—and the depth of O'Brien's moral clarity stemmed from their mutual commitment to living up to the

¹⁰⁸ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 218.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-218. (O'Brien's emphasis).

demands put on the engaged writer of the period. Richard J. Aldrich in his preface to Hugh Wilford's book, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War: Calling the Tune?*, gives a sense of what O'Brien was up against:

After the Second World War, the United States sought to emulate its rival in a dynamic display of organised spontaneity and cultural largesse. Some groups were deliberately created, but the majority were co-opted, into a struggle for intellectual hearts and minds.¹¹⁰

Christopher Hitchens summed up the committed nature of O'Brien's engagements pithily, 'there's nothing vicarious—nothing armchair—about the politics of Conor Cruise O'Brien'.¹¹¹ Hitchens provides the reader with a number of examples of his assertion, 'Up at the sharp end in Katanga, mixing it with Nkrumah's boys in Ghana, getting too close to the action at an Orange rally in Northern Ireland ... and out and about in Johannesburg ... Even when he held the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities at New York University ... he was not content with mere "teach ins" against the Vietnam war. He had to go on the pavements too.'¹¹²

O'Brien provides a detailed account of his arrest during a protest against the Vietnam War in his *Memoir*. After his case was subsequently dismissed by a judge, he expected that his Jewish students would approach him with a proposal to renew 'our illegal protest'.¹¹³ Such a request would have been logical, according to O'Brien, in the circumstances, and he was resigned to renew the protest if the students demanded it.

¹¹⁰ Hugh Wilford, *The CIA, the British Left and the Cold War: Calling the Tune?* Foreword by David Cauter (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. vii.

¹¹¹ Christopher Hitchens, *Grand Street* 6.3 (Spring 1987), p. 142.

¹¹² *Ibid.* p. 142.

¹¹³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 310.

However, O'Brien claimed to have felt 'apprehensive' about what a 'second breach of the peace' might lead to.¹¹⁴ In any event the students decided not to renew their protest. In the context of this political and moral quandary, O'Brien wrote, 'I thought of Owen, who would have renewed the protest and gone on protesting, whatever the consequences. But by now I knew I was not Owen.'¹¹⁵ This honest appraisal, counterpointing his moral strength with Sheehy-Skeffington's, was intrinsic to O'Brien's psyche. It was forged in childhood and affirmed in their shared attraction to a number of writers who reflected these qualities in the strength of their engagement with politics and art. Garvin's tribute to Sheehy-Skeffington's crusade against injustices inflicted on children, during the period that O'Brien was primarily working abroad, effectively contextualizes O'Brien's expressed intuition that Sheehy-Skeffington would have continued to protest against the Vietnam War:

In the 1950s and the 1960s this extraordinary man was an outspoken member of the Irish Senate, where he attacked many aspects of Irish public policy, particularly the practice of unrestrained physical punishment of small children in Schools.¹¹⁶

While O'Brien worked hard to define himself in literary terms that set him apart from Sheehy-Skeffington, the latter's emphasis on the duty of the writer and public intellectual to expose cant was a seminal influence on O'Brien. Indeed, it is difficult to understand O'Brien's work in the Department of External Affairs in the late 1950s in isolation from Sheehy-Skeffington's tutelage. Sheehy-Skeffington was an active voice

¹¹⁴ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 310.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

¹¹⁶ Fanning and Garvin, *The Books that Define Ireland*, p. 199.

on the sidelines, particularly in relation to the way the Irish delegation in the UN approached the question of Algerian independence. Tracing Sheehy-Skeffington's influence on O'Brien gives increased insight into what shaped O'Brien's reputation in the 1960s as a 'stripe-shirted Castro'.¹¹⁷

In a review of Donald Harman Akenson's biography of O'Brien, W.J. McCormack observed the paucity of detail in relation to Sheehy-Skeffington's influence on O'Brien. Akenson fails to provide a:

consideration of how the two discussed the contents of *Maria Cross* (1952), in which O'Brien chose to write on distinctly Catholic writers, among them Georges Bernanos, Leon Bloy, Paul Claudel, François Mauriac and Charles Peguy. As a university lecturer in French, an agnostic, and a man of more disciplined political opinions, Skeffington can safely be assumed to have had a view of his cousin's work; the acknowledgements are extensive, but Skeffington is simply thanked for helping climb out of various linguistic pitfalls.¹¹⁸

Certainly, there is evidence that O'Brien looked for Sheehy-Skeffington's opinion on the work as a whole, as well as the 'linguistic pitfalls'. In a letter to Sheehy-Skeffington dated 10 July 1951, O'Brien ventured:

Perhaps you might have time to cast an eye in a general way over the typescript—I have some rather brash passages, particularly dealing with Claudel's imagery, where I affect to know French. Also, apart

¹¹⁷ Máire Mhac an tSaoi, *The Same Age as the State* [n.p.].

¹¹⁸ W. J. McCormack, "The Historian as Writer or Critic? Conor Cruise O'Brien and his biographers", *Irish Historical Studies* 30.117 (May 1996), p. 114.

altogether from the French I should like to have your general criticisms, particularly as regards the type of defect which could be cured by excision.¹¹⁹

Bryan Fanning in his essay “The lonely passion of Conor Cruise O’Brien” has observed that many of O’Brien’s references to Catholic thinkers in *Maria Cross* are ‘half-digested’ and suggested that his reading of O’Faolain is more assured and penetrating.¹²⁰ However, the fact remains that O’Brien chose to focus primarily on French writers. This is arguably because he was emotionally drawn to the subject matter, imagery and symbolism of the French authors he chose to write about. O’Brien’s essays in *Maria Cross*, when looked at through the prism of his later profound engagement with Burke, give a sense of the continuity of O’Brien’s interest in the duality of human nature.

The patterns he attempted to locate in a number of Catholic authors were inseparable from his own understanding of those patterns and what many commentators have viewed as a swing from the Left to the Right is better understood as a resurgence of sympathy with this Manichean view of the world—underscored by his fears of revolutionary violence. What Richard Bourke said of Edmund Burke is true also of O’Brien, ‘the depiction of Burke as an apostate dramatically simplifies his political stance. It is also prone to warp our understanding of the surrounding history.’¹²¹

¹¹⁹ SSA(A), MS 40, 489/6.

¹²⁰ Bryan Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 190.

¹²¹ Richard Bourke, “Burke was no Conservative” *Aeon*, in association with Princeton University Press (22 December 2015). < <https://aeon.co/essays/conservatives-cant-claim-edmund-burke-as-one-of-their-own> > [accessed 12 December 2019].

O'Brien's political views developed in tandem with his literary interests through a process of transformation allied with his experience of history, and the writers that he imaginatively grappled with. Whelan wrote about O'Brien's 'lifelong passion for French culture and the French language', and how, 'both his wives referred to his fondness for holding forth in French and interspersing his talk with his "Gallicisms" or "Conor's French noises"'.¹²² While Irish featured largely in O'Brien's 'intellectual formation', there was 'no doubt that he was both emotionally and intellectually immersed in French.'¹²³ Quoting from the archives, Whelan revealed O'Brien's earnest affectation of literary commitment: "The Germans are in Boulogne today [...]this is awkward as it will probably prevent me getting the Dirb edition of the works of Proust."¹²⁴

O'Brien's correspondence with Sheehy-Skeffington around the same period sheds light on O'Brien's interests in the 1930s. One such letter, dated 26 September 1948, evidenced youthful affectation and a sense of adventure:

I came here to weep in the home of Mmme [sic] de Warens, JJ. Rousseau etc etc, but couldn't find the damn place (ef. [sic] Mayor freyer) I found a restaurant beside the river...with menu for 180 francs: Hors d'oeuvre Perche meunière (excellent), entreote de veau and grapes. Also white wine 30 francs half bottle.¹²⁵

¹²² Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity", p. 2.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹²⁴ O'Brien's College Diary entry (24 May 1940). Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, University College Dublin (UCD), P82/ 624.

Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity", p. 3.

¹²⁵ SSA(A), MS 40, 489/5.

Patricia Avis's *Playing the Harlot*, revealed 'a barely disguised portrait of O'Brien, with whom she had a brief affair in the mid-1950s.' She disguised O'Brien, turning him into a Scotsman with 'a disfigured arm', 'but in all other details the portrayal is vividly accurate.'¹²⁶ The picture she gave of O'Brien is revealing: 'He talked about freedom like a Frenchman, about justice, order and anarchy, and just occasionally, about Scotland, which he would, she suspected like to see attached (in a highly liberal fashion) to France, if anywhere.'¹²⁷

Whelan rightly identified O'Brien's early tendency to weave his experience into his intellectual argument, which the former identified as his 'signature technique of auto-history'.¹²⁸ O'Brien's tendency to write himself into the subject he was reviewing was a corresponding phenomenon in O'Brien's criticism. His review of Sartre's autobiography *Words* is a good example of the way that O'Brien sublimated emotions in intellectualism. O'Brien attributed Sartre's philosophical preoccupation with freedom to the fact he lost his father at a young age. This is revealing in respect of O'Brien's parallel loss of his father at a young age. The first two pages of O'Brien's review focus on Sartre's loss of his father—and what made him a writer. Sartre defined his father's death as 'the great event of my life ... it gave me my freedom.'¹²⁹ O'Brien interprets Sartre's concern with the nature of freedom along lines that mirror his own experience losing a father, thereby inheriting the anxious weight of the maternal apparatus of power (imagined and otherwise) and influence. Embroiled in this psychoanalytical reading of Sartre's formative influences is the role of religion, of

¹²⁶ Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity, p. 2.

¹²⁷ Patricia Avis, *Playing the Harlot* (London, Virago, 1996), p. 176.

¹²⁸ Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity, p. 3.

¹²⁹ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 108.

God—the father. In terms that have an unavoidable resonance, O’Brien wrote that Sartre congratulated himself on not having had a father, ‘who would have crushed him, an eminent psychoanalyst, he says, found him to have no super-ego. He contrasts his own freedom, travelling alone, with that of his father-burdened contemporaries.’¹³⁰ While O’Brien’s relationship with his maternal grandfather went no way towards alleviating the loss of his father—as was ostensibly the case with Sartre—he arguably read the following passage of Sartre’s memoirs with a shudder of recognition:

Even today when I am in a bad mood I ask myself if I have not used up so many days and nights, covered so many sheets of paper with my ink, dumped on the market so many books that no one wanted, in the sole and mad hope of pleasing my grandfather. That would be a joke.¹³¹

There is a palpable air of affability on O’Brien’s part with the terms in which Sartre wrote about his relationship with God. O’Brien is humoured by the fact that ‘this atheist has been writing to please God.’¹³² The pattern of feeling that runs through the review demonstrates O’Brien’s ease with the terms in which Sartre expressed his experience. It also gives insight into why O’Brien was attracted to Sartre’s writing, namely for its ability to ‘probe and stir’ the sediments, of the ‘slow de-Christianization which was born in the Voltaire-influenced *haute bourgeoisie* and took a century to spread to every stratum of society.’¹³³

¹³⁰ O’Brien, *WP*, p. 109.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.109.

O'Brien clearly used French literature and historical experience as a filtering mechanism through which he processed aspects of his own historical experience. The French Revolution symbolised a profound rupture in French history, and as such it became a motif throughout O'Brien's writing. The epic quality of the French Revolution and the engendered psychic shock expressed in the literature that responded to the event resonated deeply with an aspect of O'Brien's consciousness. O'Brien, similarly to Sean O'Faolain, was compelled to draw on personal experience, and particular voices in history, to create an updated story for his 'race'.

2. Sean O’Faolain’s influence on O’Brien: “Killed by a Cork realist”

Conor Cruise O’Brien’s debut in *The Bell* came after O’Faolain suggested to Vivian Mercier, who O’Brien shared a room with in Trinity, that he write a series evaluating ‘the most vital serial publications available to the Irish public.’¹ Mercier agreed on the condition that he could share the task with O’Brien. What followed was a classic case of a young writer asserting his presence on the more established literary scene. Mercier wrote about *The Bell* and *The Irish Press*, and the O’Brien piece, ‘written in 1944 and published in 1945, was on the *Irish Independent*, his father’s paper.’²

O’Brien’s piece explored the different markets the English and Irish daily papers catered to. The English were directing their content, according to O’Brien, to ‘an irreligious market’, while the Irish paper had to satisfy the Catholic Church as well as the population at large: ‘From the start, every care was taken to ensure that it would succeed the *Freeman’s Journal* as the favourite daily of the Catholic clergy.’³ The *Irish Independent*, rather like *The Daily Mail*, had become more reflective of business interests, and consequently, ‘In the 1930s, this meant that it saw communism rampant everywhere there were democratic or populist tendencies.’⁴ Akenson quoted O’Brien’s opinion that ‘Spanish-type journalism has been a success ... We have not seen the last of it.’⁵

¹ Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O’Brien* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), p. 118.

² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

This polemical tone set the pace for future writing and O'Brien, writing under the pen name Donat O'Donnell, his nom de plume until he resigned from the civil service, had effectively launched himself in Irish letters. Akenson observed that 'What was left from his undergraduate days was a strange, not entirely admirable, tense relationship with Sean O'Faolain.'⁶ O'Faolain's stature as someone who 'had kept the faith in literature and in the life of the mind during the Dark Ages of modern Irish cultural life—the 1930s and 1940s,' was lauded by Akenson. O'Faolain's role in resisting the slide into 'a gombeen republic' through his novels, his biographies of key Irish patriots, his distinguished short stories, and his editorship of *The Bell*, was remarkable.⁷

O'Faolain read O'Brien's undergraduate poetry and had consequently urged him against proceeding in that form. It was honest, but harsh criticism for a young man with pretensions to poetry, and Akenson surmised that O'Brien never quite forgave O'Faolain for his advice, despite his 'publicly mouthed words of gratitude'.⁸ This speculation preceded Akenson's account of O'Brien's response to Vivian Mercier's criticism of *The Bell*, "A Rider to the Verdict", 'a deadly accurate four-page parody of *The Bell*.' Akenson suggests that O'Faolain in licensing such criticism crossed to 'virtual masochism'.⁹ O'Brien's parody of *The Bell* posed as a "trailer" for the next issue of *The Bell*. The piece 'harpooned just about everyone of importance in Irish nonfiction writing.'¹⁰ Incorporating 'mock book and theatre reviews, Conor concluded with a

⁶ Akenson, *Conor*, p. 119.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121. O'Brien's early mode of criticism was in keeping with tradition. His father, Francis Cruise O'Brien, had been a noted mimic and satirist. O'Brien noted this aspect of his father's personality, in relation to Yeats, in his essay "Passion and Cunning", p. 33.

devastating burlesque of O’Faolain’s style as an editorial writer’, titled “Speech From the Dock. By The Editor”.¹¹

Akenson reflected that after this intervention one might imagine ‘honour would have been satisfied.’¹² However, in an article in the March 1947 issue of *Horizon*, O’Brien twisted the sword:

The Bell ... in its caution, its realism, its profound but ambivalent nationalism, its seizures of stodginess and its bad paper, it reflects the class who write it and read it—teachers, librarians, junior civil servants, the lettered section of the Irish bourgeoisie.¹³

O’Brien’s literary combativeness did not end there but was taken up again in the *Sunday Independent* over a review O’Brien had written about a book titled *Art on the American Horizon*. Akenson noted the vitriolic nature of O’Brien’s response to O’Faolain. O’Brien declaimed that when O’Faolain ‘puts on his preaching clothes’, he ‘is indifferent to all qualifications, reservations, and shades of meaning.’¹⁴ The tone betrayed O’Brien’s complex at being spoken down to, and revealed his resentment against this father figure of Irish letters. According to O’Brien, the older writer wanted ‘to denounce smug young intellectuals for being superior about America, and I was “it.”’¹⁵

O’Brien felt that the tenor of O’Faolain’s review implied he thought ‘all American literature, including Henry James’, was ‘coarse’, ‘and that all American

¹¹ Akenson, *Conor*, p. 121.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

writers, including “James Faulkner” (whoever he may be) should try to achieve European standards of refinement.¹⁶ O’Brien then continued in a condescending tone to say he knew O’Faolain was a ‘busy man’ but that perhaps he would do him the honour of reading the book he was reviewing, followed by ‘reading my review attentively and, if possible, calmly.’¹⁷ Then O’Brien countered, the former might ‘ask himself whether what I said was really equivalent to “training Liam O’Flaherty to write like Proust”.’¹⁸ Beyond the obvious perturbation on O’Brien’s part, the response reflected a wider literary concern with the oppositions and correspondences of respective national literatures. O’Brien ended his defence by accusing O’Faolain of a ‘tendency to play mental skittles’ and asking him to live up to his ‘wise words’ in *The Bell* ‘about the ‘Dublin parlour-game’ of controversy. He was, O’Brien felt, ‘too old a controversialist not to recognize the familiar touch of the practised propagandist working himself up into a mock passion.’¹⁹

Paul Delaney has drawn attention to O’Faolain’s ‘assurance of tone and subject matter’, a stance ‘that was already outmoded by the time of its writing’.²⁰ O’Brien in the latter remarks appeared to be chafing at this tone, yet O’Brien adopted a strong authorial voice, and made it his trademark. O’Brien, like many intellectuals of his generation, was shaped and influenced by the ethos of *The Bell*. In an interview given in 1972 O’Brien acknowledged this influence: ‘Among living Irish writers Seán Ó Faolain influenced me more than anybody else when he was editor of *The Bell* by his

¹⁶ Akenson, *Conor*, p. 122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁰ Paul Delaney, *Seán O’Faoláin: Literature, Inheritance and the 1930s* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2014), p. 4.

astriquent criticism, which was very good for me at the time, although I did not realise this immediately, and in particular by his example in combining the activity of a writer with social criticism.²¹ The first editorial of *The Bell* was living proof that a republican background was no obstacle to inclusivity, ending 'with the declaration that *The Bell* belonged to the reader—'Gentile or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, priest or layman, Big House or Small House', and as such would prove attractive to those feeling that the version of republicanism they believed in, had been hijacked by republicanism in name only.²² Brad Kent has observed the way that O'Faolain and Peadar O'Donnell complemented each other as editors:

Together, they managed a disparate group of people who, at least at the outset, were mainly linked through their republicanism and had become both disillusioned and motivated by the conservative turn in the post-revolutionary era.²³

While O'Faolain's analysis of the Free State that emerged from the War of Independence was strident in tone, his attachment to the Ireland of his youth was powerful. It was hard to break the:

heavenly bond of an ancient, lyrical, permanent, continuous, immemorial self, symbolized by the lonely mountains, the virginal lakes, the traditional language, the simple, certain, uncomplex modes

²¹ Des Hickey & Gus Smith eds., *A Paler Shade of Green* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1972), pp. 231-32.

²² Brad Kent, Review of Niall Carson's *Rebel by Vocation: Seán O'Faoláin and the Generation of The Bell*, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 40 (2017), p. 277.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

of life, that world of the lost childhood of my race where I, too,
became for a while eternally young (IJ, 144).²⁴

O'Brien on the other hand, 'neither sprang from nor was he at all interested in simple folk.'²⁵ Bryan Fanning draws attention to O'Brien's observation 'that many *Horizon* writers, from the evidence of their profiles in *Who's Who*, had been educated at Eton and/or Oxford. They were from the "Brahmin class".'²⁶ Fanning similarly hones in on O'Brien's essay about *Horizon* (1945) to signal an O'Brien attitude, remarking that 'O'Brien was cut from equivalent stuff.'²⁷ O'Brien's attitude, in this case, is well-observed by Fanning, yet for a burgeoning writer in Dublin, at this period, publication in *The Bell* provided a platform for reaching a wider audience. By the mid-1930s O'Faolain had emerged into Irish public consciousness as a published writer, and a Harvard graduate. His time in Harvard had allowed him 'a respite from anger ... after being on the losing side in the Civil War of 1922'—and after deciding to return home in 1929, he knew he needed to break from anger and recrimination, 'lest it damage his writing.'²⁸

His daughter Julia O'Faolain, reflecting back on her father's life, asked a pertinent question: 'should a story-writer get embroiled in the needs of his hurt and hurtful tribe? Fight for or with it? Or deal with it only in fiction?' She concluded that 'In the course of Sean's ninety-one years there was room for all three choices.'²⁹ Julia

²⁴ Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain: A Life*, p. 45. Harmon is citing from O'Faolain's travelogue *An Irish Journey* (1940).

²⁵ Bryan Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 188.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

²⁸ Julia O'Faolain, "The Man Who Stayed", *The Irish Review* 26 (Autumn 2000), p. 7.

²⁹ O'Faolain, "The Man Who Stayed", p. 7.

O’Faolain claimed that her father ‘puzzled endlessly about his own motives and aspirations’, contesting the image of him as a ‘Janus-Johnny’, in favour of a writer whose ‘whole body of writing has an essential unity in that it constitutes an exercise in self-scrutiny in the French tradition (Think of Montaigne, Rousseau, Gide ...)’.³⁰

O’Brien was at this time a promising scholarship student in Trinity College. After reading French and Irish for his degree he went on to complete the honours ‘course in history within a single year.’³¹ Akenson claimed that this led to ‘a whole new way of thinking.’³² The curriculum in modern languages had focused on:

two sorts of thought: paradigmatic patterns, based on grammar; and, when interpreting literature, tangential thinking, working from one allusion to another, moving in great sweeping curves.³³

The modern history department in opposition to this, ‘taught him the more prosaic, straight-ahead, fact-based way of working’, and therefore provided O’Brien, ‘with a keel to balance his sail.’³⁴ Akenson argued that this combination contributed to O’Brien’s significant rhetorical and dialogical gifts. O’Brien trained these gifts in “The Parnellism of Seán O’Fáolain”, published in *Irish Writing* in 1948 and reprinted in *Maria Cross* (1952). O’Faolain was the only Irish writer to be considered in *Maria Cross*. The essay opens with a deeply felt evocation of how tradition is transmitted through the generations and suggests that highly imaginative writers have the capacity to ‘incorporate into their own lives a significant span of time before their individual

³⁰ O’Faolain, “The Man Who Stayed”, p. 7.

³¹ Akenson, *Conor*, p. 110.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

births.³⁵ In O'Brien's view, such power lay behind much great writing and 'the realists of today', despite their criticisms of the past, retain 'a powerful and often creative sense of tradition.'³⁶ This overture ends with O'Brien placing O'Faolain firmly in this category positing that in O'Faolain's case it 'is especially, perhaps morbidly, acute.'³⁷

O'Brien identified in O'Faolain's work a triple association between the 'separate ideas of national, spiritual and sexual emancipation', and, in so doing, coined the phrase 'parnellism' with a small 'p', as distinct from 'political Parnellism'.³⁸ He used this as a device to explore the literary resolutions O'Faolain arrived at in *Bird Alone* and *A Nest of Simple Folk*, interpreting the former as passive 'parnellism', an extension of self-pity, but arguing that it can also be dynamic, as in the latter, which 'planned to show the apotheosis of 'parnellism' in a moment of historical decision.'³⁹ This framework reveals as much about O'Brien's imagination as O'Faolain's; parnellism with a small p is like Rabbi Loew's Golem—a metaphor with endless combinations that serves its master's purpose.

O'Brien in this essay essentially accused O'Faolain of still being in thrall to the romantic nationalist world, and only when he dropped these 'idolatries of "Parnellism,"' would O'Faolain, in O'Brien's view, ever have 'a chance to turn his energies to something of more than local significance.'⁴⁰ Joe Cleary has observed that: 'This verdict suggested that for a younger critic such as O'Brien, O'Faolain appeared

³⁵ [Donat O'Donnell] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 95.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

even in the late 1940s as someone imaginatively shackled to the nationalist revivalist mentality that he was contesting in *The Bell*.⁴¹

O'Brien's tone when he suggested the avoidance of the "idolatries of Parnellism", as a prerequisite for creating a literature of 'more than merely local significance', is very telling here. He is distancing himself from O'Faolain, his adoption of a patrician tone betrays an oedipal instinct eager to establish critical autonomy. In the 1940s and 1950s in the south of Ireland, O'Faolain's stature was immeasurable in terms of the integrity of his conviction in the status of the artist and the critic. He had consolidated through *The Bell* what O'Brien would come to view as 'one of the most important functions of the critic', 'the exposure of prejudices and complacencies which hinder the understanding of a work of art.'⁴² O'Brien, as a fledgling scholar and critic, was undoubtedly influenced by O'Faolain's pronouncements and priorities. O'Faolain's literary gaze was like a revolving mirror and O'Brien, like many of his generation, found himself reflected in it. This was a precarious situation for a young writer with O'Brien's ambition and set of circumstances. In the 1940s, O'Brien was working as a civil servant and using his spare time to write.

O'Brien transposed O'Faolain's literary concerns onto a political frame to articulate an identity at once Irish, and European. Fanning makes a distinction between O'Brien's essay on O'Faolain, and on the other seven writers, whose works he approached critically, highlighting the strengths of the O'Faolain chapter, as it 'addressed a historical consciousness that permeated O'Brien's whole existence as

⁴¹ Joe Cleary, "Distress Signals: Sean O'Faolain and the Fate of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature", *Field Day Review* 5 (2009), p. 51.

⁴² Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Writers and Politics* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 184.

distinct from a European Catholic intellectual sensibility that he had tried on as an ill-fitting suit of clothes.⁴³ In a section of his essay entitled, “Faith, Fatherland and patriot games”, Fanning discusses O’Brien’s religious background, laying emphasis on O’Brien’s early education in ‘Protestant schools,’ with the suggestion that he ‘lacked experience of and had little interest in the kind of communal Irish Catholic identity depicted by writers such as Frank O’Connor or Patrick Kavanagh.’⁴⁴ O’Brien’s publications in the 1940s and 1950s evidence Fanning’s view, however, there was a negatory sense in which O’Brien was attuned to ‘communal Irish Catholic identity’. O’Brien initially strove to define himself in terms that set him against his ‘little platoon’, but his engagement with Burke changed the lineaments of this struggle for definition, and he began to increasingly define himself in terms of the ‘little platoon’, if only to heighten the intensity of his Cassandra voice.

Revisionism as Cultural Regeneration

O’Brien was actively engaged with cultural affairs by the mid-1930s and through his relations with Vivian Mercier and Sheehy-Skeffington was in close proximity to the group of writers centred around Sean O’Faolain and *The Bell*. When O’Faolain founded the Cancan’t club, ‘for the purpose of taking about everything and anything’, it consisted of Sheehy-Skeffington, Patrick Lynch, and Christo Gore-Grimes, three of O’Brien’s closest friends.⁴⁵ The various contributors to *The Bell* ‘were brought together in their desire to establish a more secular and just society as well as kick-

⁴³ Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future*, p. 190.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁵ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff: A Life of Owen Sheehy Skeffington 1909-1970* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1991), p. 211.

starting a cultural regeneration and resuscitating the dynamism of Irish literature.⁴⁶ It proved a vital lifeline for letters at a time when many of Ireland's writers were living in exile. The cultural regeneration that *The Bell* advocated warranted reflection, and this was fertile ground for those seeking new ways of understanding history. O'Faolain led the way in this endeavour writing a number of biographies on historical figures who loomed large in the Irish nationalist historical imagination. Maurice Harmon has reflected that the figures O'Faolain chose to reconfigure historically, and imaginatively, were creative individuals, 'living at a time of great social change, at a pivotal moment in history, and capable of meeting that change effectively'.⁴⁷ In Harmon's opinion, 'O'Faolain's admiration for that achievement and for that kind of creative relationship with one's environment' revealed 'his own needs and his own aspirations.'⁴⁸ Yet, O'Faolain's fictional heroes were 'frustrated social reformers', none had 'the imaginative vitality or the intelligence to see into the life of their own time, to understand it, and to give it a destination.'⁴⁹ The need to see a pattern and a destination was something O'Faolain hankered after.

His book *The Irish* set out 'to write a creative history of the growth of the racial mind', and to tell 'the story of the development of a national civilization.'⁵⁰ O'Faolain was addressing a need given that the great majority of existing histories, 'were nationalistic, patriotic, political, and sentimental.'⁵¹ His manifest purpose was to move

⁴⁶ Brad Kent, Review of Niall Carson's *Rebel by Vocation: Seán O'Faoláin and the Generation of The Bell*, p. 277.

⁴⁷ Maurice Harmon, "Seán O'Faoláin: 'I Have Nobody to Vote For'", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 56.221 (Spring 1967), p. 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵⁰ Sean O'Faolain, *The Irish* (London: Penguin, 1947), p. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

beyond sentimental histories in order to graft a new narrative in the living tissue of history. Joe Lee has written of O’Faolain’s ‘superb eye for the big historical question.’⁵² Lee discerned in O’Faolain a ‘rare combination of imagination and intelligence, the tension between heart and head, between passion and reason’, that enabled ‘him to transcend the limits of positivistic history.’⁵³ The former description of O’Faolain is very important in understanding the tensions at the heart of writing history in the post-civil war period. Lee’s praise of O’Faolain rested on his ability to balance opposites, which revealed a tendency to see the good historian as part artist, part prophet, transcending ‘the limits of positivistic history.’⁵⁴ This antipathy to positivistic history can be explained along different lines, a part Yeatsian, part Catholic, antipathy to materialism; a siding with a view of history at once more creative, and less empirical, than the British positivist/empiricist strand of history. This approach to history writing would be further developed by O’Brien in his later essay on Michelet.

O’Brien, similarly to O’Faolain, had a tendency to identify with his subject. This approach to history required justification and O’Brien, in an early example of this line of apologetics, carefully constructed a case for the defence of Jules Michelet, in response to what he called ‘the bloody maniac’ school. O’Brien’s writing on Michelet is, like his writing on Burke, a useful way of excavating the development of O’Brien’s thought process. O’Brien’s sympathy is clearly with Michelet against the more scientific historicizing of the Naimerite tradition of historiography. In his deconstruction of Michelet’s strengths and weaknesses, O’Brien gives us a glimpse of

⁵² J. J. Lee, Review of *The Irish*, “Seán O’Faoláin: 1900–1991”, *The Cork Review* (1991), p. 67.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

his own evaluative criteria, and an early justification for the method he was in the process of making his own. There are key ideas in his essay on Michelet that touch on a number of themes which preoccupied O'Brien, chief among them the notion that the historian as artist is more truthful than the historian as scientist. This instinct suited his emerging style and in drawing out the deficiencies of Michelet's critics, he provides readers with an insight into his preferred modes of history writing—and his scepticism towards the notion that the writing of history could be approached as a strictly scientific endeavour.

Like many of his subjects O'Brien's attraction to Michelet stemmed from a sense of kinship with his method. O'Brien was imaginatively at home with the tenor of Michelet's thought—far less so with those of his critics. O'Faolain had led the way in fashioning historical figures according to his own purposes. Each historical figure O'Faolain approached reflected an element in the biographer's personality, and crucially the latent potential of that personality—often beset on all sides by the leavening masses. The latter is a motif that runs through O'Faolain's work, which reveals the cultural influence of 'existentialist' notions of 'the herd', 'the masses', 'the they', which frustrate the writer and artist. O'Faolain revealed this inflection in his thought in *The Irish* when he empathized with the author of *Parliament Clan Thomas*:

I say it in no spirit of democratic enthusiasm for the 'common people' who are to the artist and the intellectual, so often a bore and an aggravation, whose lives and minds are most creative and interesting

when they themselves are most poor and least emancipated, as
when Yeats 'discovered' them, still a traditional peasantry.⁵⁵

Disenchanted Rebels and a Hermeneutics of Failure

O'Faolain came to resent the way that revolutionary rhetoric had manipulated and stolen innocence from the youth and what made this realization more bitter was his growing sense that: 'The Rebel probably never cared. He was devoted to failure. He was a professional or vocational failure', laughing cheerfully 'at his possible, indeed probable, fate.'⁵⁶ In assessing what the Irish rebel had sacrificed, O'Faolain was resolute that the hardest thing to bear was how the rebel had sacrificed 'the better part of his mind.'⁵⁷ He considered 'Men like Tone, Mitchel, Doheny', as 'smothered talents', who had deprived themselves 'and Ireland, of as much as they gave', who had choked the 'the critical side of their minds'.⁵⁸ O'Faolain concluded that:

they were good rebels in proportion as they were bad
revolutionaries, so that their passion for change and their vision of
change never pierced to organic change, halted dead at the purely
modal and circumstantial.⁵⁹

The next entry in this passage is noteworthy in that it prefigured O'Brien's later imaginative and critical tendency to use the French Revolution as a comparative device, or a harbinger of sorts.⁶⁰ O'Faolain drew attention to Matthew Arnold's

⁵⁵ O'Faolain, *The Irish*, p. 104.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.105.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

suggestion that the French Revolution had its source ‘in a great movement of feeling, not in a great movement of mind.’⁶¹ O’Faolain used this summation to justify his belief that Irish rebels, ‘devoted their lives and all their beings to passion rather than to thought’.⁶² O’Faolain’s notion that Irish rebels had primarily seized ‘upon the emotional content’ and not the ‘intellectual content’ of revolution was a strain of thought that O’Brien would eventually harness to his own ends.⁶³ O’Faolain’s charge that this had led to a body of ‘Irish patriotic literature’ concerned ‘with matters of sentiment rather than thought’ laid the ground for O’Brien’s later revisionism.⁶⁴

Lee justifiably points out that, ‘Long before the current controversy about “revisionism”, O Faolain had been a constructive revisionist who almost wholly rejected the nationalist political concept ‘of Ireland always on the defensive against foreign enemies.’⁶⁵ O’Faolain told his reader that they might be:

a little taken aback at the record which looks at Nationality solely from the point of view of Civilisation; which, for example, is interested almost exclusively in the great *gifts* brought to Ireland by the Norman invasion.⁶⁶

Many of O’Brien’s later positions are introduced on the pages of *The Irish*. O’Faolain prepared the way for O’Brien’s later ‘electric shock to the psyche’. O’Faolain’s sense of invasions as a ‘gift’ rather than a sufferance was an early example of the narrative revisions to come; ‘they brought into the landlocked lagoon of Gaelic

⁶¹ O’Faolain, *The Irish*, p. 105.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁶⁵ J.J. Lee, Review of *The Irish* “Seán O’Faoláin: 1900–1991”, p. 67.

⁶⁶ Sean O’Faolain, *The Irish*, p. 5.

literature welcome gushes from the world's seas.'⁶⁷ In its emphasis on the imagination, creative historiography, and beneficence, it was a significant contribution to a changing historical landscape.

This was a sign of the way winds were blowing in the late 1940s—an early signalling towards new historical approaches, which would contest the received wisdom of Irish nationalist mythology. O'Faolain had been seduced during his adolescence, and time in UCC, by a version of cultural nationalism that wove uncomplicated narratives, and he set about unravelling the threads. The themes that ran through O'Faolain's corpus of writing were themes that were taken up and developed by O'Brien. In O'Brien's influential essay *The Embers of Easter* (1966) he articulated his generation's frustration with the shibboleths of Irish nationalist rhetoric. In this essay he answered O'Faolain's call for writers to dispel with illusions and romantic national myths, and to come to maturity as befits those living in a Free State. O'Faolain created the conditions for criticism to exist and be taken seriously in the fledging State. O'Faolain's stature as an exemplary in the field of Irish literature paved the way for a succeeding generation to take literature and its claims for itself to heart. He had carved a space in *The Bell* for intellectuals to document the consciousness of their generation.

By 1966 O'Brien was moved to write that the Irish State, as it had come into existence, constituted a 'violation of the principles' of its founders.⁶⁸ He expressed his frustration with the nature of this violation in terms of betrayal, advancing the idea that the contradictions that existed between the ideals expounded, and the reality that

⁶⁷ Sean O'Faolain, *The Irish*, p. 64.

⁶⁸ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Embers of Easter 1916-1966", *Irish Times*, 7 April 1966, p. 16.

ensued, had ‘a strong, still unexplored, effect on the psychology of my generation, those who are roughly coeval with the state.’⁶⁹ O’Brien stressed how pervasive the tradition of Irish nationalism was, and how deeply it affected the personality of those brought up in it. Through the logical exposition of the divergence between national narratives, and national facts, he exposed the narratological distortions that so affected his contemporaries:

From within this tradition the partition of the country seems not a wrong—which is an empty rhetorical expression—but just wrong, as a picture hung in a certain way is wrong, causing vague but persistent feelings of perplexity and dissatisfaction.⁷⁰

Here, we find O’Brien’s trademark style—a succinct articulation of the way the political presses down on the individual in society. After wondering if his generation bought into the idea that partition was ‘just a temporary hitch,’ he claimed to doubt that they fully believed it, ‘but we found it a more comfortable concept than the alternative: the thought that Irish history, in the sense in which we had understood it, had come to an ignominious end.’⁷¹

O’Brien in 1966, blushed to recall that he once devoted considerable time and energy to an “anti-partition” campaign as part of his professional duties as a member of the Department of External Affairs. He concluded with hindsight that, ‘The only positive result of this activity, as far as I was concerned, was that it led me to discover

⁶⁹ O’Brien, “The Embers of Easter 1916-1966”, p. 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

the cavernous inanities of “anti-partition” and of Government propaganda generally.’⁷² O’Brien proceeded to explain the implicit, and explicit, agenda of those propagating such activity, ‘Nominally, the object of this activity was to convince others—Ulstermen, Englishmen, Americans’ of the wrong that had been done to them, ‘the perfidy of our enemies’, but perhaps, O’Brien suggested, the actual ‘object was to console ourselves for the rubbish that our history had turned into.’⁷³

O’Brien’s regrets over his former commitment to “anti-partition” government propaganda is reminiscent of O’Faolain’s later embarrassment of his early book on de Valera. Both writers experienced the pull of nationalist commitment and lived to question and reject many of the forms their commitment took. This compelled them to explore further the source, and nature, of what had clouded their judgement. O’Faolain expressed his feelings on de Valera in terms of categorical ambivalence. ‘Sometimes he’s a hound of hell to me. Sometimes I see him lyrically’, whereas, O’Brien became determined to deconstruct the feelings nationalist rhetoric engendered in others, and how religion was bound up in the manipulation of those susceptible to its charms.⁷⁴

O’Faolain had led the way in his questioning, particularly in his early rejection of those who preyed on the idealism of youth for their own selfish ends. O’Faolain used the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising to pen an open letter to ‘fellow old republicans’ to remind them that ‘the object of the freedom for which they had fought was “the pursuit of the happiness of the nation and of the individuals that

⁷² O’Brien, “The Embers of Easter 1916-1966”, p. 16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁷⁴ Harmon, *Sean O’Faolain: A Life*, p. 104.

compose that Nation".⁷⁵ O'Faolain decried that since no political party shared this aspiration 'Republicans like himself were disenfranchised.'⁷⁶ O'Faolain criticized a mentality 'whose image of life' was based on privilege and patterned on the old colonial model, 'thriving on the same theory of God-made inequality, welcoming and abetting ... the repression of every sign of individual criticism.'⁷⁷

O'Brien in his essay, coterminous to O'Faolain's, "The Embers of Easter" was similarly beginning to articulate an emotional substratum of Irish public life and the feelings that governed behaviour at both a public and private level. Declan Kiberd has noted that, 'The radical ideas of the nation, espoused so movingly in the artistic and political works of the Revival, did not fit at all well into the flawed forms of the inherited state.'⁷⁸ Yet, while O'Brien lamented that southern Irish people had no cause for 'self-congratulation on the fiftieth anniversary of The Rising, he also warned against 'that cynicism which is the obverse of our hypocrisy.'⁷⁹ In an early intimation of future obsessions, he reminded his readership that 'Much of what went wrong was inevitable, like the division of the country.'⁸⁰

O'Brien spread the blame widely among those who had 'cooperated in nonsense, or failed to expose it', those, like himself, who had perpetuated fantastic ideas through the "anti-partition" campaign, 'or quietly acquiesced in the injustice being systematically practised against the children of the poor in Ireland.'⁸¹ These were

⁷⁵ O'Faolain, "The Man Who Stayed", p. 6.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁷⁸ Declan Kiberd, "Irish writers were an early warning system about abuse", *Irish Times*, 21 October 2017, p. 25.

⁷⁹ O'Brien, "The Embers of Easter 1916-1966", p. 16.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 16.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 16.

issues that Sheehy-Skeffington had been relentlessly highlighting throughout his life.⁸²

The Clergy, 'but not exclusively the Catholic clergy, have their share of the responsibility, and members of the Hierarchy have a share in proportion to their power', but those meriting the greatest share of responsibility are 'those laymen, both politicians and voters, in whom the very thought of a hypothetical clerical rebuke induced a chronic mental cringe.'⁸³

In O'Faolain's distrust of romance, promotion of realism, and his self-appointed task as dispeller of romantic nationalist myths, he created the ideal literary conditions for a writer like O'Brien to emerge. More important, however, was the nature of the realism O'Faolain aspired to. Joe Cleary has suggested that what O'Faolain's criticism pursued was not a 'realism' that was simply the opposite of 'romance' but rather one that had somehow assimilated 'romance' into itself.⁸⁴ O'Brien's realism, to a great degree shaped by the poetic tradition of W.B. Yeats, and the writing of Edmund Burke, was a realism that rejected 'romance'. What has been viewed as a conservative turn in his later politics has much to do with this submerged poetic realism coming to the surface in the form of arguments pertaining to tradition and nationalism.

