

**“The Vacant Room”:  
Afflictions of Memory in Edna O’Brien**  
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*ABSTRACT: The essay reads selected early stories by Edna O’Brien through the rubric of hysteria. For Freud and Lacan, hysteria is a form of repetitious behaviour through which a feminine subject expresses dissatisfaction with social structures and unconsciously revisits the moment of maternal separation. Irish literature and national mythography being historically feminised, the essay investigates the political implications of the actions of O’Brien’s heroines in this light. It finds that they insist on an attachment to ‘nothing’ as a deadly historical substance rather than finding themselves able to allow it to fuel new desire.*

**Keywords:** *Irish fiction, nationalism, love, memory, hysteria, psychoanalysis*

Two themes haunt Edna O’Brien’s fiction and are largely responsible for its mood of quiet desolation. One is love, the other memory, and perhaps inevitably these are bound, in turn, to her commitment to writing of the experience of women and to the intractable question of exile from Ireland. “It’s amazing,” the author remarks, in an interview with Grace Eckley in the seventies, “‘childhood really occupies at most twelve years of our early life [. . .], and the bulk of the rest of our lives is shadowed or colored by that time.’” Acknowledging Proust as the “great architect of memory,” O’Brien goes on, in Eckley’s words, to “describe herself as a person ‘afflicted and blessed with the obsession of memory.’” Her family, she says, “are here, they’re in my throat [. . .] and I suppose I’m haunting them as much as they’re haunting me” (1974: 79).

While this kind of statement has led several critics to read O’Brien’s fiction, if not as a laying to rest of ancient ghosts, then at least as an attempt to alleviate the harshest residues of her rural Irish past, it has further implications for this author’s portrayal of the Irish nation, past and present. What does it mean to be “afflicted and blessed” with “the obsession of memory,” to haunt as much as one is haunted? If memory is the means by which we renovate the past, make it mobile and fluid—as when revisiting a cherished childhood scene—it is also the means by which the past can return to us unbidden, startling present complacency and temporal habitation.

Irish history, of course, is particularly marked by the wishful, and the wistful, workings of memory, and by the inseparability of the two. With the necessity for a discourse of nationhood in eighteenth-century Europe arose a corresponding need to look to the past in order to discern the relation between people and land as one which could be narrativised historically and thus serve as a viable platform for coherent political claims (Smyth 1997: 11. Also Lloyd 1993: 5). Yet as O’Brien herself contends in her memoir of her mother country, *Mother Ireland*, Irish history is “thought to have known invasion from the time when the Ice Age ended,” making it, in Gerry Smyth’s words, “a story of a series of invasions and hybrid graftings of different peoples and different cultures” overdetermined by a growing need, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to depict itself forging ahead along a trajectory of linear time (O’Brien 1976; Smyth 1997).

Irish nationalism, like all nationalism, is rife with contradictions. As Smyth observes, and from the point of view of its critics,

the nation imposes human form upon the world but then treats that imposition as if it were a (re)discovery. Moreover, the temporal location of the nation is uncertain . . . in as much as it appears to exist in the past, as a point of mystical origin from which all cultural and political legitimacy derives; but also in the future as the utopian destination of all nationalist activity. Thus, the nation is always present (allowing nationalist activity) and always absent (that which nationalist discourse is working to realise). For many, this represents the central philosophical paradox of nationalism---its inability to constitute itself as a coherent narrative of human activity. (1997: 12)

If novel writing, or, more generally, narration, is one means by which nationalism is effected (Anderson 1991), it is, as Smyth observes, because both nationalism and novel reading require a “leap of faith between the individual and the large unseen community in which his/her actions and thoughts make sense” (1997: 19). This account is particularly charged in relation to Ireland. The challenge facing all would-be nationalist or self-defining minority discourse is to reconstitute through its address the shape that “large unseen community” of nation and readership has taken. However, an Irish national literature has to contend, on the one hand, with the perception that its defining characteristics lie in a mythical past resistant to language, and on the other, with a powerful Catholic tradition of arbitration over the word. There, the fall into temporality and its divine reconstitution through Christ’s suffering is the happy accident uniting the imagined community of the faithful on earth. While Holy Mother Church grounds that community in the meantime, she also functions, like all mothers, as a ghostly presence outside time, a land of origin which, impossible to remember, absorbs the multivalent longings on which dreams of future communion depend.