O'Faolain in *The Irish* put forward the idea that a sense of the 'otherworld' has dominated the Celtic imagination and literature from the beginning. He expressed it in terms that are redolent of the subterranean fears and labyrinthine uncertainties that lurked beneath much of O'Brien's assured prose:

⁸² Julia O'Faolain recounted a disapproving letter she received from her father Sean O Faolain, after he heard that she had been on a march to protest internment in Northern Ireland. O'Faolain wrote, 'I follow Owen Skeffington, whose line on the North always was that he did not care who ran the place so long as everybody got a fair deal.' Julia O'Faolain, "The Man Who Stayed", p. 6.

⁸³ O'Brien, "The Embers of Easter 1916-1966", p. 16.

⁸⁴ Cleary, "Distress Signals: Sean O'Faolain and the Fate of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature", p. 53.

So I see him at any rate struggling, through century after century, with this imaginative domination, seeking for a synthesis between dream and reality, aspiration and experience, a shrewd knowledge of the world and a strange reluctance to cope with it, and tending always to find the balance not in an intellectual synthesis but in the rhythm of a perpetual emotional oscillation.⁸⁵

This vision is illustrative of a compulsion that encapsulates much of O'Brien's oeuvre, and inasmuch, also demonstrated O'Faolain's attunement to the emotional continuities—in the form of emotional oscillation, and intellectual challenges, facing a writer of his generation. Much of O'Faolain's writing, particularly his biographical writing, experiments with the nature of character and the potential of personality. *The Irish*, alternatively, provides readers with an opportunity to explore how a writer of his generation understood and expressed the nature and source of artistic expression in a pre-literate people—and by default gives an insight into the mentality of a generation of intellectuals whose frustrations and hopes he expressed.

To understand O'Brien's milieu as an ambitious young intellectual in the 1930s and 1940s it is essential to understand the personalities that were fashioning the literary narratives he was shaped by. Sean O'Faolain is a key figure in this constellation, not least because the magazine that he co-founded with Peadar O'Donnell in 1940, *The Bell*, gave a platform and voice to many writers. *The Bell* emerged as part of a quest to define an intellectual tradition in opposition to the passionate idealism, often uncritical in its emphasis, that had transfixed O'Faolain and many of his generation.

⁸⁵ Sean O'Faolain, *The Irish*, p. 11.

The ethos of *The Bell* was articulated in terms that strove towards a ‘Republican culture instead of a tradition of Republican sentimentality.’⁸⁶ George William Russell (Æ) wrote to O’Faolain after reading *Midsummer Night Madness* (1932) and with characteristic generosity expressed his feeling that O’Faolain and his ‘generation must create its own ideals as the generation to which I belonged...’ He urged him to do, with his comrade Frank O’Connor—and others—‘what Yeats and others did for my generation.’⁸⁷ *The Bell* set out to do that within a decade of Russell’s advice.

The ensuing struggle against romantic myths and naive sentimentality was undertaken in the early editorials of *The Bell*. The clarion call was sounded towards a cooler, more rational and constructive approach to life—as it was actually lived—in the Free State. O’Faolain, and many of the contributors, were part of a generation that had come of age during the War of Independence. They had experienced the seductions of idealism and revolution, its brotherhood of man, only to have those ideals shattered by the Civil War that followed the emergence of the Free State. Many of these men had responded passionately to the call to arms during both the War of Independence and the Civil War that followed. They had taken to heart the idealism espoused by their revolutionary mentors. ‘There was much to be bitter about’, during the Civil War, when the government set up military courts and classified Republicans as criminals, ‘In just over six months the Government executed eighty-one Republicans, thirty-four in January 1923 alone.’⁸⁸ As Harmon noted, O’Faolain was to describe each death as a ‘bruise on his soul.’⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Harmon, *Sean O’Faolain: A Life*, p. 62.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

According to O’Faolain, de Valera had ‘high ideals but no sense of reality and swung us with him—young men.’⁹⁰ This left them susceptible to the wounds of disappointment when the realities of the new Free State became manifest in the realpolitik of a State allied to Church power. Harmon stressed that it took ‘many years and many books and articles before Sean would be able to place himself and the events that had moulded him into some kind of rational perspective.’⁹¹ Yet O’Faolain, wounded by the needless deaths during the Civil War, led the way towards a critical questioning of idealism. This desire to contain the body of emotions stirred by the War of Independence and the Civil War, and to discern a pattern and destination in events was a lifelong concern. O’Faolain rejected his former mentor Daniel Corkery—a well-known exponent of romantic nationalist ideals—and came to view writers like W.B. Yeats and Corkery as ‘revolutionaries and romantics who thought of art and society exclusively in terms of politics and nation.’⁹² As a result, these writers ‘could never adapt themselves to the post-revolutionary world or to the post-revolutionary tasks that O’Faolain and his peers had inherited.’⁹³

Reflecting on this time in *Vive Moi!*, he came to see much of his former idealism as an aberration of character, remembering Corkery’s words ‘All idealists are callous’, and interpreting his own experience of blind idealism as a time when he quickly became ‘heartless, humourless, and pitiless.’⁹⁴ O’Brien was circumstantially primed for this exegesis on the nature of commitment to abstractions such as Faith and Fatherland, coming from a family whose fate was bound up with the form these abstractions took

⁹⁰ Maurice Harmon, *Sean O’Faolain: A Life*, p. 60.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁹² Cleary, “Distress Signals: Sean O’Faolain and the Fate of Twentieth-Century Irish Literature”, p. 52.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁹⁴ Harmon, *Sean O’Faolain: A Life*, p. 59.

in Irish rhetoric and political life. O'Brien would, in time, run the gauntlet of criticism for his relentless adherence to an idea O'Faolain was working out in the aftermath of his earlier commitments—an adherence that became more relentless as O'Brien's career progressed. O'Faolain's generation were cut off from their forebears by an inheritance that had been fought for by successive generations, except that it wasn't exactly the inheritance they were prepared for by their mentors. The nature of this inheritance made it necessary to challenge the literary and rhetorical foundations it was built on, something of a mixed blessing for O'Faolain's generation. O'Faolain had tired of the 'reiteration of principles', 'the people needed facts, they needed reason and intellect'.⁹⁵

While defining experience and literature in generational terms is problematic, O'Faolain approached his criticism of Irish writing in generational terms largely to proscribe, and circumscribe, the task facing his peers. Therefore, it was less a critical term than a structuring device which separated those who pandered to an 'ersatz' literature, as opposed to those who sought after a literature that reflected 'a dignity that depends largely on the oneness of man.'⁹⁶ This earlier concern was recurrent in his criticism, and expressed in similar language. O'Faolain continued to be frustrated by his impression that 'the new public', 'didn't really want 'realistic', 'political', 'representational' or 'social' plays, 'they wanted these things in an ersatz form: plays that merely gave the illusion of being political, realistic, social, critical, and so on.'⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain: A Life*, p. 62.

⁹⁶ Sean O'Faolain, "Plea for a New Type of Novel", *Virginia Quarterly Review* 95.4 (Spring 1934, republished online, Winter 2019). <<https://www.vqronline.org/essay/plea-new-type-novel>> [accessed 12 September 2019].

⁹⁷ Seán Ó'Faoláin, "Fifty Years of Irish Writing", *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, p. 100.

Existentialism – ‘the back door to theology’

In what may be one of the more telling expressions of the influence of what can be loosely termed existentialist writing on mid-twentieth-century Irish intellectuals, O’Faolain decried the ‘whole breaking down process which goes on in civilisation’, betrayed in the over analysis of character in literature.⁹⁸ It is worth quoting at length to get a sense of the existential conclusion:

ever since, in the effort to assert the dignity of man, the Renaissance tore him from his stable position in the community. Dozens of observers have commented on this disunification of the soul—Berdyaeu, Mauriac, Belgion, Yeats, Chesterton, Maritain. To the one it is due to the lost sense of the difference between good and evil; to another it is due to the worship of the dividing brain instead of the unifying heart; to another it is all to be traced to the growth of individualism in politics; others think criticism has outstepped creation. But whatever the cause, everywhere one sees the breaking down process, the watch-menders at their evil work.⁹⁹

O’Faolain showed his concern with the ‘dividing brain’ in his analysis of the mind at work in Cardinal Newman. ‘The trouble with Newman’ is that he was ‘too good at refining and analysing his own mental processes, with the result that his biographers generally failed to realize that what he was really doing was transforming emotion into intellect and thus, in a certain sense and from the highest motives, falsifying

⁹⁸ O’Faolain, “Plea for a New Kind of Novel”.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

experience.¹⁰⁰ This qualification of Newman's critical skills is at odds with his comments in "Fifty Years of Irish Writing."¹⁰¹ This attests to the prevalent mood of ambivalence in terms of what Irish literature should represent at this period. By the 1950s, O'Faolain had moved on from Daniel Corkery's insular and nationalist proscriptions as to what 'authentic' Irish writing should consist of. However, the instincts of the Catholic imagination may have been harder for O'Faolain to ignore. This is given almost lyrical expression in his analysis of 'Newman's reply to a little-known pamphlet by Dr Fausset of Magdalen College, Oxford, written in 1838 and attacking the Tractarian position on the eucharist'.¹⁰²

O'Faolain begins by suggesting that what at first appears to be an 'apparently dry-as-dust essay into theology, is a courtship between the Imagination and the Reason', which aims to do what he later defines as 'the aim of all development in thought—to crown an early impression of the Imagination as a system or creed in the Reason'.¹⁰³ It is worth quoting at length his assessment to get a sense of O'Faolain's existentialist sensibility at this period.

If anybody feels this is a dull adventure he can never have experienced the ecstasies of applying language to the refinement of thought in the effort to capture some philosophical concept at once abstract and material, evanescent and permanent, or even to define some historical event. If we doubt this we might ask, say, some

¹⁰⁰ F.S.L. Lyons, "Seán O'Faoláin as Biographer", *Irish University Review* 6.1 (Spring 1976), p. 108.

¹⁰¹ In this essay he laments the absence of 'a deep cutting critical objectivity' in the Irish literary movement.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

philosopher to explain the meaning of the word Existence ... The experience, according to one's nature, will be amusing or terrifying, or even disgusting, in its revelation of the powers and vagaries of reason falling into unreason, an unreason masquerading as reason, and reason sensibly aware of its limitations and functioning within them; and, perhaps, in the end, we will feel that the only certainty is with the artist or the mystic for whom all language dilates ultimately into a symbol.¹⁰⁴

This may go some way towards an understanding of the ambivalent thought processes of O'Faolain, swerving between reason and unreason. O'Brien in his analysis of the imaginative patterns in Catholic writing observed that the most common feature of all the patterns was a sense of exile, 'The foreign shore on which these exiles find themselves is known by various names. Of these the most current, because the most consciously accepted, is modernity.'¹⁰⁵ O'Faolain was a complex figure, not entirely at home with the 'modernizing thrust' of Irish society, and society elsewhere.¹⁰⁶ Existentialist writing, or what has been loosely classified as existentialist, writers like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolay Berdyaev and Albert Camus, appealed to O'Faolain and O'Brien largely because the subjects they dealt with provided distancing mechanisms, which helped them to heal internal divisions.

These writers reached beyond the divides to a more universal sense of alienation that was shared by everyone. The political and religious ambiguities

¹⁰⁴ F.S.L. Lyons, "Seán O'Faoláin as Biographer", p. 109.

¹⁰⁵ O'Brien, *MC*, p. 229.

¹⁰⁶ Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune* (Dublin: Field Day, 2007), p. 4.

'existentialist' writers expressed made it ideally suited to the Irish intellectual climate of that period. In Sartre's formulation, 'Its very indeterminism', enabled existentialism 'to provide a forum and a language in which various religious, secular idealist and anti-religious advocates', were able to negotiate the complicated nature of twentieth-century religious and political commitment.¹⁰⁷

Brad Kent has noted how Niall Carson in his book *Rebel by Vocation*, 'sees strands of romanticism and even inter-modernism in his fiction', while also shedding 'light on O'Faoláin's troubled relationship with modernism'.¹⁰⁸ Carson re-evaluated him in the light of other writers of his own generation, but a case is to be made that what has been often construed as 'romanticism' in his novels, and critical yearning, is an inflection gleaned from reading a large number of works that have been loosely categorized as existentialist. O'Faolain's literary internationalism in this sense had a formative influence on O'Brien, foreshadowing the latter's commitment to understanding patterns of imagination in a number of Catholic writers.

O'Brien's genius in the late 1960s and early 1970s lay in his ability to light up the intersection between the public and the private sphere of life. The increasingly international context of his literary influences, and life, which increased after Ireland joined the UN, must have come as a relief from the tensions of trying to rationalize the events, and associated emotions, of 1916-1923, which preoccupied writers born into the confusion of the time. O'Brien's writing and his editorial decisions in *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* suggest a writer less concerned with the economic and sociological

¹⁰⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, (London: Methuen, 1974) p. 15.

¹⁰⁸ Brad Kent, Review of Niall Carson's *Rebel by Vocation: Seán O'Faoláin and the Generation of The Bell*, p. 277.

dimension of life than the literary-poetic potential of politics and history, Niall Meehan noted that:

It has been argued that O'Brien's commentary tended to diminish the role of socio-economic forces. His politics were literary and his aesthetics political, so much so that in his historical imagination art produced action.¹⁰⁹

O'Faolain's book *The Irish* had similarly lacked a sociological dimension, something that O'Faolain acknowledged, 'No word about Trade Unions or workers, or social life of the poor Irish in the towns and cities; no word about British law and Irish adaptations of it.'¹¹⁰ O'Faolain's feeling that 'All we can ever hope to create ... is an image of ourselves' is indicative of the mentality of intellectuals at that period.¹¹¹ They were less concerned with bread and butter issues than with spiritual regeneration and cultural renewal. It is worth exploring why this was the case. It could be argued that it was a residue of the Yeatsian antipathy to English materialism that inflected much of O'Faolain's writing and complicated O'Brien's. This, in both O'Faolain's and O'Brien's case, led to a literary approach to history writing. The historical personages that compelled them were larger than life figures. There is something Carlylean in their attraction towards charismatic and powerful men in history. Paul Delaney has brought attention to this influence on O'Faolain, 'his biographies display the influence of the

¹⁰⁹ Niall Meehan, "Arrested development: Conor Cruise O'Brien, 1917–2008" *History Ireland* 17.2 (March/April 2009).

¹¹⁰ Harmon, *Sean O'Faolain*, p. 175.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Victorian idea of the hero, and in particular Thomas Carlyle's influential set of lectures and essays *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841).'¹¹²

History as Autobiography

Fanning has observed that 'In O'Brien's oeuvre cultural politics and family history were intertwined.'¹¹³ In his foreword to his ground-breaking book *States of Ireland*, O'Brien unabashedly situated himself in relation to his personal and 'complex' experience of both the Catholic and Protestant communities in Ireland, admitting that this fact may partly explain his compulsion to understand the relation between them.¹¹⁴ He qualified the former admission by telling the reader that while these communities have different attitudes to Britain, so too did members of his own family:

My family was a political one, and the activities of its members, since the eighteen-seventies, traversed at different times most of the range of what seemed politically, culturally and socially possible and desirable within their own community.¹¹⁵

O'Brien confessed to being 'undoubtedly affected by family influences', as well as by his 'later education'.¹¹⁶ Therefore in order for the reader to understand 'the historical standpoint from which the enquiry begins', he includes a 'thread of family history', alongside general history.¹¹⁷

¹¹² Paul Delaney, *Seán O'Faoláin: Literature, Inheritance and the 1930s* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2014), p. 49.

¹¹³ Fanning, *Histories of The Irish Future*, p. 188.

¹¹⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 18.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Fanning has also demonstrated O'Brien's tendency to draw on ancestral voices noting that, 'Various ancestral voices were palatable presences within his analyses of Irish nationalism. His writings on current affairs and politics drew heavily on autobiography'.¹¹⁸ This is ironic given O'Brien's recurrent criticism of the seductive power of ancestral voices in Irish nationalism. O'Brien, however, was unapologetic for his method. In *Ancestral Voices* (1994) O'Brien stated frankly that his interest in the general subject matter 'derived mainly from my family's share in the specific Irish experiences of the workings of these formidable world-historical forces'.¹¹⁹ Roy Foster has suggested an element of the return of the repressed in O'Brien's work, with his emphasis on atavism, ancestral memory, and his own arguably sublimated sense of his family as a dispossessed ruling class.¹²⁰ O'Brien's essay on Sean O'Faolain had given his readers a sense of how O'Brien understood the transmission of history as essentially beginning in the family.

A recurring theme in O'Brien's writing is an exploration of the nature of history writing and the very knowability of history. It is the primary theme of his essay on Michelet and it is also a component of his argument in "The Embers of Easter". O'Brien argued for the 'uses' of speculation, which is 'often called futile' because 'it helps us to reconstruct the possible universe which great men strove to bring into being.'¹²¹ O'Brien warned that people were prone to regarding their 'being in the universe', in terms 'of "how it actually turned out"' thus 'conferring on us some kind of advantage in retrospect.' He cautioned that the advantage was 'illusory' and that 'our knowledge

¹¹⁸ Fanning, *Histories of The Irish Future*, p. 188.

¹¹⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland*. (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1994) p. 1.

¹²⁰ During questions at the centenary conference in Trinity College Dublin (3 November 2017).

¹²¹ O'Brien, "The Embers of Easter 1916-1966", p. 16.

of “how it actually turned out” was ‘in reality a block to our comprehension of a historical figure in action’, whose ‘primary characteristic is precisely the lack of that knowledge which distinguishes us.’ O’Brien concluded that if the actor had had that knowledge ‘he would not act as he did; he might not act at all; he might despair and die.’¹²²

O’Brien’s *Memoir* provides readers with many examples of a writer anxious to situate himself, via his family connections, in the wider historical picture. This is not so much self-aggrandizement, as a psyche anxious to understand the ways that historical events impinged on his ancestors and changed the course of their lives—and consequently his own future destiny. Whelan, in a chapter dealing with the resultant influence of O’Brien’s father on his son’s life, places emphasis on the antipathy displayed by David and Bessie Sheehy to his father’s designs on their daughter, O’Brien’s future mother. According to Whelan, the rift which emerged in the Sheehy family divided along the lines of those who supported the relationship and those who opposed it. This had repercussions long after Francis Cruise O’Brien and Kathleen Sheehy got married. These and other stories led to a tendency on O’Brien’s part to think in a ‘what if’ mode, and O’Brien’s writing is replete with references to unexpected consequences of political decisions, and counter-factuals.

O’Brien’s historical imagination strove to understand the conjunction of the personal and the political, of politics and fate—the latter was particularly compelling to his literary imagination. This goes some way towards explaining O’Brien’s recurrent use of counterfactuals. In his *Memoir* O’Brien informed his reader that: ‘Most of us

¹²² O’Brien, “The Embers of Easter 1916-1966”, p. 16.

don't know that the Irish Jews were on Hitler's list, and some of the few who do know seemed to have missed the significance of the listing.'¹²³ He explained how he discovered in the course of his research for a book on Israel in the 1980s, the arresting fact that about '4,000, or so' Irish Jews, were on 'Hitler's list'.¹²⁴

It was only then he wrote, that he began to think about 'what would have happened to Ireland if the Nazis had won the war'.¹²⁵ He explained that 'up to that time', he had assumed, 'as most Irish people did assume, that Ireland's independence would have been respected by the victorious Nazis, just as the victorious allies did in fact respect it.'¹²⁶ However, his new discovery suggested otherwise. The Jews, he believed, would have been murdered, 'and the independence of a country that insisted on continuing to harbour them would be violated in order to have them murdered, and anyone who tried to protect them would also have been murdered.'¹²⁷

In a very revealing follow-up to this stark passage, O'Brien explained that it took him some time 'to digest the full implications of that statistic from Hitler's list', and that once he had 'digested these general implications', he 'began to consider 'their particular implications for me and for Owen: Owen being the hinge.' As he lays bare his thought processes on a subject of grave historical proportions, his first instinct was to place himself and Sheehy-Skeffington immediately to the fore in its implications. Here and elsewhere his imagination struck outwards from himself and his family towards the wider society around them, and outwards from there to envelop international

¹²³ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 91.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

conflicts—that very often mirrored the concerns of his own ‘little platoon’. With perceptible sincerity, O’Brien proceeded with his imagined personal historical scenario:

Had it not been for Owen, I might well have kept my head down,
even had the Nazis come and taken the Irish Jews in order to murder
them; kept my head down and tried to escape to America. But I knew
Owen could not have kept his head down.¹²⁸

His lifelong tendency to admire Sheehy-Skeffington, and the revelatory repetition of ‘kept my head down’, is here given decidedly political expression. His cousin, ‘would have protested, even in the knowledge that protest meant certain death, and he would have died with the conviction that he was following the example set by his father at Easter, 1916.’¹²⁹ The latter statement contains at least two themes that were larger than life in O’Brien’s thought and writing: the role and responsibility of a committed intellectual and man of action, and ironically, the presence of the dead ghosts of 1916. O’Brien was scathing of the mentality of Irish republicans wishing to appease the ghosts of the dead, but his own writing is not immune to a peculiar O’Brien style ghosting. His ghosting was perhaps a subliminal attempt to scare the dominant ghosts that were, in his strongly held view, haunting Irish politics.

O’Brien concluded his thought processes with a question to himself: would he have ‘followed Owen’s example, and met with Owen’s fate?’¹³⁰ He is not at all sure how he would have acted ‘in those terrible circumstances’, but he is ‘quite sure’, that if he had kept his head down, he wouldn’t have ‘survived him for much more than a

¹²⁸ O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 91.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

year', he 'would have been killed by a mixture of grief, guilt and shame, probably working through a surfeit of whiskey.'¹³¹ These passages are a testament—among many—to O'Brien's internalization of his cousin's sense of moral responsibility.

¹³¹ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 92.

3. Albert Camus's influence on Conor Cruise O'Brien: "Rebel With A Cause"

O'Brien's introduction to *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence* (1978) is valuable as it gives an indication of how O'Brien viewed the evolution of his thought in respect of the legitimacy of political violence from his period in the Congo up until the mid-1970s. O'Brien set out purposefully to highlight the way his thinking changed in light of the different circumstances he encountered. This emphasis on circumstances is a harbinger of the way that Burke's writings would come to weigh heavily on his conclusions. Yet this collection of essays, mostly written in the 1970s, clearly reflects Camus's influence on O'Brien's thought. O'Brien, like Camus, confronted circumstances that time and again begged the question: at what point, if ever, is violence legitimate, and unsurprisingly, in formulating a response, O'Brien leant on Camus's writings on the subject.

Despite his political objections to Camus's position on Algerian independence, O'Brien was temperamentally at ease with Camus's style, and this attraction was heightened by O'Brien's sense that Camus's writing was beset by the tensions inevitable in his situation. O'Brien was most at ease, both imaginatively and academically, with writers who wrote from a place of irreconcilable tension. W.B. Yeats, Edmund Burke and Camus, O'Brien's arch imaginative companions, all display this characteristic tension—a spirited tumult, riven with contradiction—which compelled each writer to strive for some kind of synthesis that would reconcile their respective internal divisions. O'Brien in the essays and the plays compiled in *Herod* similarly tried to work out his own irreconcilable tensions, and, as such, gives us an

important insight into how he responded intellectually and creatively to the outbreak of the Troubles.

The fact that O'Brien was sensitized to the problematics of conflict resolution in different international contexts lends an added dimension to his analysis in *Herod*, and provides an insight into how these events came to weigh on O'Brien's articulations as a prominent intellectual in a new and challenging period of recent Irish history. That O'Brien was haunted by certain unresolved issues in relation to his authorization of the use of force in Katanga—an action that set in train a chain of consequence that dramatically ended with the death of Dag Hammarskjöld—is evident in his introduction to the collection, "The Legitimation of Violence".¹ O'Brien came to New York in 1965 after spending 'most of the first half of that decade' in Africa.² In 1961, O'Brien:

had been responsible for the implementation, in Katanga—now the Shaba province of what is now Zaire and was then the Congo—of a United Nations Security Council Resolution which authorized 'the use of force if necessary in the last resort'. Force was used. Had it been necessary? Had the last resort been reached?³

The unrelenting imaginative force of these questions on O'Brien's psyche is revealed when he tells us that 'In a book written immediately after these events—*To Katanga and Back* (1962)—I answered these questions confidently, politically, positively. In New York, six years later, I found myself answering them all over again, at

¹ Title of the introduction to *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence*, p. 7.

² Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), p. 7

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

a different level, in a play, *Murderous Angels*.⁴ This 'different level' was a different artistic form and implicit in O'Brien's formulation is the sense that having dealt with the issues involved 'politically and positively', the unresolved, unresolvable, nature of the issues necessitated a different form—a dramatic form—from which to approach issues that continued to haunt O'Brien. Akenson dwelt on the impact Hammarskjöld's death had on O'Brien, likening Hammarskjöld to a second father figure who had been rent from O'Brien inexplicably. Undoubtedly, the conjunction of events which were bound up with O'Brien's authorization of force and the subsequent public struggle to vindicate his decision had a profound emotional effect on him. This manifested politically in the short term—and in his dramatic play *Murderous Angels* (1968), when the political fell short of expressing the deeper archetypal patterns of his quandary. According to O'Brien, the legitimation of violence is the theme of the three *Herod* plays, and the 'argument' of *Murderous Angels* and all the essays collected in *Herod*.⁵

There is a self-confessed and tangible conceptual break in O'Brien's writing on the subject of political violence in the 1970s. Writing on his attempts to draw attention to the structures of legitimation that were, in his view, exacerbating the Troubles in the North, he admitted:

I have spent, as this collection partly testifies, some time in attempting to dismantle legitimation-structures of that kind. Some of them were legitimation-structures of a kind which had once impressed me.⁶

⁴ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The legitimation-structures he referred to were those that lent legitimation to violence by playing on the emotions, 'by obliquity, by scientism, by appeal to tribal self-applause and atavistic resentments'. These had, according to O'Brien, 'no moral force, but they could have 'considerable political force.'⁷

The dominant change documented in the introduction to *Herod* was one of perception. O'Brien was no longer perceived to be 'quite where I was expected to be'.⁸ The emphasis he placed on this phenomenon is not unwarranted, as this aspect of O'Brien's trajectory continues to receive more attention than any other aspect of his varied career. It appears, however, that O'Brien's explanations have gone unheeded as his book *Herod* is infrequently addressed in any discussion of the issue. O'Brien's efforts to understand the historical nature of political reality preceded and underscored all his attempts to represent it dramatically.

The plays dramatized O'Brien's tendency to historicize, which is apparent in his conceptual and artistic approach. The artistic emphasis shifted in O'Brien's plays from an exploration of the attractions of the rebel figure, represented in *Salome and the Wild Man*, towards the subject of political expediency in *King Herod Advises*. This shift highlights O'Brien's struggle to reconcile his new political role with his former identity as a rebel of sorts. The former, O'Brien explained, was partly a product of New York City and 'of the protest movement in the American universities against the war in Vietnam.'⁹ O'Brien pivoted his post-factum rationalization—in relation to the shift in

⁷ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

his thinking in respect of the legitimacy of violence—on his experience of American politics in the 1960s:

In New York, in the late 1960s, the debate about the legitimization of violence filled the air. The administration, and its supporters in the academies and in the media, sought to present their war in Vietnam as a justifiable response to Communist aggression and terrorism.¹⁰

O’Brien noted the way that ‘this campaign of legitimation was backed by great resources, both financial and intellectual’, stressing that it ‘had to be a campaign’.¹¹ The unspoken assumption, in this last sentiment, was that in the context of American democracy the government had to excite a campaign in support of the war to counter its critics. According to O’Brien:

Those who opposed the war—as I did—were free to speak. In the universities we used our freedom to expose what we saw as the sophistry of the arguments used in support of the war. We sought, in fact, to *de-legitimize* the war, and our efforts met with some success.¹²

The former statement has a footnote added noting that ‘the present collection’, has only one essay included ‘out of the many essays and lectures in this sense written at this time—“State Terrorism: The Calculus of Pain, of Peace and of Prestige”’. This is noteworthy as it serves to highlight the way O’Brien was actively distancing himself from former iterations on the subject of violence and political

¹⁰ O’Brien, *Herod*, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

legitimacy, which were widely received as anti-imperialist. O'Brien's commitment to liberalism was already evident in the ethos of *Writers and Politics* (1965). In that text he situated his articulation of his commitment to liberalism in the context of a conversation with Kwame Nkrumah. When asked if he was a liberal by the former leader of newly independent Ghana, his denial was represented with connotations of the apostle Peter's denial of Christ, which, somewhat, foreshadowed the nature of the conversion that was to follow. The elements of O'Brien's later stances were in place, but the way in which they were arranged changed in light of new circumstances. He continued to resist imperialism, but his personal understanding of how imperialism operated came into conflict with the traditional understanding of imperialism.

The inclusion of two plays, *King Herod Explains*, and *Salome and the Wild Man*, which reflected his 1960s persona are situated in the context of essays that predominantly cast a cold eye on ideologies that, in his view, served to legitimate violence in teleological terms. The architectural framework supporting these plays, "Reflections on Political Violence", consists of thirteen essays which—apart from the essay noted which was written during the Vietnam crisis—forcefully delegitimize exponents of ideological violence.¹³ O'Brien in his discussion of the anti-Vietnam protests highlighted the way that certain groups used the unrest to 'legitimize other forms of violence. There was the waving of the Viet Cong flag and the burning of the American one. There were the slogans "Burn, baby, burn" and "Bring the war home".¹⁴ However, while O'Brien was consistent in his condemnation of the American

¹³ Title of the section of the book dealing with a broad range of essays in relation to political violence, n.p.

¹⁴ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 8.

war in Vietnam, he was also keen to show how well-intended protesters could be sabotaged by those with ulterior motives among their ranks. This reading of the Vietnam protests, while based on experience, was heightened by O'Brien's perception of the way the Civil Rights movement in Derry was co-opted and sabotaged by the hard-left and the IRA. The intertwined nature of these elements, and how, in O'Brien's view, they exacerbated the Troubles, served to harden O'Brien against ideological formulations that manipulated public opinion and served to conceal what he viewed as the historical-sectarian basis of the conflict.

O'Brien's *Camus* (1970) provides us with a fascinating glimpse into O'Brien's thought processes during a period that people consider to be a turning point in his intellectual development. An exploration of his writing on Camus, seen against his later change of heart in respect of revolutionary violence, reveals a sense of Camus's importance to O'Brien's intellectual trajectory. One of the signal aspects of Camus's influence on O'Brien in terms of Irish cultural history is the fact that Camus's writing came to have practical consequences on the course of subsequent Irish history. O'Brien's reception and re-articulation of Camus's writing, most specifically *L'Homme révolté*, was to influence a current of Irish politics that had ramifications at several cultural, social and political levels. O'Brien's imaginative dialogue with Camus was to take on a new dimension in the changed political circumstances in Ireland after the outbreak of the Troubles in the North on the heel of the Civil Rights movement. This upheaval shook the undemocratic status quo in the North, and unleashed political and emotional forces that pushed the question of the legitimacy of political violence out of literature and into the chambers of government and onto the streets.

O'Brien arrived back to Ireland for the summer of 1969, and a confluence of factors were to result in his decision to enter into Irish politics. O'Brien's son Donal wrote to his father at this time wondering "'Why do you have to do this?'". O'Brien reflected in his memoirs that 'I didn't feel that I could decently go into the stuff about the schism in my soul, or even put that thought into intelligible words.'¹⁵ The next thirty years were monumental in terms of the challenges they presented to the future relationship between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

O'Brien was, along with Charles Haughey, one of the new faces to enter the political scene in the late 1960s and their relation to each other represented a new fault line in Irish politics that was to bring literature and its intersection with politics, back to the fore in Irish life. O'Brien's entrance into Irish politics in 1969 coincided with the outbreak of unrest in the North. He became Labour spokesman for the North at a crucial transition period in contemporary Irish history. The North went from a situation of 'frozen violence' to one of outright hostilities.¹⁶ O'Brien laid the responsibility for this deterioration at the feet of the IRA and hardline Marxist elements within different groupings in the North. This growing understanding of events coincided with O'Brien's publication of *Camus*, and O'Brien's pattern of blame to a great degree resembles Camus's formulations against communism in *L'Homme révolté*.

Diarmuid Whelan argued forcibly and persuasively that 'it can be shown that *L'Homme révolté* is the bedrock upon which O'Brien's subsequent critiques of the IRA and of Irish history are founded', noting that while O'Brien was working on *Camus*, the

¹⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Memoir: My Life and Themes* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1999), p. 318.

¹⁶ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 10.

violence was escalating in the North.¹⁷ O'Brien co-wrote *A Concise History of Ireland* with Máire Mhac an tSaoi at this period, 'while also keeping notes which would appear in *States of Ireland*.'¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus are background presences in *States of Ireland* (1972). Sartre is referenced explicitly in the foreword in the context of O'Brien's full disclosure with regard to where he speaks from. O'Brien wrote that he had decided to include 'a thread of family history', as his 'attitude to these past activities, and to present-day alignments, is undoubtedly affected by family influences ... There are no privileged observers as Sartre remarked.'¹⁹

It was Camus's voice, however, that resounded in O'Brien's closing argument regarding the dangers of ambivalent language in the Republic in relation to partition and unity. O'Brien was adamant that 'the Puss-in-boots Provisionalism of Mr Lynch and his associates' had 'provided a soft and furry cover for the deadly reality of the Provisional 'by-product' itself.'²⁰ O'Brien cited as a cautionary note Camus's words at the end of the *Plague*: 'the bacillus of the plague can be dormant for years', and 'then waken its rats and send them to die in a happy city.'²¹

While the received interpretation of *Camus* is that of a book that challenged any unquestioning acceptance of Camus as that 'just man', there are aspects of his reading that hint at transformations to come, predominantly in his reading of *La Chute*.²² It was Camus's *L'Homme révolté*, however, that elicited a more immediate

¹⁷ Diarmuid Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity: Conor Cruise O'Brien and France", *Études Irlandaises*, 34.2 (September 2009), p. 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

response. O'Brien compared Camus's argument in the 'very long' introduction to *L'Homme révolté* to Yeats's 'short' poem "The Great Day", remarking that:

Camus, unlike Yeats, approves the revolt of the beggar on foot. What he wishes to reject is the continuation of the lash, and more especially the justification of the lash in terms of the philosophy of history, the superman or the dictatorship of the proletariat.²³

Whelan contended that while the Irish context has not allowed for the emergence of a 'Superman' or for that matter the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', there has 'been a philosophy, or interpretation, of history which has given rise to many an action'.²⁴ Camus's philosophy, or O'Brien's 'interpretation of it', would, according to Whelan, 'constitute the motif of all his later writings'.²⁵ O'Brien's re-articulation of Camus's philosophy of history was re-purposed to fit the Irish 'predicament' and provided O'Brien with a conceptual weapon against those he perceived as 'enemies' of the State. As Whelan noted, 'The text of *L'Homme révolté* is replete with examples of the language which O'Brien would later introduce to an Irish audience.'²⁶ O'Brien replaced communism with Republicanism and 'distilled' the themes in *L'Homme révolté*, 'mapping them onto Ireland'.²⁷ Whelan argued that however 'apposite' the notion that violence derives from the 'ethos of past revolution, the philosophy of history' and 'the specific language and accusations about violence and lies deriving

²³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Camus* (London: Fontana, 1970), p. 55.

All references in this text are from the Fontana/ Collins edition; the book was published simultaneously in the US by Viking, under the title *Albert Camus*.

²⁴ Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity", p. 9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

from past precedent', they 'all initially came from Camus and especially *L'Homme révolté*.'²⁸

The influence of *L'Homme révolté* on O'Brien should be viewed less as a fixed view at a fixed point in time, and more a continuum. O'Brien's reading was received against the backdrop of a conundrum that was embedded imaginatively in O'Brien's psyche. There are several meanings inscribed in the text of O'Brien's *Camus* and they are not limited to O'Brien's post-colonial critique, but rather comprise a textual premonition of future possibility. The palpable sense of investment in O'Brien's review of *La Chute*, for instance, pre-empt faultlines in his future political life and themes:

Not every intellectual has to make the same final choice, but each must realize how much he is a product of the culture of the advanced world, and how much there is which will pull him, among the 'Algerias' of the future, towards Camus's 'fall'.²⁹

O'Brien's reaction to the Sartre-Camus controversy after the publication of *L'Homme révolté* revolved around the notion of priorities. The idea 'that intellectuals must look to their own area of responsibility before condemning others', formed a continuous thread in O'Brien's writing, and was the summa of *Writers and Politics*.³⁰ O'Brien agreed wholeheartedly with Sartre's position 'that Frenchmen who hated terror and repression should turn their attention first to the area of responsibility of their own country.'³¹ One of the central dramas in O'Brien's public life in the late 1960s

²⁸ Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity", p. 10.

²⁹ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 85.

³⁰ Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity", p. 2.

³¹ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 63.

was his outspokenness on the political dynamics of anti-communism. It is crucial to weigh O'Brien's disappointment with Camus—the writer whose pronouncements had meant so much to O'Brien and his 'generation'—on the side of what O'Brien viewed as 'counter-revolutionary subordination'.³² This was after all the phase in O'Brien's life when he was most publicly associated with the Left and with radical activism. Despite his emotional attraction to Camus, he was, in this period, disillusioned by Camus.

L'Homme révolté discredited the Left, and according to O'Brien, played into the hands of US neo-imperialism. Prior to this, Camus had been influential in highlighting the political implications of anti-communism so his change of heart was a victory for those O'Brien was in public battle with. O'Brien wrote that the nature of the 'Sartre-Camus quarrel' had been seriously distorted to 'Sartre's disadvantage' in light of the 'prevailing intellectual climate'. Public opinion, according to O'Brien was 'predisposed to be for the anti-communist protagonist in such a controversy.'³³ Here, again, O'Brien raised the spectre of Benda's misappropriation when he wrote about the efforts of intellectuals who were 'covertly sponsored by the United States Government', to 'accredit the proposition that failure to take an anti-communist stand constituted 'the treason of the clerks'.³⁴

O'Brien's position in respect of political anti-communism was relatively clear-cut when compared to other subjects he addressed at that period. This is evident in his

³² Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Politics and the morality of scholarship", *Power & consciousness* ed. with Dean Vanech (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 41.

³³ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 61.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

explanation in *Herod* of his intellectual strategy during the protests against the Vietnam War—which throws light on his dialectic in respect of revolution:

I found myself conducting two different and somewhat contradictory set of arguments, with two different sets of people. To the student left I was a “right-winger”, challenging their tendency to romanticize revolution and to idealize America’s enemies—and especially their tendency to romanticize revolution and to idealize themselves.

However, in ‘public arguments’ with ‘the fence-sitters’ or ‘plague on both your houses’ school, I found myself defending the position of the left-wing students, even to the point of idealizing and romanticizing that position.³⁵

O’Brien cited a misunderstanding in a debate with Hannah Arendt at this period. Arendt had attributed to ‘the wrong O’Brien’, the statement that ‘Violence is the only way of ensuring a hearing for moderation’.³⁶ O’Brien had quoted an ‘aphorism’, ‘coined by the nineteenth-century agrarian agitator William O’Brien’, with ‘a degree of approbation’ which, he found ‘unjustifiable and repugnant in retrospect.’³⁷ This frank admission, which sharply deviated from his past pronouncements, is very revealing of how O’Brien changed in the interval between the late 1960s and the late 1970s. The question then presents itself: what happened to profoundly alter O’Brien’s rhetorical strategies on the legitimation of violence? One important factor which had changed was the location of the violence. The outbreak of

³⁵ O’Brien, *Herod*, pp. 8-9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

hostilities in the North had the potential to compromise security and constitutional sovereignty in the Republic. O'Brien is candid in his description of how his former doubts, regarding the legitimacy of revolutionary violence, became certainties, 'These doubts crystallized into certainties after returning to Ireland, and especially on contemplating the behaviour of these left-wingers after the deployment of British troops in August 1969.'³⁸ O'Brien saw these groups as playing into the hands of IRA objectives:

The ginger group called 'People's Democracy', which had been at the core of the 'civil rights left wing', now provided the Provisional IRA with propaganda designed to make those Catholic soldiers look presentable to left-wing extremists in other countries; the Provos themselves could look after the business of collecting the money from right-wing Catholic Irish-Americans.³⁹

The marxism of the Official IRA was a factor that prejudiced O'Brien against the radical marxist left, both imaginatively, and intellectually. O'Brien began to structurally conflate left-wing rhetoric with blind and dangerous ideological excess that was playing into the hands of sectarianism. Here, Camus provided a template, and where Camus had constructed his argument around the links between communism legitimizing violence through a philosophy of history, O'Brien borrowed elements of this to denigrate the left-wing rhetoric of the IRA.

³⁸ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Another factor, important in understanding O'Brien, was that the source of the disturbance was exacerbated by a group claiming allegiance to a concept of history that had destabilized O'Brien's immediate ancestors. For someone as profoundly historical as O'Brien, who interpreted recent Irish history through the lens of his family's place in that history, this new development occasioned a deeply personal response. There is a passage in O'Brien's essay "Theorists of Terror (One)" that casts light on how O'Brien had internalized the side-lining of his ancestors by the 'rebels' of 1916; and how he subsequently interpreted external post-colonial conflicts along lines that resonated with his own personal experience of revolution. Responding to an aspect of J. Bowyer Bell's study on national liberation movements, O'Brien wrote:

This aspect concerns not the 'foreign oppressor'—who is on his way out anyway—but the question of who is to rule the territory when he is gone ... Nkrumah's mass demonstrations in the Gold Coast, ostensibly directed against the British, really defeated the old African élite of the Gold Coast itself, and replaced it by the new élite of Nkrumah and his friends. Recourse to arms in Ireland in the 1916-1922 period had similar effects. Self-government (for what is now the Republic) was coming anyway; what the violence determined was not the departure of the British, but the question of who should be in charge after they left.⁴⁰

O'Brien's determination to delegitimize those who were drawing on the legacy of 1916 was thus embedded in very specific socio-historical circumstances, and he

⁴⁰ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 60.

summoned a wealth of experience—literary, international, historical—to delegitimize the concept of history that his political enemies were drawing on. O’Brien’s increasing obsession with the North, while constructive at the outset, became self-defeating. All his literary and political objectives hinged thereafter on the delegitimization of the IRA. In an interview responding to the leak of an internal document O’Brien had written for Administrative Council of the Labour Party in 1974—advising on strategy in relation to the North—he made the candid statement that, ‘I described dangers by which I have been haunted—it is not too strong a word—for some considerable time, and I dwelt on that.’⁴¹ It is only in the context of this obsession that we can begin to understand his refusals to entertain any possibility of peace in the North that entailed power-sharing or legitimation of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA.

The impact that Charles Haughey exerted on O’Brien’s psyche is well-known, what is less understood is the political and cultural elements of that exertion. Haughey symbolized the legacy of the 1916 Rising—and for O’Brien the subsequent emergence of Sinn Féin as an insurmountable force in Irish politics in 1918—that had relegated the Irish Parliamentary Party to the margins. O’Brien emerged as an intellectual force in Irish politics at a time when Haughey—a symbol of this past—was potentially undermining constitutional sovereignty by allegedly importing arms for use in an unsanctioned war in the North. This catalyzed O’Brien into action. O’Brien consequently customized a philosophy of history that would delegitimize Charles Haughey, and everything he represented in the Republic. It is hard to overstate O’Brien’s commitment to constitutional politics. It is one of the central continuities in

⁴¹ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Irish Times*, 27 September 1974, p. 8.

his political writing, and his obsession with the question of the legitimacy of violence stemmed from deep-rooted fears of the fragile nature of democratic structures based on consensus.

An important element in O'Brien's relentless delegitimization of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, was linguistic. Over and over again he attacked those who used ambivalent language in the context of Northern violence to secure electoral gain in the South. O'Brien framed his argument against publications whose 'material', tended 'to legitimize the existence and objective of the Provisionals' inflaming 'the vein of tribal self-righteousness which it fed, and on which it fed.'⁴² O'Brien expressed this in anthropological terms evoking his experience in Africa:

Reading this stuff anyone who had lived among other tribes for any length of time had to feel choked with the sense of *Déjà vu* and *Déjà entendue* and with the sheer impenetrable cosiness of it all... What was most oppressive was not the legitimation of violence in itself, but the frivolity of this legitimation, the refusal to see that it was legitimation, or that legitimation was important.⁴³

'Legitimacy' appearing four times in one sentence confirmed to some extent O'Brien's obsession with the issue, when he wrote the introduction to *Herod*. O'Brien was at pains to show that certain statements made by Jack Lynch, such as 'Violence is a by-product of the partition of our country', granted a certain legitimacy to the IRA campaign. O'Brien acknowledged that despite the fact that Lynch 'has often and

⁴² O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

sincerely condemned the IRA', 'he and his friends have provided the IRA with its charter of legitimacy'.⁴⁴ In O'Brien's view it was this 'sense of legitimacy' which sustained 'a fighting force and keeps up the killing.'⁴⁵ The repetitive focus on legitimacy begs the question, why this obsession with legitimacy?

The answer may spring from a personal source. The IRA took their legitimacy from those who were executed in 1916. In this 'illegitimate' uprising—essentially a coup against the 'legitimate' government—O'Brien's family, and their future place in the promised Home Rule dispensation, was lost. It is for this reason that legitimacy was a burning issue for O'Brien. This preoccupation combined in literary, and emotional, terms with an idea of justice and tradition that predisposed him towards Edmund Burke. In a discussion of Conor Cruise O'Brien's legacy in 2019, Frank Callanan stated that 'How we modern Irish think and talk of ourselves owes something to O'Brien.'⁴⁶ If this is the case, then it is arguable that 'we modern Irish' also owe a debt to the Albert Camus of O'Brien's imagination. Like Edmund Burke and W.B. Yeats, Albert Camus is an aspect of the structure of O'Brien's critical imagination, and in Camus, as with Burke and Yeats, he discovered conceptual tools that enabled him to express the depth of feeling he brought to his critical writing. O'Brien articulated this when he wrote, 'Probably no European writer of his time left so deep a mark on the imagination, and at the same time on the moral and political consciousness of his own generation.'⁴⁷ The fact that there is no entry for Camus in the index of his memoir is remarkable to

⁴⁴ O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁶ The quote is from a debate between Frank Callanan and Niall Meehan, organised by the Howth Peninsula Heritage Society (23 April 2019), entitled "An evaluation of the career of Conor Cruise O'Brien". The quote is from my own notes on the evening. The debates were later published by *Dublin Review of Books*, 117 (July 2019). <<https://drb.ie/articles/the-polariser/>> [accessed 5 August 2019].

⁴⁷ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 84.

anyone familiar with O'Brien's development and oeuvre. However, O'Brien was frank in his admission of the nature of Camus's importance in his life:

The real significance, and the source of the appeal, of the work of this period is not one of revolt but one of affirmation. To a generation which saw no reason for hope, it offered hope without reason. It offered a category—the absurd—in which logical, psychological, philosophical, and even social and political difficulties could be encapsulated and it allowed the joy of being alive, in the presence of death, to emerge. It was neither a revolutionary message, nor a specially moral one; but it was a singularly sweet and exhilarating message to a whole generation who were also pleased to think of itself as revolutionary and moral. I belonged to that generation and if I scrutinise that message now with the wary eyes of middle age, I am no less grateful for having received it in my youth.⁴⁸

Camus presented in literary and dramatic form philosophical expressions of key themes that preoccupied O'Brien and some of his contemporaries. Whelan observed that for a considerable period of time, 'O'Brien's primary concern' was 'bound up with somehow trying to be both 'revolutionary and moral'.'⁴⁹ Camus's influence on O'Brien's literary and political development, and the way that this imaginative dialogue affected his developing position in relation to the Troubles in the North, religion, and revolutionary violence in general, has been underexplored. Camus's philosophy of

⁴⁸ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 32.

⁴⁹ Diarmuid Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien: Violent Notions* (Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 67.

history was enlisted in O'Brien's campaign against those in the North who were justifying their campaign of violence in historical terms. This was enhanced by an emotional affinity, which underlay O'Brien's attraction to Camus, and notably provided an imaginative link to Owen Sheehy-Skeffington, who died in 1970.

Albert Camus's life mirrors O'Brien's in some important respects. Camus's father died fighting in WW1 at the Battle of the Marne, and while O'Brien's family were rich in cultural capital, he also experienced the vagaries of misfortune after his father died leaving O'Brien's mother in need of financial assistance. O'Brien wrote of Camus's childhood:

The poverty of his childhood—reflected most distinctly in the early essays, *L'Envers* and *L'Endroit*—has marked him for life: in his health ... and no doubt in the quality of his loneliness, despair and joy.⁵⁰

Camus's writing, from the 1930s to the 1950s, provided the emotional and intellectual backdrop to a crucial phase in O'Brien's intellectual and imaginative formation. O'Brien wrote of Camus, 'European and part-French by birth, Camus became thoroughly French by education'.⁵¹ The latter point was no small detail. O'Brien's knowledge of the French language and his interest in French literature and history sensitized him to the literary and historical impetus behind Camus's writing, thus providing the basis for O'Brien's novel critique of Camus's work in his widely acclaimed *Camus*.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

According to John Foley, O'Brien's book on Camus 'remains one of the most influential English-language books on the subject and is widely credited with inaugurating the post-colonial critique of Camus in the English-speaking world.'⁵² *Camus* issued a sustained attack on the subject's blindness to the political implications of his fiction. O'Brien's study of Camus approached different aspects of Camus's literary and political odyssey in the period after the liberation of Paris. It is noteworthy that O'Brien began his argument by situating Camus in political terms in the immediate post-WW2 period. In the three years 'after the liberation, Camus was the most brilliant and the most influential figure on the non-communist left in France'.⁵³ This is significant as it pointed to a central external concern of O'Brien's, Camus's relationship to the left in France.

O'Brien wrote that by the time Camus's name was revealed on the masthead of the first edition of *Combat* in newly liberated France, thus bringing the 'revelation of his resistance role', he was already well known, and 'widely discussed' in literary circles.⁵⁴ *L'Etranger* and *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, had been largely discussed 'in terms of pessimism and nihilism.'⁵⁵ Camus's reputation continued to grow with the success of his stage play, *Caligula*, and the 'immediate success of *La Peste* on its publication in June 1947.'⁵⁶ Once O'Brien had firmly established Camus's importance on the non-communist left, his worth in literary terms, and his role in in the Resistance, he began

⁵² John Foley, "A Postcolonial Fiction: Conor Cruise O'Brien's Camus" *The Irish Review* 36/37 (Winter 2007), p. 1.

⁵³ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

to chip away, slowly but increasingly effectively, at the edifice of the widespread acceptance of Camus as ‘the model of the Just man’.⁵⁷

While O’Brien acknowledged that Camus rejected any such identification, he pressed the reality of this identification as ‘a central element in his fame.’⁵⁸ O’Brien pursued this theme in a related footnote adding that, ‘in England, and especially in America, this identification is even more solidly established.’⁵⁹ O’Brien undoubtedly encountered this phenomenon in his experience in New York University, in the late 1960s, when the cultural and literary manifestations of the Cold War were ubiquitous. His early and profound identification with Camus increased his political disenchantment during that period.

It is in this context that we have to examine O’Brien’s book on Camus, as his experience in the US, between 1965-69, set him on a collision course with those Duncan White has since described as “Cold Warriors”, in his exploration of the literary Cold-War.⁶⁰ O’Brien located Camus’s tenure as editor of *Combat* in the post-war but pre-Cold War period, and analysed the revolutionary momentum of the post-war period that coincided with his role as such. O’Brien observed that despite Camus’s editorial commitment in *Combat* to carrying through a social revolution the ‘content of the revolution was never very clearly defined and the whole concept was seriously qualified quite early on’.⁶¹ O’Brien contrasted Camus’s ambivalence at this period in respect of social revolution with his fervour for ‘revolutionary justice’. In a classic vein,

⁵⁷ O’Brien, *Camus*, p. 52.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶⁰ Duncan White, *Cold Warriors* (London: Abacus, 2019), pp. 486-488.

⁶¹ O’Brien, *Camus*, p. 53.

and intuiting future criticism when he used the excesses of the French Revolutionary period as a mechanism for raising doubts about revolution per se, O'Brien wrote, 'Here, in the first months, Camus's *Combat* and the communists are united on a Jacobin line.'⁶² O'Brien quoted Camus's line, 'This country does not need a Talleyrand ... It needs a Saint Just', and invoked approvingly François Mauriac's condemnation of Camus's view of revolutionary justice.⁶³ This emphasis served to heighten the tension around Camus's historical moral judgement in relation to political violence. O'Brien's forensic dissection of Camus at this period hinged on the development of Camus's thought in relation to justice, but as O'Brien approached Camus's work from 1947 on, he became more concerned with Camus's equivocations:

By January 1945, he came out—with one of those double negatives that were to become increasingly characteristic of his political style—
“against both hatred and amnesty”.⁶⁴

O'Brien identified in Camus's *Ni Victimes Ni Bourreaux (Neither Victims nor Executioners)* (1946), an early manifestation of the way his subject's 'reaction against violence took a specifically anti-communist turn'.⁶⁵ This theme was refined to its controversial conclusion in *L'Homme révolté*, when Camus expressed his idea that 'violence and lies have in some special sense their home among the communists because there they are legitimized by a philosophy of history'.⁶⁶ O'Brien observed that the former idea became 'an obsession with him, and with many others during the Cold

⁶² O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 53.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

War period'.⁶⁷ For O'Brien, Camus's formulation gave Eastern and Western violence a different 'moral significance', thus 'requiring a different moral response.'⁶⁸

O'Brien's experience in Katanga had heightened his sensitivity to the implications of such an assumption, a fact symbolized in the murder of Patrice Lumumba. O'Brien, like Camus, used drama as a way of engaging with the concept of political justice in the late 1960s and 1970s, most notably in the plays *Murderous Angels* (1968) *King Herod explains* (1969) and *King Herod advises* (1973). O'Brien was working through complex political questions on the subject of the legitimacy of violence in these plays. Another aspect of O'Brien's foray into theatre that mirrored Camus's style was the didactic nature of O'Brien's stage work. *Murderous Angels* is a fictional treatment of elements of personality in two of the main archetypal figures in the Katanga episode.

O'Brien highlighted Camus's earlier statements on political anti-communism and its dangers to show how they contrasted with his later revocation in *L'Homme révolté*. O'Brien quoted Camus's early view on political anti-communism to illustrate the change, "if we are in agreement neither with the philosophy of communism, nor with its practical ethic, we vigorously reject political anti-communism because we know what inspires it and what are its undeclared objectives".⁶⁹ It was Camus's symbolic rejection of this in *L'Homme révolté* that, in practical political terms, led to O'Brien going on the offensive. O'Brien was contemptuous that Camus grew 'to forget his original distrust of 'political anti-communism'.⁷⁰ In the heightened atmosphere of

⁶⁷ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 53.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

the Cold War, Camus's emergent 'political anti-communism', constituted a betrayal for the left, and how this betrayal was received was in direct proportion to the esteem in which Camus had previously been held.

The attention O'Brien gave to the split between Jean-Paul Sartre and Camus after the publication of *L'Homme révolté* gives an indication of O'Brien's investment in the personalities that dominated the intellectual life of the Left Bank in Paris at that period. Camus's quarrel with Jean-Paul Sartre is an event O'Brien raises twice in the third section of *Camus*.⁷¹ O'Brien traced the lineaments of Sartre's and Camus's friendship—beginning with Sartre's praise of *L'Étranger* (1942) which brought Camus increased public recognition. O'Brien illustrated his familiarity with the various strands of Existentialism, and the debates, then fashionable, as to where Camus stood in relation to Existentialism. Acknowledging the widespread bracketing of Camus and Sartre as existentialists and 'Resistance writers', O'Brien informed the reader that 'as early as 1945 Camus had indicated that he thought the bracketing inappropriate, and had denied that he was an existentialist'.⁷²

O'Brien offered his own distinction suggesting that Camus 'can hardly be reckoned a philosopher at all, in comparison with Sartre, 'who was 'a teacher of philosophy by profession.'⁷³ O'Brien's interpretation of why Camus was seen as an existentialist gives us an insight into how the term was understood in Irish literary circles of the period. O'Brien deemed it 'inevitable', that Camus's 'idea of the absurd, as developed in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and elsewhere, should be classified as a sort of

⁷¹ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 54, p. 61.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

sub-variety of existentialism', particularly given the 'loose literary and journalistic terminology of the period', in which 'existentialism meant finding life meaningless but finding reasons for carrying on all the same.'⁷⁴ Myles na gCopaleen confirmed this impression in his *Cruiskeen Lawn* column when he wrote in 1946, 'me friend, that solemn dreary character, Albert Camus.'⁷⁵

O'Brien's identification with the arguments that raged around the Sartre and Camus 'quarrel', and his criticism of Camus's defection to political anti-communism demonstrated his strong intellectual interest and political investment in the cultural politics of France in the post-War period. This fascination is mirrored, to opposite effect, in Thomas Hogan's opinion on the cultural politics of the Left Bank in an *Irish Times* review of *The Mandarins* (1954) by Simone de Beauvoir:⁷⁶

"The Mandarins" of course is a Roman á Clef, which was one of the reasons for its Parisian success. Even a remote Hibernian can identify Dubreuilh as M. Jean-Paul Sartre, and Perron as M. Albert Camus. Wet weekends in rural—or suburban—Ireland might be passed in other identifications—Lachaume as M. Merleau-Ponty, for instance. The opportunities for penmanship are endless. But the principal importance of "The Mandarins" is the picture it gives us of the French intellectual Left.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 60.

⁷⁵ Cruiskeen Lawn column, *Irish Times*, 20 September 1946.

⁷⁶ Thomas Hogan, "Unquiet Pagodas", review of *The Mandarins* by Thomas Hogan, *Irish Times*, 9 March 1957, p. 6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

The resulting picture did not please Hogan and, in terms antithetical to O'Brien's interpretation of the Sartre-Camus split, he denounced the 'black and white' declamations of the 'Mandarins'. "'Never become anti-Communist'" is the golden rule of these mandarins. The reason, of course, would be that to take up such a situation would be to desert to the Right.⁷⁸ Hogan's fascination with the lives of the Left Bank intellectuals had a strong prurient dimension, 'These leftist intellectuals leap from bed to bed, still preserving intact their political integrity', and he is cynical of the way 'they live on enormous emotional overdrafts, but keep their intellectual balances straight.'⁷⁹ Hogan's implied suggestion is clear—their private lives compromised their political integrity, resulting in dialectical overtures, 'The brilliant dialectics they have taken as second nature from the Ecole Normale Supérieure enable them to explain away any situation, however disagreeable'.⁸⁰ This interpretation reflected a different strain in the reception of writers associated with Existentialism, and the overt suspicion of some critics towards writing that challenged their assumptions about the nature of reality. Hogan makes this clear when he concluded his review with the lament that:

They are artists in black and white, these Mandarins, Unfortunately
pure black and white do not exist in nature. So they chop their logic
and split their hairs, but only to the effect that one wants to shake

⁷⁸ Hogan, "Unquiet Pagodas", p. 6.

Thomas Hogan was the pseudonym of Thomas Woods, a civil servant, who wrote a column in *The Irish Times* under the pseudonym 'Thersites'. O'Brien writes about Woods in his *Memoir* advancing the notion that his Catholic education, in a school run by the Patrician brothers in Galway, had disadvantaged his 'powerful and enquiring mind'.

O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 111.

⁷⁹ Hogan, "Unquiet Pagodas", p. 6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

them and make them realise that the world is not logical, that syllogisms lead only back to where one came in.⁸¹

O'Brien's treatment of Simone de Beauvoir's novel *Les Mandarins* (1954) is in stark contrast to Hogan's. O'Brien approached the book purposefully as a way of demonstrating the Cold War faultlines that had emerged on the French Left in the wake of the Sartre-Camus split. O'Brien summarized the plot of *Les Mandarins* which contained 'a quarrel between Henri and Dubreuilh'—the former identified as Camus, and the latter as Sartre, by many of their contemporaries. The quarrel concerned 'whether or not to publish a report revealing the existence and nature of forced labour camps in the Soviet Union'.⁸² In the book Dubreuilh is opposed to publication for the reason that it would further the interests of the bourgeoisie at the expense of the working class, yet 'Henri insists on publication'.⁸³ O'Brien was at pains to defend Sartre from the suggestion that this has any basis in fact citing de Beauvoir's rejection of the identification of either writer with her characters. O'Brien drew attention to Sartre's integrity by invoking his 'published record' which revealed his acknowledgement of Stalinist excesses:

That Sartre's position on the Soviet Labour camps has nothing in common with that of the fictional Dubreuilh is a matter of record: he had published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1947—long before his break

⁸¹ Hogan, "Unquiet Pagodas", p. 6.

⁸² O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 62.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

with Camus—a report of the exact nature discussed in *Les Mandarins*.⁸⁴

For O'Brien the split between Camus and Sartre was 'the most significant political controversy between intellectuals in the Cold War period.'⁸⁵ O'Brien's analysis in *Camus* stemmed from his direct experience of the international political fall-out of the 'Sartre/Camus quarrel'. In the context of O'Brien's outspoken position on the covert operations of the CIA in the cultural and literary domain and his call for transparency in relation to CIA funding, he lamented the way Sartre's role in the quarrel had been distorted to serve 'a concerted effort—then just beginning—to discredit intellectuals who refused the anti-communist position'.⁸⁶ O'Brien had been in the vanguard of those trying to expose this tendency in American letters of the period.⁸⁷ Duncan White's recent study of how literature impacted the course of the Cold War, *Cold Warriors*, features an account of O'Brien's struggle to highlight the role of *Encounter* in disseminating Cold War propaganda.⁸⁸

White portrays O'Brien's "Homer Watt Lecture" (1966) as a significant event in terms of the evolving furore concerning the revelations that *Encounter* magazine had been a CIA front under the umbrella of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In the lecture O'Brien had drawn attention to how Julien Benda's conceptualization of intellectual integrity in *La Trahison des clercs* was being misappropriated for reasons of Cold War expediency.⁸⁹ O'Brien argued that Benda's book was, after all, 'a stand in a

⁸⁴ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 62.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁸⁸ White, *Cold Warriors*, pp. 486-488.

⁸⁹ O'Brien asserted that Benda's aphorism 'is remembered after his qualifications are forgotten and serves the ends of those who ... wish to save the writer from his politics.'

contemporary conflict,' which involved a 'passionate and brilliant attack on Barrès, Maurras, and the French right-wing intellectuals.' O'Brien wished to salvage Benda's formulation from those who had been using Benda's writing to denigrate 'the image of the Writer as a Public Figure.'⁹⁰

O'Brien was particularly concerned with those who were suggesting that the failure to take an anti-communist line constituted 'the treason of the clerks'. The very fact that Camus was perceived as the prototype of Benda's ideal intellectual raised O'Brien's ire in the context of the cultural Cold War. This confirmed O'Brien's instinct that 'wherever there was a public capable of interesting itself in the Sartre/Camus controversy, that public was encouraged to see in Camus, not in Sartre, the exemplar of the truly independent intellectual.'⁹¹ O'Brien's commitment to engaged writing and the Sartrean notion of priorities manifested in a wholehearted defence of Sartre in the context of this quarrel. In 1971, a year after *Camus* was published, O'Brien returned to this theme in "Some Thoughts on Commitment" in the *Listener*. While O'Brien continued to emphasize Sartre's dissimilarity with the fictional Dubreuilh, new qualifications entered into O'Brien's analysis of Sartre's political commitments. Significantly, this centred around Sartre's foreword to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*.

O'Brien had written a sensitive treatment of this book in 1965, which culminated in the appraisal that Fanon 'was right on the plane of generalities' but

Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Homer Watt Lecture", *Conor: A biography of Cruise O'Brien, Anthology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 114.

⁹⁰ O'Brien, "The Homer Watt Lecture", p. 114.

This essay was originally a lecture delivered at NYU on 19 May 1966.

⁹¹ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 61.

wrong in terms of moral responsibility.⁹² However, by 1971, O'Brien's reception of Fanon's 'Manichean view' was more dismissive, Fanon is described as 'the preacher of a crusade, a sort of Peter the Hermit in reverse.'⁹³ O'Brien's new relation to circumstances in 1971 appear to have occasioned a new emphasis in respect of Fanon, which begs the question: how did O'Brien then deal with Sartre's introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth* extolling Fanon's insights. O'Brien conveniently decided that Sartre's 'romantic panegyric to Fanon' had no depth and 'was merely fashionable.'⁹⁴ O'Brien's notion that writers speaking from a privileged position 'sometimes express more revolutionary fervour than they can actually feel or live', was symptomatic of the pressure he was under to reorient his emphasis away from sympathy with revolutionary rhetoric and towards a language of human limits.

In this sense, Camus became a more natural ally for O'Brien, but the latter was arguably hoist with his own petard in terms of the positive critical reception of *Camus*, which arguably precluded him from publicly acknowledging a debt to Camus's philosophical exploration of the importance of human limits in *L'Homme révolté*.⁹⁵ Camus and O'Brien expressed a strong compulsion for thought rooted in experience as opposed to abstract thought, both identified as socialist for most of the 1930s and

⁹² O'Brien was referring specifically to the notion that violence was the only possible response to rule which had been 'imposed and maintained by violence.'

O'Brien, "The Neurosis of Colonialism", in *Conor: A biography of Cruise O'Brien, Anthology*, ed. by Donald Harman Akenson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 94.

⁹³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Some Thoughts on Commitment", *Listener* 86. 2229, 16 December 1971, p. 834.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 835.

⁹⁵ O'Brien also claimed that Camus's 'metaphysical and anti-communist revolt' was 'merely fashionable' and had no depth, yet the text as a whole is profoundly sympathetic to Camus, who according to O'Brien, invoking Benda's aphorism, writes 'Camus, in my opinion, committed such a treason and lived to tell the tale. That tale is his best novel, *The Fall*. Its hero, Clamence, is called "a penitent judge". He might also be called a penitent clerk.'

O'Brien, "Some Thoughts on Commitment", p. 837.

1940s, and both were respectively suspicious of political manifestations of anti-communism despite their early reservations about communism. This was a sympathy Edward W. Said tuned into when he wrote that, 'Having shrewdly and even mercilessly exposed the connections between Camus's most famous novels and the colonial situation in Algeria, O'Brien lets him off the hook.'⁹⁶

Whelan contended that Camus is arguably O'Brien's most influential 'mentor'. He observes that we can learn a lot about O'Brien's development by paying attention to Camus's influence, 'From the various views which O'Brien held of Camus, we can see how O'Brien's mind evolved.'⁹⁷ However, while it is clear that Camus was a major influence, there is a subtle but nevertheless important distinction to be made between Camus as mentor and Camus as influence. To view Camus as a mentor diminishes O'Brien's status as a committed intellectual contributing to the leading journals and magazines of the twentieth century both locally, and internationally.

Stephen Howe has addressed a related shortfall in academic treatments of O'Brien, noting that despite the fact that 'No Irishman or woman of the twentieth century was more intensely, influentially and controversially engaged with global affairs than was Conor Cruise O'Brien', the commentary continues to be 'near-exclusively Hibernocentric in focus.'⁹⁸ Moreover, when 'his global and colonial interests are recalled, it is often only as a foil for comment on his views of Irish politics.'⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 209.

⁹⁷ Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien: Violent Notions*, p. 67.

⁹⁸ Stephen Howe, "The Cruiser and the Colonist: Conor Cruise O'Brien's Writings on Colonialism", *Irish Political Studies* 28.4 (September 2013), p. 487.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

O'Brien wrote from experience and constructed narratives based on the felt truth of that experience; and he expressed a distrust of writers who took precepts and ideology as their starting point—attempting to make reality fit their objectives.

O'Brien's understanding of experience did not just encompass sense and reason, it also sought to account for nonsense and unreason, countenancing all expressions of human nature. O'Brien's political prognosis became embedded in the deeply felt conviction that constitutional integrity was vital in resisting the encroachment of those who would seek to undermine constitutional legitimacy.¹⁰⁰ Howe has argued persuasively that O'Brien drew from the Katanga crisis a:

keen awareness of the terrifying potential for violence lurking just beneath the surface of political and diplomatic routine, a potential certainly not just to be found in African, or indeed in Irish, politics, but quite general.¹⁰¹

This former experience when combined with his committed intellectual anti-imperialist stances—issuing, as Howe observed, from his experience of 'the duplicity and ruthlessness with which major powers and transnational businesses sought to advance their interests in international politics' led to an idiosyncratic response, that was at once revolutionary and anti-revolutionary in nature.¹⁰² Tom Paulin, responding to this facet of O'Brien's politics, viewed O'Brien's 'vertiginous swerve to the Right' as a response to the developing political crisis in Northern Ireland. Paulin pays particular

¹⁰⁰ This is clearly expressed in the appendix of *SOI*—the published version of a statement that O'Brien made in public debate with Tomás Mac Giolla, President of Sinn Féin (Official) at Newman House, Dublin on 23 October 1971.

O'Brien, *SOI*, pp. 317-325.

¹⁰¹ Stephen Howe, "The Cruiser and the Colonist", p. 490.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 490.

attention to O'Brien's evolving interpretation of *Antigone*.¹⁰³ O'Brien published an account of a lecture he had given in Queen's University, Belfast, in October 1968, in the *Listener*, where he had used the play as a way of thinking through the virtues of civil disobedience as a strategy for effective social change. O'Brien had emphasized to the assembled audience that Antigone's non-violent action had led to 'acts of violence':

Antigone's own violent death; Haemon's turning of his sword first against his father Creon and then fatally against himself; the suicide of Eurydice, Creon's wife and Haemon's mother. A stiff price for that handful of dust on Polyneices.¹⁰⁴

O'Brien's interpretation on that occasion, and later in *States of Ireland*, was received as encouraging political quietism. Paulin inferred that O'Brien was acting hypocritically by encouraging political quietism in the context of the Troubles, while actively encouraging revolutionary consciousness in New York. In the *Listener* O'Brien had simultaneously acknowledged, and played down, the 'disabilities of Catholics in Northern Ireland', asking if their removal was really worth attaining given the 'risk of precipitating riots, explosions, pogroms, Murder?'¹⁰⁵ In a panel discussion on "The Legitimacy of Violence as a Political Act?" that took place on 15 December 1967 in New York City, O'Brien had seemingly taken a very different approach to revolutionary violence. Responding to Hannah Arendt's invocation of Machiavelli to support the idea that there should be a distinction between politics and morality, O'Brien countered

¹⁰³ Tom Paulin, "The Making of a Loyalist", *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984), pp. 25-30.

¹⁰⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Views", *Listener* 80, 24 October 1968, p. 526.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

that any discussion of the legitimacy of violence was essentially ‘a moral category.’¹⁰⁶

Yet, while, on the surface, O’Brien’s argument appears to endorse revolutionary violence in certain circumstances, there are signals in the text that point in the direction of O’Brien’s later intellectual emphases.

O’Brien made two observations that have subsequently been used as a counterpoint to emphasize how his views changed in respect of the legitimacy of revolutionary violence; his citation of William O’Brien’s (the nineteenth-century Irish agitator) notion that ‘violence is the best way of insuring a hearing for moderation’, and his statement that there was a qualitative distinction between:

the use of terror by oppressed peoples against the oppressors and their servants, in comparison with the use of terror by their oppressors in the interests of further oppression.¹⁰⁷

What has been overlooked in critical terms in respect of this panel discussion was O’Brien’s opening remarks, ‘I agree with Miss Arendt in sharing a dislike of a certain romantic mystique of violence which has appeared recently ... on the left.’

O’Brien’s emphasis on the romanticization of violence arising in certain sections of the Left—emblemized in Sartre’s foreword to Fanon’s *The*

¹⁰⁶ Arendt cited Machiavelli’s statement, ‘I love my city and my country more than the salvation of my soul’, to assert that herein Machiavelli had ‘showed quite clearly the distinctions between politics and moral questions.’

Alexander Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1971), p. 116.

¹⁰⁷ Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation*, p. 117.

This accords well with Camus’s notion, which Robert Silvers quoted at the beginning of the debate, that to reject the notion of violence outright, ‘never to resist violence with violence can amount to a life of acquiescence in evil and inhumanity and to what he called bourgeois nihilism.’ *Dissent, Power and Confrontation*, p. 97.

Wretched of the Earth—gives an indication of O’Brien’s views on the interrelatedness of aesthetics and political action. O’Brien’s expressed opinion that the ‘rather bogus mystique that has been made to surround violence ... is almost an aesthetic matter’ illuminates why O’Brien felt qualified as a literary critic to challenge Irish historical narratives that, in his view, were lending legitimacy to the armed campaign of the IRA.¹⁰⁸ O’Brien’s emphasis on Creon’s plight surprised many who had been conscious of his reputation as a critic of imperialism, in its various guises, during the Congo Crisis and his penetrating criticism of American strategies of ‘counter-revolutionary subordination’.¹⁰⁹ This, however, failed to take into account the signals inherent in O’Brien’s texts. There has been a critical tendency to look at O’Brien’s writing—and commentary—in ways that emphasize divergence rather than continuity but continuity nonetheless exists.

Criticism of O’Brien’s legacy in 2019—in a public debate between Frank Callanan and Niall Meehan—centred around O’Brien’s political influence on the Labour Party from 1969 to 1977 and, more specifically, his role in expanding Section 31 in 1973, as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in the Fine Gael/Labour coalition (between 1973 and 1977). This period is perceived by several commentators as a time when O’Brien ‘switched sides’. Niall Meehan posed the question during the debate: ‘Why did

¹⁰⁸ Klein, *Dissent, Power and Confrontation*, p. 103.

¹⁰⁹ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Power & consciousness* edited with Dean Vanech (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 41.

O’Brien interpreted Creon’s authority as ‘legitimate ... even if he had abused it, and the life of the city would become intolerable if citizens should disobey any law that irked their conscience.’ O’Brien, “Views”, *Listener* 80, 24 October 1968, p. 526.

he lose his bearings in 1970?’¹¹⁰ This implicitly negative assessment stems from an understanding of O’Brien as an internationally acclaimed left-wing postcolonial commentator—not least because of his book on Camus—to a more conservative counter-revolutionary force. Certain events were overlooked in the debate that are of crucial importance in understanding O’Brien’s shift of feeling in respect of revolutionary justice.

In January of 1970 O’Brien’s book on Camus came out and a few months later Sheehy-Skeffington died. The latter is of vital significance in understanding O’Brien’s writing from that point onwards. Both events are linked. The Sheehy-Skeffington archives provide ample evidence of O’Brien’s and Sheehy-Skeffington’s ongoing correspondence in relation to French writing and politics, and much else besides. In a letter, dated 3 March 1954, O’Brien wrote to Sheehy-Skeffington as follows:

I have relied on the NNRF (Sept 1953) for its summary of *The Tempes Modernes* [sic] Do you happen to have that issue of T.M? As I am advising people to ‘study’ the article in question, it seems only decent to read the thing myself first.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Niall Meehan, Howth Peninsula Heritage Society (23 April 2019). The quote is from a debate between Frank Callanan and Niall Meehan, organised by the Howth Peninsula Heritage Society (23 April 2019), entitled “An evaluation of the career of Conor Cruise O’Brien. The debates were later published on the DRB website. <<https://drb.ie/articles/the-polariser/>> [accessed 5 August 2019].

¹¹¹ The Sheehy-Skeffington Papers (Additional), MS 40, 489/6.

**La Nouvelle Revue Française* was a literary magazine founded in 1909. It was banned after the liberation of France for collaborationism and relaunched in 1953 as *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*.

**Les Temps Modernes* was an influential literary magazine—initially founded to replace *La Nouvelle Revue Française* after the latter was banned. It was founded by Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It was widely associated in the 1940s and 50s with Existentialism and more specifically, Sartre’s promotion of engaged writing (*littérature engagée*).

O'Brien adds as an afterword, 'I'd like to hold on to the magazines I still have for a spell if I may. There are a few ad [sic] furthermores; in reserve in case someone weighs in with a letter, if you can imagine anyone doing a thing like that.' Sheehy-Skeffington provided a sounding board throughout O'Brien's development on a wide variety of topics, but one area where O'Brien repeatedly sought Sheehy-Skeffington's advice was in relation to French translation. In the letter previously cited O'Brien asks Sheehy-Skeffington for advice on the title of an essay:

Would you favour calling the thing 'Un examen de Conscience' Or would that ... (as we say about the use of the word 'Éire') be perhaps a trifle precious 'An examination of conscience' would sound well but would be inadequate.¹¹²

This is documentary evidence of the distinctly literary vein in the politics espoused by Sheehy-Skeffington and O'Brien; their respective political-imaginaries were steeped in French literary currents of that period. O'Brien's developing views on Algeria undoubtedly owe much to his intellectual alliance with Sheehy-Skeffington, and while material relating to this period is scant in the O'Brien papers in the UCD archives, the Sheehy-Skeffington archives shed light on the latter's unambiguous commitment to Algerian independence. The Algerian committee based in London wrote to Sheehy-Skeffington requesting some financial support, and according to Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, 'his letter to them had been "warmly welcomed" by the committee, as well as his small financial contribution.'¹¹³ Sheehy-Skeffington was evidently aware of events on the ground in Algeria in relation to political dissidents. Among Sheehy-

¹¹² SSA(A), MS 40, 489/6.

¹¹³ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. 191.

Skeffington's documents is a French pamphlet on Algeria. The pamphlet itself is material evidence of Sheehy-Skeffington's close attention to detail, with several lines underlined, by him, for emphasis. The underlined text clearly stood out to him in respect of the strong colonial attitude it evidenced towards Algeria.

Sheehy-Skeffington's emphasis on the condescension, and barely credible assertions, in the text, suggest the extent to which such language affected him—and demonstrates the degree of his investment in the subject. Sheehy-Skeffington also wrote to the Irish delegation in the UN, of which O'Brien was a part, commending them on a recent speech made in relation to Algeria. Andrée noted that:

The Algerian crisis had come up at UNO in New York early in the year, and Frederick Boland, the permanent Irish delegate to the United Nations, had made a speech which impelled Owen to write and congratulate him: an unexpected gesture towards one for whom he had no personal admiration.¹¹⁴

Sheehy-Skeffington was always abreast of French political developments as a result of his French connections. O'Brien made use of these connections when writing his book on Camus, and credits M. Jean Denis (Andrée Sheehy Skeffington's father) with providing him with a picture of the '*village nègre*' in Oran.¹¹⁵ The professional origins of O'Brien's anti-imperialist phase has been traced to the period when O'Brien 'became Councillor in the Irish Embassy in Paris'.¹¹⁶ In 1955 O'Brien moved with his

¹¹⁴ Andrée Sheehy Skeffington, *Skeff*, p. 191.

¹¹⁵ O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 89.

¹¹⁶ Donal Cruise O'Brien, *The Story of a Migrant: A personal memoir* (self-published by Rita Cruise O'Brien), p. 67. (Akenson also makes this case).

family for just over a year 'to a small suburban house on the river at La Frette sur Seine.'¹¹⁷ O'Brien's son, Donal Cruise O'Brien has left an account of this period in his memoirs that reveal useful details that help recreate O'Brien's influence on his young son, and thus a sense of the ideas O'Brien was imparting.

In a passage that tallies with O'Brien's unqualified anti-imperialist position of that period, Donal Cruise O'Brien recalled, 'I'd been reading a little of Stendhal and was for a time captivated by the epic of revolutionary France, as told by French novelists and historians.' Donal Cruise O'Brien then recollects his impression that, 'the bad guys were undoubtedly the English: Pitt the younger and the paid agents of aristocracy in their unceasing conspiracy to suppress the cause of the revolution: money versus freedom.'¹¹⁸

Returning on his own for a casual gap year in 1958, Donal Cruise O'Brien recalled how different his experience was in the absence of his 'very well-informed father.' O'Brien's son recalled that:

This was the first year of the French Fifth Republic: Charles De Gaulle was newly President, and there was a feeling of political insecurity, even of danger, in Paris, because of the shadow of the war in Algeria. De Gaulle had come to power with a lot of help from the army in Algeria, and on the Left there was apprehension of a military dictatorship to come. Critics of the war in Algeria were being harassed, notably including the news magazine, *l'Express*, which

¹¹⁷ Cruise O'Brien, *The Story of a Migrant*, p. 67.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

carried material that questioned government policy in Algeria. I remember the street posters, “l’Express est saisi ce matin.” How far would the government go?¹¹⁹

This account confirms that Algeria was a pressing concern in both O’Brien’s immediate, and extended family. O’Brien’s French appointment coincided with Camus’s period of silence on Algeria. Donal Cruise O’Brien also recalls that he went to see a play by ‘Albert Camus based on a Dostoevsky story’.¹²⁰

O’Brien evidently paid close attention to the ‘dual crisis of the autumn of 1956- Suez and Hungary’.¹²¹ These international events coincided with O’Brien’s increasing involvement in foreign affairs and his increasing scepticism of rhetoric that legitimized imperialist wars and counter-revolutionary strategies. O’Brien condemned the fact that the terms on which Camus sanctioned the Hungarian rebellion, simultaneously provided an excuse to quell the Algerian one. O’Brien quoted Camus in order to demonstrate what O’Brien considered to be the logical consequence of the latter’s view that:

We will be less tempted to overwhelm our own nation, and it alone,
under the weight of its historic sins. We will be more careful—

¹¹⁹ Cruise O’Brien, *The Story of a Migrant*, pp. 81-82.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹²¹ O’Brien, *Camus* p. 73.

This crisis, and the role the UN played in allowing the United States to save face, was a theme that O’Brien repeatedly turned to in order to demonstrate how the UN operated. In “An Unhealthy Intersection”, he describes the UN as a mechanism whereby, ‘people can hold ... the appearance of consistency and yet avoid the results of being really consistent.’

Conor Cruise O’Brien, “An Unhealthy Intersection”, *New Review* 2.16 (July 1975), p. 7.

Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The United Nations: Sacred Drama* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p. 15.

without ceasing to demand from her all the justice of which she is capable—about her survival and her liberty.¹²²

This, according to O'Brien, was a France that included Algeria, thus, in the latter's view, Camus was by implication supporting the pacification of Algeria. What most disillusioned O'Brien at this period was Camus's defection to the 'Western camp'. This was epitomised in Camus's statement that:

The defects of the West are numberless, its crimes and its faults real. But in the last analysis, let us not forget that we are the only people who hold that power of improvement and emancipation which resided in the genius of freedom.¹²³

John Foley has argued that Camus's explanation for his condemnation of Russian aggression in Hungary—while supporting the continued role of France in Algeria—on the pages of *Encounter* went unnoticed by O'Brien. Foley's essay "A Postcolonial Fiction: Conor Cruise O'Brien's Camus" is generally critical of O'Brien's failure to take Camus's journalism, specifically that 'devoted to Algeria', into account in his negative assessment of Camus.¹²⁴ Foley's observation that O'Brien neglected Camus's abundant journalistic political testimony and chose to focus 'his attention instead on Camus' novels', is arguably further proof that O'Brien was temperamentally drawn to decoding political truth in fiction.¹²⁵

¹²² O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 73.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹²⁴ John Foley, "A Postcolonial Fiction: Conor Cruise O'Brien's Camus", p. 1.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Camus had stated that any effort to compare the Algerian question to the Hungarian came up against the reality of 'the existence in Algeria of over a million Algerian-born pieds noirs':

The Hungarian problem is simple: the Hungarians must be given back their liberty. The Algerian problem is different: there, it is necessary to assure the liberties of the two peoples of the country.¹²⁶

It seems unlikely that O'Brien would have missed such a statement when one considers his close engagement with the magazine at that period. O'Brien's case against *Encounter* was the result of his impression of the magazine content over a period of time increasing the possibility that O'Brien had read the article.

An element of foreboding hangs over "Monsieur Camus changes his climate" as O'Brien at the outset tells his readers that *L'Homme révolté* will be a problem for those who think they know what Camus means, despite what he is saying: 'Critics of this sort will find *La Chute* hard going.'¹²⁷ This was to plague those who attempted the same with O'Brien at a later date. Declan Kiberd is one such critic, and he has been challenged by John Foley for crediting O'Brien with a change of heart, in respect of Camus, that a straightforward textual reading or documentary evidence doesn't warrant. Everything points to the conclusion that O'Brien held fast to his criticisms of Camus, yet Kiberd's contention accords with the facts on the ground. O'Brien's disenchantment with Camus's turn did not preclude the feeling of emotional attraction to Camus. W.J. McCormack has come closest to observing this element in O'Brien's

¹²⁶ John Foley, "A Postcolonial Fiction: Conor Cruise O'Brien's Camus", p. 11.

O'Brien critiques what he views as Camus's hypocrisy in relation to Hungary in *Camus*, pp. 73-75.

¹²⁷ O'Brien, *WP*, p. 97.

criticism noting the biographical similarities between O'Brien and Camus and linking O'Brien's analysis of *La Chute* with O'Brien's future political trajectory.¹²⁸

A clue to O'Brien's ambiguous attraction to Camus is in the foreword to Martin Dillon's book *The Dirty War* (1991).¹²⁹ The opening lines commend Dillon in the following terms, 'As a writer, Martin Dillon possesses a quality which was commended by Albert Camus: "The reserve that befits a good witness".'¹³⁰ This is not insignificant in light of the fact that O'Brien was enamoured of Dillon's journalistic strategies in dealing with the complex terrain of spies, informers and counter-revolutionary tacticians. O'Brien wrote *Camus* as he was reaching the end of a period (1965-1969) that necessitated a certain kind of emphasis—that would expose the cant of political anti-communism. In this respect, Camus provided the perfect foil for O'Brien in terms of marrying practical criticism with postcolonial critique—a combination that was strengthened by his emotional affinity with the subject of his study.¹³¹

There are a number of details that warrant attention in O'Brien's foreword to *The Dirty War* in respect of the thematic concerns of this thesis—not least that he resorts to an intense bout of catastrophizing. There is a certain irony in the fact that

¹²⁸ O'Brien wrote that Camus was 'beginning to take the side of his own tribe'. McCormack describes this process, astutely, as having 'its louder echo in Dr O'Brien's own political odyssey.' W.J. McCormack, *The Battle of the Books: Two Decades of Irish Cultural Debate* (Gigginstown: Lilliput Press, 1986), p. 27.

¹²⁹ Martin Dillon's *The Dirty War* is an examination of the covert war between Northern Ireland's paramilitary groups and British security forces. O'Brien called Dillon, 'our Virgil to that inferno.' Martin Dillon, *Crossing the Line: My Life on the Edge*, (Kildare: Merrion Press, 2017), p. n. a.

¹³⁰ Martin Dillon, *The Dirty War* (London: Arrow Books, 1990), p. xi.

¹³¹ It is reasonable to assume that I.A. Richards influenced O'Brien's approach in this period as he had stayed with O'Brien in Ghana. The intersection of literature and politics is to the fore in his evaluation of Richards contribution to his thought processes. O'Brien wrote, 'I. A. Richards, during an extended stay with us in 1964, suggested, by the forms and quality of his attention to the surrounding political phenomena, the possibilities inherent in an approach to politics quite different from that of either the practical politician or the academic political scientist.' O'Brien, *UN:SD*, p. 319.

Dillon's book, which set out to realize an impartial examination of culpability on behalf of Northern Ireland's paramilitary groups and British security forces—is preceded by a foreword that resolutely proceeds to deal with one side. O'Brien writes that 'the primary responsibility for the foundation and arming of the Provisional IRA rests squarely on the shoulders of a particular group of Irish politicians, members of Jack Lynch's government in 1969-70.'¹³² In this O'Brien demonstrates a certain intellectual continuity—that of 'chipping away' from within, that accords with his attachment to Sartre's notion of priorities.¹³³

The foreword to Dillon's *The Dirty War* echoes features of O'Brien's tone and style on the question of the cultural Cold War in his own foreword to *Writers and Politics* (1965).¹³⁴ However, despite this similarity, the foreword as a whole provides rich material for those looking for evidence that O'Brien's position in relation to Northern Ireland was increasingly illiberal. In this piece, O'Brien addresses what he viewed as the unconscious hypocrisy of the 'liberalism' of the Irish media. O'Brien presents a troubling scenario when he hypothesizes what would happen if the IRA brought their armed campaign south of the border—and after the death toll had reached fifty.

¹³² Dillon, *The Dirty War*, p. xiii.

¹³³ Diarmuid Whelan attested to the force of Sartre's influence in this respect when he wrote that, 'A persistent trait of O'Brien's which derives from his reading of the Sartre and Camus controversy is the question of priorities.'

Whelan, "Emblems of his early adversity", p. 8.

¹³⁴ Here I refer specifically to his passage in *Writers and Politics*: 'My own guess is that the liberation of the communist world and of the poor world, from their crude forms of mendacity, will have to proceed from within and the liberation of the Western world from its subtler and perhaps deadlier forms of mendacity will also have to proceed from within.'

O'Brien, *WP*, pp. 20-21.

Public opinion would approve the most ruthless measures against any of the IRA who might remain at large. The beating of suspects and a 'shoot to kill policy' would be routine, and public opinion in the Republic would have no fault to find with it, provided it worked, and the IRA was stopped from shooting and bombing people in the Republic ... This type of liberalism is for export only.¹³⁵

Considering the above passage, Ronan Sheehan—former member of the editorial board associated with *The Crane Bag*—suggested that O'Brien was making a rhetorical point drawing on Roman sources. Sheehan viewed the passage as an example of updated, polemical and rhetorical usage of phrases such as, 'Inter arma enim silent lēgēs' and 'Si vis pacem, para bellum'.¹³⁶ Regardless of how one views O'Brien's hypothesis, however, there was no escaping the reality that O'Brien's liberalism was under strain.

Fintan O'Toole brought this issue into focus when he challenged O'Brien to account for his turnaround from his earlier opposition to an amendment that would impinge on civil liberties—The Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act—introduced by Desmond O'Malley, then Minister for Justice in Fianna Fail, in 1972. O'Toole writes that the clash between O'Brien's 'dark vision and his rational enlightenment liberalism' resolved itself at this juncture. O'Brien, as Labour Party spokesman for Northern Ireland, was expected to lead the attack on the legislation but O'Brien had difficulty falling in with the party line. He eventually yielded to the party

¹³⁵ Dillon, *The Dirty War*, pp. xvi-xvii.

¹³⁶ Ronan Sheehan's translation, respectively, 'When arms are found, the laws are silent', and 'if you wish for peace, prepare for war.'

line, but in hindsight reflected on his difficulty in reconciling his public role with his personal feelings on the issue as follows:

With my kind of general liberal outlook, I didn't like the shape of the Bill very much, but at the same time, with what was shaping up in this country, I was beginning to see that standard liberal practices were oddly inadequate.¹³⁷

By exploring O'Brien's patterns of thought in the period leading up to and subsequent to this juncture, this thesis shows how literary and imaginative alliances have real consequences when they enter the political space in ways that influence political action. O'Brien, interviewed by O'Toole, reflected in hindsight that, 'By this time I had changed myself.'¹³⁸ However, as the next chapter will show, O'Brien's readings of literary and philosophical figures in the 1960s point more in the direction of emotional, literary and philosophical continuity than change.

¹³⁷ Fintan O'Toole, "The Life and Times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: An Economy of Truth" *Magill*, June 1986, p. 43.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

4. O'Brien on Friedrich Nietzsche, Niccoló Machiavelli and W.B. Yeats: When "Veiled Statues and Tender Minds" meet "The Block and The Bloody Knife"

When O'Brien wrote in the late 1960s that it was 'no exaggeration to say that there was hardly an important mind in Europe in the first half of this century that was not deeply marked by Nietzsche', he could well have added that his uncle, Thomas Kettle, was such a person.¹ Kettle, who was described by Frank Callanan as 'Ireland's first European', and lauded accordingly, in President Michael D. Higgins's 2014 speech in Westminster, wrote the foreword to J.M. Hone's translations of Daniel Halévy's *The life of Nietzsche* in 1911.² When O'Brien wrote "The Gentle Nietzscheans", a condemnation of a strain of Nietzschean revisionism that was, in O'Brien's view, trying to sanitize Nietzschean excesses, he was considering writing a biography of Thomas Kettle. Writing to Kettle's wife, Mary, O'Brien's aunt on the maternal line, he revealed the impetus, and scope, of his planned book:

It would aim at presenting a picture, not only of uncle Tom himself, but of his friends, the Dublin of his time and the events in which he played a part. The period is extraordinarily rich in personalities and in events and it would be hard to think of anyone more central in relation to the important aspects of its life, political, social and literary, than Uncle Tom. Hitherto the period has been written about almost exclusively in relation to the biographies of people, who, great as they were, were

¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Suspecting Glance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 54.

² Rónán O'Brien, "Thomas Kettle: The Lost Leader?" *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 104.414 (Summer 2015), p. 176. Michael D. Higgins's Address to the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, 8 April 2014.

exceptional and in some degree peripheral to the social and political life of the time—Joyce, Yeats, O’Casey.³

The letter as it unfolds clearly illustrates O’Brien’s commitment to reading and re-writing history in light of family circumstances. O’Brien was determined to set right the wrongs of a historical emphasis that had not, in his view, sufficiently recognised his family’s historical contribution and standing in pre-1916 Ireland, when the Irish Parliamentary Party were the main players in the historical drama of the day. It seemed to O’Brien that ‘with a different centre and a new line of approach a different and in some ways more interesting picture would emerge.’⁴ This ‘more interesting picture’ was to highlight what O’Brien perceived as having been neglected in post-1916 historiography—the ‘political, social and literary’ contribution of members of his family, and their milieu.⁵ While O’Brien stressed in the letter his commitment to carry out the task as ‘a historian interested only in the historian’s question: “how it really was?”’, he admitted, however, that other factors influenced his decision:⁶

I am not ashamed ... to admit to you at least that in deciding to undertake the task certain motives of a lowly order from a historian’s point of view, but valuable incentives, entered in: family piety and family pride.⁷

It was not accidental that the three ‘exceptional and in some degree peripheral’ examples O’Brien chose were all literary figures. O’Brien’s political

³ The Sheehy-Skeffington Archives MS 40, 489/8.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

imagination was profoundly literary, and as such, his political re-configurations of history were contrived along lines that strove to re-enact imaginatively the drama of the period he was attempting to reconstruct. Denis Sampson noted that O'Brien was 'not altogether unaware of this process of self-definition through dramatic identification ... at least by 1969'.⁸ Sampson has provided an assessment of O'Brien's writing that is marked by deep attunement to O'Brien's intellectual proclivities. Writing on O'Brien, Sampson has highlighted the degree to which O'Brien's 'major interest in writing is biographical and those he has chosen to write about help him to define himself through a dramatic identification with his subjects.'⁹ In a nuanced analysis of O'Brien's creative process, Sampson observes that:

Continually we find a note in his writing which suggests that the penetration of his insights derives from this identification, or, sometimes, from a relation of confrontation. Continually his commentary becomes a testing out of directions in which his own life moves.¹⁰

This chapter traces how these insights deriving from identification affected the development of O'Brien's interpretative frames in the period preceding his entry into party politics in Ireland. Correspondingly, this chapter will show where his interpretation was brought into a 'relation of confrontation', when thought, or responses to thought, was perceived by O'Brien as dishonest in relation to the 'facts'.

⁸ Denis Sampson and Fahmy Farag, "Passion and Suspicion: An Approach to the Writings of Conor Cruise O'Brien", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 2.2 (December 1976), p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Certain patterns of thought and feeling emerge in his responses that are of importance in order to gain a deeper understanding of O'Brien.

O'Brien's two autobiographical essays "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's" and "The Roots of My Preoccupations" both confirm Sampson's and Fahmy's observation, and dispel any doubts—if there ever were any—as to the centrality of O'Brien's family history in his evolving world-view. These essays published as a two-part series in *The Atlantic*, in January and July 1994 respectively, give a fascinating insight into the way O'Brien's intellectual development was enmeshed in a complex of emotions set in train by the events of the Easter Rising in 1916. These essays are noteworthy in that they unabashedly reveal the way that O'Brien had come to view twentieth-century Irish history as something that was inextricably bound up with the fate of his family, something made explicit in the title of the first *Atlantic* essay. Correspondingly, O'Brien analyses various family members in terms of their historical roles, and how those roles impinged on his developing sense of Irish history. 'Self-dramatization and contemplation' were at the centre of both essays in the style of his earlier work *States of Ireland*, a book that could be 'read as essay, as autobiography, as journal, and at times as fiction'.¹¹

The series editor of *The Atlantic* introduced O'Brien's January essay with the observation that 'The series might well be titled "This Century in My Life," because O'Brien uses his life as a prism through which to view his times.'¹² O'Brien staked a claim to an interpretation of Irish (and international) history that sets a 'Cruiser'

¹¹ Sampson and Farag, "Passion and Suspicion", p. 18.

¹² Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", *The Atlantic* 273.1 (January 1994), p. 49.

constellation firmly at the heart of the matter. This emphasis, which transcended the context of these particular essays, was manifest in the way that he structured the essays. The reader is told that the first sound O'Brien heard was the bombing of the Four Courts, 'I was then four and a half years old.'¹³ The time of a seminal event in national Irish history juxtaposed with the writer's age adds a new dimension to Lynch's notion that 'The destruction of the Public Records Office in Dublin in 1922', 'left large gaps in the nation's biographical source material' acting 'as a reminder that whilst historical events can provide autobiographical inspiration, they may also remove it, encouraging writers to supplement breaks in private narratives with the national story and vice versa.'¹⁴

O'Brien had absorbed the shocks of history into an intensely personal historiography. O'Brien blurred the boundary between historiography and life-writing in an attempt to lend authenticity to the historical narrative he was intent on elucidating. Tom Garvin has highlighted this aspect of O'Brien's seminal book, *States of Ireland* (1972):

O'Brien uses literary evidence for psychological states and social conflict and rarely has much use for the apparatus of the social sciences, despite the avalanche of academic studies that had already begun to descend all over the 'Irish Problem' from universities in Ireland, Britain and the United States.¹⁵

¹³ O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", p. 50.

¹⁴ Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation (Reimagining Ireland)* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 11.

¹⁵ Bryan Fanning and Tom Garvin, *The Books that Define Ireland* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2014), p. 197.

O'Brien's first memory involved an encounter with a 'Black-and-Tan' and is recollected with his characteristic emphasis on the strength of childhood impressions:

My earliest memory is of an encounter—an entirely harmless one—
with a Black-and-Tan. I was about three years old, and my nursemaid,
Sadie Franklin, was taking me for a walk on the Rathmines Road, in
the middle-class South Dublin suburb where we lived. The Black-and-
Tan was sitting on a gate. Sadie started when she noticed him and
hurried me on past him. I looked at him. He was a small man with a
rather sad expression, and he just sat there, slowly swinging a
revolver up and down. But he had clearly frightened the wits out of
Sadie, without doing anything at all. As I was a bit frightened of Sadie,
this achievement made a strong impression on my infant mind.¹⁶

This anecdotal style is present throughout both autobiographical essays in *The Atlantic*.¹⁷ In fact, as O'Brien sets out to document the unfolding of Irish history from 1912 onwards (1912 being the year the third Home Rule Bill was carried in the House of Commons), he writes, 'The background to the bombardment, and the political and military setting of my early life, need to be told, if the reader is to understand the rest of the story.'¹⁸

As O'Brien proceeded to recount the 'political and military setting' of his early life, he did so in the spirit of his letter to his aunt Mary Kettle in 1967, to redress the lack of attention given to various family members who were prominent in Irish cultural

¹⁶ O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", p. 66.

¹⁷ Fanning and Garvin, *The Books that Define Ireland*, p. 198.

¹⁸ O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", p. 50.

and political life at the turn of the century. In that letter O'Brien had cited three literary figures, who were 'in some degree peripheral to the social and political life of the time.'¹⁹ In *The Atlantic* essays he returns to this theme. Joyce and O'Casey, however, are only spoken of in relation to how they touched on the Sheehy (O'Brien's maternal line) fortunes. Perhaps in these essays, more than elsewhere, O'Brien is explicit about his sense of disinheritance and the way that it shaped his emergent political, intellectual and social ambition. After an exposition on the reasons for the demise of the Irish Parliamentary Party, and the subsequent Sinn Féin landslide victory in the elections of December 1918, O'Brien writes:

I was just over a year old at the time of those elections, which had negative implications for the status of our family, and therefore for my own prospects in life. In the Ireland of before December, 1918, my grandfather had been a person of considerable consequence—one of the most senior members of the party, and the right-hand man of its last leader, John Dillon.²⁰

It is in this context that James Joyce is invoked, and the context may provide us with a clue as to why O'Brien used the word 'lacerating' when discussing Joyce's work at an earlier period. O'Brien viewed *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, as 'a chapter in our intellectual and moral history', and had decided that, that was perhaps 'why I can't like it. Our intellectual and moral history is a lacerating sort of affair.'²¹

¹⁹ SSA(A), MS 40, 489/8.

²⁰ O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", p. 63.

²¹ Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien, Anthology* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 269.

Joyce had 'ironically' testified to the special status O'Brien's ancestors had in the period preceding the emergence of 'a new Republican elite'. O'Brien writes it thus:

The family's sense of its own importance in the first decade of the century was ironically acknowledged by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, in the passage in which he recorded a conversation between my grandmother, the wife of "Mr David Sheehy, M.P.," and a deferential priest, Father Conmee. If Home Rule had been achieved by the parliamentary route, David Sheehy would certainly have had a seat in the Irish Cabinet. Our whole family would have been part of the establishment of the new Home Rule Ireland. As it was, we were out in the cold, superseded by a new Republican elite. To be connected with the Irish Parliamentary Party had been an asset; it was now a liability.²²

These later essays provide further evidence of the emotional continuity that underlined O'Brien's work from the outset. Commenting on his longstanding interest in the intersection between religion and nationalism he notes that:

It is not surprising that my first two books grapple with Catholicism and Irish nationalism. The first, *Maria Cross* (1952), was an exploration of the Catholic imagination in literature. The second, *Parnell and His Party (1880-1890)* (1957), was a study of a phase of Irish nationalist history.²³

²² O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", p. 63.

²³ O'Brien, "The Roots of My Preoccupations", *The Atlantic*, 274.1 (July 1994), p. 81.

The revelations in these two essays also shed light on the way his internalized experience of Irish history might have sought recognition and modes of justification in literary and philosophical writing. This chapter began with the fact that Tom Kettle wrote the foreword to Hone's translation of Daniel Halévy's *The life of Nietzsche*. Kettle's assessment of Nietzsche foreshadows O'Brien's contribution to literature and thought, but it does so from a very different vantage point. Kettle demonstrated in his assessment of Nietzsche's writing style the high esteem in which he held French literature—something that was passed down to O'Brien. Praising Nietzsche for enlivening the German tradition, Kettle quoted from a letter Nietzsche had sent to Peter Gast suggesting that: "We must 'Mediterraneanise' German music,"²⁴ Kettle concluded that, 'in fact he did indisputably "Mediterraneanise" the style of German literature. That edged and glittering speech of his owed much to his acknowledged masters, La Rochefoucauld, Voltaire, and Stendhal, the lapidaries of French.'²⁵

The terms in which Kettle and O'Brien interpreted Nietzsche are irreconcilably shaped by their circumstances. Kettle was writing before the horrors of WW1—where he tragically met his death. Therefore, Kettle's reading emphasized the literary qualities of Nietzsche's prose, while astutely identifying the potential dangers of Nietzschean excesses:

Zarathustra is a counter-poison to sentimentalism, that worst ailment of our day. He brings a sort of ethical strychnine which taken in large doses is fatal, but in small doses is an incomparable tonic. He

²⁴ Daniel Halévy, *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. by J.M. Hone, foreword by Thomas Kettle, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911) p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

disturbed many who were woefully at ease in Zion, and was a poet of the heroic life.²⁶

O'Brien was writing in very different circumstances when he launched an attack on what he referred to as "The Gentle Nietzscheans" in the late 1960s. This article was published as part of a collection entitled *The Suspecting Glance* (1972) and later republished in *The New York Review of Books*. D. R. O'Connor Lysaght observed the fact that O'Brien had raised Yeats and Nietzsche 'to be major political figures in a quartet with Machiavelli and Edmund Burke.'²⁷ This had arguably much less to do with their equivalent importance as political figures, and far more to do with their imaginative dominance on O'Brien's consciousness, as creators of imagery that was utilised for political purposes.

The majority of O'Brien's intellectual concerns in the 1960s circled back to this original concern with the power of words and images and their political implications in transforming people's futures, and more particularly, his own. O'Brien expressed the process as follows, 'All writing that we know—even the writing of Samuel Beckett—is a form of social communication, a cryptic signalling going on in society and history. And this signalling is not going along a narrow channel, as the old New Criticism would perhaps have preferred'.²⁸ O'Brien had concluded by the late 1960s that 'Richard Ellmann was wrong in his view that although Yeats had read Nietzsche, he had

²⁶ Halévy, *The Life of Friedrich Nietzsche*, p. 18.

²⁷ D.R. O'Connor Lysaght, "A last word on Conor Cruise O'Brien (1917-2008) (25 January 2009). <<http://www.socialistdemocracy.org/News&AnalysisIreland/News&AnalysisIreALastWordOnConorCruiseOBrien.html>> [accessed 25 November 2019].

²⁸ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 51.

discarded the implications of Nietzsche's ethics.²⁹ Nietzsche, in O'Brien's words, was 'was one of the great liberators,' and Yeats 'might never have developed into a great poet without the Nietzschean permissions.'³⁰

This is the central premise of "Passion and Cunning" (1965) and his later essay "Burke, Nietzsche, and Yeats", published in *The Suspecting Glance* (1972). O'Brien reflected in the "The Gentle Nietzscheans" that 'Each age, of course, reinvents the authors of the past,' demonstrating his awareness of how writers can be appropriated, or re-appropriated to meet the needs of a given time.³¹ O'Brien in his revision of the intellectual and emotional foundations of Yeats's political commitments was to a great extent reaching for a deeper understanding of the interplay of forces—literary and political—that led to the creation of images that gave people an image of a new 'order'.

The crux of O'Brien's controversial essay on Yeats was that previous Yeats scholarship had focused more on theory than on 'practical choices' when discussing 'his political activities' in the Irish context.³² O'Brien set out to focus on Yeats's practical choices, stressing that the two lines of approach gave 'significantly different results.'³³ This reflected a longstanding interest on O'Brien's part with the relationship between thought and action. The 'practical choices' Yeats made were, from O'Brien's point of view, a better indicator of the truth of feeling, as Yeats experienced it, than

²⁹ Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 292.

³⁰ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 63.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

³² Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning: Essays on Nationalism, Terrorism and Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), p. 54.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

theoretical assumptions regarding the premises of Yeats's actions. This was part of a larger pattern of distrust O'Brien exhibited in his writing for theoretical formulations based on abstract notions or ideas—this aversion to abstractions predates his Burkean phase, and is evident, for example in his reading of Mauriac in *Maria Cross*.

O'Brien, true to this characteristic element of his thought, opens the essay describing his sense of his generation's loss on the occasion of Yeats's death. The scene revolves around O'Brien's conversation with his aunt Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington on the day of Yeats's funeral. The extent of O'Brien's psychological and poetic immersion is clear from the outset when he defines Hanna's personality in terms of Yeatsian antinomies: 'Hers was the kind of Irish mind which Yeats could call—when he felt it to be on his side—'cold', 'detonating', 'Swiftian', or when, as in this case, it was not on his side, 'bitter', 'abstract', 'fanatical'.³⁴ The reader is presented with the image of a cold, impassive, patrician aunt, holding court with her young, pompous, nephew. Lamenting her inability to appreciate their sense of loss, he reflected that:

She wished, I know, to say something kind; she could not say anything she did not believe to be true. After a pause she spoke: 'Yes,' she said, 'he was a Link with the Past.' I had been speaking of the poet; she was thinking of the politician. At that time, I thought this attitude exasperating and even ludicrous. Who cared about Yeats the politician?³⁵

³⁴ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

Writing to Sheehy-Skeffington on the 13 July 1964, O'Brien informed him of Hanna's inclusion in his essay on Yeats.

I am sending you a long thing I have written on Yeats and Politics for the centenary volume, edited by Derry Jeffares of Leeds, which Macmillan is bringing out next year under the gruesome title 'In Excited Reverie'. I should be grateful if you could look over it and let me have your comments. There are, as you will see, references to your mother on page 1 and again at the foot of page 25. If you would like any change in the wording of these passages, please let me know. I think they should be all right. I should also like your reaction to the piece generally, and to any specific passages.³⁶

The last line gives a sense of how O'Brien valued Sheehy-Skeffington's input on an issue of historical and literary significance that touched on their family's personal history. The letter also, somewhat surprisingly, contains an admission on O'Brien's part that he didn't like 'controversy':

The fact is that the Yeatsists have consistently played down his involvement in reactionary and fascist politics. Derry Jeffares, for example spoke in a review—which I have not quoted because, unlike you, I detest controversy—of Yeats's 'brief interest' in Fascism. It is hard to see what was so brief about an interest which lasted from

³⁶ SSA(A), MS 40,489 /8.

within a fortnight of the March on Rome to his last writings on the eve of his death in 1939.³⁷

O'Brien's view that Yeats's protestations of political innocence were feigned, and that he was in fact much more Machiavellian in respect of his political interventions, ruffled many feathers among Yeatsian scholars. Terence de Vere White, then editor of *The Irish Times*, claimed that "the print swam, before my eyes."³⁸ When O'Brien wrote "Passion and Cunning" he was at the height of his intellectual powers, and the lure of exploring the nature of Yeats's poetry and how that reflected on his political commitments, and vice versa, was doubtlessly great. George Orwell had written in 1943 that, 'The relationship between Fascism and the literary intelligentsia badly needs investigating, and Yeats might well be the starting-point.'³⁹ O'Brien's essay was in some respects an accomplished development of Orwell's themes. Both Orwell and O'Brien wrote in unambiguous terms about the implications of Yeats's anti-democratic and reactionary impulse, yet both wavered enough to hesitate at points—Orwell by suggesting that there was almost a naivety in Yeats's glorification of Fascism. To demonstrate this, Orwell quoted Yeats on the new civilisation he anticipated and hoped for, 'great wealth everywhere in a few men's hands, all dependent upon a few, up to the emperor himself ...'⁴⁰ Orwell concluded in response:

The innocence of this statement is as interesting as its snobbishness.

To begin with, in a single phrase, "great wealth in a few men's

³⁷ SSA(A), MS 40,489 /8.

³⁸ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 1.

³⁹ George Orwell, *Essays*, ed. and introduced by John Carey, Everyman's Library (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), p. 468.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

hands”, Yeats lays bare the central reality of Fascism, which the whole of its propaganda is designed to cover up. The merely political Fascist claims always to be fighting for justice: Yeats, the poet, sees at a glance that Fascism means injustice, and acclaims it for that very reason.⁴¹

O’Brien’s hesitation, however, was on a poetic level—the level of the artistic imagination. This is clear when O’Brien cites Yeats’s attempt at reasoning how a poem emerges into consciousness to show that Yeats’s conscious mind was swept away in the act of creation:

I thought, ‘After the individualist, demagogic movement founded by Hobbes and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries.’ Then I thought, “Nothing is now possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation.” My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor, and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it.⁴²

O’Brien concluded that very little seems to be known, or perhaps can be known, of how this process actually works, and ends wondering how that political ugly duckling can be ‘turned into this glorious Swan?’⁴³ The way O’Brien dealt with the inherent ambivalence of Yeats’s poetic process reflected his own deep ambivalence in

⁴¹ Orwell, *Essays*, p. 466.

⁴² O’Brien, *PC*, pp. 50-51.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

respect of Yeats's politics. By analysing the contrapuntal nature of Yeats's temperament—on the one hand drawn towards an aristocratic, anti-democratic style of politics, and on the other the reality of what that style of politics would logically have become in the Ireland of that period, namely, clerical fascism—O'Brien excavated the Irish imaginary of the period. To do this he had to imaginatively inhabit Yeats's position and re-imagine the historical dialectic of that period.

Another element of O'Brien's essay was his emphasis on Yeats's romantic antipathy to materialism and greed and his 'desire to educate an Irish public away from English materialism to intellectual dependence'.⁴⁴ When O'Brien quotes Yeats he quotes his anti-modern instinct, and much of his antipathy to modern England is based on a sense that it has become base, driven by material and financial gain. He quotes Yeats's reasoning as to why the 'old Fenian' in him would have rejoiced 'if a Fascist nation or government-controlled Spain'.⁴⁵ In Yeats's stated opinion it:

would weaken the British Empire, force England to be civil to India and loosen the hand of English finance in the far East of which I hear occasionally. But this is mere instinct. A thing I would never act on. Then I have a horror of modern politics—I see nothing but the manipulation of popular enthusiasm by false news.⁴⁶

In this reading O'Brien is embedding Yeats's emotional sway towards Fascism in his ambivalence to England, particularly modern industrialized England, emblemized

⁴⁴ Richard English and Joseph Morrison Skelly eds., *Ideas Matter: Essays in Honour of Conor Cruise O'Brien* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1998), p. 95.

⁴⁵ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 46.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

in Yeats's notion that 'The English mind, excited by its newspaper proprietors and its school-masters, has turned into a bed-hot harlot.'⁴⁷ The "Passion and Cunning" of the title, albeit ascribed to Yeats, is a fitting description of O'Brien's mode of argument throughout the essay. The passion required cunning to achieve its ends; leaving one to wonder what exactly O'Brien hoped to achieve by destabilizing the reputation of an iconic Irish poet. Yeats, however, emblemized the tensions of Irish political life from the demise of Parnell, through 1916, the Free State, the Civil War, and the lead up to WW2—a crisis that reordered international politics, and only such a figure could carry O'Brien's intellectual ambition. His intellectual engagement with Yeats, and his imaginative transfiguration, was in itself an act of creative linkage.

"Passion and Cunning" is in many respects a striking example of narrative re-appropriation by a younger writer working against the backdrop of new post-WW2 realignments. The essay deconstructed a national icon in a way that brought his family centre-stage. Bryan Fanning has pointed out that from *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* onwards O'Brien's writing, 'in which he explained Ireland's conflicts to the wider world ... tended to place his own family and their social circle (and therefore himself) centre-stage.'⁴⁸ The O'Brien papers in UCD show that O'Brien was attempting to trace his genealogy on his father's side in 1967, attesting to the fact that O'Brien was on a quest to situate himself personally, as well as intellectually, at this period.⁴⁹ O'Brien's father had been part of Yeats's circle in the Arts Club on Fitzwilliam Square. The strength of feeling as it evolved can be seen in O'Brien's palpable analytical and emotional

⁴⁷ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Bryan Fanning, "Not a Woman's place", *Dublin Review of Books* (July 2016). <<https://drb.ie/articles/not-a-womans-place/>> [accessed 12 March 2018].

⁴⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien papers, University College Dublin (UCD), P/82 167.

investment in attempting to understand the nature of the poetic process, and his concern with how the 'prudent Yeats' became the manager of the poet.⁵⁰ Through this device O'Brien frames his subsequent exploration of the cause and effect of Yeats's poetic interventions in the political sphere. Thereby, two of O'Brien's over-riding concerns are addressed: the nature of the poetic process (its source, and mysterious, often unintended, consequences); and how it impinges on lived, political reality. In this sense "Passion and Cunning" has an exploratory dimension. Readers witness O'Brien's effort to understand the metaphysical dimensions of poetry:

Is the connection then between the politics and the poetry only trivial and superficial? There is, I think, a deeper connection: if the political prose and the poetry are thought of, not as 'substance' and 'metaphor', or 'content' and 'style' but as cognate expressions of a fundamental force, anterior to both politics and poetry.⁵¹

In 1939 O'Brien was writing poetry and trying to get it published. Yeats's poetry had a profound influence on O'Brien in the 1930s at a time when O'Brien harboured ambitions to be taken seriously as a poet. This emphasis on a 'fundamental force, anterior to both politics and poetry,' is crucial to understanding the character of O'Brien's intellectual make-up.⁵² This unnameable, numinous dimension of reality appears to have historical agency in O'Brien's imagination and this strain of thought is pervasive right across his writing. Already by the mid-1960s O'Brien was offering an

⁵⁰ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

interpretation of this phenomenon in relation to Yeats's poetic source that was resonant with the terminology of Jungian analysis:

That force was, I suggest, Yeats's profound and tragic intuitive—and intelligent—awareness, in his maturity and old age, of what the First World War had set loose, of what was already moving towards Hitler and the Second World War. That he is conscious of the danger a letter shows as early as 1923: "Unless Europe takes to war again and starts new telepathic streams of violence and cruelty." But the poetry is already responding to the telepathic streams as early as 1920, when he wrote 'The Second Coming'.⁵³

O'Brien's ambivalence in "Passion and Cunning" is manifest in the co-existence of two contradictory emphases. On the one hand, his conclusion can be viewed as essentially exonerating Yeats by granting that all calculated intent is thrust aside when images take hold of the poet. The mystical process that unfolds in the writing of poetry, according to O'Brien, leads to an encounter where 'the raw intimations of what is impending—the "telepathic waves of violence and fear"—make themselves known, not in the form of calculated practical deductions, but in the attempt to reveal, through metaphoric insight, what is actually happening.'⁵⁴ O'Brien's preoccupation with the prophetic character of art, did not always let the creator off the hook in this respect. Writing on Dostoevsky around the same period he surmised that:

⁵³ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 51.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

There is a kind of understanding which is a complicity, and Dostoevsky's very deep intuitive understanding of cruelty took the form, in politics, of chauvinism. He was a prophet of disaster who helped his own prophecies toward fulfilment.⁵⁵

This observation on Dostoevsky is yet another example of the way O'Brien was dealing with one of the central imaginative concerns that dominated his life—the relationship between thought and action. This relationship, and how it manifested in different historical situations, dominated his output from the mid to late 1960s, and prepared the ground for his later thinking on a wide range of issues of both historical and contemporary interest. When O'Brien wrote "Passion and Cunning" he was determined to make a case for the prosecution, yet, O'Brien's inherent sensitivity to the mystery of the process of poetic creation was for all intents and purposes undermining his case. It is the scale of these imaginative concerns that account for the novelty and polemicism of his critique of Yeats's poetry, in terms of the latter's waxing and waning political commitment.

The fact that O'Brien was ever revising his feelings on the extent of Yeats's commitment to Fascist politics was in itself testament to O'Brien's ambivalence in respect of Yeats's poetry. While he was determined to make a political point about the dangers posed when poetry and politics intersect— thus granting legitimacy to violence—he was less sure if the intention of the poet and the poetic process could be reconciled in any way that would confirm his hypothesis that Yeats was, in fact, a poet who manipulated political opportunity to poetic advantage.

⁵⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Writers and Politics* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 193.

O'Brien's cynical thesis that, 'A poet, if he is to survive long enough to be recognized as a great poet, has need of such a manager,' says as much about O'Brien, in the 1960s, as it did about Yeats.⁵⁶ The Machiavellian echoes demonstrate O'Brien's thought processes in the 1960s and displays an antagonism that was part of O'Brien's make-up—the tension between the private sphere of creativity and thought and its translation in the public sphere, where it is received. O'Brien had become increasingly concerned at this period with how writers and intellectuals, either subvert, reflect or enhance the status quo. In Nietzsche's case, his message—as O'Brien interpreted it—was answered to devastating effect; in Yeats's case, his gravitation to Fascist politics did not find fertile ground in Southern Irish politics in the early 1930s.

When O'Brien set about challenging the "The Gentle Nietzscheans", he was working in a similar vein to that of his controversial essay on Yeats, "Passion and Cunning". O'Brien's fundamental point was that literature has consequences. O'Brien remained consistent on this point. In *On The Eve Of The Millennium* (1994), he compared Yeats's role in the 1916 Rising to Wagner's role in The Bierkeller Putsch of 1923.⁵⁷ In a chapter called "Things Fall Apart" O'Brien returns to the power of the image, 'It was a Wagnerian image that supplied the leitmotif of the opening phase of Hitler's political career, in 1919. The image was that of the *Dolchstoss*, the stab in the back that brought down the hero Siegfried in *The Ring*.'⁵⁸ After expounding on his understanding of the way that Hitler drew sustenance from the image in the lead up to the Bierkeller Putsch, O'Brien revealingly links this event to the Easter Rising. O'Brien

⁵⁶ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium: The Future of Democracy through an Age of Unreason* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 80.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

in high polemical form describes Yeats as the ‘The Wagner of Dublin’s Easter Rising’, and likens Hitler’s ‘symbolic revolt’, and the close links to ‘poetic drama’, with the Easter Rising.⁵⁹ This is evidence of the degree to which O’Brien engaged in hyperbole, when he saw any opportunity to make historical comparisons based on shades of the event that shook his family.

The dominant theme of O’Brien’s criticism of Nietzsche, and of Yeats, stemmed from a combination of political experience and inherited psychological trauma, which attuned him to the consequences of ruptures in the body politic. O’Brien’s close friend Darcy O’Brien observed that in O’Brien the literary and the professional were ‘almost indistinguishable from one another.’⁶⁰ This interpretation is certainly consistent with O’Brien’s conclusion that Yeats was being insincere when he wrote, ‘We have no gift to set a statesman right’. O’Brien rejected this ‘neat and memorable dividing line between literature and politics’, arguing that ‘the poet who wrote it was exercising a political choice: he was refusing to write a war poem—probably solicited for the cause of the Allies in the First World War, a cause which did not move Yeats.’⁶¹ O’Brien pointed out that when Yeats was in fact moved by a cause, ‘that of Ireland’, he was no longer reluctant to write in a political vein.

Yeats’s political poems are inseparable in their moment from the reversal of fortunes in O’Brien’s maternal family from the Home Rule Crisis onwards. Yeats’s poetry benefited O’Brien’s ancestors’ historical political enemies, Sinn Féin, and were part of the political-cultural tapestry that served to reinforce their victory in 1918 over

⁵⁹ O’Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium*, p. 80.

⁶⁰ Darcy O’Brien, *James Joyce Quarterly* 11.3 (Spring 1974), p. 211.

⁶¹ O’Brien, *PC*, p. 10.

the Irish Parliamentary Party. O'Brien rarely uses the word 'anguish', but it appears three times in his essay "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's". It is used to describe the way his parents felt after the Home Rule Crisis had set in train a series of consequences that were to impact the Irish Parliamentary Party at the ballot box in 1918. O'Brien writes:

There could be no mistaking, in their faces and their voices, the depth of the personal anguish they both experienced as they contemplated that turning point in the history of Ireland (and of the United Kingdom).⁶²

Retrospectively rejecting their interpretation of these events, he outlines the reasons for his parent's anguish:

The source of the anguish was not the "loss" of eastern Ulster—not by any means. Few Catholics and nationalists in what is now the Republic of Ireland have ever cared all that much about what is now Northern Ireland, and my parents were no exception. The source of the anguish was the impact on us, inside the Catholic and nationalist community (of what is now the Republic), of the tragic and unexpected flaw that became apparent at the very moment of the seeming triumph of the Home Rule cause. The Partition of Ireland compromised the constitutional nationalists in the eyes of their own constituents.⁶³

⁶² O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", p. 51.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 51-52.