In O’Brien’s fiction, that which is always present (allowing activity) and always absent (the ultimate goal) is, most strikingly and exactingly, love. She describes the concern with love in her work as, like that of memory, an obsession (1968a, quoted in Popot 1975-6: 272). Like Irish nationalism and like the Catholic faith, however, the love that is imagined and hoped for in the future—an act of blissful union—is threatened by the intrusive return of the violence of its past. Caitheleen Brady of *The Country Girls* is the first of many O’Brien heroines to find that escape from home to love and, in her case, England, returns her to the joyless fate of her own Irish mother.

O’Brien is certainly not the first, as in *Mother Ireland*, to read her country in its beleaguered history as a woman raped and spurned by her invaders, chiefly and most brutally the long-staying English. But she may be the Irish author who has pushed longest and hardest at the seamy, abject underside of the quintessentially feminine career of loving. Her melancholy women remain stopped at the threshold where the social world could compensate for lost communion with the mother, and, thus trapped between two worlds, display the real costs of romantic dreams of oneness premised on an unmediated, and thus deadly, maternal union.

The chief aim of this essay is to register the political implications of the pressures to which O’Brien submits her heroines, afflicted as they are by memory, in their

exorbitant and unrelinquished search for love. That O'Brien has not been given the critical attention her output, sales and range of subject matter would seem to deserve is perhaps due, in part, to the way her fictions map the boundary between the palatable and impalatable components of the experience of romantic dissolution. While she is perfectly willing to take on, and profit from, stock or "stage" comedic characterisations of Ireland and the Irish, embracing their less as well as their more appealing traits, her narratives also seem to suffer from an inability to transcend their own tragic weight of longing. It may be that O'Brien is giving us the measure of a romantic "mother Ireland" myth sustained, as myth is, by affective investment it cannot, within current terms, repay. What made O'Brien so successful in the sixties, I suspect, was the way she put idealism alongside the physical fervour which sustains it, so that her trademark descriptive lyricism could be read as youthful hope. And it may be that same refusal to separate the outer from the inner workings of a now embattled optimism that has earned her critical disapproval in the image conscious, globalised culture that forms the backdrop to the Ireland of today.

That some criticisms of her work have been registered in the name of changing Ireland, in contradistinction to which she is read as being morbidly attached to the past, is particularly telling (see Rodd 1994: 22, cited in Hatheway 1999: 123; Hayden 1999; Wroe 1999; cited in Hillan-King 2000; McCann 2000). While I agree that O'Brien traverses the same ground in much of her fiction I am not convinced that her territory is one from which the rest of the world, and Ireland in particular, has moved on. Rather her writing, in giving shape and substance to a persistent cultural fantasy about Ireland—the mother land whose love exacts from all her children a harsh, undischageable penalty—shows not only the continuing costs and benefits of that relation but aspects of its structural workings, particularly as regards love.

Renata Salecl, following the thought and practice of Jacques Lacan, observes that "one of the greatest illusions about love is that prohibition and social codes prevent its realization" (1999: 6), whereas in fact these are better seen as the symbolic framework that gives love meaning. Psychoanalysis in the tradition of Freud and Lacan is famously pessimistic about romantic love—O'Brien's constant theme. Yet a psychoanalytic reading of her work is necessary, in my view, to understand the continuing popularity of what reads, now, after feminism and the Northern Irish ceasefire, as a retrogressive, labour intensive realisation of a war between the sexes, waged in love's name—and thus read as timeless—yet with its tents pitched firmly in an Ireland whose chief characteristic is its bondage to the past.