The logical progression of this line of thought when considered in relation to O'Brien's later literary criticism is that Yeats was culpable when he wrote any number of his poems that intervened at moments of great national stress. O'Brien notably used an Irish subject—Yeats's relation to the politics of the period between the fall of Parnell and the emergence of Fascism in Europe—as the starting point for his essays dealing with cultural Cold War politics. O'Brien's writing on Nietzsche and Yeats provides readers with a valuable insight into O'Brien's thought processes in the period that preceded his social, political, and manifestly literary intervention by way of *States of Ireland*. The interconnectedness of the themes, and the mental projections within the various texts discussed here, show us the way that O'Brien, while ostensibly dealing with international subjects, was striving to understand the nature of the historical process that had impinged on his own existence. Revealingly, he stressed in later autobiographical writing that he inherited his parents 'feelings' as opposed to their 'intellectual interpretation' of events, writing, 'I am their son, after all, and my grandfather's grandson. I have what Irish Republicans (extreme nationalists) used to call "the bad parliamentary drop."⁶⁴

This revelation makes sense of O'Brien's lifelong commitment to constitutionalism, and the depth of his commitment to expose the avarice and cunning of those who through literature or political machinations touched on what was, for O'Brien, felt as a primal wound, the rupture of continuity in Irish parliamentary politics from 1916 onwards. O'Brien's closely studied thematic correspondences centre on the fragility of democracy, the atavistic nature of religious and tribal attachments, the

⁶⁴ Cruise O'Brien, "Twentieth-Century Witness: Ireland's Fissures, and My Family's", p. 52.

transformative power of the artist, and the nature of artistic creation per se, and this has its roots in the expression of an early family trauma. This was part of his ongoing exploration of the role of literature on the reshaping of Irish political life and consciousness in the period that preceded his birth, thereby impacting on his future history.

O'Brien's essay on Nietzsche thus provides readers with a paradigmatic example of the way O'Brien transplanted his imaginative experience of Irish history onto his own strain of literary-historical revisionism. This begs the question: how much of O'Brien's literary-philosophical criticism in the period before he actively returned back into Irish politics in 1969—the high watermark of his role in international politics—took its bearings in his personal understanding of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish history? O'Brien's writing in the mid to late 1960s evidently works through issues that are of great personal and political concern for him. The literary and philosophical figures he focuses on, and the way he deals with the controversial elements in their writing, tells us much about his evolving political philosophy, and its autobiographical basis.

What became very clear in the late 1960s was O'Brien's deepening belief that literature sends out signals, and that the reception of these signals, however arbitrary, has a political impact. O'Brien studied his quartet of major thinkers to come closer to an understanding of how politics and literature were historically intertwined, thus consolidating his growing conviction that literature and politics were engaged in a dialectical relationship between inspiration and legitimacy.⁶⁵ It was in this mood that

⁶⁵ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 52.

O'Brien deduced that 'A few lines of poetry, the selected aphorisms of a retired man of letters, may liberate the daemon of a charismatic political leader.'⁶⁶ In O'Brien's formulation:

the real creative and destructive process of communication goes on in jumps, and crisscross jumps at that. Each mind and each age take from the messages what they can absorb and feel they need, and in this process, it is irrelevant whether the signaller or the receiver is classified as politician, poet, or philosophical writer.⁶⁷

Correspondingly, the writer must be judged by the political impact of his words, regardless of obfuscations on the part of critics, or the writers in question. This is the root of O'Brien's grievance with Nietzschean scholarship, namely that of Walter Kaufman—'as far as interpretation is concerned ... the king of the gentle Nietzscheans'⁶⁸—that it attempts to sanitize, or whitewash, Nietzsche's writing, and thus the logical consequences of Nietzsche's writing.

O'Brien's analysis of Nietzsche's contribution to literature and thought is characterized by a Camus-like focus on what happens when logic is followed to the bitter end. The line of argumentation that O'Brien follows—to denigrate those who argue for a gentle Nietzsche—is built on similar structural foundations to Camus's argument that when violence is justified by a philosophy of history, violence gains legitimacy. O'Brien made this structural device—what happens when the logic of an idea is pursued to the bitter end—the basis of his emergent and evolving hostility to

⁶⁶ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 52.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

the concept of nationalism then espoused by representatives of Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, and those sympathetic to the latter's rhetoric in mainstream Irish society and political life. Thus, to understand what has been perceived as a major transition in O'Brien's career, sometimes expressed as that of someone who moved from being an arch critic of colonialism to an apologist for contemporary manifestations of colonialism, one benefits from scrutinizing the thinkers he engaged with in this period, and even more importantly the terms of that engagement.

In O'Brien's essay on Nietzsche he rejects Thomas Mann's conception that 'Nietzsche did not invent Fascism: Fascism invented Nietzsche.'⁶⁹ O'Brien's rejection of Mann's 'neat' formulation, that 'society was incubating Fascism, Nietzsche merely expressed the trend of what was happening in the society,' betrayed a deeply held view that a writer was not just 'a symptom or a clinical indicator,' but a figure that shaped and brought legitimacy to new developments in history.⁷⁰ According to O'Brien:

The imagined order which he creates legitimizes in others some image of that order. To legitimize means to free something which would otherwise be at least partly suppressed.⁷¹

O'Brien's entire oeuvre reflects a continuous attempt to understand the votive power of words and images and the effects of their transmission on the body politic. O'Brien spent the greater part of his professional and creative life exploring literature and political philosophy in order to gain a deeper insight and increased clarity on the

⁶⁹ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

intersection of art and politics. It is only in light of this consideration that we can begin to understand an aspect of his professional life that continues to be contentious, namely, his role in enforcing Section 31, to prevent Provisional Sinn Féin from broadcasting on RTÉ. It is possible to view “The Gentle Nietzscheans”, published in *The Suspecting Glance* as “Nietzsche and the Machiavellian Schism” as a proto-text for O’Brien’s working out of his views in relation to censorship. O’Brien’s contention in the latter essay that, ‘The whole imaginative and intellectual life of a culture is one interacting field of force,’ is an early expression of this concern.⁷² It is noteworthy that he separates ‘imaginative’ and ‘intellectual’ life. Implicit in O’Brien’s Freudian formulation is a sense of the writer as freeing something that ‘would otherwise be at least partly suppressed’.⁷³ The interpreters of Nietzsche that O’Brien takes to task are chiefly accused of trying to ‘insulate’ Nietzsche, ‘to isolate him from the culture in which he has been so potent a force.’

O’Brien in “The Gentle Nietzscheans” demonstrated his regard for Freud and shows that he had absorbed his central message regarding the force of the unconscious. To a great extent, it is O’Brien’s understanding of Freud’s writings, allied to his personal experience of history, that shaped his response to Nietzsche and Yeats, and historiography in general. O’Brien credited Nietzsche with having made ‘Freud possible’, quoting Ernest Jones’s recollection that Freud repeatedly acknowledged Nietzsche as having a “more penetrating knowledge of himself than any man who ever lived or was likely to live.”⁷⁴

⁷² O’Brien, *SG*, p. 52.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

O'Brien's critique is marked by a desire to decipher influence. We are presented with a map of influence—Nietzsche influenced Freud, Nietzsche was influenced by Machiavelli, whose hero, Cesare Borgia, became his hero in turn, something that elicits the remark from O'Brien that, 'Identification is strong indeed when the hero of one's hero becomes one's own hero'.⁷⁵ Cesare Borgia is a central archetypal figure in O'Brien's essay on Machiavelli, "The Ferocious Wisdom of Machiavelli".⁷⁶ Borgia was representative for O'Brien of that political figure who was ready to go to any lengths to establish his rule. O'Brien wrote of Machiavelli's understanding of this phenomenon, 'And when, in the third chapter, he asks the ruler of new possessions to "bear in mind ... that the family of the old prince must be destroyed", he meant murder, and he knew what murder was.'⁷⁷

In O'Brien's quartet of essays a central thematic concern is the way that interpretation has come between these writers, and their originary force, and context. O'Brien took issue with this hermeneutical dilution of thought in order to make it palatable to contemporary audiences—or to serve contemporary political ends. Christopher Hitchens, in a scathing review of *On The Eve of the Millennium*, which doubles as a great example of a literary 'killing of the father', references this aspect of O'Brien's thought. Of O'Brien, he writes, 'He also knew a lot, in those days, about the bad intellectual habit of coming up with pretty names for violence and cruelty.'⁷⁸

⁷⁵ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 75.

O'Brien's identification with Burke was so strong that a reverse process was stimulated. Burke's enemies became his enemies.

⁷⁶ Essay published in the *SG* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).

⁷⁷ O'Brien, *SG*, pp. 15-16.

⁷⁸ Christopher Hitchens, "The Cruiser", *London Review of Books* 18.4, 22 February 1996.

<<https://www-lrb-co-uk.elib.tcd.ie/the-paper/v18/n04/christopher-hitchens/the-cruiser>> [accessed 15 December 2019].

O'Brien was suspicious of present-minded, 'gentle', interpretations of thinkers whose thought was cast in different political circumstances. His issues were twofold, the interpreters were disingenuous, and possibly more importantly, modern audiences were being denied the important lessons thinkers such as Nietzsche and Machiavelli had to teach us—what human nature is capable of in drastic circumstances, and the natural consequences of following the fierce possibilities of thought, when allied to political action. Cesare Borgia therefore symbolized a figure who was unafraid to follow the logic of war to the bitter end.

The way O'Brien goes about deconstructing the various interpretations of Machiavelli along the left wing-ring wing axis hinges on his understanding of how Burke would have felt about Machiavelli. Here again we are taken on a journey of influence—a formula that repeats itself throughout these essays: Nietzsche admired Machiavelli, Nietzsche's innovations would have appalled Burke, therefore Machiavelli cannot have been authentically attuned to a conservative mindset, thus he cannot have been a conservative force. O'Brien explored the conservative reception of Machiavelli through T.S. Eliot, who saw 'Machiavelli's pessimistic view of man', as a reason for placing the political philosopher 'in what is in the main a conservative tradition of thought'.⁷⁹ O'Brien cited Eliot's approval of Machiavelli in the former's essay in *For Lancelot Andrews*, "'Machiavelli was no fanatic; he merely told the truth about humanity".⁸⁰ Yet, O'Brien concluded that thinkers such as Marx, Gramsci, and Rousseau were 'perhaps more consistent with the general pattern of their thinking in

⁷⁹ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 23.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

expressing admiration for Machiavelli than Eliot was.⁸¹ O'Brien's summing up is rendered with his characteristic wit, irreverence and sensitivity to political nuance and tone:

Yet, however acceptable Machiavelli's view of human nature may in theory be to a conservative mind—and however grateful Eliot may have been for a supple Florentine stick with which to administer a passing whack to a nineteenth-century liberal—I believe that Machiavelli, and the Machiavelli of *The Prince* in particular, is profoundly uncongenial to practising conservatives in active politics, and irreconcilable to the interests which they seek to protect. This is not because of anything that he may have consciously intended, but because of what he was. The fellow was what the French call a vulgarizer, indeed a vulgar person who wrote—by preference in the vulgar tongue—the sort of thing that should not be left around for the servants to see. He was, in the language of a distinguished White Russian lady, 'not out of the top commode'. In Italian terms, the ex-secretary brought the language of the palazzo right out into the Piazza, where it should have no place.⁸²

This attempt to establish which political tradition Machiavelli accorded to culminates in terms that essentially contrast Machiavelli with Burke. Machiavelli wrote in a way that alerted people to the way that power was used, whereas 'Burke, in the true conservative tradition, would cloak the origins of the state with "a politic well-

⁸¹ O'Brien, *SG*, pp. 23-24.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 23.

wrought veil”, and have us ‘approach to the faults of the state as to the wounds of a father with pious awe and trembling solicitude’.⁸³ O’Brien’s psychological reading encourages his reader to see personality as important in comprehending approaches to political science both at the level of understanding, and in terms of approaching political science as a subject of study. In essence, O’Brien’s Burke was pragmatic and would have classed thinkers like Machiavelli and Nietzsche with ‘with deep disapproval, with those who “exploited the marvellous” giving rise to ‘new and unlooked for strokes in politics and morals’.⁸⁴

O’Brien’s interpretation of Machiavelli, however, conjures a figure who ‘seems to have been incapable by nature of experiencing anything resembling awe’. O’Brien writes that he ‘simply tears away the veil, or bandage.’⁸⁵ O’Brien is anxious to point out that the father of political science was a writer not immune to the idea of literary fame, an assumption O’Brien makes from the fact that Machiavelli wrote so well, ‘a funny kind of father for a funny kind of science.’⁸⁶ From this he extrapolates contemporary lessons, which he develops across a number of texts at that period.⁸⁷

It is instructive to look closely, for example, at the way he deconstructs Gramsci’s interpretation of Machiavelli as a thinker aligned with the interests of the Left. The terms in which O’Brien frames this argument implicitly praise Machiavelli’s direct way of writing, in contrast to Gramsci’s interpretation of Machiavelli, as the

⁸³ O’Brien, *SG*, pp. 23-24.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸⁷ O’Brien, *Power and Consciousness*, pp. 11-12.

He addresses this theme explicitly in “Imagination and Politics”, ‘Yet the comparatively modern claims of political theory to be fully accepted as a science should surely be treated with scepticism.’

Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Imagination and Politics”, in *The Future of the Modern Humanities*, ed. by J.C. Laidlaw (New York: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1969), p. 75.

latter spelt out what was necessary to achieve and maintain power. O'Brien, to this end, pens an imagined scenario where Machiavelli is chastising Gramsci. O'Brien hinged his 'ghostly' enactment on the following line by Gramsci, 'those who must recognize certain necessary means, even if those of tyrants, because they want certain ends', O'Brien assumes Machiavelli's voice to emphasize that:

it is not enough just to *recognize* these means, if, as you say, they are *necessary*, and if you and your friends really want these 'certain ends'. *Use* is the word required. Why not say what you mean? I always did. And if you use the means of tyrants, don't blame me if you are taken for tyrants yourselves....On consideration perhaps you are right to use the word "recognize". Deception belongs, after all, with cruelty among "the means necessary"⁸⁸

O'Brien's reading of Machiavelli is important in respect of what it tells us about his evolving perception of nationalism at the time of writing (1969). O'Brien troubles the interpretation of Machiavelli's writing as 'purely' scientific, suggesting, with the support of a translation of Machiavelli's poem "Ambition", that Machiavelli's scientific study was based on a 'wish' that had a patriotic motive. O'Brien argues that this does not necessarily invalidate the scientific nature of Machiavelli's writing, rather that we should be on our guard to Machiavelli's ulterior motive, and by implication all writing that claims the mantle of political science:

The fact that the initial impetus is not scientific but patriotic does not invalidate the scientific character of the work itself: that point is well

⁸⁸ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 24.

covered in Eliot's essay. But the patriotic intent does imply that, where the author has found something which he believes to be true, he will also wish to persuade the reader that it is true: the unscientific temptation to pile on a bit enters here.⁸⁹

Thus, through O'Brien's interpretation of the various interpreters of Machiavelli (primarily Eliot and Gramsci), we can glean how O'Brien's mind was labouring to understand the contemporary resonance of the way these thinkers worked through the challenge presented by Machiavelli's thought. The contemporary note is glimpsed in the presence of a footnote alluding to the outbreak of the Troubles in the North of Ireland. This footnote is in the context of a central theme of O'Brien's—the relationship between literature and political action. Musing over Machiavelli's writing and whether or not his contribution to thought could be used to justify killing, O'Brien writes, 'Could the balance be tipped, by a reading of the appropriate passages in *The Prince*, in favour of murdering a politically inconvenient child? The answer is yes, I think, unless we are prepared to make the improbable assumption that reading never influences anyone in any decision.'⁹⁰

It is in the context of this reflection that O'Brien includes a revealing footnote to describe a personal experience in a taxi in Derry in the summer of 1969. He asked a taxi driver what he thought should be done, to which the reply came, 'Burn Bernadette and the F ____ Bible!'. This is an unexpected intrusion in the essay, and operates as a sign of things to come.⁹¹ The depth of O'Brien's obsession with the connection

⁸⁹ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 28.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29. [footnote 1].

between imaginative processes and political action underlay his entire oeuvre and is arguably O'Brien's chief pattern of thought. In "Imagination and Politics" he deals explicitly with this issue. This lecture, later published in essay form, took place in Cambridge to honour the fiftieth anniversary of the Modern Humanities Research Association in October 1968. The book published to honour the occasion, *The Future of the Modern Humanities*, dealt with themes which illustrated 'the place of the humanities in the contemporary world.'⁹² O'Brien's contribution opens by quoting one of the 'best-known' English proverbs, "The wish is father to the thought".⁹³ He proceeded analogically to draw attention to the shared psychological state that underpins the formation of poetry, and political science, respectively. O'Brien used Yeats's poetry and Marx's political theory as a framework for his parable-like lecture, stating that his theme was the commonalities between:

the process of imaginative creation, as described by Yeats in *The Circus Animal's Desertion*, and the process by which political concepts and systems emerge, which is, I think, basically though not necessarily in details, the process discerned by Marx.⁹⁴

O'Brien counters his critics early on in the essay by admitting that bringing Marx and Yeats together in this way will seem to many 'eccentrically eclectic', yet, he proceeds to elucidate on the notion that Marxism, as a system, is rooted in 'a greedy

⁹² O'Brien, "Imagination and Politics", in *The Future of the Modern Humanities*, p. vii.

⁹³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Imagination and Politics" in *Power & consciousness* ed. with Dean Vanech (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 203.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

wish'.⁹⁵ O'Brien thus creates a parallel between the roots of Marxism and the root of Yeats's "masterful images":

The Marxian system comprehends a specialized application of this concept: it sees the social, ethical, religious, economic and political thought of individuals, and of the classes to which they belong, as stemming ultimately from class interest: underneath language which is often elaborate, noble, idealistic, there lies always, in this view, a greedy wish.⁹⁶

O'Brien views this system as an approximation of Yeats's poetic process—images 'growing in pure mind but always having to begin: In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.'⁹⁷ O'Brien developed this analogy by stressing that among the items that Yeats visualized in his rag and bone shop is a single human figure, 'That raving slut who keeps the till.'⁹⁸ The fact that O'Brien worked out a central intellectual preoccupation by creating equivalence between the root of Marxist thought and Yeats's poetic process gives some idea of the extent to which O'Brien prioritized the poetic process.

In this essay, O'Brien read Marx in light of his own concern with the role of imagination in politics, idiosyncratically conjoining a Yeatsian image, and Marx's central theme—how people were defined according to their relationship to the means of economic production. It also demonstrated another continuity in O'Brien's thinking,

⁹⁵ O'Brien, "Imagination and Politics" in *Power & consciousness*, p. 204.

*He describes the comparative process as a 'procedure', which is of a piece with his tendency to use medical terminology.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 203.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 203.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 204.

that of deconstructing Marxism along poetic-religious lines. O'Brien argued that Marx's theory was not as 'narrowly concentrated on the economic factor as is sometimes suggested.'⁹⁹ To demonstrate this he singled out Marx's 'magnificent commentary' on *Timon of Athens* to show that Marx's thought allowed for the fact that 'economic interest' is not an entity existing in isolation, 'mere greed or avarice', rather:

a sort of funnel—the sort of funnel one sees in the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch—through which crawl for satisfaction, through the transmuting power of money, not only gluttony and avarice but also pride, lust, envy, rage, even sloth.¹⁰⁰

O'Brien in the mid to late 1960s was concerned with the increasing compartmentalization in academic departments. Much of his writing during his NYU professorship expressed scepticism about the increasing tendency to view political science as wholly scientific. O'Brien stressed the need to see both "English Literature" and "Social Theory" as originating in the need to tell us something 'of importance' about human existence, and argued that by filing 'their messages in different compartments', readers were missing 'something of importance which they are both saying.'¹⁰¹

Presumably, for O'Brien this centred on the supersession of the imaginative processes. From the late 1960s onwards, he increasingly used Edmund Burke to reinforce this latter notion, 'In both cases there are at work those powers which Edmund Burke bade us respect: powers "growing wild from the rank, productive force

⁹⁹ O'Brien, "Imagination and Politics" in *Power & Consciousness*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

of the human mind".¹⁰² O'Brien expressed this in dialectical terms that synthesized the thought of Marx and Yeats into a Burkean sublation reinforcing O'Brien's deepening conviction of the existential root of all thought. In O'Brien's view, Yeats and Marx, despite their contrasts, were 'describing the effects of passions, and mediations of passions, which they both felt and knew, and to whose workings they penetrated by different routes, to an unusual depth.'¹⁰³

Notwithstanding O'Brien's acknowledgement of the uses of approaching politics scientifically, he insisted on challenging the agenda of those who claimed political or social science to be value-free. O'Brien explored the notion that the process of 'artistic creation and the process of formation of political theories, ceremonies, and institutions,' are not 'merely analogous', but perhaps 'structurally related.'¹⁰⁴ 'This 'assumption'—in O'Brien's words—would lead one to study 'the political process, including political theory, from the side of "art" rather than "science," and to justify such an approach.'¹⁰⁵ O'Brien is attempting here to draw people's attention to this phenomenon claiming that he is drawing on 'some political observations and experiences in rather widely varied conditions, and on some reading about history and politics and about the working of the imagination in literature.'¹⁰⁶

Here and elsewhere, O'Brien speculated as to the context and conditions of the emergence of political thought. Readers are presented continually with evidence of O'Brien's abiding fascination with the role of the imagination in politics and literature.

¹⁰² O'Brien, "Imagination and Politics" in *Power & Consciousness*, p. 205.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

In “Imagination and Politics”, O’Brien’s formulation of the conditions within which political thought emerges is uncanny when one considers his longstanding grievance with the way his ancestors were ‘pushed’ out of power.

Much—and as I think, most—political thought begins among people who lack political power—or at least feel such power painfully diminished or threatened—and who feel this deprivation painfully, either because they are attracted to the exercise of power, or because they are made conscious of the harsh consequences of political impotence (for a group with which they identify themselves) or both.¹⁰⁷

Thus, even under cover of academic neutrality, O’Brien is formulating from personal experience. This does much to explain the degree to which he argued against the notion that there could be such an entity as an objective historian. O’Brien’s experience of thought and the personal ground of its formation led him to suspect those who claimed neutrality, or used the category ‘political science’ as a smokescreen for political agendas. A section of a later autobiographical essay sheds light on O’Brien’s political-emotional motivations in the 1960s. O’Brien revealed his attraction to working with the Department of External Affairs in these terms:

The year before I was born, 1916, was important, but so was the year after I was born, 1918. In that year my grandfather ceased to represent Ireland at Westminster, and our family came down in the

¹⁰⁷ O’Brien, “Imagination and Politics”, in *Power & Consciousness*, p. 205.

world. By representing Ireland internationally, I would be reversing that misfortune, and staging a family comeback.¹⁰⁸

O'Brien's 'comeback' was to end in an international imbroglio that could potentially have ruined him. O'Brien accomplished a reversal through writing and force of character in ways that resembled his aunt Hanna, who went on a lecturing tour of America to raise support for Irish independence, despite her grief, after Francis Sheehy-Skeffington was murdered.¹⁰⁹ O'Brien's ambivalent relation with Hanna, arguably, lent instability to his views on Republicanism. The international dimensions of O'Brien's career in the late 1950s and 1960s, while representative of Ireland's growing willingness to have a voice in international affairs, was not in any sense novel in respect of his family traditions.

O'Brien's aunt Hanna, had 'crossed continents' and defied the British government when it had 'attempted to destroy her reputation.'¹¹⁰ And when O'Brien was maligned by much of the world press for his role in the Congo, his response was similarly 'an unremitting defiance that several times captured world headlines.'¹¹¹ This makes Sheehy-Skeffington's—Hanna's son—palpable joy at O'Brien's changing fortunes after O'Brien wrote *To Katanga and Back* all the more understandable. The constancy of Sheehy-Skeffington's intellectual and emotional support is evident in letters concerning the development of O'Brien's book *To Katanga and Back*. In a letter dated 3 January 1963, Sheehy-Skeffington wrote:

¹⁰⁸ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Roots of My Preoccupations", *The Atlantic*, 274.1 (July 1994), p. 81.

¹⁰⁹ <<https://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/women-of-1916-present-petition-to-u.s.-president>> [accessed 12 June 2019].

¹¹⁰ Margaret Ward, *Hanna Sheehy Skeffington: A Life* (Cork: Attic Press, 1997), p. xii.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

I read the last chapters, having first retremped myself in earlier parts. They lived up to my expectations, but I found myself thinking increasingly towards the end: “How heartbreaking!” The whole business was both supremely unlucky and also pretty vile. You had wretched luck. You deserve the kind of success that looks possible now at last. You probably won’t be mentioned in despatches, but there is no doubt that all your activity, including the book—very much so—has been responsible for making the present hopes possible.¹¹²

O’Brien was to accomplish a remarkable reversal in a short space of time. His appointment in NYU in 1965 afforded O’Brien the time and space to reflect on his recent experience in Africa, which led to a remarkably productive period devoted to examining the intersection of politics and the literary representation of power. In this respect O’Brien’s period in NYU can be seen as preparing the intellectual grounds for the counter-offensive O’Brien was to launch against those who were emotionally enthralled with a particular version of Irish nationalism, and more specifically, a version of nationalism that threatened constitutional and democratic sovereignty. O’Brien was frank about his attraction to public office.

I came to be, from 1965 on (after a spell as the head of the University of Ghana), the holder of a cushy, congenial, and tenured job as Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University. I resigned that chair in 1969, in order to run—successfully—for election to the Dáil for Dublin Northeast. This meant a considerable

¹¹² SSA(A), MS 40,489/8.

drop in income. But the pull of Ireland—and specifically of representing Ireland—was more than I could resist.¹¹³

Intriguingly, O’Brien’s writing in the 1960s consistently probes the role of the intellectual in relation to power in ways that foreshadow his future role as an “intellectual” in power. O’Brien was fascinated by the conditions in which historical figures such as ‘Thucydides and Machiavelli, Marx and Lenin, Maurras and Hitler’ had framed their ‘contributions to political theory’ while they were ‘debarred from the exercise of power’.¹¹⁴ The way he expressed this had an autobiographical dimension that was both present, and prescient: ‘In these conditions, attention to politics is informed by a wish, a kind of yearning, which makes it preternaturally acute at certain points, perversely obtuse at others.’¹¹⁵

The actual crucible that O’Brien’s thought was being formed in was that of the U.S. in the Cold War period, so his writing in the 1960s is, certainly on the surface, dealing with Cold War realities. The theme that O’Brien repeatedly addresses from 1965 to 1970 is that of the role of the intellectual in times of crisis. O’Brien wrote the foreword to a collection of essays entitled *Power and Consciousness*—a book dedicated to the memory of Peter Nettl. O’Brien’s essays, published in *Power and Consciousness*, are a continuation of a central theme of “Passion and Cunning”, that of the relation of ‘intellectuals—individually and collectively—to political power.’¹¹⁶

¹¹³ O’Brien, “The Roots of My Preoccupations”, p. 81.

¹¹⁴ O’Brien, “Imagination and Politics” in *Power and Consciousness*, p. 205.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹¹⁶ O’Brien, *Power & consciousness* ed. with Dean Vanech (New York: New York University Press, 1969) [synopsis on dustjacket].

Nettl's scholarship had dealt with the way that power presses on consciousness and had largely concluded that power and the intellectual were incompatible. Nettl had 'assigned the area of power and the organizational framework to the bureaucrat, and the area of influence and the universal framework to the intellectual.'¹¹⁷ O'Brien was less cynical and to a great degree adamant regarding the necessity of the intellectual's duty not to abdicate responsibility, despite the constraints that office necessarily impose on the intellectual. O'Brien's writing on this subject foreshadows his later position as an intellectual in the Labour Party, and later in Government. His fascination also, arguably, derived from his experience of the constraints imposed on him as an Irish civil servant. Discussing the distinctions that Nettl had drawn, O'Brien enters the argument in a way that highlights O'Brien's individualistic, one might say existentialist, approach to political philosophy. Whereas Nettl had drawn distinctions between 'two human types', O'Brien was anxious to stress the 'human' role behind the 'type':

Nettl's dichotomy between bureaucrats and intellectuals should not, I think, be taken to imply an absolute division between two human types. In fact, "bureaucrat" and "intellectual" are human *roles*, rather than separate categories of humanity, and the same human being can play both roles at different times in his life. This is a difficult thing to do, because successful bureaucrats usually take a different, and less fastidious, attitude toward the truth from that which is becoming to an intellectual.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ O'Brien, *Power & Consciousness*, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

O'Brien dwells on this issue at length in the foreword to *Power and Consciousness* and provides his readers with an insight into his preoccupation with the way power compromises the intellectual, and vice versa. To demonstrate the workings of the way that power presses on consciousness O'Brien caricatures Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., Kennedy's advisor, and a historian, and pens a trenchant account of how Schlesinger Jr, publicly dealt with the way power had compromised his ability to fulfil the basic duty of a public intellectual, namely, honesty in relation to the facts. Schlesinger had helped to 'camouflage the C.I.A.'s Bay of Pigs expedition ... pretending that it was a spontaneous and autochthonous Cuban affair.'¹¹⁹

O'Brien duly notes that Schlesinger was ipso facto forced to lie, and demonstrates how Schlesinger dealt with the fact of his lying when he later returned to his academic role. O'Brien's powers of observation are at their height as he traces the lineaments of Schlesinger's negotiation of his role as a politician and his role as an intellectual. To do this he analyses how Schlesinger responded to *The New York Times* when it was observed that his subsequent 'historical narrative' differed from the statements he had made 'at the time of the Bay of Pigs.'¹²⁰ Schlesinger 'coolly said that, in his initial statement, he "must have been lying".'¹²¹ O'Brien's analysis draws on his fascination with Machiavelli and Burke at that period. 'This avowal was a praiseworthy attempt to reinstate the Machiavellian dualism. We are to understand that we have to do with two Schlesingers.'¹²² The 'two Schlesingers' O'Brien gives us are 'Schlesinger-

¹¹⁹ O'Brien, *Power & Consciousness*, p. 8.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Hyde, the politician', and 'Professor Schlesinger-Jekyll, the historian'. Playing with this conceit, O'Brien wrote:

When, however, Schlesinger-Hyde falls from office, Professor Schlesinger-Jekyll, the historian reappears. An austere figure, with a touch of a modern Lord Acton, Schlesinger-Jekyll judges impartially even the history which he has lived in his Hydian avatar, calls things by their names, and does not hesitate even to classify Schlesinger-Hyde as a liar: that is to say, the kind of person whom Schlesinger-Jekyll would not care to meet socially.¹²³

In O'Brien's schema Schlesinger-Hyde is the politician who acts with expediency when required and Schlesinger-Jekyll is the disinterested historian. This analogy is O'Brien's way of probing Nettl's 'diction that intellectuals and power are incompatible'.¹²⁴ This drawn out indictment of 'Schlesinger's method' suggests for O'Brien that 'A sort of compatibility, or at least nonincompatibility' might have been achieved 'through intermittence and schizophrenia', had Schlesinger 'attained the perfection of alternation which the model requires'.¹²⁵ This intellectual sonata ends with O'Brien coming face to face with Schlesinger in a televised debate on 'April 24 1967'.¹²⁶ O'Brien wrote that:

Hyde has been glimpsed—by the present writer with his own eyes—
in the chair of Jekyll ... Mr. Schlesinger, spiritually arrayed as Jekyll,

¹²³ O'Brien, *Power & Consciousness*, p. 9.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

was questioned about a letter which he had signed, also as Jekyll, in company with three other Jekyllian figures, on the controversial subject of an organization with which he was associated.¹²⁷

O'Brien is referring here to the controversy with *Encounter* and the fact that it had been receiving funding from The Congress of Cultural Freedom. The letter in question had been published by *The New York Times* on 9 May 1966 and in it Schlesinger had rebutted the 'rumour then circulating (and subsequently admitted by Schlesinger to be true) that the organization had been covertly subsidized by the C.I.A.'¹²⁸ The letter had stressed the independence of the organization but sometime afterwards 'it had come to light that the independence in question was of the covertly subsidized variety'.¹²⁹ O'Brien deconstructed Schlesinger's response, when asked if he knew when signing the letter that the organization was in receipt of funding from the C.I.A., with characteristic flair.

Mr Schlesinger did not meet this question with the dazzling frankness which he had displayed (as Jekyll) about the Bay of Pigs. The new question was of a far more difficult order. It was not a straight case of the dispassionate Jekyll assessing the dashing Hyde. It required Jekyll to explain something that Jekyll had said, and that had turned out to be misleading, about a matter which might be assumed to be within the knowledge of Hyde.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ O'Brien, *Power & consciousness*, p. 9.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

It is worth dwelling on the fact that Conor Cruise O'Brien was to rejoin the Labour Party in 1969 bringing this linguistic dexterity and training it on his opponents in Irish politics. It also demonstrates the level of attention that O'Brien paid to narrative ambiguity, and this was to find fertile ground in the cultural context of the Irish Arms Trial. O'Brien's retrospective approach to criticism is a constant pattern in his writings. It often takes the form of a consideration of the role of politics in poetry and art, and vice versa. O'Brien perceived literature as informing political action and his writing over the course of his lifetime is a testament to the centrality of this approach to writing and politics.

What proves fascinating in O'Brien's case is the way this process, by virtue of his vast career—in respect of time-span, and the various roles he took on—brought his particular conception of the interconnectedness between literature and political action into the public space, and in a very real sense shaped contemporary Irish attitudes on a range of issues that have contemporary resonance. O'Brien's essay on Yeats and Nietzsche also reveals how an Irish critic and man of letters contributed to a large body of international revisionism, a phenomenon that had grown out of the horrors of WW2 and had taken many different forms. Thoughtful writers, and academics, were compelled to explore the tenets of language, and literature, in the wake of the Holocaust. O'Brien's reaction became increasingly lodged in his sense of belief that myths and metaphors were powerful motivating factors in the human condition, and consequently he became attracted to anthropological conceptions of man in explaining the origin of violence. O'Brien, while aware of post-structuralism and post-modernism as emerging disciplines, was nevertheless committed to the search for 'truth' as the duty of the public intellectual.

Geoffrey Wheatcroft observed that O'Brien was 'a scholarly rather than an academic critic', 'who was never likely to have much sympathy for what he once called "deconstructionism, post-structuralism and what-not".'¹³¹ Another dimension of O'Brien's identification with the historical suffering of the Jewish diaspora during the Holocaust was to manifest in his increasing tendency to fatalism in human relations. This begs the question: how did someone of O'Brien's background and historical experience view his relation to the catastrophe? O'Brien's writing expressed a sense of retrospective collective guilt, which manifested in his creation of counterfactual historical scenarios that emphasized what could have happened had Hitler not been defeated. O'Brien was adept at creating counterfactual scenarios, and the scale of his counterfactualizing was in direct proportion to his emotional investment in the subject. In "Passion and Cunning" O'Brien speculates that if an Irish Fascist regime had been instituted, Yeats would have been dropped, or would have been forced out, 'not through any great aversion on his part from thugs in coloured shirts, but because an Irish Fascism, to have any chance of staying in power, would necessarily have to become an intensely clerical Fascism.'¹³²

O'Brien was the antithesis of the archetype of the rootless cosmopolitan in the sense that he increasingly focused on the tribe as a source of political meaning and attachment. In the 1960s—the most peripatetic period of his life—he was continuing to draw on his roots as an imaginative resource. As Sampson and Farag noted:

¹³¹ Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "No regrets, no surrender", *Guardian*, 12 July 2003. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jul/12/politics>> [accessed 16 May 2017].

¹³² O'Brien, *PC*, p. 45.

The epic confrontation of individual and history, which O'Brien's life and writing dramatize, is not in his case an exaltation of scepticism in favour of a cosmopolitan or "intellectual" transcendence of the local. Rather, the truth of experience is inescapably local, and, even on residence away from one's origins, the validity of that truth continues.¹³³

At a local, and international level, O'Brien conceptualized political difficulty in terms of the conflicting desires among 'tribes'. In Ireland O'Brien's 'tribal paradigm' was determined along religious lines, namely, Catholic and Protestant, and his writing was marked by a focus on the figure of exception among the tribe—figures who broke with the status quo and consequentially triggered new phases of history. In this state of exception, personified in figures like Charles Stewart Parnell, Wolfe Tone, and Edmund Burke, O'Brien strove to find patterns of cause and effect. Throughout O'Brien's writing the notion of the exception as a mover of history is a lasting one. Bryan Fanning reflected that 'for all their good points', *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* (1960) edited by O'Brien, and the later collection of the same name edited by Eugenio Biagini and Daniel Mulhall, both pointed 'to the depressingly low status of social history in Ireland. For all that both are called *The Shaping of Modern Ireland* the focus is mostly on individual shapers rather than on society.'¹³⁴

O'Brien's writing reflects an attempt to grasp at the implications of literature that has at its root an image of man as heroic. This is most evident in the fact that

¹³³ Sampson and Farag, "Passion and Suspicion", p. 21.

¹³⁴ Bryan Fanning, "Not a Woman's place", *Dublin Review of Books* (July 2016). <<https://drb.ie/articles/not-a-womans-place/>> [accessed 12 March 2018].

while O'Brien is putting the reader on their guard to elements of Yeats's and Nietzsche's writing that idealize respectively, a 'romantic' or 'Superman', conception of 'men', he is, by virtue of his emphasis on their historical effectiveness reinforcing the notion that great 'men' move history. O'Brien's history is compelled by a struggle to resolve how personalities shaped their age, and in the case of "Passion and Cunning", the focus is on how Yeats shaped a history that would in turn shape O'Brien's future. Written into this is a concern with the future. Interpretation is a site of creative battle for O'Brien in preventing a future that would see those responsible for upending, and subsequently downplaying, his forebears' role in pre-1916 Ireland gain political influence from 1970-1 onwards. The struggle is beset by a tension that manifests on various levels and differs over time. O'Brien was to alter his earlier conclusions on Yeats, and by the time a revised edition of "Passion and Cunning" was published in 1988, he stated that he no longer believed that Yeats would have been 'at least a cautious participant, or ornament, in a collaborationist regime.'¹³⁵

¹³⁵ O'Brien, *PC*, p. 2.

5. Simone Weil and O'Brien: Emotional Affinities

O'Brien's essay "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*: The Antipolitics of Simone Weil" (1981) continues his concern with morality and the nature of political commitment. His first article on Simone Weil was published by MIT in a limited edition entitled *Simone Weil: Live Like Her?* (1976). The timing of his interpretation of Weil corresponded with a period when O'Brien's influence in party politics was becoming increasingly contentious, and many considered his interventions, intellectual and otherwise, unhelpful in terms of creating a consensus on the North within the Labour Party. The 1973-77 Coalition government that O'Brien was a part of, 'the government of all the talents', was noted for its fractiousness, and O'Brien increasingly became alienated from his colleagues on the question of Northern Ireland. Writing in 1980, Mark Patrick Hederman, a contributing editor to *The Crane Bag*, offered an insight into how O'Brien's Irish contemporaries viewed him in the 1970s, noting that O'Brien was 'a man of many parts; Cabinet Minister, influential intellectual but yet isolated from the collective Irish 'us' that *The Crane Bag* sought to identify with.'¹

In Hederman's opinion, O'Brien betrayed a preoccupation with a different form of martyrdom from his Irish contemporaries, 'one that excluded him from the various but intertwined shades of Irishness that made up *The Crane Bag*.'¹ Hederman attended a lecture O'Brien gave on Simone Weil and concluded that while O'Brien was ostensibly talking about Weil, he was in reality alluding to his 'own isolated position in Irish politics. Her unusual and highly personal philosophy which had led to her political

¹ Mark Patrick Hederman "'The Crane Bag' and The North of Ireland", *The Crane Bag*, 1980, 4.1, p. 98/ Bryan Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 204.

martyrdom, was almost like a mirror image of his own.² According to Hederman, this identification was to prove prophetic as O'Brien lost his seat within months of this talk. O'Brien had, by the time he gave this lecture on Weil, a well-developed sense of European intellectual history. While the subjects he had focused on in *Maria Cross* were primarily French and English—Sean O'Faolain was the only Irish subject of criticism—there was never any doubt that every intellectual avenue he explored was to gain a deeper sense of his own predicament.

O'Brien was very self-conscious of his status as an intellectual. In this respect, he felt compelled to write about intellectuals who struggled to respond to the call of political circumstances, particularly those that exerted unique pressures on them. Albert Camus's predicament as a Pied Noir in revolutionary Algeria touched on fault lines in O'Brien's intellectual make-up and experience in a way that was very stimulating for him. Simone Weil was another such figure, and his engagement with her thought provides a clear example of the way that O'Brien externalized and worked through issues that obsessed him. O'Brien revealed his thinking on a wide range of issues in his Weil essay, giving a strong sense of where he stood in relation to nationalism, Marxism, colonialism, collaboration, and the role of the intellectual, at the time of writing in the mid to late 1970s. There is also a strong focus on the nature of political involvement and its relation to humanism. The fact that O'Brien was compelled to look to Weil in order to illuminate his thought was not unusual at that period. Ronan Sheehan, a contributing editor to *The Crane Bag*, has reflected that:

² Mark Patrick Hederman, "'The Crane Bag' and The North of Ireland", p. 98. Bryan Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future*, p. 204.

Looking back, I think Simone Weil was a problem for us. We grew up in the fifties and sixties, when the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland was everywhere evident. It was unspoken, but we saw our role as offering a challenge to that power. To that end, we eagerly read and deployed the great radical writers of Europe: Marx, Freud, Sartre and so on. Simone Weil was straight out of the top drawer. A female embodiment of the European humanist ideal: *Vir Bonus, dicendi peritus*, the good man, skilled in speech. Here she was, affirming the essentials of the Catholic tradition: its spirituality, its charity ... which we tended to ignore. What did we do with her? ... Had we got it wrong?³

Denis Donoghue noted the impulse in those involved with *The Crane Bag* to look abroad for inspiration, 'The editors have been reading Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Chomsky, Marcuse, Vanier, and trying to think of their bearing upon the state of Ireland.'⁴ There is a sense in which—aside from being published in *The Crane Bag*—O'Brien was a shadow-figure who was being addressed, argued with, and fundamentally engaged with in terms of his vision of Irish history. Hederman acknowledged this fact when he stated that in order to deal with the 'essential' problems 'caused by the conflicting ideas of what is meant by the term "Irish" society', 'we debated, the notion of "Irishness" presented by such diverse figures as Samuel

³ Personal correspondence with Ronan Sheehan.

⁴ Denis Donoghue, *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1986) p. 181.

Beckett, Monk Gibbon, Conor Cruise O'Brien and others.⁵ Bryan Fanning has incisively observed that *The Crane Bag's* programme as an intellectual journal, 'owed much to his 1965 essay "Passion and Cunning".⁶ The fact that O'Brien was an oppositional figure for many involved with *The Crane Bag* has overlooked the very real sense in which O'Brien's international status as a public intellectual had given credence and weight to the value of engaging with international, and more specifically European, intellectual history. Hederman acknowledged the need to cast the net wider for answers: 'the situation which we have inherited springs from roots which politics by itself can never succeed in disentangling. Help would have to come from other quarters.'⁷

O'Brien's engagement with Weil was influential in initiating a wider cultural attempt to rethink and reimagine Irish history in relation to European intellectual thought. Yet, the terms of O'Brien's emotional affinity with Weil were personal as well as political and stemmed from a commitment to understanding the nature of human experience in relation to God and society. Camus had written that Simone Weil was 'the only great spirit of our time', a tribute that doubtlessly influenced O'Brien's determination to engage with her thought.⁸ Behind Weil's writing was the influence of Plato and the love of good. Her writing emphasized the singularity of the individual in relation to God, and the 'we' that political life necessitated was in many ways for Weil

⁵ Mark Patrick Hederman, "'The Crane Bag' and the North of Ireland", pp. 94-103.

⁶ Bryan Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future*, p. 204.

⁷ Mark Patrick Hederman, "'The Crane Bag' and the North of Ireland", p. 94.

⁸ Roy Pierce, *Contemporary French political thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 121.

‘an illegitimate middle term between the soul and God’.⁹ Thus O’Brien inferred from Weil’s writing, and intellectual stances, that she was in fact anti-political, and from this that she was in some way ‘antihuman’, for ‘to be anti-political is to be antihuman as well’.¹⁰ The fact that O’Brien approached Weil from this angle betrays his deep concern with the relation of intellectuals to systems of governance, and his cynicism in relation to thought that undermined—by implication—the integrity of democratic-constitutional politics.

The critical line O’Brien takes on Weil, written at a crucial junction in his political career, is revelatory of the continuity of certain patterns of thought in his writing. O’Brien opens his essay with a quote from T. S. Eliot’s introduction to Arthur Wills’s translation of Weil’s book, *The Need for Roots*. The quote concerns the negligible influence Weil’s book will have on practising politicians, belonging, according to Eliot, ‘in that category of prolegomena to politics which politicians seldom read, and which most of them would be unlikely to understand or to know how to apply.’¹¹ Eliot’s conclusion that *The Need for Roots* should be ‘studied by the young before their leisure has been lost and their capacity for thought destroyed in the life of the hustings and the legislative assembly’ allowed O’Brien to frame his own response in personal terms that called into question Eliot’s view.¹² O’Brien claimed to address ‘those who

⁹ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*: The Antipolitics of Simone Weil”, in *Simone Weil: Interpretations of a Life*, ed. by George Abbot White (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

are prepared to entertain the hypothesis that Eliot may have been wrong, at least to some extent.¹³

O'Brien set out to challenge Eliot's view which implicitly called into question his own status as an intellectual. 'In my country I am a politician. I participate in the life of the hustings and in the legislative assembly. My capacity for thought is thereby deemed to be destroyed.'¹⁴ In half-jest, or perhaps in earnest, O'Brien wrote, 'The existence of this discouraging handicap is confirmed by the fact that I have considerable difficulty in understanding *The Need for Roots* and cannot claim to know how to "apply it" or how much sense it makes even to talk about applying it.'¹⁵ The latter issue did not deter O'Brien from reading Weil in light of his own concerns, and as the essay shows, he identified with much of Weil's positions, which were a deep source of fascination for him. O'Brien had long been compelled to explore structures of feeling in this kind of Catholic writing, and Weil, as a Jew who had converted to Catholicism, provided rich grounds for exploration. Simone Weil was born in 1909 and her life is a stark reflection of the historical period she lived through. As a thinker she responded directly to historical catastrophe and for a writer like O'Brien, who was retrospectively trying to establish historical and emotional patterns across a vast range of historical contexts, Weil represented a particularly potent amalgam of pressures.

O'Brien drew a number of conclusions about Weil based on what he considered an anti-political 'thrust' in her thought. This was a result of Weil's expression of the notion that 'politics' or 'indeed social life generally... is the domain of The Great Beast,

¹³ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 96.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 95.

or of the Devil, something to be suffered, something to be cried out against and struck back at, not something that can be set right.¹⁶ This, according to O'Brien, made the application of Weil's thought to practical politics a somewhat contradictory exercise. However, O'Brien detected an inconsistency here in that while Weil held the former view, she also sketched 'the kind of reconstruction of French society that the Free French might carry out after the liberation.'¹⁷ Weil's vision disconcerted O'Brien, 'The atmosphere she evokes is that of a state governed by a spiritual and moral elite, a rule of the saints.'¹⁸ O'Brien felt that any attempt to implement such a vision, as that set out in *The Need for Roots*, 'by mortal and fallible men', would 'probably have resulted in something quite like Vichy France.'¹⁹ It is precisely this element in her thought that made Weil suspect for O'Brien. However, O'Brien credited Weil for acknowledging this 'resemblance', 'minus collaboration with the Nazis, and with de Gaulle at the top instead of Petain. [sic]'²⁰ It is therefore Weil's honesty in relation to the truth, as she sees it, that compelled O'Brien. Weil's political vision is brushed aside as 'the rather discouraging outcome of a hypothetical effort to apply in politics the thinking of a writer who was essentially non-political, and even antipolitical.'²¹

"Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*" abounds with tributes to Weil's 'characteristic courage and integrity'. This coexists with O'Brien's view that Weil's shortcomings as a thinker are based on his understanding that 'her dissociative bent and her exaltation of the intellect do not ... always stand her in good stead in her

¹⁶ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 96.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 96.

²¹ Ibid., p. 96.

consideration of political processes.²² O'Brien's writings expressed, from the mid-1960s onwards, an increasing tendency to equate progressive politics, with a capacity for friendship and warmth, and revolutionary tendencies with coldness of heart. This stemmed from O'Brien's kinship with Edmund Burke and an increasingly exaggerated emphasis on the dangers of those who exploit "the marvellous in life, in manners, in characters and in extraordinary situations, giving rise to new and unlooked-for strokes in politics and morals."²³ Burke's former rebuke of Jean-Jacques Rousseau was beginning to have echoes in the context of O'Brien's developing political framework. Rousseau became O'Brien's *bête noire*, having once been Burke's, thus sealing the emotional continuity.

Burke had called Rousseau, "the great professor and founder of the philosophy of *vanity*".²⁴ *The Great Melody* contains correspondence between Isaiah Berlin and O'Brien in which O'Brien makes his feelings on Rousseau very clear:

I believe that minds which are in agreement over Rousseau—one way or another—are likely also to find themselves in agreement over a wide range of historical intellectual and moral matters. If I find that if a person is pro-Rousseau I class that person as basically an enemy, however agreeable they may appear in other respects.²⁵

²² O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 102.

²³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Suspecting Glance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 36.

²⁴ Joseph Morrison Skelly, "Outrider of the Enlightenment: A look at the legacy of Conor Cruise O'Brien", *The National Review*, 17 March 2009. <<https://www.nationalreview.com/2009/03/outrider-enlightenment-joseph-morrison-skelly/>> [accessed 21 February 2019].

²⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), p. 616.

This was the consolidation of a view that had emerged in the late 1960s. There are strains of thought in O'Brien's writing that became increasingly ubiquitous from the late 1960s—essentially a period when O'Brien was intellectualising his political experience to date. One of these strains was a suspicion of intellectuals who claimed to have a 'strictly scientific outlook'; contrasted unfavourably with Burke who claimed to have 'as fair and impartial an eye as can be united with a feeling heart'.²⁶ O'Brien asserted that Burke had denied the 'possession of the last organ' to 'the political philosophers, the left wing of Machiavelli's descendants, whom he calls the "metaphysicians"'.²⁷

Burke's spectre weighs heavily on O'Brien's ambivalent relationship with Weil's thought. O'Brien invoked Aristotle's belief that 'man is a political animal', to suggest that 'Weil's aversion to the 'first-person plural' is symptomatic of anti-humanism', for 'to be rigorously anti-political is to be anti-human as well'.²⁸ O'Brien could not quite accept Weil as anti-human so he tempered his assessment accordingly, 'I think she is antihuman in the sense in which Swift, and to a lesser extent Albert Schweitzer, were antihuman—combining great compassion for the suffering with a settled contempt for those of us who are up and around, but not up to much.'²⁹ The Burkean shade followed: 'Note her trust in intelligence and distrust of friendship.'³⁰ O'Brien expounded at some length (almost half the page) in a footnote to this observation

²⁶ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 36.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁸ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

singling out a quote from one of her letters, published in *Waiting for God* (1973), on her reasons for refusing to be baptised into the Catholic Church:

There is a Catholic circle ready to give an eager welcome to whoever enters it. Well I don't want to be adopted into a circle ... In saying I don't want this, I am expressing myself badly, for I should like it very much; I should find it all delightful. But I feel that it is not permissible for me. I feel that it is necessary and ordained that I should be alone, a stranger and an exile in relation to every human circle without exception.³¹

O'Brien concluded that Weil's view of friendship was 'notably abstract and exalted'.³² Returning to the idea that Weil trusted intelligence and distrusted friendship, O'Brien asked whether 'the love of good' depends 'on the light of intelligence?', then offered his answer in the negative:

Might not friendship conceivably be a more likely channel for the love of good than intelligence? And might not the impairment of friendship by the demands of intelligence be a greater evil than the impairment of the expression of intelligence by the demands of friendship?³³

For readers familiar with the terms of O'Brien's engagement with Burke, his reading of Weil will begin to feel familiar, and it will feel so even before he drew

³¹ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 98.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

explicitly on Burke for a point of comparison. When he did this, O'Brien was explicit in his sympathy with Burke's political sensibility:

Burke set a high value on friendship, and his conception of a group of friends working in concert for political ends was a stage in the development of the modern political party—and even though modern parties are not uniquely composed of friends, friendships still play an important part in them.³⁴

O'Brien emphasized Burke's suspicion of intelligence as a contrast to Weil, who for O'Brien represented someone who idealised the category of a pure intellectual untainted by political involvement and its compromises. O'Brien wrote, 'Simone Weil, the antipolitician, is a pure intellectual.'³⁵ To this end, he repeated Burke's maxim that 'Bears ... lick, cuddle and cherish their young but bears are not philosophers.'³⁶ When O'Brien quotes this he appeared to do so with relish. O'Brien, in fact, created an equivalence between 'the loftier pretensions of intelligence, the flights of those who in his time were called philosophers' and 'what we mean now by intellectuals.'³⁷

The ambivalence deepened when O'Brien appeared to accord with Burke's view, expressed in the first of the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, that 'We practice an economy of truth ... that we may live to tell it the longer'.³⁸ O'Brien's career up to date

³⁴ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

*The first two of these letters were published in 1796, the third in 1797, and the fourth posthumously in the collected works. The letters express Burke's view of the necessity of suppressing the Jacobin government of France; and England's ability to achieve this end.

could scarcely be seen to adhere to the logic of that statement.³⁹ However, in “Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*”, O’Brien was not thinking of the intellectual in respect of truth; he was thinking of the intellectual in relation to politics, and therefore, the intellectual as someone compromised by his relationship to power. In Weilian terms, ‘Those intellectuals who seriously engage in politics (no matter what kind of politics) are impure intellectuals, necessarily committed to the Burkean economy, and doomed, according to Simone Weil, to the dimming both of their intellectual and of their moral sense.’⁴⁰ It is at this point that O’Brien comes closest to revealing the source of his confrontation with Weil, and he issues forth a self-defence—an apologia for the intellectual in politics:

The political intellectual ... will necessarily feel reluctant to accept her view about his predicament. He will wish to claim that, even though he practices an economy of truth, he still brings into circulation more truth than, without him, would be in circulation in a vital domain of social life—one that stands in need of as much truth as it can tolerate. But he will nonetheless be uncomfortably conscious of the force of Weil’s observations.⁴¹

Various strands in the essay connect with O’Brien’s key concerns in the 1970s. One of the dominant themes developed is Weil’s antipathy to nationalism. O’Brien’s chief attraction to Weil was her anti-nationalism, and the terms in which he wrote about Weil’s articulation of this central element in her life and writing were consistent

³⁹ O’Brien, “Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*”, p. 99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

with O'Brien's feelings. O'Brien's focus was on the fact that Weil's anti-nationalism and love for humanity was so deep that she was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice—her own life—for what she considered a higher good. This was clearly a source of fascination for O'Brien. O'Brien emphasized Weil's 'comments' in *L'Enracinement* which reflected the depth of her intellectual engagement with racism, collaboration, and colonialism.⁴²

O'Brien highlighted the way she blamed the 'Roman idea of greatness' as culpable in creating a temperament that was compelled towards domination.⁴³ The phrases O'Brien selected are bracing in the context of Weil's argument, and when O'Brien put them in the context of his emphasis on the extent of Weil's intellectual courage, they became increasingly so:

Hitler, she sees as simply applying something handed on to him, in the form of the Roman idea of greatness consisting in the capacity to triumph over other peoples.⁴⁴

O'Brien's sympathy with Weil originated in a feeling that she, perhaps like him, was not unafraid of the terrible realities facing her. Rather than use language that hid the reality facing her and shield herself from the brutal truth, she confronted it in a process that was marked by a continual interrogation of the historical processes that were unfolding around her.

The passages O'Brien chose to highlight, in terms of Weil's strengths, invariably have a psychoanalytic dimension. An example of this is when he wrote that 'one of her

⁴² O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 106.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

most piercing insights' was an observation on the nature of collaboration made in line with the 'general pattern of her antinationalism':

She saw ... how the traditional triumphant French nationalism, so prevalent among the French right and among Catholics, could turn into collaborationism in the circumstances of 1940. "If France," she wrote, 'found herself on the side of the vanquished, they thought, it could only be because of some faulty deal, some mistake, some misunderstanding; her natural place was on the side of the victors; therefore, the easiest, the least arduous, least painful method of bringing about the indispensable rectification was to change sides. This state of mind was very prevalent in certain circles at Vichy in July, 1940.'⁴⁵

O'Brien also highlighted, with an air of unshakeable zeal, Weil's 'great lucidity and coolness' in lambasting Catholic bishops in France and Germany.⁴⁶ The terms in which he did this resonate with his problematizing of the relationship between Catholicism and nationalism in Ireland. The passage quoted from Weil in this context parallels O'Brien's—then much publicized—views on the intersection of religion and nationalism in Northern Ireland:

Christians today don't like raising the question of the respective rights over their heart enjoyed by God and their country. The German bishops ended one of their most courageous protests by saying that

⁴⁵ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", pp. 106-107.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

they refused ever to have to make a choice between God and Germany. And why did they refuse to do this? Circumstances can always arise which make it necessary to choose between God and no matter what earthly object, and the choice must never be in doubt.⁴⁷

Weil had stressed that 'the French bishops would not have expressed themselves any differently', writing that 'Joan of Arc's popularity during the past quarter of a century was not an altogether healthy business.'⁴⁸ It is clear why this observation would carry weight with O'Brien. O'Brien's writing on Irish nationalism had emphasized the sacral dimension of Irish nationalism and the historical role played by the Church at key moments in the Irish struggle for independence.⁴⁹ The 1916 Rising had succeeded to a great degree, in O'Brien's view, because of the sacral quality invested in its leaders, and the Church, initially critical, came to support a strain of nationalism that had side-lined O'Brien's ancestors in the Irish Parliamentary Party.

Weil's historical and psychoanalytical exploration of patriotism and her profound 'anti-nationalism' mirrored O'Brien's concerns at this period to a great degree. Weil therefore provided an authentic source of intellectual sustenance for O'Brien at a time when he felt increasingly alienated from the political culture at large in the Republic. The terms in which O'Brien represented Weil's fears for France could just as well be used to represent O'Brien's feelings toward Ireland in the 1970s: 'Her greatest fear for the France she loved was of its falling victim to the form of patriotism she despised.'⁵⁰ In her excavation of the roots of patriotism she provided points of

⁴⁷ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 105.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Bishops and Another Cult", *Irish Times*, 19 January 1982, p. 10.

⁵⁰ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 106.

reference for O'Brien's ongoing explorations in the same vein. O'Brien's reading of Weil can be seen in the context of his dialogue with elements in French Catholic thought, that had begun in his early essays published in *Maria Cross*.

O'Brien was at pains to emphasize Weil's aversion to the 'idea of a chosen people', and the lengths she went, both in writing and in spirit, to reject the idea. This impulse corresponded on Weil's part with a heightened sensitivity to the latent potential for those who were on "the right side of history", that is, those who resisted fascist domination, to fall prey to the notion that they were immune to fascist tendencies. O'Brien quoted Weil on the importance of keeping patriotism restrained "within the necessary bounds".⁵¹ Camus's life and writing exemplified the dilemma Weil had elucidated here, and O'Brien's engagement with this aspect of Weil's thought was an extension of an engagement with the ambiguities in Camus's life. When Weil wrote that 'Fascism is always intimately connected with a certain variety of patriotic feeling,' she was exploring avenues of thought that O'Brien would apply to his own time and circumstances.⁵² What is clear, and of critical interest, is the way O'Brien internalized strains of thought present in writers whose thought resonated with his, who were writing in historically critical periods—in this case Weil—to enhance the clarity of his own thought.

Running through "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*" is the theme that Christianity, for all its stated faults, was a belief system that approached humans as imperfect beings. This is, ironically, raised in the context of anti-anti-communism.

O'Brien was adamant that Weil would never have fallen into the trap of 'the

⁵¹ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 107.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 107.

convenient localization of slavery “over there” and liberty “over here,”” and suggests that her religious convictions prevented her from taking sides.⁵³ O’Brien sympathized with Weil’s friend Dr. Louis Bercher, who had been critical of Weil’s desire for purity. O’Brien drew attention to a letter Bercher sent to Weil reminding her that the desire for purity was ‘the source of all heresies’, reminding her of the fate of the ‘Cathars’. O’Brien was clearly drawn to the theological language that surrounded the debates on Weil’s legacy. Therefore, when O’Brien quoted Bercher to the effect that ‘Man is not pure but a ‘sinner.’ And the sinner must stink a bit, at the least’, with some approbation, one is reminded how much O’Brien’s pattern of thought owed to a Christian conceptualisation of sin.⁵⁴

Weil’s analysis of French colonialism and more specifically the colonial mentality was inspirational for O’Brien, both in its astuteness and its prophetic character. He saw Weil as a prophet of the dilemma that would face France if she succeeded ‘on recovering the French Empire’ to liberate France, and subsequently hold onto it, thereby bringing ‘great troubles on both France and the peoples of the empire.’⁵⁵ This prophecy proved true: ‘like Cassandra’s.’⁵⁶ In fact, O’Brien felt that the great tragedy was that Weil died ‘just as the time was coming when her spirit and her voice would be most desperately needed.’⁵⁷ While O’Brien acknowledged that one person could not have prevented ‘the French decision to reconquer Indochina, or to hold Algeria by force’, he was at pains to stress that ‘any reader of Simone Weil knows with certainty that if she had lived, her voice would have been lifted up against these

⁵³ O’Brien, “Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*”, p. 109.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

things; and that the opposition to them would thereby have gained immensely in intensity, determination and integrity.⁵⁸ O'Brien was clearly attracted to the mystical import of her writings, which has wider significance in respect of his own temperament. His writings on nationalism—in the period he wrote on Weil—were a form of 'emptying out' writ large on the political culture of the Republic. O'Brien ends his meditation on Weil with the conclusion that:

One does not need to be convinced by her mystical intuitions, or propose to imitate her life, in order to see that her warnings about nationalism, in all its multiform disguises, possess not only moral force but great practical shrewdness and permanent political value. She was a true prophet who foresaw the "appalling adversity" that certain tendencies present in the movement to which she adhered were capable of bringing on her country and on others.⁵⁹

The fraught nature of O'Brien's position in relation to Camus's late anti-communism is a strange undercurrent in "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*". O'Brien speculated that Weil's 'capacity for dissociation' would have prevented her from rushing headlong into the 'Gadarene rush', in the direction of anti-communism.⁶⁰ It is worth noting O'Brien's use of an Old Testament image in illustrating what he perceived as the hypocrisy of political anticommunism. In this paragraph O'Brien essentially used Weil to justify his own stance on political anti-communism, and by implication to further erode Camus's moral standing in reneging on his anti-anti-communism. This

⁵⁸ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 109.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 109.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

was all the more pointed when one considers the way Camus was, to a great degree, associated with Weil in the public imagination. O'Brien remarked of Weil:

At a time when everybody in the West was being harangued about the dangers of communism, she would have seen those dangers—as she did see them, clearly, in the thirties—but she would also have seen the dangers of *anticommunism*, and stressed them not only because they were nearer, but for the fundamental reason that, for us in the West, they were the dangers *within us*, the means for the moment of exalting our triumphant group feelings, and our tendency to see evil as something external to us.⁶¹

O'Brien projected the exact lineaments of his argument against political anti-communism onto Weil. Subsequently, O'Brien's commentary turned to decrying Camus's inability to see what Weil, and by implication himself, could see so clearly. This raised again the question of how O'Brien interpreted Camus—whose presence haunts "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*"—considering that a central element in Camus's thought, which is present in *L'Homme révolté*, was consonant with O'Brien's stated feelings in relation to revolution at that period. O'Brien was explicit in his condemnation of Camus's silence on Algeria, but that condemnation was belied by an implicit understanding and sympathy with Camus's psychic ambivalence in relation to religion and art that illuminates O'Brien's writing on Camus, most apparent in his review of *La Chute*.

⁶¹ O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 109.

O'Brien's sense that Weil was a true prophet was inseparable from his understanding of her as a thinker who confronted certain tendencies in nationalism that were capable of delivering "'appalling adversity'", a phenomenon that O'Brien had become obsessed with in his own national and political context. Therefore, when O'Brien wrote that Weil brought 'the kind of insight of which practising politicians in every country are most in need', he was speaking with conviction.⁶² O'Brien weighed up Weil's achievement as follows:

Weil's contribution to politics is not in system or method, or even in analysis, but in her lucid sensitivity to the dangerous forces at work in all collective activities, and her refusal to localize these forces exclusively in some other nation, or among the adherents of some other faith or ideology.⁶³

O'Brien's feelings on the subject illuminate how his reading of Weil was influenced by his sense of the potential for "appalling adversity" in his own 'tribe'.⁶⁴ Thirteen years after the publication of "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots: The Antipolitics of Simone Weil*", O'Brien was to write in ways that swam very much against the current of the best elements he had identified in Weil's writing. How could a writer who was so ready to see the way America used political anti-communism to further a neo-imperial agenda fail to see that the same could be done under the slogan of a 'war on terror'? This is, perhaps, the hardest question to address definitively in respect of O'Brien's legacy. This thesis puts forward the argument that O'Brien's

⁶² O'Brien, "Patriotism and *The Need for Roots*", p. 110.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

dramatic and literary imagination—saturated in religious symbolism—and his obsession with schismatic events, compelled him towards formulating worst case scenarios. His interpretation of Teilhard de Chardin provides a classic example of how this distinctive quality manifests in his writing.

O’Brien’s engagement with Teilhard de Chardin

O’Brien’s essay on Teilhard de Chardin, “The Words of the Tribe”, is structured around two passages from Teilhard de Chardin’s book, *The Phenomenon of Man*, which reveal in their content, and O’Brien’s subsequent interpretation of that content, themes that occur repeatedly throughout O’Brien’s writing. These themes include: the perils of imagining the future in terms of untroubled progress, an attraction to language steeped in Christian symbolism, and conceptual teleological readings of the future that make allowance for the existential drama of life. It is useful to see O’Brien’s writing as, to a great extent, concerned with teleological ethics, particularly in relation to political conceptualisations of civic society.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin proved another foil for O’Brien’s concerns. De Chardin, a controversial French Jesuit priest-philosopher, developed theories regarding the potential evolution of the future human race that were delineated in terms that strove to synthesize Catholicism and evolution. His theory of the “Omega Point”, which de Chardin is synonymous with, is an optimistic hypothesis that humanity is moving in the direction of unification. O’Brien cites from Bernard Wall’s translation of *The Phenomenon of Man*, as follows, to give his readers a sense of de Teilhard’s vision:

evil on the earth at its final stage will be reduced to a minimum.

Disease and hunger will be conquered by science and we will no

longer need to fear them in any acute form ... hatred and internecine struggles will have disappeared in the ever-warmer radiance of Omega. Some sort of unanimity will reign over the entire mass of the noosphere. The final convergence will take place in peace.⁶⁵

De Chardin's theory was built on the Christian notion that all things are destined in teleological terms for unification in God, and his work strove to synthesise religion and science. Richard Dawkins's critique of de Chardin's work, and its limitations, bolstered by the writing of Sir Peter Medawar (distinguished scientist and polymath) unwittingly gives us a clue to O'Brien's attraction to de Chardin. Medawar's warning with respect to the intellectual dangers of 'becoming intoxicated by symbolism', leads Dawkins to quote Medawar's 'devastating review of *The Phenomenon of Man*', 'in which Teilhard de Chardin "resorts to that tipsy, euphoristic [sic] prose poetry which is one of the more tiresome manifestations of the French spirit."' ⁶⁶ O'Brien was by temperament and inclination predisposed to such manifestations. Further to that, Medawar ascribes to the style in which de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* was written, 'some part the cause as well as merely the symptom of Teilhard's alarming apocalyptic seizures.'⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", in *Teilhard de Chardin: In Quest of the Perfection of Man*, eds., G. O. Browning, J. L. Alioto and S.M. Farber (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973), pp. 25-26.

*Noosphere is a term, popularized by de Chardin, that relates to the evolution of human consciousness and thought in connection with wider processes of evolution in the biosphere.

⁶⁶ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and the Appetite for Wonder* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 184.

P. B. Medawar, "VI.—Critical Notice", Review of *The Phenomenon of Man*, *Mind* 70.277 (January 1961), p. 99.

Dawkins, perhaps mistakenly, writes 'euphoristic' rather than the original 'euphoric'.

⁶⁷ P. B. Medawar, "VI.—Critical Notice", Review of *The Phenomenon of Man*, *Mind* 70.277 (January 1961), p. 99.

Medawar's interpretation, therefore, is in stark relief to O'Brien's, and the differing emphases ingrain the contours of O'Brien's poetic-quasi- apocalyptic sensibility. Frank Callanan alluded to this aspect of O'Brien's character, when he noted that O'Brien had 'on a few occasions gamely committed himself to exaggeratedly precise countdowns to Armageddon.'⁶⁸ The first passage from Wall's translation of *The Phenomenon of Man*, which O'Brien addresses, deals with the effect of technology on human evolution. De Chardin had posed the question, 'What in fact do we see happening in the modern paroxysm?'. De Chardin described this process as, 'the prodigious biological event represented by the discovery of electro-magnetic waves'. Humans now, according to de Chardin, found themselves 'henceforth (actively and passively) simultaneously present, over land and sea, in every corner of the earth.'⁶⁹

After quoting the latter passage, O'Brien drew his readers' attention to a 'second passage', which contains a qualification to which he ascribed great importance. Almost everything about the paragraph touches on O'Brien's particular political and conceptual interests and inclinations: the concern with international disputation, the suggestion that disaster might be imminent if people do not face up to their situation in an increasingly globalised and capitalist world, and the framing of these concerns in numinous language:

In order to avoid disturbing our habits we seek in vain to settle
international disputes by adjustments of frontiers ... As things are

⁶⁸ Frank Callanan, "Conor Cruise O'Brien's long odyssey in forbidden terrain", *Irish Independent*, 6 January 2002.

<<https://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/conor-cruise-obriens-long-odyssey-in-forbidden-terrain-26238528.html>> [accessed 17 November 2019].

⁶⁹ O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", p. 24.

now going it will not be long before we run full tilt into one another. Something will explode if we persist in trying to squeeze into our old tumble-down huts the material and spiritual forces that are hence-forward on the scale of the world.⁷⁰

O'Brien's main objective was to challenge de Chardin's belief that human nature was moving in the direction of unity. O'Brien acknowledged that de Chardin was not so naive as to assume 'that we are not going to run full tilt into one another', rather that the latter thought it better to focus on 'the hypothesis of a convergence in peace', as the outcome for which humans 'ought' to strive for as an ideal.⁷¹ Yet O'Brien honed in on the other possibility that he suggested has been 'sometimes overlooked' in de Chardin's thought—that of evolution towards 'an "abyss," a final paroxysm of evil'.⁷² In light of this, O'Brien steered the essay in the direction of addressing how far the evolution of humanity has accorded with de Chardin's optimistic vision in "Point Omega", and his conclusions were decidedly pessimistic: 'it may be easier at the moment to believe in Teilhard's apocalyptic hypothesis than in convergence in peace.'⁷³

O'Brien supported the former statement by demonstrating the implications of the population explosion in Ghana, 'the underdeveloped country I know best'.⁷⁴ O'Brien pointed out that the population of Ghana 'at the time of the last census in 1965', was 'about seven and a half million', and that if the rate of increase were to

⁷⁰ O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", p. 24.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 26.

⁷² Ibid., p. 25.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 26.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

continue 'as it ran between the two last censuses', there would 'be 240 million before the middle of the next century; that is to say within the lifetime of children now being born.'⁷⁵ O'Brien's analysis revolved around the humanistic implications that arise from the resultant pressures on resources, which affect geographic regions unevenly: 'Coastal people, forest people, Savannah people, and their subdivisions struggle in vastly increasing numbers for resources that increase much more slowly, if at all.'⁷⁶ O'Brien also drew on his experience in Biafra, and quotes from a letter sent to him by 'a Nigerian turned out of Ghana' to elucidate on the terrible results of the recent Nigerian Civil War, and increased competition for jobs. With reference to the Ibos, the losers in the recent Civil War, he wrote:

Scores of thousands of those, apart altogether from the war and its aftermath, are in essentially the same position as the man who wrote to me. They were turned out of Northern Nigeria because local people needed their jobs. Those who stayed were killed. A stationmaster's job is a prize worth killing for. This is the way profusion gropes at present.⁷⁷

The reference to 'profusion' is a gesture towards de Chardin's sense of the 'evolutionary past' as "'groping profusion"'.⁷⁸ O'Brien invited those who thought he was 'exaggerating or overstressing the dark side of this particular picture' to read an article by William Border, the foreign correspondent with the *New York Times*, pertaining to the situation in Nigeria. Border had made the point that 'in Nigeria,

⁷⁵ O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", pp. 26-27.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 26-27.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

because of the vast expansion in unemployed population and therefore in crime, the government had instituted public execution of thieves,' and O'Brien deduced fatalistically that 'This is an example of the kind of panic measure that we may expect to find in these conditions.'⁷⁹ O'Brien's essay is imbued with fearful, pessimistic, and cautionary warnings, and these extend not only to the "groping profusion" he described, but to all attempts to alleviate the suffering experienced as a result of it. He divided the answers 'offered' into three sets: 'a meliorist set, a *laissez-faire* set, and a revolutionary set', none of which, according to O'Brien, were 'wholly satisfactory'.⁸⁰

The terms in which he described the limitations of each approach are consonant with his self-identification as someone who was not afraid to face uncomfortable realities, and who did so because of direct experience of that which he wrote about. O'Brien appeared, for all intents and purposes, to be compelled by the very intractability of the situations he described. Describing the limitations of the meliorist approach 'associated above all with the United Nations and UNESCO', O'Brien wrote about the 'horrible dilemma' when 'relief by itself expands the dimension of the problem'.⁸¹ This O'Brien argued was felt deeply by those who had tried to help the 'Biafran people during the Nigerian civil war.'⁸² O'Brien was at pains to instil a sense of the 'types of problems that in real life', 'underlie such an apparently simple concept, such a simple humane, humanitarian concept as relief.'⁸³

⁷⁹ O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", p. 28.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 28.

⁸² Ibid., p. 28.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 28.

O'Brien problematized aid in terms that were consistent with his anti-imperialist stances:

There is a Gresham's law about aid. Those forms of aid which are supposedly in the direct national interest of the donor country by keeping its supposed friends in power are the most likely to be continued, even though they are the most likely to benefit the recipient country.⁸⁴

He feared that the knowledge of these realities engendered 'cynicism about aid in general' and he was adamant that aid 'however desirable, however necessary'—and he felt it was both—was 'unlikely in itself to avert the catastrophe that threatens most of humanity and that, if we count misery as catastrophic, already does engulf it.'⁸⁵ In respect of the *laissez-faire* or 'Malthusian' answers, 'not often offered explicitly, but they are present in the thinking and practice of various sets of people who exercise authority over the world's economy and resources,' O'Brien's predictions were especially dire.⁸⁶ Speaking of areas where 'indifference' has replaced the competitive drive present 'in the heyday of the Cold War', O'Brien wrote, 'I have heard it said that the grimmest threat today throughout vast areas of tropical Africa is not neo-colonialism but the absence of anything to interest neo-colonialists.'⁸⁷ This essay shows that O'Brien's fears in relation to the future, and potential catastrophe, were already well-established in 1971, and to a great extent, emerging out of his experience in the Congo and Ghana. O'Brien's essays on de Chardin and Weil respectively,

⁸⁴ O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", p. 29.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 31.

bookend, as it were, the years that O'Brien was in government and yet, a pattern of concern runs through both essays with the notion of historical, and futural, schismatic events.

"The Great Siege"

O'Brien's article in the *Observer* on 4 March 1979 provides insight into how O'Brien was repositioning himself in his new role as Editor-in-Chief of *The Observer*. In a satirical piece harking back to his arrest in New York outside the induction center in Broad Street, while protesting against the war in Vietnam, O'Brien shifts humorously through various registers. What is striking about the set piece O'Brien creates is how he uses humour to deflect from the main theme of the article, which is his changed relationship to authority—particularly to those tasked with enforcing the authority of the State. The article appears to send a number of messages to his new audience in the *Observer*. The first message was that O'Brien viewed himself as an engaged writer, and remained unrepentant about his role in the anti-Vietnam war protests. The casual and humorous engagé tone was expressed as follows:

After my arrest, on the day of the Demo, I spent a number of hours, first at Bellevue Hospital and then at the Tombs prison—and of the two I much preferred the Tombs.⁸⁸

O'Brien claimed to have gotten an insight into the humdrum attitudes of the police force towards the protestors, 'arresting large numbers of people involved an intolerable volume of paperwork.'⁸⁹ This depoliticized observation segues to the next

⁸⁸ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "On being kicked by a New York cop", *Observer*, 4 March 1979, p. 9.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p. 9.

'close encounters' O'Brien had with police, when, in Ireland, he was under police guard. In his new register O'Brien writes that, 'I was a member of the Government of Ireland. Also there were people around who wanted to murder me.'⁹⁰ This thesis does not contest that O'Brien's life was at risk while he was a government Minister, rather, to examine the way he defined the situation in the immediate aftermath as 'The Great Siege'. The political shifts in O'Brien's worldview can, as such, be traced to emotional and psychological states of mind. The 'Siege mentality' trope became an operational paradigm in O'Brien's analysis of conflict and was evidently a metaphor with deep roots by the time he began working on his book on the history of Zionism, *The Siege: The Saga of Israel and Zionism*.

Another interesting aspect of the article was O'Brien's emphasis on how far he was actually willing to go in terms of personal consequences to prove a political point. The implicit quietism insinuates a suggestive rejection of the psychological profile that will push beyond the human limit of self-preservation. Describing the court scene in New York, where he was charged with breaching the peace, O'Brien writes, 'I said I was not breaking the peace, but protesting against breaches of the peace being committed in Indo-China by the Government of the United States.' This defiance, however, is followed closely by a note of political quietism: 'The judge said he was on the point of dismissing the case if I would only shut up. I shut up.'⁹¹

O'Brien's description of 'The Great Siege' he was under strikes at liberal pretensions through the prism of 'race relations'. O'Brien contrasts the relationship between his 'guardians'—the Irish police assigned to protect him—and his children

⁹⁰ O'Brien, "On being kicked by a New York cop", p. 9.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

with ‘certain people of impeccable liberal credentials’.⁹² The latter, according to O’Brien, saw ‘colour not children’.⁹³ The article reveals the psychological pressures that he felt in being seen to have abandoned his own liberal credentials in the exercise of his Ministerial role. The way O’Brien was bolstering the defence of his ‘liberal’ image is clear in the language he used to praise the guard’s relationship with his children, who ‘not being asked about the abstraction, but being brought into contact with real, live children ... responded to them as children, not as aspects of a problem.’⁹⁴ The article reflects O’Brien’s self-conscious awareness of how his liberal image had been tarnished. Responding to those who ‘murmured disapprovingly’ about the fact he had participated in ‘demos’ in the United States, but banned them in his own country, O’Brien retorted that ‘The New York demo was against a war; the Dublin one was in support of a war.’⁹⁵

O’Brien’s need to reconcile his various personas was also evident in his appreciation of George Orwell’s legacy in 1983. The appreciation is consistent with his earlier essay on Orwell but for one significant departure—the situating of Orwell as a legatee of Edmund Burke. *1984*, according to O’Brien, is what Orwell implies ‘can happen in Britain if these people, with their Stalinist ideas and psychology are ever allowed to get control.’⁹⁶ For O’Brien, this resembled Edmund Burke’s warning in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was ‘aimed at a specific section in Britain—the British Whigs who sympathized with the French Revolution’.⁹⁷ O’Brien, for

⁹² O’Brien, “On being kicked by a New York cop”, p. 9.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Orwell’s Legacy: Stranger than Fiction”, *Observer*, 18 December 1983, p. 9.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

all intents and purposes, positioned himself as a direct legatee of both writers, stating that their 'polemical writing was extremely effective and of lasting resonance.'⁹⁸ *The Observer* drew on this affinity when announcing O'Brien's appointment. O'Brien was 'exactly our sort of man and the nearest thing to a modern Orwell.'⁹⁹

Revolution, in both real and imaginative ways, as I have shown, played a large part in O'Brien's life. O'Brien drew intellectual sustenance from his interest in historical revolutionary and counter-revolutionary narratives. Hitchens, in his foreword to O'Brien's *First in Peace: How George Washington set the course for America* (2009), observed that despite his own view that O'Brien had moved too far to the right, O'Brien's arguments had always 'been intelligible and internally consistent.'¹⁰⁰ Hitchens attributes this consistency to O'Brien's 'fidelity to Burkean principles as these are applied to the contemplation of (and opposition to) radical violence.'¹⁰¹ But O'Brien, as has been shown, was not always opposed to violence in all circumstances.

Had O'Brien significantly changed in the decade between 1966 and 1976? It is worth recalling Melvin Lasky's remarks on the difference between O'Brien and the intellectuals who were associated with *Encounter* magazine in the 1960s:

Our old differences with Dr. O'Brien—which date back to his time in the UN, the Congo, his career in Nkrumah's Ghana and his political line as a New York professor—had generally to do with our attitudes, far less radical than his, on matters of revolution and reform,

⁹⁸ O'Brien, "Orwell's Legacy: Stranger than Fiction", p. 9.

⁹⁹ "Conor Cruise O'Brien joins The Observer", *Observer*, 18 December 1977, p. 1.

¹⁰⁰ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *First In Peace: How George Washington Set The Course for America* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2009), p. 5.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

violence or peaceful change, militant dictatorship or democratic compromise.¹⁰²

Lasky took considerable pleasure in observing O'Brien's political evolution in the intervening years,

I have been following Dr. O'Brien's new and substantially revised ideology with the greatest of satisfaction ... it does seem to me that he now stands with us ... in a spirit of reform, peaceful change, and democratic compromise.¹⁰³

O'Brien, whose political coloration owed so much to Sheehy-Skeffington, was never going to wholly represent a modern-day incarnation of Edmund Burke. O'Brien's resolute commitment to identify language and thought that was deleterious to an ethical and progressive future for individuals, served also to fortify his own moral commitment to respond to his perception of near and present danger. This active element in O'Brien's literary and dramatic imagination was always restive, and when his political adversaries advanced various initiatives towards peace and reconciliation, O'Brien's fatalism—which had a profoundly literary and religious quality—became increasingly entrenched. When he wrote the following lines, it is almost certain that he spoke from personal experience:

Intellectuals have a particularly high propensity to be attracted by the idea of revolution and to be repelled by any contact with the reality,

¹⁰² Melvin J. Lasky, "Backbencher on O'Brien", *Irish Times*, 20 July 1974, p. 11. Cited in Akenson, *Conor*, p. 300.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

or even with the backwash of a real revolution occurring elsewhere. For some intellectuals, and perhaps for many, the quarrel is with reality itself, with man's nature and the results of action: it is logical that this quarrel should take a quasi-revolutionary form in times of social stability, and a conservative one in times of revolution.¹⁰⁴

These lines have a prophetic quality considering that O'Brien was ultimately perceived as a quasi-revolutionary, postcolonial thinker in the period when he was abroad—before the outbreak of the Troubles—and a conservative thinker when 'social stability' was threatened in his own social and political context. Thus, it is rewarding to explore the contexts in which O'Brien felt revolution was necessary or justified in order to decide if continuity exists between his earlier writing and his later actions. When O'Brien explored in writing the origins of the alternation from quasi-revolutionary to conservative, he dwelt on the fact that 'however profound their psychological and even metaphysical origins', they 'occur under specific conditions of material pressure.'¹⁰⁵ This formulation demonstrates the extent to which O'Brien was internalizing Burke's influence at this period.

The emphasis on psychological, metaphysical origins, and the way certain 'circumstances' could activate the former to revolutionary effect, was classic Burke. However, at some point, it became, in turn, classic O'Brien. O'Brien was cognisant of the fact that being an intellectual in the first place was a mark of a certain elevated place within one's own community, thus, in his view, only extraordinary circumstances

¹⁰⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Power & consciousness*, ed. with Dean Vanech (New York: New York University Press, 1969), p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

could bring such an individual to break with the society that had so favoured him.

O'Brien described at length such conditions as might arise:

adherence of the society to an ideology which he finds to be intellectually unsatisfactory and which, therefore, his own integrity requires him to fight (eighteenth-century French Catholicism; Russian Orthodoxy); intellectually indefensible social archaisms within the society, especially where these operate to exclude the intellectual himself (caste privileges under *L'Ancien Régime* and in Czarist Russia); as a variant of this last, the existence of a stigmatized subgroup to which the intellectual belongs, so that even relative success cannot reconcile him to the total society (Jews in nineteenth-century Russia and elsewhere; blacks in the United States); finally, the most powerful condition of all, actual collapse, or foreign annexation, of the State structure of the society to which the intellectual belongs, so that he is obliged to be a revolutionary if he wishes to restore a society of his own people, not under foreign control (China, Cuba, Latin America, Vietnam)¹⁰⁶

The parameters laid down by O'Brien allow us to measure his commitment to his own principles. Curiously, the first condition expressed—'adherence of the society to an ideology which he finds to be intellectually unsatisfactory and which, therefore, his own integrity requires him to fight'—were precisely the terms in which he waged a battle against Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA.¹⁰⁷ O'Brien was adamant that 'if

¹⁰⁶ O'Brien, *Power & Consciousness*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

some such conditions, or some combination of them' were not present, the 'the intellectual's revolutionary commitment will probably be unreliable.'¹⁰⁸ O'Brien's understanding of the emotional demands of revolutionary commitment, and the way that the logic of revolution will press on the intellectual, is remarkable in its debt to Camus. In this passage, the reader gets a sense of the way O'Brien had in fact been influenced by Camus's articulation of the nature of Revolution expressed in *L'Homme révolté*. While it is doubtless that O'Brien's animosity to Camus's revised stance on communism—which made him the bedfellow of O'Brien's intellectual enemies in the 1960s—originated in a deeply held antipathy to political and moral hypocrisy, there is also a real sense that he separated the wheat from the chaff for his own emotional and intellectual purposes. In his syntax, tone and use of stylistic devices, O'Brien demonstrates the extent of his intellectual attraction to Camus:

Indignation against the shams, injustices and oppressions of his own society will take him a certain length, at least verbally, but if his revolution even begins to look like attaining a significant degree of material success, it too will offer its share of shams, injustices, and oppressions. At this point he must decide whether or not to say to himself: "These things are regrettable but we must accept them for the eliminating of far worse shams, etc., and for the bringing of great benefits to humanity far outweighing these transitory evils." And if he says that privately, and still retains the energy of his initial course, he must say publicly: "This sham is true, these injustices are just, these

¹⁰⁸ O'Brien, *Power & consciousness*, p. 5.

oppressed people are in the course of rehabilitation.” Now the intellectual who will take this step may be as altruistic as any man can be, but he still requires a motive distinct from altruism. His opinion that the evils which he condones or commits will be outweighed by future benefits, etc., is a guess, or an act of faith; he knows no more than anyone else what the future may bring.¹⁰⁹

O’Brien judged that the intellectual’s guess that the suffering would be worth it at some future time depended not ‘on his prophetic skill or ethical insight, but on whether he really hates the existing society enough to fight it as men fight in war, without scruple about deceit or cruelty.’¹¹⁰ O’Brien advanced the notion that this kind of hatred could not be advanced by sheer ‘altruism or theoretical speculation’ but rather that it required ‘personal involvement, either through one’s own experience or through the feelings of a group to which one belongs.’¹¹¹ What underlined this was a sense that O’Brien viewed ideologically led revolution as bogus, as opposed to revolution that sprang from the lived experience of the community to which one belonged. O’Brien reserved special mention for those who sympathized with other people’s revolutions, regarding such sympathy as ‘deceptive.’¹¹²

O’Brien’s issue was that the sympathizer identifies with slogans, which have been created at a particular phase in the revolution, ‘without the reservations of those who created them to meet the needs of that particular phase.’¹¹³ Therefore, when the

¹⁰⁹ O’Brien, *Power & consciousness*, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

course of the revolution changes, and a phase of creating justifications for actions not unlike those which had previously been opposed ensues, 'the sympathizer undergoes a real disenchantment.'¹¹⁴ O'Brien had first-hand experience of this phase of the socialist revolution in Ghana under Kwame Nkrumah. In O'Brien's post as Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, he experienced the intellectual and moral difficulties that academics faced amidst Nkrumah's efforts to consolidate his power base and maintain his control over the country. O'Brien's experience had brought him to an understanding of revolution that was consequentialist. He approached the notion of whether a revolution was good or bad in terms of weighing up current suffering against the suffering that would necessarily come about as a result of a revolution. This form of thinking was antithetical to those who saw revolution in more idealistic terms.

O'Brien, imaginatively immersed in Burke's thought by the late 1960s, would subsequently use the French Revolution, and more specifically Burke's response to the French Revolution, as a framework for assessing the merits and, more often than not, the demerits of a revolutionary cause. The crux of O'Brien's reading of Nietzsche and Machiavelli concerned the ethical dimension of their thought, and more specially the consequences of this thought in practice. This originated in O'Brien's fixation on the French Revolution and Burke's counter-revolutionary writing—the latter becoming an obsession, and an organizing principle in his thought. George Steiner observed in 1988—in the lead-up to the bicentennial of the French Revolution—that less attention had been 'given to counter-revolutionary thought, to the political, philosophical and aesthetic repudiations of the whole enterprise of 1789', than to other aspects of the

¹¹⁴ O'Brien, *Power & Consciousness*, p. 6.

Revolution.¹¹⁵ In this context Steiner pointed to O'Brien as an exception: 'Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien's preface to the Penguin edition of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* represents a brilliant exception.'¹¹⁶ O'Brien saw the Cold War as beginning with the French Revolution:

There is a real sense in which the cold war can be said to have begun in November, 1790, with the publication of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Ever since that date, the idea of revolution has been an important factor in our intellectual life: fear of it, or hope of it, produced contrasting mental anthologies from reality, contrasting styles and theologies, dreams and nightmares.¹¹⁷

This belief was to intensify with his emotional and intellectual proximity to Burke. The more O'Brien's attachment to Burke deepened, the more his critique of political figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Wolfe Tone became coloured by an emotional reaction against a particular view of history, one which O'Brien viewed as inimical to progress, and consequently to individual freedom. O'Brien's mind was dramatically inclined to dwell on political entelechy. This factor is evident throughout his work— from his interpretation of de Chardin's thought, through to his essay on Nietzsche, and right up to his gloomy prognostications in *On The Eve of The Millennium*.

¹¹⁵ George Steiner, "Darkness Visible", *London Review of Books* 10.21, 24 November 1988. <<https://www-lrb-co-uk.elib.tcd.ie/the-paper/v10/n21/george-steiner/darkness-visible>> [accessed 15 October 2019].

¹¹⁶ Steiner, "Darkness Visible".

¹¹⁷ O'Brien, *Power & Consciousness*, p. 4.

The chiliastic theme provided O'Brien with an opportunity to formalize a recurrent, and increasingly pronounced, aspect of his writing, namely, the prophetic and apocalyptic dimension. In the introduction to the reprinted edition of *Maria Cross* (1963) O'Brien asked: 'What are these apocalyptic passages doing here and there, these flashes of certainty about the future, these moments of elegant pessimism?'.¹¹⁸ Denis Sampson and Fahmy Farag in response offered the astute observation that: 'It is in fact in these passages that O'Brien reveals what he really finds personally valuable in his study of these writers, and, indeed, we may conclude, what drove him to be interested in them initially.'¹¹⁹

On The Eve of the Millennium, subtitled "The Future of Democracy Through an Age of Unreason", resulted from O'Brien's contribution to the CBC Massey lecture series in 1994. In the book the lectures were arranged into five sections: The Enlightenment and Its Enemies, Democracy and Popularity, Things Fall Apart, The Millennium Commission, and The Guarded Palace. The book as a whole is primarily concerned with what O'Brien perceived as the extant and coming challenges to democracy, and the secular Enlightenment, in its moderate Scottish and English form. O'Brien opens by quoting from Yeats's "The Second Coming", and in doing so sets the tone for the book as a whole: prophetic, cautionary, and pessimistic. Christopher Hitchens, in his devastating review of the book, observed, sardonically, 'He begins with—what else?—Yeats's 'Second Coming'.¹²⁰ In a testament to the enduring force

¹¹⁸ [Donat O'Donnell] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. vii.

¹¹⁹ Denis Sampson and Fahmy Farag, "Passion and Suspicion: An Approach to the Writings of Conor Cruise O'Brien", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 2.2 (December 1976), p. 23.

¹²⁰ Christopher Hitchens, "The Cruiser", *London Review of Books* 18.4, 22 February 1996. <<https://www-lrb-co-uk.elib.tcd.ie/the-paper/v18/n04/christopher-hitchens/the-cruiser>> [accessed 15 December 2019].

exerted by Yeats's images on O'Brien's imaginative and intellectual life, O'Brien writes that 'Yeats's images have lost nothing of their relevance.'¹²¹

O'Brien was self-admittedly preoccupied with visualizing possible futures for some time, revealing that, 'Even before the opening of the last quarter of the twentieth century, my imagination was at grips with the idea of what the world would be like at the end of the century.'¹²² O'Brien indicated the extent of his concern with the question of how moral responsibility—and more especially Western notions of moral responsibility—would evolve, when faced with the consequences of the population explosion: 'Specifically, I was concerned with the moral and ethical consequences, for the advanced world, of what its relations would then be with the poor world.'¹²³ O'Brien returned to the scenario he had outlined in "Nietzsche and the Machiavellian Schism" (1969).¹²⁴ In that text, O'Brien had speculated that there might be 'historical reasons why a Nietzschean ethic may come to recommend itself', and described a future scenario heavily influenced by the imagery in Camus's *La Peste*:

The world by the turn of the century is likely to present some terrible aspects ... the poor world is likely to be drowning in the excess of its own population, a human swirl of self-destructive currents ... The advanced world may well be like, and feel like, a closed and guarded palace, in a city gripped by the plague.¹²⁵

¹²¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium: The Future of Democracy through an Age of Unreason* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) p. 4.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 131.

¹²³ O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium*, p. 131.

¹²⁴ Published in *The Suspecting Glance* (1972), delivered at the T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures, 1969.

¹²⁵ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Suspecting Glance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 61. *On the Eve of the Millennium*, p. 131.

In 1994, he was to draw again on this metaphor. The extended paragraph he devotes to this scenario is worth quoting in full in light of the current crisis in the Mediterranean:

There is another metaphor, developed by André Gide, one of the many powerful minds powerfully influenced by Nietzsche: This is the metaphor of the lifeboat, in a sea full of the survivors of a shipwreck. The hands of the survivors cling to the sides of the boat. But the boat has already as many passengers as it can carry. No more survivors can be accommodated, and if they gather and cling on, the boat will sink and all will be drowned. The captain orders out the hatchets. The hands of the survivors are severed. The lifeboat and its passengers are saved.¹²⁶

This bracing paragraph, like Burke's prediction of a future military despotism in Revolutionary France, is chilling. By 1994, O'Brien reviewing his earlier predictions wrote that there were things that he foresaw, and things that he did not foresee: 'The things I did not foresee but begin to see now make the total picture significantly worse than what I did foresee.'¹²⁷ This remark is consonant with what has been perceived as a darkening in O'Brien's vision of the future. While the weight of prediction veers heavily towards apocalyptic scenarios, the burden of guilt for these scenarios lie with political figures who represent a political aspect that was antithetical to O'Brien's political and historical sensibility. The paragraph detailing Gide's lifeboat metaphor veers into a condemnation of the hypocrisy of Clinton's administration for rhetorically

¹²⁶ O'Brien, *SG*, p. 61. *On the Eve of the Millennium*, pp. 131-132.

¹²⁷ O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium*, p. 133.

encouraging the spread of democracy in the Third World and Latin America, while in O'Brien's view being in reality concerned with 'having governments in the Caribbean (and no doubt in Latin America also) that will be able and willing to prevent their populations from migrating north.'¹²⁸

The fact that O'Brien condemned Clinton and Thomas Jefferson in the same chapter—and notably in the section following the lifeboat analogy—issues from the fact that these men, respectively, through their different political commitments, facilitated an understanding of history that gave legitimacy to those who were, in his reading, undermining constitutional democracy. In Clinton's case, O'Brien was angered by his willingness to enter into dialogue with Sinn Féin, and with regard to Thomas Jefferson, Hitchens pithily observed: 'Of course, O'Brien doesn't especially care about the slavery business or any of the other distractions he intrudes into the discussion. What matters to him is that Jefferson was a lifelong antagonist of Edmund Burke. And this, you must know, is not to be pardoned.'¹²⁹

O'Brien's antipathy to revolutionary rhetoric was to lead to a forensic deconstruction of the motives, and the possible consequences, of such rhetoric. Viewed at its best, it emanated in a profound humanism, but at its worst, and particularly in his later career, it allied him with reactionary elements in the political contexts that received and promoted his prognostications.

¹²⁸ O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium*, p. 134.

¹²⁹ Christopher Hitchens, "The Cruiser", *London Review of Books* 18.4, 22 February 1996. <<https://www-lrb-co-uk.elib.tcd.ie/the-paper/v18/n04/christopher-hitchens/the-cruiser>> [accessed 15 December 2019].

Conclusion

At the outset of this thesis, I stated Nathan Wallace's assertion that O'Brien represented for the *Field Day* project 'a hegemonic cultural and intellectual presence to be overturned'.¹ I questioned how it could be that an intellectual of O'Brien's calibre and influence became the *bête noire* of such an intellectual enterprise. Outside the political reading of O'Brien and Seamus Deane as representatives of rival nationalisms, or more specifically, approaches to the question of nationalism per se, there is the important question of how their respective childhoods shaped their literary and historical sensibility.² Karl Miller described Seamus Deane's novel *Reading in the Dark* as a story about 'generations of a household crucified on the idea of betrayal.'³

In O'Brien's case, the way the symbolic power of the crucifixion was interpreted and subsequently presented and re-presented, tells its own story. O'Brien's compulsion to explore the literary iconography of the cross was mired in what he interpreted and arguably experienced as a form of emotional violence. His account of his father's death, when he was ten years old, revolved around what he describes as a veritable battle for his soul in respect of his schooling. O'Brien describes his mother's

¹ Nathan Wallace, *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland: From Yeats to Field Day* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015), p. 15.

² The tension in their respective interpretations of the unfolding of the Troubles in the North is notably expressed in their exchange of views on the subject in the *New York Review of Books*. Seamus Deane, "Who Began the Killing?", *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1974. <<https://www-nybooks-com.elib.tcd.ie/articles/1974/05/30/who-began-the-killing-1/>> [accessed 16 May 2021].

Deane presents an analysis of O'Brien's ideological trajectory in "Edmund Burke and the Ideology of Irish Liberalism", concluding with the observation: 'It is the Burkean battle being fought over again.' Richard Kearney, *The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), p. 156.

³ Karl Miller ed., *Dark Horses: An Experience of Literary Journalism* (London: Picador, 1999), p. 159.

resistance to ‘emotional blackmail and terror’ from ‘the Catholic Church’, and her retreat in grief to Catholic sentimentalism.⁴ A relevant detail in this regard appears in O’Brien’s *Memoir*. Writing of the admiration his former colleagues in the Department of External Affairs had for his outspoken ‘defiance of Church authority’, he adds, ‘They had no need to follow suit—not being subjected to the same kind of pressures that I had been under.’⁵

O’Brien’s biographical writing and his recollection of the key enigmas of his childhood, and indeed his life, were infused with the imagery of the cross. O’Brien’s political struggle with the protean nature of Irish republicanism was mediated through the figures of Tom Kettle and Francis Sheehy-Skeffington. Of the latter, O’Brien wrote, ‘at one level of my imagination the story of Frank Sheehy-Skeffington blended with the passion and death of Jesus Christ.’⁶ Likewise, O’Brien refers to the route Francis Sheehy-Skeffington took from the GPO to Portobello Barracks on the day of his arrest as ‘The Dublin Via Dolorosa’.⁷ O’Brien’s retrospective attempts to understand this feature of his thought powerfully convey the emotional substratum of his writings on religion and nationalism. On the subject of how Frank Sheehy-Skeffington’s death was presented to him, in his childhood, as a form of martyrdom, he writes, ‘there was attraction there as well as repulsion; the combined result was a kind of wary fascination that has lasted all my life.’⁸

⁴ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Memoir: My Life and Themes* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1999), p. 43.

⁵ O’Brien, *Memoir*, p. 111.

⁶ Conor Cruise O’Brien, “The Roots of My Preoccupations”, *The Atlantic* 274. 1 (July 1994), p. 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

* O’Brien refers to Francis Sheehy-Skeffington as Frank Sheehy-Skeffington throughout his published writings. However, in this article, he drops the Sheehy and refers to him as “Frank Skeffington.” One of the characteristic features of O’Brien’s writing is a tendency to use humour to offset something that has a troubling aspect in respect of his own historical and emotional concerns. O’Brien follows his

O'Brien identified the 'heavy mental stress' that the 'idolatrics' of Parnellism exerted on O'Faolain's imagination but his own criticism in *Maria Cross* (1952) also bears the signs of 'heavy mental stress'. O'Brien's essay on François Mauriac, for example, features the word 'mother' twenty-three times. The title *Maria Cross* derives from the female protagonist in Mauriac's novel *Le Désert de l'amour* (1925), who represents a relationship between a father and son, 'who is for one of them a sexual image, for the other a sorrowing mother, and who is herself directed, unawares, towards God and who bears the name, consciously or unconsciously symbolic, Maria Cross.'⁹ Correspondence in the Sheehy-Skeffington archive between John A.S. Cushman Esq., from Oxford University Press and O'Brien, on 10 July 1951, reveals O'Brien's alternative suggestions for the title but a strong commitment to the image itself:

I would be anxious however, if possible, to keep the name "Maria Cross" in the title, for reasons which I made clear (I hope) in the last section of the book. Would something like "The pursuit of Maria Cross" or "Children of Maria Cross" be any improvement?¹⁰

This insistence highlights O'Brien's commitment to an image which symbolized for him the, 'intuitive harmony of mystery and suffering, the reverberation, even at the oblique touch of a fingernail, of the great Catholic bell.'¹¹

meditation of Francis' martyrdom with the line, 'there was something distinguished about having a crucifixion in the family.' These interjections of irony and mordant humour are, arguably, indicators of a code red in terms of how much difficulty the subject is presenting to O'Brien.

⁹ [Donat O'Donnell] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 32.

¹⁰ The Sheehy-Skeffington Papers (Additional), MS 40, 489/6.

¹¹ O'Brien, *MC*, p. 259.

Ultimately, O'Brien's desire in *Maria Cross* was to find a holding pattern for deep and urgent existential concerns, and his essays on writers as various as François Mauriac, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus are spiritual navigations in the form of literary criticism. O'Brien's sense of the purpose of literature set him against the New Criticism movement. O'Brien took a 'hostile view' of the movement 'as a kind of attempt to defuse literature, by disconnecting it from the rest of life to make it a harmless thing to be studied under glass in an academy.'¹² O'Brien's word choice, in describing the New Criticism as a 'heresy', was in itself revealing of the depth of Catholic symbolism in shaping his thought processes.¹³ This inflection was also evident in his positive appraisal of George Steiner's critical process:

He has indeed an unusual combination of breadth of sympathy with excitement about his subject. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are not, for him, fodder for critical 'strategies', but living forces with which he as a person, not as a technician, must wrestle.¹⁴

The fault lines underscoring Deane's and O'Brien's different readings of literature and history originated in profoundly different experiences of 'Irishness' and indeed, the living 'forces' within which they were wrestling. This is powerfully expressed in Deane's collection of essays *Small World* when he writes of his experience of British democracy as a Catholic growing up in Derry:

In 1969, O'Brien described the difficulty of introducing a book about Ireland as akin to 'introducing one's mother descriptively to a roomful of strangers.'

Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Conor Cruise O'Brien Introduces Ireland*, ed. by Owen Dudley Edwards (London: André Deutsch, 1969), p. 14.

¹² Donald Cameron, "Politics and Scholarship: A talk with Conor Cruise O'Brien", *The Humanities Association Bulletin* (Canadian) 21.4 (Fall 1970), p. 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Writers and Politics* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 188.

In 1957, an IRA campaign had just begun, and the local police were more aggressively sectarian than ever before, especially at night; unemployment in our area was running at nearly 50 per cent; housing was appalling; discrimination, with a Sten gun behind it, was what we knew of British democracy.¹⁵

O'Brien's childhood in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising and WW1 stimulated him in ways that made him imaginatively and dramatically compelled by revolutionary themes and, crucially, images of violence—their differing interpretations of the function and value of literature answered a very different set of imaginative and political needs. The progress of Irish intellectual history in the twentieth century was influenced by these different experiences of 'Irishness' as, when the crisis in the North intensified in 1969, both read their contemporary political experience, and emotional needs, into the progress of the French Revolution.

O'Brien's dramatic identification with revolutionary violence, in Ireland, and elsewhere, was imaginatively intensified because of his childhood internalization of how a recent revolutionary event had affected his immediate family. O'Brien's writing on political subjects is replete with references to this element in his thought, as I have shown throughout this thesis. His *Memoir* is explicit in relation to this matter, 'If Home Rule had been achieved ... Our whole family would have been part of the establishment of the new Home Rule Ireland. As it was, we were out in the cold, superseded by a new republican elite.'¹⁶ O'Brien's remove from the actual violence

¹⁵ Seamus Deane, *Small World: Ireland, 1798-2018* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 276.

¹⁶ O'Brien, *Memoir*, p. 21.

arguably intensified his dramatic imagining of events, not least because the events were relayed by—in the case of his two aunts—deeply traumatised widows.¹⁷ The imaginative leap required was to set in train an obsession with the various elements that set these circumstances in motion. These imaginative pressures were constant and shaped O’Brien’s intellectual responses in ways that reveal an underlying pressure to account for his own place in the world.

David Caute’s *Isaac and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* provides a brilliant template with which to view O’Brien’s critical divergence from Deane, and more specifically, Charles Haughey, in respect of the intensely negative emotions the latter inspired in him. Caute convincingly demonstrates how Isaiah Berlin’s feelings of fratricidal rivalry, directed against Isaac Deutscher, grew out of his imaginative and political hostility to communism. This hostility was a result of Berlin’s early personal experience of the Russian Revolution, and Berlin’s literary and political writing life was charged by the literal and imaginative impact of that event. Caute shows how this hostility manifested in outright intolerance of Deutscher, to the extent that Berlin interfered with the selection process appointing Deutscher to a new chair in Soviet studies at Warwick University, by vetoing the appointment. O’Brien taught Deutscher’s writing in his course in New York University but the former’s thinking,

¹⁷ O’Brien rarely dwells, at any length, on the fact that he was surrounded by widows from early childhood. However, a suggestive observation occurs in his review of “The Oresteia of Aeschylus”, at the Théâtre Marigny, presented by the Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault Company in 1955. O’Brien writes, ‘It is through the women that the terror reaches us ... through Cassandra, in the weight of her darkness and stillness ... through the baying chorus of collective political widows who incite Orestes to revenge.

[Donat O’Donnell], Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Spectator*, 28 October 1955, p. 16.

political ‘emphasis’ aside, was arguably closer to Berlin’s, even in that period, evidenced in his writing on Marxism and literature between 1965-69.¹⁸

Notwithstanding, the literary and emotional similarities between O’Brien and Berlin, it is also clear that O’Brien’s intellectual agenda in NYU was at sharp variance with Berlin’s—who was then closely engaged with influential intellectuals who were providing the ideological foundations for America’s military engagement in the Vietnam war.¹⁹

O’Brien’s literary emphasis in the 1960s revolved around intellectual freedom, and the role of the intellectual to withstand political pressures from partisan politics—as has been shown throughout this thesis. David Cate, who was hired by O’Brien to lecture in NYU in 1966, has provided fascinating insight into O’Brien’s activities in that period that have relevance to the changed tone of O’Brien’s writings on revolutionary violence after 1969.²⁰ In a passage discussing the nature of O’Brien’s anti-anti-communism, Cate writes that O’Brien harboured no illusions about the Soviet system, but ‘his current emphasis—and it was all about emphasis—was directed against the hypocrisy and wrongdoing of the USA.’²¹ The subject was intellectually exciting for

¹⁸ O’Brien cited Deutscher’s biography of Leon Trotsky *The Prophet Outcast* in his bibliography in *The United Nations: Sacred Drama*.

Conor Cruise O’Brien, *UN:SD* (London: Hutchinson, 1968), p. 316.

Deutscher was a friend of O’Brien’s in his most ostensibly radical period.

Discussed in Donald Harman Akenson, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O’Brien* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), p. 282.

¹⁹ Christopher Hitchens, “Moderation or Death”, *London Review of Books* 20.23, 26 November 1998. <<https://www.lrb-co-uk.elib.tcd.ie/the-paper/v20/n23/christopher-hitchens/moderation-or-death>> [accessed 9 November 2019].

²⁰ David Cate, *Isaac and Isaiah: The Covert Punishment of a Cold War Heretic* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 206-210.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

O'Brien but not rooted in personal experience, therefore his pursuit of the 'truth' at all costs was a straightforward intellectual matter.

When O'Brien returned to Ireland to face the crisis in Southern politics occasioned by the outbreak of the Troubles in the North his 'emphasis' changed tangibly. His writings between 1969 and 1972 still drew on shattering ambiguous political language and exposing hypocrisy, but increasingly as the numbers of the dead escalated, and his relation to the crisis shifted from that of intellectual to Minister, a different emotional relation to events was triggered. The Congo had drawn on O'Brien's Irishness in a general sense which led to the perception of O'Brien as a postcolonial leftist, whereas the outbreak of the Troubles in the North drew on his Irishness in a more specific sense—that of his relation to a supplanted constitutional nationalist tradition.

O'Brien's literary-political scholarship drew sustenance from the emotions that were snarled in that connection. This matrix was underscored by O'Brien's actual experience of Civil War in Biafra in the period just preceding his entry into Irish politics. Nathan Wallace writes that O'Brien, 'did not think that sheer rationalism was the answer; rather, his experience in Africa led him to the conclusion that peacemakers must learn to engage with the irrational as well as the rational aspects of human society.'²² The impact of O'Brien's experience of Civil War in Biafra was a factor that haunted his imagination. He was to write about the carnage he witnessed in terms that clearly show how his literary imagination shaped his experience of events. The following description in his essay "A Global Letter" (1972) illuminates the historical

²² Wallace, *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland*, pp. 51-52.

background that informed his analysis of the Northern conflict as an essentially tribal conflict, and prefigures, in its terminology, the mythical significance O'Brien attached to what he described as the cult of 1916:

I have witnessed the ceremony of the crying out of the names of the patriot dead: those who invoked the dead seeming, like mediums, in the grip of some outside force, and communicating a part of that force: those listening, partly under the spell, partly embarrassed and uncomfortable. But mostly overawed. At times I have felt that I was living in that Ionesco play in which each of the characters, one after another, turns into a rhinoceros.²³

O'Brien's writing was thus set in a new relation to circumstances, and the focus was increasingly on delegitimizing the political, cultural and military justifications for violence. Yet, as previously stated, the circumstances had significantly changed, and O'Brien was no longer at an emotional remove from events. Akenson locates the germ of O'Brien's 'great antiterrorism campaign' in O'Brien's experience in Katanga during the Congo crisis in 1961.²⁴ O'Brien had become sensitized, in his biographer's view, to the reality 'that the veneer of civilization is very thin and that social anarchy, which he had experienced at first hand, was only a millimetre away.'²⁵ Akenson, likens this to 'a major watershed' and surmises that 'the import of this change of direction in Conor's emotional world was to become clear only further downstream.'²⁶ Fintan O'Toole cites

²³ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Herod, Reflections on Political Violence* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), p. 19.

²⁴ Akenson, *Conor*, pp. 187-188.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-188.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

O'Brien as interpreting his experience in the Congo through an analogy with a character in Georg Büchner's play "Danton's Death". In O'Brien's words:

One of the characters has difficulty walking down the street and he says he's discovered how thin the earth's crust is. I was only in the Congo for six months ... It gave me a feeling how thin the earth's crust is and a feeling of what anarchy is like.²⁷

In line with this, and to reach a better understanding of O'Brien's active role in enforcing and amending Section 31, in his role as Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, it is necessary to draw attention to O'Brien's emotional volatility in the period during and after Sunningdale. Garret FitzGerald provided an account of the circumstances surrounding his memorandum, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, to the government on 11 July 1975, documenting the dangers facing the government in the eventuality of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland under Harold Wilson. FitzGerald accounted for the clear concern that existed in his department that such a withdrawal, on the back of 'failure to reach agreement on the future of the North' through a negotiated solution, might be 'followed by full-scale civil war and anarchy in Northern Ireland, with inevitable disastrous repercussions for our State.'²⁸ O'Brien replied with a counter-memorandum on 17 June 1975, excoriating FitzGerald's suggestion of a confidential exploration by the Cabinet of the options available to them. O'Brien claimed that such an exploration would diminish the prospect 'of continued direct

²⁷ Fintan O'Toole, "The Life and Times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: A Liberal in Chaos", *Magill*, May 1986, p. 26.

²⁸ Garret FitzGerald, "The 1974-5 Threat of a British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland", *Irish Studies in International Affairs* (2018), p. 141.
<doi:10.3318/irisstudinteaffa.2018.0141>

rule', and that it 'would in effect let the British "off the hook", by enabling them to withdraw in a favourable international climate.'²⁹ There was discontent with FitzGerald's suggestion that the government should, perhaps, 'disclose its hand' to the SDLP in relation to the government's view of the matter.³⁰

It is worth highlighting the terms in which FitzGerald documents his understanding of O'Brien's reaction to this memorandum, and how much emphasis FitzGerald puts on what he perceived as O'Brien's emotionalism. FitzGerald begins by writing that there existed within the Irish political system 'an emotional factor that has rarely surfaced publicly, or been identified by political commentators.'³¹ He identified this as the existence of resentment on the part of many politicians, across different parties, based on the perception that 'the common interests of the SDLP and the Irish state on most, but not all issues, have often tied us into a closer relationship with that party than some people in our state have felt to be comfortable.'³² The key figure FitzGerald identifies in this respect is O'Brien. While FitzGerald acknowledged that he and O'Brien were closer in their views than several of their counterparts, particularly in respect of moving their respective parties away from 'the irredentist nationalist approach', he identified certain qualities that separated them—and they hinged on O'Brien's emotionalism.³³ FitzGerald writes, 'Conor's counter-memorandum was in fact a classic example of his capacity to invent and then vigorously denounce a

²⁹ FitzGerald, "The 1974-5 Threat of a British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland", p.147.

³⁰ Ibid., p.146.

³¹ Ibid., p.146.

³² Ibid., p.146.

³³ Ibid., p. 146.

disagreement where little or none existed'.³⁴ FitzGerald defended his approach to relations with the SDLP in contrast to O'Brien's in similarly emotive terms stating:

I shared the view of my professional staff in the Department of Foreign Affairs that negative emotions have no useful role to play in politics or diplomacy. I never came to share some of my colleagues' muted hostility towards that party.³⁵

This account is no less extraordinary for FitzGerald's revelation that O'Brien wrote him a steady stream of 'long letters', and that when he was too busy due to the pressure of work to respond to all of them, O'Brien 'even wrote at length to my rather bemused wife, Joan, to complain about my Northern Ireland stance.'³⁶ FitzGerald memorably described the feelings that he, and others involved, felt as 'a terrible sense of virtual impotence', concluding that Irish public opinion had been in the dark as to 'how close to disaster our whole island came during the last two years of Harold Wilson's premiership.'³⁷

O'Brien had undoubtedly embarked on a personal form of crusade to 'enlighten' the public to the dangers facing them and used the literary and conceptual tools that had served him on international platforms throughout the 1950s and 60s to exorcise ambiguity from Southern thinking in relation to the North. Rosie Lavan identified the 'portentous and notably personalised' style of argument O'Brien used in a lecture he gave in Yorkshire in 1975, while also acknowledging that despite the

³⁴ FitzGerald, "The 1974-5 Threat of a British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland", p. 148.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 146.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 147.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 150.

divisive nature of O'Brien's contributions to the commentary 'he identified a subject that was a perennial preoccupation for writers addressing the North, and for the critics who appraised their work.'³⁸ The subject, the relationship between literature and politics, was a well-rehearsed theme in O'Brien's life and writing by 1975. O'Brien's early criticism balanced an element of aesthetic libertarianism with the sense that literature has an ethical responsibility. These contradictory emphases remained relatively frictionless on the literary plane until O'Brien re-entered Irish politics, and political developments sensitized O'Brien to the connotations of language in the context of heightened political tension.

O'Brien's review in the *Listener* of Seamus Heaney's *North*, "A Slow North-East Wind" (1975), provides a classic example of this tension. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews interpreted O'Brien's review as troubled by Heaney's 'morally dangerous aestheticisation and mythicisation of violence in *North*'.³⁹ However, there are other ways of reading O'Brien's review in light of his own previous writing. Heaney in many ways represented O'Brien's ideal poet. In "The Words of the Tribe", O'Brien's essay on Teilhard de Chardin, he maps out the major challenges facing humanity in his time in order to address the relevance and potentiality of de Chardin's vision.⁴⁰ O'Brien considered de Chardin's ideas in relation to the 'noosphere', which O'Brien defined as 'the striving for convergence in peace, of an eventual unity in diversity', as majestic

³⁸ Rosie Lavan, "Violence, Politics and the Poetry of the Troubles" in *Irish Literature in Transition, 1940-1980* 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 216.
<https://doi-org.elib.tcd.ie/10.1017/9781108616348.014>.

³⁹ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews ed., *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Duxford: Icon, 2000), p. 81.

⁴⁰ This is the published version of a paper O'Brien gave at a symposium on de Chardin in San Francisco in May 1971, during his time as a Regents Professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

and inspiring.⁴¹ What is significant here is O'Brien's notion of how such 'striving for a convergence in peace' might actually work in practice. This would necessitate, according to O'Brien, a refinement of 'intertribal communication'. O'Brien stated that by 'tribe', he meant 'any group conscious, over generations, of an emotional bond uniting its members in conscious differentiation from another group or groups'.⁴²

Embedded in O'Brien's response to de Chardin's 'majestic' vision is his own working out of the reception of *States of Ireland* and his new relation to his 'little platoon'. In a passage that rings of conscious irony, O'Brien writes, 'By the refinement of intertribal communication I mean going beyond the mere conveying to Tribe A of what Tribe B thinks and feels. In its raw form that type of communication is often no more than the opening of an attack.'⁴³ There is a sense, however, in which O'Brien's conclusion prefigures Heaney as an 'icon of reconciliation'.⁴⁴ Troubling Burke's notion of the 'little platoon' as being an ominous military metaphor, O'Brien writes:

It is, I think, the poet Mellarmé [sic] who points the way of germination when he defines the poet's task: "*donner un sens plus pur aux mots de la tribu*"—not the abandonment of the tribe or its words, but the giving of a purer meaning to the words. Only thus can diversity be combined with unity. Only thus can there be ... after multiple convulsions, a convergence in peace.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", in *Teilhard de Chardin: In Quest of the Perfection of Man*, eds., G.O. Browning, J.L. Alioto and S.M. Farber (New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973), p. 38.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴³ O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", p. 39.

⁴⁴ Wallace, *Hellenism and Reconciliation in Ireland*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ O'Brien, "The Words of the Tribe", p. 41.

This illuminates, and gives added significance to, O'Brien's emphasis in "A Slow North-East Wind" on the exacting nature of Heaney's poetry. Despite the negative political overtones of O'Brien's excursus on the implications of *North*, O'Brien's opening line that he 'had the uncanny feeling ... of listening to the thing itself, the actual substance of historical agony' was a forthright acknowledgement of Heaney's gift. What is, as often as not, overlooked in commentary on O'Brien is the element of creative dissent he both embodied and stimulated. In this context, Kiberd has recalled Heaney's remark 'I've got him in my sights', as he pointed out his attic window towards O'Brien's home in Howth.⁴⁶

The clash of instinct in relation to the burden of responsibility literature bears between O'Brien and Deane in *The Crane Bag* and *The Field Day* project was indicative of deeper clashes in O'Brien's imaginative relation to the European enlightenment. It is indicative of the heightened tensions of the 1970s that O'Brien was represented as a critic overly enchanted with the rationalism of the secular enlightenment. In Deane's interview with Heaney in *The Crane Bag* (1977), O'Brien is represented by Deane as someone slightly irrational in his forced emphasis on rationality. Deane's loaded question probing Heaney's views on whether or not O'Brien's humanism 'totally detached from its atavisms which, though welcome from a rational point of view, renders much of what he says either irrelevant or simply wrong', creates an impression of O'Brien that resembles the Hercules figure in Heaney's poem, "Hercules and Antaeus".⁴⁷ Heaney expressed these figures in iconic terms, 'Hercules represents the

⁴⁶ Personal correspondence with Declan Kiberd.

⁴⁷ Seamus Deane, "Unhappy and at Home", Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney eds., *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977–1981)* (Dublin: Blackwater, 1982), p. 68.

balanced rational light while Antaeus represents the pieties of illiterate fidelity.⁴⁸

Commenting on the poem, Heaney notes, 'This poem drifts towards an assent to Hercules, though there was a sort of nostalgia for Antaeus.'⁴⁹ O'Brien's early ambivalence about Antigone, and what he surmises is lost when we reject the part of our nature that she represents, echoes the mood of Heaney's poem:

We should be safer without the trouble-maker from Thebes. And that which would be lost, if she could be eliminated, is quite intangible: no more, perhaps than a way of imagining and dramatising man's dignity. It is true that this way may express the essence of what man's dignity actually is. In losing it, man might gain peace at the price of his soul.⁵⁰

Heaney's mythological reach summoned up the dilemma of a writer struggling with internalized and externalized pressures concerning the extent to which a writer has a responsibility to write for their community. There is a striking harmony between Heaney's poetic articulation of this conflict in *The Crane Bag*, and O'Brien's pre-1977 critical commentary on this subject. Heaney's remark in his preface to *The Crane Bag* edition on "Art and Politics" that 'good thinking ... would also have us re-member ourselves,' is itself salutary of the impulse in O'Brien's writing.⁵¹ In *States of Ireland* O'Brien had re-membered in ways that set him against the grain of certain

⁴⁸ Deane, "Unhappy and at Home", p. 68.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

⁵⁰ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p. 158.

⁵¹ Heaney was drawing on John Keats's contention that 'all good poetry strikes us as a remembrance'. Heaney surmised that this applied equally well to 'good thinking, which would also have us re-member ourselves.'

Seamus Heaney, 'Preface' to Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney eds., *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977-1981)* (Dublin: Blackwater, 1982), n.p. [7].

sections of Irish society, and Heaney commended O'Brien's 'obstinate insistence' that 'southerners' face up to the reality of Protestant feeling in the North.⁵² The tensions that ensued were generative and O'Brien's writing became increasingly acerbic as a result. "Nationalism and the Reconquest of Ireland" (1977) provides a good example of how the tensions began to impact his style.

O'Brien opened this essay by exploring a number of dictionary definitions of nationalism to reinforce his main contention that the sacral element of nationalism was an element of nationalism in historical terms. The tone was in stark contrast to his critical writing in the late 1960s. The year of publication was also the year that O'Brien lost his seat in Dáil Éireann and a corresponding current of distemper runs through the essay. One of the remarkable features of O'Brien's career as a whole was his capacity to reorient ostensible moments of failure to his advantage. This essay, written before another transformation was underway, provides an insight into O'Brien's thinking in the period when he was turned out of office. O'Brien was clearly under pressure, and the earlier political subtlety and nuance gave way in this essay to high polemic. O'Brien's writing was channelled towards a singular goal—that of delegitimizing 'republican violence by associating it with primitivism and superstition.'⁵³

There is ill-concealed resentment in the passage dealing with the connotations of the word 'nationalist' which, according to O'Brien, had for most Irish people positive connotations until the word itself faded through its association with the former Irish

⁵² Seamus Deane, "Unhappy and at Home", p. 69.

⁵³ Richard Bourke, "Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles", *The Journal of Modern History* 83.3 (September 2011), p. 553.

Parliamentary Party.⁵⁴ O'Brien writes scathingly that militant nationalists began to call themselves 'Republicans, in order to mark the purity of their nationalism by the defiant shibboleth of separatism.'⁵⁵ "Nationalism and the Reconquest of Ireland", as such, is an essay of disquiet. O'Brien, in denigrating the extant feeling in relation to concepts like 'nationalist' and 'nation', is attacking a strong element in his own character.⁵⁶ He uses an anthropological comparison to prove his point that 'most Irish people of Catholic origin and background' are attached to the word 'nationalist', in the way that for many African tribes the word for 'a person' and 'a member of the tribe' is one and the same.⁵⁷ This ambivalence counters Mark McNally's contention that O'Brien was anti-nationalist. McNally views O'Brien's 'unremitting critique of Irish nationalism,' in particular, the Republic's 'irredentist claims over Northern Ireland' and the latter's role in legitimating the IRA's armed campaign, as well as O'Brien's denigration of the 'religious and emotional character of all nationalist movements', as evidence of a deep-rooted attachment to conservative anti-nationalism.⁵⁸

McNally's interpretation overlooks the extent to which O'Brien's interpretation of the historical nature of nationalism was primarily trained on delegitimizing a particular strain of Irish nationalism, namely, the republican strain that had derailed

⁵⁴ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Nationalism and the Reconquest of Ireland", *Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney eds., The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1977–1981)* (Dublin: Blackwater, 1982), p. 96.

⁵⁵ O'Brien, "Nationalism and the Reconquest of Ireland", p. 96

⁵⁶ O'Brien frequently used footnotes for personal disclosures. In his essay "American Aid to Freedom-Fighters?", he makes the admission that as a boy he was much prouder of the fact that his grandfather had been a Fenian in his youth, than of his having been, in his mature years, an Irish Parliamentary Party MP.

O'Brien, *Herod*, p. 44.

⁵⁷ O'Brien, "Nationalism and the Reconquest of Ireland", p. 96.

⁵⁸ Mark McNally, "Conor Cruise O'Brien's Conservative Anti-Nationalism: Retrieving the Postwar European Connection", *European Journal of Political Theory* 7.3 (7 January 2008), p. 308.

the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1918.⁵⁹ O'Brien's use of dictionary definitions and devices like 'the first answer' and 'the second answer' was a symptom of his need for stability and order. O'Brien was neither an anti-nationalist or a conservative in any straightforward way and to insist on either definition is to lose sight of the psychological undercurrents in his writing which signal emotional discord.

Failing to assess this aspect of O'Brien's political writing leads to an unsatisfactory analysis of what has been looked on as a conversion in O'Brien's political commitments. McNally fails to reckon with the deep ambivalence prevalent in O'Brien's writing in relation to the subject of nationalism. O'Brien's entire corpus is a symptom of his obsessive need to understand the interaction of religion and nationalism in literature and politics; and to view him as anti-nationalist, without serious qualifications, loses sight of the compulsion that drove this commitment.

In 1967, reviewing William Irwin Thompson's study *The Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin, Easter 1916: A Study of an Ideological Movement*, O'Brien specifically takes issue with Thompson's 'breezy contempt for the force that made the movement move.'⁶⁰ O'Brien challenges Thompson's judgement that Connolly and Pearse shared 'the common futility of being nationalists,' writing that Thompson was 'saturated in that easy contempt for other people's nationalism, which is the

⁵⁹ McNally also overlooks the significance of O'Brien's commitment to retrieve Edmund Burke as something akin to an Irish patriot. O'Brien writes of his attraction to Burke's work as follows: I would have to admit that my own feeling for Burke is affected by the same element of tribal or national affinity and pride in such affinity. Both his origins and his education—away from his origins to a considerable extent—were very similar to my own.

Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Suspecting Glance* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p. 49.

⁶⁰ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Two-Faced Cathleen", *New York Review of Books*, 29 June 1967.

<<https://www-nybooks-com.elib.tcd.ie/articles/1967/06/29/two-faced-cathleen/>>

Reprinted in Donald Harman Akenson's, *Conor: A Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien, Anthology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 132.

prerogative of nations so powerful that they take their own nationalist assumptions for universal truths.’⁶¹

What stands out in O’Brien’s review of Thompson is the sense that O’Brien was somehow affronted by the notion of nationalism being written off as futile. That omission would leave, in O’Brien’s view, ‘little of interest to be said about Connolly and Pearse.’⁶² This is a striking remark, and resonates with O’Faolain’s notion in *The Irish* that ‘The national thing gave Irish writers the necessary resolution, or if they rejected the political tenets of nationalism, the necessary excitement to find in Ireland the stuff of their work.’⁶³ The review itself is notable for the terms in which O’Brien criticizes Thompson’s book: ‘deficient in any feeling for his subject’, ‘lack of feeling’, ‘lack of sympathy and sensitivity’.⁶⁴ With this judgement, O’Brien insinuated that Thompson was not reverential enough in light of his subject. O’Brien’s combined horror and fascination with regard to revolutionary contexts, in Ireland and elsewhere, brings to mind Edmund Burke’s writings on the sublime. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke defined the sublime as:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger,
that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is analogous to

⁶¹ O’Brien, “Two-Faced Cathleen”, p. 132.

O’Brien in *UN: Sacred Drama* criticizes Albert Einstein’s then influential work *On Peace* using precisely the same argument: ‘Einstein’s idea of world government based on world democracy ... is a fine example of the kind of absurdity which results from assuming the American to be the universal’, p. 312.

⁶² Akenson, *Conor, Anthology*, p. 132.

⁶³ Sean O’Faolain, *The Irish* (London: Penguin, 1947), p. 136.

O’Faolain’s discussion in his chapter “The Writers” prefigures many of O’Brien’s concerns in relation to the intersection of literature and politics. O’Faolain, referring to the highly politicized Irish ‘Rebel’, states that, ‘Their interest was in functional literature, or as we now call it *littérature engagée*. Their literary work suffered accordingly.’

O’Faolain, *The Irish*, p. 132.

O’Brien, likewise, judged Camus’s and Mauriac’s efforts to obey Sartre’s call for an engaged literature in *What is literature* as failures in artistic terms.

⁶⁴ O’Brien, “Two-Faced Cathleen”, pp. 132, 133.

terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.⁶⁵

Luke Gibbons acknowledged O'Brien's scholarship on Burke for sounding the colonial notes in the latter's 'Great Melody', with the caveat that O'Brien had failed to address the relation between 'the discordant strain in his politics, and his troubled aesthetic writings'.⁶⁶ This thesis argues correspondingly that O'Brien's political writing, particularly that which reflects emotional discord, needs to be contextualized in relation to his earlier critical and literary influences, and the affective experience of his childhood. What is remarkable in O'Brien's case is the way that his fascination with literature emanating from revolutionary contexts prefigured his professional encounters with revolutionary violence in several countries, such as, the Congo, Biafra and Nicaragua. The extent to which O'Brien merged images from literature with his own life is clearly drawn from his account of being driven back to the UN headquarters in Elisabethville in 1961:

I remember one night coming back from the airport, lying in the back of an open goods-truck, looking up at the sparse, not yet familiar, Southern stars. It had been, of course, another bad day: the operation was going all wrong. I knew my own share of responsibility, but I felt for the moment altogether happy. I thought as I looked up, of Tolstoy's Prince Andrey on the field of Austerlitz. This was not

⁶⁵ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James Boulton (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 39.

⁶⁶ Luke Gibbons, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonial Sublime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. xi-xii.

Austerlitz, and I was not exactly Prince Andrey, or Tolstoy, but no matter.⁶⁷

The expression of his personality—reflected in the previous passage—became more overt after the crisis in Katanga, and his subsequent need to legitimize his role there. Roy Foster’s suggestion that the opportunity afforded O’Brien by Dag Hammarskjöld was ‘a poisoned chalice’, as it got O’Brien ‘into severe trouble for taking a forward line in ordering UN forces to combat Tshombe’s secessionist campaign in Katanga’, is only true up to a point, in the sense that this juncture gave way to a decade of O’Brien’s most lucid and engaged writing.⁶⁸ O’Brien’s need to exonerate his role in Katanga was bound up with legitimizing his character by questioning the legitimacy of different actors in the UN, whose national presses had been at the forefront of assassinating his character. *To Katanga and Back*—a combination of life-writing, post-colonial indignation and satire—garnered a warm reception in several quarters, not least in the Afro-Asian community and on the international left. O’Brien’s *Camus* developed in this context and, as such, was predisposed to emphasize the political and ethical shortcomings in Camus’s writing. There was a certain amount of irony in O’Brien’s condemnation of Camus’s ‘universalising’, as he had integrated elements of Camus’s style into much of his best writing in the post-Congo period.

This thesis contends that the transition in O’Brien’s style developed alongside his internalization of a sense of responsibility to use his voice to counter language that

⁶⁷ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *To Katanga and Back: A UN Case History* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), pp. 278-279.

⁶⁸ Roy Foster, “The Cruiser”, *Standpoint*, February 2009. <<https://standpointmag.co.uk/the-cruiser-february-09-text-conor-cruise-obrien-roy-foster/>> [accessed 20 July 2020].

consciously, or unconsciously, gave sustenance to non-democratic elements in Irish society. This confluence triggered ancestral voices of his own, and, allied with his formidable talents, led to an arguably constructive contribution to affairs of state in the years 1969-1973. Increasingly however, in the aftermath of the Arms Crisis, a new emphasis increasingly took hold in O'Brien's writing, centring around legitimacy. This became a ruling passion, which led O'Brien to de-emphasize other important factors in his subsequent writing on the Northern troubles. Richard Bourke observed that, 'O'Brien strained to produce an analysis that could account for the problem that absorbed him, so he settled for underdeveloped arguments that would serve his polemical purpose.'⁶⁹

The problem that absorbed O'Brien was the existence of a political culture that was irredentist, and thus, in his view, giving a degree of legitimacy to the aims, if not the actions, of the IRA. O'Brien felt a cultural transformation was needed. Margaret O'Callaghan has written about this aspect of O'Brien's efforts to 'remake' the culture. Callaghan's use of 'remake' is very suggestive, in that her choice of word hints at O'Brien's will to shape opinion and exercise cultural power.⁷⁰ O'Brien for all intents and purposes functioned like an anti-Yeats in his political writing on the Troubles, and his attempts to challenge the force of nationalist feeling that had in an earlier revolutionary context impacted on the lives of his immediate ancestors.

I have argued throughout this thesis that Owen Sheehy Skeffington's death in 1970 led to a strengthening of O'Brien's bid to counter language that, in his view,

⁶⁹ Bourke, "Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles", p. 553.

⁷⁰ Margaret O'Callaghan, "Conor Cruise O'Brien and the Northern Ireland conflict: formulating a revisionist position", *Irish Political Studies* 33.2 (26 April 2018), p. 224.

unwittingly aided and abetted the provisional campaign of violence. There were signs of the ‘heavy mental stress’ O’Brien felt in 1977, when he described how Irish Catholic nationalists viewed the Northern Unionists who rejected an all-Ireland republic: ‘Those of them who want to stay can stay—on our terms. Those who reject our terms can clear out—or drop dead.’⁷¹ This intemperate, crass, extemporization was a gift to O’Brien’s political enemies, and those in his own party, who felt that he was becoming a political liability. Yet, the deeper question remains, how did a writer of O’Brien’s calibre resort to polemical caricature when he had a wealth of conceptual linguistic and conceptual tools at his disposal? Richard Bourke notes this irony when he observes that ‘it is an interesting fact about the history of interpreting the Ulster crisis that one of the most intellectually ambitious analysts of the problem was also among its most polemical observers.’⁷²

Yet, O’Brien’s role as a polemicist was inextricable from his pursuit of self-definition. He repeatedly worked out his identity in relation to circumstances outside himself; familial, national, religious, cultural, and political.⁷³ His instinctive need to bring the more complex aspects of the socio-cultural framework he was born into under some kind of control by pinning it down with words was a primary aspect of his compulsion to write. This need was self-perpetuating and manifested consistently throughout his writing life. The ‘I’ in the text is unmistakable and ever-present. R. W.

⁷¹ O’Brien, “Nationalism and the Reconquest of Ireland”, p. 97.

⁷² Bourke, “Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles”, p. 550.

⁷³ Andrew O’Hagan has surmised that ‘His personality is such that when he asks ‘What is Ireland?’ you suspect he is actually saying ‘Who is Conor O’Brien?’.’ [sic]

Andrew O’Hagan, “Heavy Cruiser, Loose Cannon: He’s a Former UN Emissary Who Thought the Way to End Apartheid was to use the A-Bomb; a Great Irish Thinker Who Doesn’t Believe in the Current Peace Process. Andrew O’Hagan on a Contrary Defender of Causes”, *Guardian*, 28 November 1998, section B, p. 6.

Johnson in an otherwise generous and insightful review of *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (1988) and *Passion and Cunning, and Other Essays* (1988) linked this aspect of his writing with O'Brien's characteristic contrarianism. Johnson notes that this constant need to assert intellectual independence was:

necessarily a highly ego-centred exercise. In effect, you are always saying, 'I am right against the conventional view, whatever it is,' and the most important word in that sentence is, or becomes, the 'I'. The danger is that one's treatment of subjects can become a little self-serving.⁷⁴

Tom Paulin, troubled by O'Brien's shifting identity, surmised that it was 'as though his identity is a figment of public opinion and since there are many opinions there must be many identities.'⁷⁵

Richard Bourke's exposition on O'Brien's failure to establish a coherent historical analysis of the Ulster problem draws attention to the way O'Brien's genealogical and sacral interpretation pushed credibility to the limit, noting that 'while it is true that deference to ancestors can often border on veneration, it is surely implausible to reduce such reverence to the literal status of a religious cult.'⁷⁶ Bourke's essay investigates the problematic nature of reverting to primitivist or cultural interpretative models to account for a breakdown in civil society and civil disobedience, and inadvertently facilitates another reading of O'Brien's gravitation

⁷⁴ R.W. Johnson, "Lordspeak", *London Review of Books* 10.11, 2 June 1988.

<<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v10/n11/r.w.-johnson/lordspeak>> [accessed 9 July 2020].

⁷⁵ Tom Paulin, "The Making of a Loyalist", *Ireland and the English Crisis* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984), p. 30.

⁷⁶ Bourke, "Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles", p. 553.

towards this model. In exploring the limitations of the primitive and cultural conceptions of political violence in general, Bourke claims that both are “primordial” in Clifford Geertz’s sense of the term.

The way Bourke expresses this, tallies with my own reading of what moved O’Brien to embed himself in the cultural and political field of action. Bourke writes that both the primitive and the cultural conception of political violence ‘concentrate on the passions and motives that inspire solidarity regardless of the ideological framework that gives political ties their meaning.’⁷⁷ The problem with these models, in Bourke’s view, is that the political struggle becomes isolated from its intellectual content, and ‘political attachments are reduced to their affective bonds and abstracted from the principles by which loyalty is rationalized.’⁷⁸

This thesis argues that O’Brien’s intellectual strength was in the balance between passion and cunning in his own work. This balance was destabilized by his deep-rooted need to control the narrative in political circles, and beyond, in respect of how to deal with revolutionary violence. By 1977, O’Brien was articulating the consequences that faced those who challenged the ‘consensus of the tribe’ as ‘to risk being seen as having forfeited the basic minimum of Nationalism, as being an outlaw, a renegade, an unperson.’⁷⁹ There is a submerged impulse towards belonging in O’Brien’s writing. He was fixated on tribal identity, which partly accounts for his fascination with anthropology as a discipline. There is a tendency in much of his writing to state where he speaks from. In *States of Ireland* O’Brien identifies southern Irish

⁷⁷ Bourke, “Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles”, p. 549.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 550.

⁷⁹ O’Brien, “Nationalism and the Reconquest of Ireland”, p. 96.

Catholics as his ‘little platoon’, later, as he became more involved in Jewish history, he re-presents his Sandford identity to the extent that he presents himself as akin to a *maskil*:

My family background was entirely southern Irish Roman catholic, but my father was what would be called, in the Jewish tradition, a *maskil*. That is to say he was a person of the Enlightenment, an avowed agnostic.⁸⁰

Crucially, O’Brien emphasizes that his schooling in Sandford impacted him ‘not in theory, but in feeling.’⁸¹ O’Brien’s continued emphasis on ‘feeling’ was arguably a result of his immersion in literature, both literary and historical. He consistently sought in literature patterns of thought and feeling that mirrored his own—as has been shown throughout this thesis. O’Brien’s tendency to identify with particular characters in literature, such as, Prince Andrei Bolkonsky in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, or the hero in David Karp’s *One*, was magnified in his later search for a political identity that would compensate for lost political-ancestral potential.⁸²

O’Brien’s writing on major figures such as Yeats, Camus, and Burke, signals a temperamental inclination to systematize according to ancestral loyalty. In *The Great*

⁸⁰ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *The Siege: The Saga of Israel and Zionism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p. 19.

O’Brien defines Sandford, where he received his education, as ‘our tiny island of Enlightenment (Haskala)’, *ibid.*, p. 19.

⁸¹ O’Brien, *The Siege: The Saga of Israel and Zionism*, p. 19.

⁸² In the closing chapter of *To Katanga and Back*, O’Brien compares himself to the hero in this novel. The hero is resistant to efforts made by his superiors to eradicate human characteristics that might lead to dissension and war. The parallels O’Brien was creating, by implication, and in the context of his treatment by his superiors in the UN in 1961, was clear in his summary of the hero, ‘In fact his superiors have found, in the tone and language of these reports, the very characteristics—bumptiousness, individualism—against which they are pledged to hold the ramparts of society.’
Conor Cruise O’Brien, *To Katanga and Back: A UN Case History* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), p. 314.

Melody, O'Brien pivots Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) on the latter's fears for his Catholic kin in Ireland. "Passion and Cunning" analysed Yeats's political susceptibilities through the prism of class and tribal identification. In this regard, Camus's famous admission that "I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice", contained an expression of 'feeling' that presented an archetypal challenge for O'Brien. Whelan poses a related question, 'what did O'Brien do in 1971, and after?', and answers that, however sceptically some may view the suggestion, O'Brien 'adapting Burke, loves his 'own platoon': his family, his friends, neighbours, his compatriots, the Republic.'⁸³ In O'Brien's worldview emotional and affective bonds were active and transformative and underwent processes of literary and political transformation. This led O'Brien to underrepresent the social, political and economic bases of conflict.⁸⁴

This thesis, in examining the influence of significant influences on O'Brien's development as a writer—and the writers he used as a mirror for his own concerns—shows that O'Brien's political stances on the North cannot be separated from his development as a writer. The focus on O'Brien's political shift in direction as Left to Right, socialist to capitalist, liberal to conservative, is unproductive in terms of the complexity of O'Brien's positions at any given time. Yet, as Barra Ó Séaghdha has observed the fact that O'Brien was perceived as a 'left-liberal in the 1960s and something of a 'neo-con' in the late 1980s and 1990s, adds to the interest of his

⁸³ Diarmuid Whelan, *Conor Cruise O'Brien: Violent Notions* (Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p. 75.

⁸⁴ Fintan O'Toole, writing about O'Brien's first public speech to the Labour Party, identified this tendency on O'Brien's part to gloss over economic issues, 'He had said nothing about the economic policies of socialism beyond a passing reference to the need to "contravene free enterprise orthodoxies".' Fintan O'Toole, "The Life and Times of Conor Cruise O'Brien: An Economy of Truth", *Magill*, June 1986, pp. 37-38.

case.⁸⁵ Aidan O'Malley views this issue through the prism of O'Brien's writing on Michelet and Camus, writing that 'his promotion of Michelet's overtly partial historiography in his essay 'Michelet Today' (1959) and the surgical uncovering of Camus's elision of the realities of colonial occupation in his 1970 monograph *Camus*, for instance, are all notes that he silences or rearranges as he becomes more politically engaged with the Northern Irish Troubles.'⁸⁶ Outside the obvious contradictions, the deeper contradictions beg the question why someone who was advocating William Smith O'Brien's contention that 'violence secures a hearing for moderation' in 1967, came so quickly to the conclusion that the Irish Civil Rights movement had to accept both sides of the balance sheet, that is, by securing legitimate reforms, they had also inadvertently opened the way to the violence in the Province.⁸⁷ This naturally blindsided those on the Left who assumed that O'Brien would automatically be on their side. However, familiarity with O'Brien's writing on Sartre and Camus demonstrates that O'Brien was always cognizant of political priorities, and after 1970, O'Brien's priority was to prevent Civil War from spreading south of the border.

O'Brien's experience of Irish politics in the 1970s, the progress of the Troubles, and the various attempts to secure peace in the North, brought him intellectually and emotionally closer to Burke. The most obvious manifestation of this new emphasis was an increased scepticism towards what he viewed as radical political initiatives. O'Brien increasingly shifted his intellectual focus towards rehabilitating Burke as an Irish

⁸⁵ Barra Ó Séaghdha, "Engaging with an Irish intellectual", *Saothar* 34 (2009), p.155.

⁸⁶ Aidan O'Malley, "Irish Writers and Europe", *Irish Literature in Transition, 1940–1980*, ed. by Eve Patten (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 74.

⁸⁷ Richard Bourke, "Languages of Conflict and the Northern Ireland Troubles", p. 557. Bourke cites O'Brien's stated view that "Neither part of the balance sheet should be left out of the count" in his "Address to the New Ulster Movement", 9 November 1970. Conor Cruise O'Brien Papers, University College Dublin (UCD) Archives P82/252 (5).

patriot. The importance of this element in O'Brien's political writing from the 1970s onwards is the key to understanding the nature of O'Brien's politics. A significant departure in O'Brien's writing after he departed from political office in Ireland was the substitution of Burke as a proxy for his own concerns.

O'Brien's historical emphasis shifted towards an emphasis on denigrating figures supportive of the French Revolution and dwelt on Burke's prognosis that it would end in military dictatorship in his *Reflections*. O'Brien's emotional identification with Burke was increasingly unabashed and was rooted in a temperamental likeness that he detected in Burke. This is arguably located in O'Brien's aesthetic attraction to Burke's style, which begs deeper questions as to how O'Brien, through Burke and Yeats, was temperamentally inclined to look at the political and natural world as a world on the brink of catastrophe and refashion himself as a contemporary diviner of augurs. Joe Cleary's essay "Rupture Rapture" offers insight into Yeats's artistic process that has relevance to this study of O'Brien:

Yeats's attunement to the rhetoric of chaos and collapse owes much to his immersion in seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century Irish and English literatures. From a pulverised Gaelic order, Yeats borrowed the cadences of a poetry that clung to a civilisation shattered beyond salvage.⁸⁸

O'Brien was imaginatively steeped in Burke's writing and thought and attuned to the resonance of catastrophe in Irish history and literature. The notion that Yeats's

⁸⁸ Joe Cleary, "Rupture Rapture", *Dublin Review of Books* (November 2020). <<https://drb.ie/rupture-rapture/>> [accessed 20 January 2021].

“The Second Coming”, ‘belongs to the poet of violent conjunctures when an old order is shattered and something new and necessarily obscure breaks and enters the house of history’, is suggestive as to why O’Brien returned to this image as an emblem in his writing on conflict.⁸⁹

The fact that O’Brien admired Burke’s writing style intensified his attraction to Burke’s ideas, reinforcing their significance for O’Brien. The link between a tradition of Catholic counter-revolutionary literary expression in contrast to the literary expressions of French republicanism, as it manifested in O’Brien’s politics is relevant here. O’Brien and Sheehy-Skeffington had differed in the 1930s and 40s on what constituted major literature, and O’Brien sided with the French tradition of interiority, notably, Marcel Proust and Ferdinand Brunetière, whereas, Sheehy-Skeffington, chose the more overtly political writing of André Gide and Jules Romains. After Sheehy-Skeffington’s death, and O’Brien’s marginalization from the Labour Party, O’Brien reverted to this earlier sensibility. O’Brien’s attachment was arguably strengthened by the emotional distance such literature had from the root of republicanism, particularly in its more recent manifestations. This was a delicate balancing act as O’Brien’s campaign to delegitimize the elements of republican ethos that were, in his view, giving legitimacy to violence involved delegitimizing aspects of his own historical consciousness, and, in fact, aspects of his own writing under the guise of an intellectual not unduly proud of the efforts of some of his own ancestors in resisting colonial rule.

O’Brien’s writing on Eamon de Valera is an interesting aspect of this phenomenon. De Valera largely escaped O’Brien’s vitriolic commentary, and at least

⁸⁹ Joe Cleary, “Rupture Rapture”

two elements are intrinsic to this phenomenon; de Valera's great respect for O'Brien's grand-uncle Eugene Sheehy, who according to de Valera 'taught me patriotism', and O'Brien's evident fascination with de Valera's serpentine strategies.⁹⁰ Given O'Brien's fear of the breakdown of civil society and his repeated forecasts of imminent civil war, it is interesting to compare his scant writing on de Valera's role in this traumatic interlude that shaped Irish post-Civil War politics. It was the 1916 Easter Rising and the marginalization of the IPP following Sinn Féin's victory in the 1918 general election that relegated it to history, rather than the Irish Civil War, that profoundly affected his own family and thus stirred his polemical energies.

In "Rupture Rapture" Cleary has written that, 'Too many of Yeats's successors ... have tried to walk a circle around him rather than absorb his work at his strongest points and take him on in the way that great poets contest and surpass predecessors.'⁹¹ It is arguable that O'Brien, failing at the level of poetry, took up the gauntlet implicit in Yeats's poetry, defined by Cleary as an effort to 'to remake a national imagination'.⁹² Kiberd, responding to the suggestion that O'Brien struggled intellectually in a Yeatsian mode with the tension between literature and action, has suggestively written that O'Brien was, like Yeats, attempting 'to hold in a single thought reality and justice.'⁹³ Poetry was O'Brien's first instinct, after all, until O'Faolain told him that his attempts were, 'congeries of one man's ideas and another man's style, both misunderstood and misused, which constitutes your sole originality.'⁹⁴ O'Brien's conception of himself as an outsider can be read as a

⁹⁰ O'Brien, "The Roots of My Preoccupations", p. 78.

⁹¹ Joe Cleary, "Rupture Rapture".

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Personal correspondence with Declan Kiberd.

⁹⁴ Whelan, *Violent Notions*, p. 57.

refashioning of himself as a cross between the poète maudit, the ‘accursed outsider’, and the bardic doomsayer. The revisionist nature of much of O’Brien’s historiography has potentially obscured from critical view, his imaginative and emotional links with Irish historical suffering.

O’Brien’s loyalty to his father’s worldview—expressed in Francis Cruise O’Brien’s intellectual contribution to Irish cultural and political affairs—predisposed him to sympathy with Yeats’s struggle to defend the artistic freedom of the Abbey Theatre from pressures exerted by those with a narrow and less inclusive vision. This struggle was emblemized in the row over Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, in 1907. Roy Foster has written that ‘The play’s opponents are often represented as the outraged Dublin bourgeoisie; but Yeats identified them specifically as a Sinn Féin ramp-and said so.’⁹⁵ Francis Cruise O’Brien also contributed to the intellectual history of the period when he co-edited, with W. E. G. Lloyd, reissues of two works by the historian W. E. H. Lecky, *Clerical influences* (1911) and *History of the rise and influence of the spirit of rationalism in Europe* (1910). O’Brien’s father was at this time a contemporary and friend of Yeats, and actively working to promote a more secular and inclusive nationalism in his role as private secretary for Horace Plunkett. He was also deputy editor of the *Irish Statesman* (June 1919-June 1920), the mouthpiece of Plunkett’s Irish Dominion League. The elements of O’Brien’s inheritance were thus transmitted along a parallel axes of culture and politics and no full appreciation of the complexity of O’Brien’s political thought can be achieved, if either element is ignored.

⁹⁵ Richard English and Joseph Morrison Skelly eds., *Ideas Matter: Essays in Honour of Conor Cruise O’Brien* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1998), p. 91.

Thus, while O'Brien muddied the waters of Yeatsian scholarship, Yeats's contribution to language and Irish culture was an integral aspect of O'Brien's imagination.

This thesis shows that O'Brien's shifting discourse in relation to revolutionary violence was less a Pauline conversion from Left to Right, and more a renegotiation of literary and political influences—in response to a new set of circumstances—that touched on fears that had been sublimated in literature and revolution. O'Brien's essay "An Unhealthy Intersection" (1975), offers a wealth of details that hint at the emotional substratum of O'Brien's compulsion to write on the subject of literature and politics. O'Brien discussed, herein, the resistance of mythological notions of achieving immortality by 'getting oneself killed for Ireland's sake', to the reality that the 'actual' people of Ireland wanted no such sacrifice. In a passage that developed the notion that the IRA campaign had been bolstered by manifestations of literary symbolism that glorified sacrifice and martyrdom, namely, Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, O'Brien writes, 'Indeed, if Ireland were ever to cease to be oppressed, what would happen to 'history', how would one get into it?'⁹⁶ This notion of getting into history was evidently one that bothered O'Brien, and, as the archives reveal, O'Brien felt that the contribution of Tom Kettle, and those associated with the IPP, had been diminished by the legacy of 1916'.⁹⁷

The question then presents itself: how did O'Brien 'get into history'? O'Brien's voice undoubtedly became a stimulus to thought and action. *The Crane Bag* and *Field Day* contained writers in the wider field of Irish Studies that admired O'Brien's postcolonial critiques in *To Katanga and Back*, *Camus*, and elsewhere. Kiberd has

⁹⁶ O'Brien, "An Unhealthy Intersection", p. 7.

⁹⁷ SSA(A), MS 40, 489/8.

attested to the admiration that existed among those associated with *Field Day* for O'Brien's courageous critique of American neo-imperialism during the course of the Vietnam War. This continues to have contemporary relevance.

Noam Chomsky, as keynote speaker at a conference organised in UCD on the subject of "Academic Freedom and Intellectual Dissent" (8 June 2021), referred to an essay he wrote in 1967 that had dealt with many of the themes the conference was organised to address. The essay in question, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals", struck out at the complacency of intellectuals, who were shirking their duty to speak truth to power. The essay is a sustained meditation on the role and limitations of intellectuals in relation to power—and draws on the substance of O'Brien's writings on the subject at that period. The essay was a condemnation of intellectual mouthpieces for propaganda—who served the ends of the Washington administration by formulating sophisticated and evasive rhetoric. Such intellectuals were, according to Chomsky, justifying neo-imperial expansion under the rubric of the containment of communism.⁹⁸ In response, *The New York Review of Books* published a reply to Chomsky on 23 March 1967 from George Steiner, then teaching on O'Brien's course in literature and society at New York University. Chomsky's recent reference to this essay in UCD served, at least to the present writer, as a reminder of O'Brien's intellectual ambition, and fearlessness, on subjects that were then, as now, of pressing concern. As

⁹⁸ Noam Chomsky, "A Special Supplement: The Responsibility of Intellectuals", *The New York Review of Books* (23 February 1967).

< <https://www-nybooks-com.elib.tcd.ie/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/> [accessed 10 May 2021].

such, O'Brien's writings and actions in defence of intellectual freedom, specifically between 1963-1969, are rich sources of reference.

Unlike Sean O'Faolain, O'Brien moved beyond the edges of Europe, and negotiated professionally, and intellectually, a number of major historical junctures in Africa—primarily the challenges facing newly independent African states like the Congo and Ghana. O'Brien brought the burden of Irish historical experience to bear on his treatment of the postcolonial experience of these countries. This process also worked in reverse, in that O'Brien arguably brought his lived experience of the reality of postcolonial liberation movements back to bear on his interpretation of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. It is without doubt that O'Brien's experience in the Congo, in Ghana, and in Biafra, chastened him in respect of idealist revolutionary rhetoric but it is misleading to assume that this was a straightforward process. In reality, O'Brien's evolving responses to revolutionary events were negotiated through the literary and political expression of these events.

The primary device that O'Brien used to filter his response to moments of revolutionary crisis was the progress of the French Revolution. This event provided an inexhaustible paradigm through the course of O'Brien's writing life. The emotional resonance this held for O'Brien stemmed from his emotional and familial proximity to a revolutionary event. The study of the course of the French Revolution provided O'Brien with endless material, most notably: the personalities associated with it, the role of intellectuals in precipitating revolutionary violence and the contrasting responses to both the revolution and the exporting of the revolution abroad.

The Sheehy-Skeffington archives contain a striking letter that O'Brien wrote to Sheehy-Skeffington, which demonstrates exactly how involved O'Brien was imaginatively with the progress of the French Revolution, and crucially, with the progress of the historiography of the Revolution.⁹⁹ The latter characteristic of O'Brien's thought is in itself worthy of a single study, as O'Brien's historical treatment of Irish subjects is inextricably bound up with his sense of how the French Revolution played itself out in national and world-historical terms. There is a constant dialectic between the French Revolution—more specifically the nuances of Burke's response to it—and O'Brien's evolving responses to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and indeed elsewhere.

Different commentators have noted O'Brien's tendency towards apocalyptic thinking and the strain of pessimism in his writing without satisfactorily locating the source of this characteristic feature of his thought in historical terms. It was, however, firmly rooted in historical experience, both real and learned. There has been, as such, a critical neglect in acknowledging that O'Brien's imaginative world was shaped in the post-WW1 environment. O'Brien is usually situated in terms of post-WW2 historical consciousness. While the latter placement is entirely legitimate, it fails to acknowledge that the historical and literary figures that people much of O'Brien's writings are largely pre-WW2 figures, such as, Yeats, Parnell, Tom Kettle, de Valera, Charles Péguy,

⁹⁹ SSA(A), MS 40,489 /8. The letter is dated 13 July 1964.

*This correspondence concerns O'Brien's fascination with Pieter Geyl's work on Napoleon. The letter was sent to Sheehy-Skeffington ostensibly in order to provide him with ammunition in his attempts to expose clerical hypocrisy. O'Brien's letter is remarkable for its fascination with the casuistry employed by French bishops, in order to cope with the exigencies attendant to the progress of the French Revolution. O'Brien writes that the resultant paradoxes 'are of the kind that shook the soul of the squeamish young Péguy but fortified the more robust faith of a Paul Claudel.'

Marcel Proust, Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin, Jean Jacques Rousseau and Nadezhda Krupskaya.

The names chosen here reflect just a few of the recurring names that are scattered across O'Brien's writings, however, what they all have in common is that they took part in schismatic events. O'Brien's obsessive interest in historical events that had a schismatic aspect began in the heart of his family. It centred on his grandfather's decision to side against Parnell in the split in 1890, and gradually worked its way outward to encompass national, and international, historical events of great political importance. However, when it came full circle, and the lion was in the ante-chamber, O'Brien's emotional and imaginative relation to revolution had arguably reached saturation point, and became hostile and intemperate in response to language that, in his view, belittled the traumatic aspect of revolutionary events.¹⁰⁰ In this sense, it is arguable that his fascination turned to revulsion. Kiberd, in trying to come to terms with O'Brien's 'illiberal stances' in his later years (from the mid-70s onwards), has reflected that perhaps O'Brien had 'scared himself'.¹⁰¹

D. R. O'Connor Lysaght spoke from the audience briefly in Howth Angling club, and made the observation that O'Brien was 'strikingly naive'.¹⁰² The remark was in the context of O'Brien's first political intervention in Trinity, at a Labour Party conference, addressing the Spanish Civil War. Lysaght's description bears dwelling on. Reading the

¹⁰⁰ This is a reference to O'Brien's citation of Burke's *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, SG, p. 45.

¹⁰¹ Personal correspondence with Declan Kiberd.

¹⁰² The quote is from a debate between Frank Callanan and Niall Meehan, organised by the Howth Peninsula Heritage Society (23 April 2019), entitled "An evaluation of the career of Conor Cruise O'Brien". The quote is from my own notes on the evening. The debates were later published on the DRB website.

<<https://drb.ie/articles/the-polariser/>> [accessed 5 August 2019].

various appraisals and criticisms of O'Brien's work, one is left in no doubt that the word naive—in the widely understood sense of the word—is inaccurate. However, there is another sense of the word that shapes a new understanding of O'Brien, that of someone who was almost childishly candid. The origin in Latin *nativus* is translated as 'native, natural'.

There is in O'Brien's published writings a motif that appears in *Maria Cross*, his first publication, and *The Eve of the Millennium*, one of O'Brien's last published books. This motif combines childhood and darkness and, crucially, where understanding reaches its limit. In "The Temple of Memory: Péguy" (1951), O'Brien writes:

From that border of the dark, marked with such signs, most men retreat all their lives until they find it again at last on the far side. A few only, poets or adventurers, spend their lives along the border, following it through many different territories and still always through landscape of the same character, between childhood and night.¹⁰³

This essay offers rich material for those looking to understand the complexity of the interplay between logical and extralogical aspects of experience in O'Brien's writing.¹⁰⁴ His scepticism towards 'a particular class of scholars' in the fields of social and political science contrasts with his fascination with 'poets or adventurers', who 'spend their lives along the border', and arguably grew out of his early interest in Catholic writing. The terms that O'Brien uses in his criticism on this subject are

¹⁰³ O'Brien, *MC*, pp. 137-138.

¹⁰⁴ This essay was first published in *The Hudson Review* (Winter 1951), later republished in *MC*.

unambiguously Christian, 'Implicit in this enterprise is nothing less than an effort to replace the Judeo-Christian ethic (in its post-Enlightenment modification) by a sub-Nietzschean scientism.'¹⁰⁵ This strain of thought was the foundation of his denigration of "The Gentle Nietzscheans", and it was also an inseparable element of his attraction to Edmund Burke. The emotional substratum of Burke's attack on 'the French philosophes' and intellectual abstraction in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* provided an intellectual counterweight to O'Brien's liberalism. O'Brien's early writing balances the antithetical counter-revolutionary strains of thought emblemized in his father's secular rationalism and the gravitational force that particular religious writing held for him. O'Brien, in *The Eve of the Millennium* (1994), set down his thoughts on the Enlightenment in terms that echo his earliest explorations in *Maria Cross*:

The Enlightenment we need is one that is aware of the dark, especially the dark in ourselves. An Enlightenment that is aware that there is far more evidence extant in favour of the Christian doctrine of Original Sin than of Rousseau's doctrine of Original Virtue.¹⁰⁶

O'Brien makes a distinction in his essay on Péguy between those who 'use scientific nomenclature' and writers like Péguy, for whom 'truth is so far beyond words that one can only let the words follow it in a great mass as the tide follows the

¹⁰⁵ O'Brien, *Power and Consciousness*, p. 12.

In this argument, O'Brien is referring specifically to social and political scientists who were providing intellectual cover for American neo-imperialist ambitions. This argument was made in tandem with Noam Chomsky's efforts to 'expose the progress of corruption-by-"science".' Chomsky's essay, "Objectivity and Liberal scholarship", published in *Power and Consciousness*, deals specifically with this issue, as does his essay, "The Responsibility of Intellectuals".
<<https://www.nybooks-com.elib.tcd.ie/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/>> [accessed 10 May 2021].

¹⁰⁶ Conor Cruise O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium: The Future of Democracy through an Age of Unreason* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 30.

moon'.¹⁰⁷ That passage serves as a reliable guide to what moved O'Brien both intellectually and creatively. The critical distinction for O'Brien was the difference between 'those writers who explore the unconscious and those who ... live in it', and, as such, gestures towards the pre-eminence of poetry and consciousness in O'Brien's worldview. O'Brien's compulsion to write was moved by his need to control the ineluctable 'forces' that had shaped his world, namely, religion and nationalism. Increasingly, however, he began to emphasize the elements in life that resisted categorization, and he returned in the end to an image of life which encapsulated the border "between childhood and night". Recalling how his son Patrick had once asked him if he believed in ghosts, he wrote:

I was that much younger then, and more confidently enlightened in proportion. So I answered: "No, Patrick, of course not." Patrick replied: "Yes, Daddy, that's how I feel, too. All the same ... when you're up in the attic ... in the dark ... and you hear those little feet coming after you ... sometimes you'd wonder." You might indeed.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ O'Brien, *MC*, p. 138.

¹⁰⁸ O'Brien, *On the Eve of the Millennium*, p. 31.

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