The central themes of O'Brien's early fiction are carried through, with remarkable consistency, into her later work, so that Eckley's identification of these, in 1974, still holds good: "Loneliness and independence," she writes, "most dramatically take the form of a quest for someone to love" (1974: 12-13). The stories collected in *The Love Object*, published in 1968, exemplify the melancholy love obsession we would come to expect from this author, and the persistent theme of sexual failure that numerous critics have identified as integral to her work (Eckley 1974: 14; Popot 1975-6: 272; Carpenter 1986). The title story concerns the unnamed lover—the love object—of Martha, who tells us retrospectively of her affair with a married man. This man is characterised from the outset as physically undistinguished (he is "elderly," has "blue eyes" and "khaki hair"), with an "inner smile [. . .] governed as it were by [. . .] private joy." While describing

herself and her lover as “strangers,” the narrator simultaneously insists that “there were no barriers between us,” yet later claims that “we would always be outside one another,” and, paradoxically, to have only really fallen in love with this man some time after the relationship’s demise (1968a: 13, 43).

Thus while the story is on one level the tale of this affair, it is on another a study of the workings of the speaker’s memory, in which her lover is shown to be relatively tangential. The claim that “there were no barriers between us” is only partly contradictory. While on the one hand the narrative charts the entwining and disentanglement of what are essentially two separate lives, that of the speaker and her man, on the other it figures the surprising way love works to convey union through the operation of (invisible) barriers, so that each partner is ignorant of what the lover sees in him or her, while at the same time unconsciously seeing the beloved as the self she or he would like to be (Lacan 1998a: 267-8; also 1998b: 6, quoted in Salecl 1999: 14; MacCannell 1994). In this way, love implies “the follies and torments of those in love,” as Alain Badiou observes, while remaining in excess of those experiences:

Let us say that love is a process which arranges such immediate experiences, without the law which arranges them being decipherable within these experiences. This can also be said: the experience of the loving subject, which is the matter of love, does not constitute any knowledge [savoir] of love. (2000: 266. Also Lacan 1988: 276-7)

For the narrator of “The Love Object,” it is not knowledge of love that is desired but rather the experience—the follies and torments—through which it is enfolded. Knowledge of love would mean, to her, the possibility of foregoing the consuming feelings she seeks. Although the speaker is named Martha, she is named only once, in the story’s opening lines, a naming which functions performatively to effect the necessary feeling: “He simply said my name [. . .] and once again I could feel it happening. My legs trembled under the big white cloth and my head became fuzzy, though I was not drunk. It’s how I fall in love” (1968b: 13). These lines, along with the description of the pair as “strangers” and the gradual unravelling of their relationship, suggest that, for the narrator, the real love object is not this particular man so much as the experience of love itself. The theatrical opening image of herself in the act of falling in love is later reversed when, after the affair has ended, the narrator meets her former lover in a café for tea:

“I’m over it,” I said, and dipped my finger into the sugar bowl and let him lick the white crystals off the tip of my finger. Poor man . . . In a way it was like being with someone else. He was not the one who had folded back the bedspread and sucked me dry and left his cigar ash for preserving. He was the representative of that one. (1968b: 44)

Here the speaker admits what the reader has already been shown through the image of Martha repining in her sitting room following the end of the affair:

The leisure enabled me to brood, also I have very weak bulbs in the lamps and the dimness gives the room a quality that induces reminiscence. I would be transported back. I enacted various kinds of reunion with my lover, but my favourite one was an unexpected meeting in one of those tiled, inhuman pedestrian subways and running towards each other and finding ourselves at a stairway which said (one in London actually does say), "To central island only," and laughing as we leaped up those stairs propelled by miraculous wings. (1968b: 41-2)

Thus absorbed, the speaker walks the wire of eidetic tension strung deliciously between desire and happenstance. The room with its weak bulbs encouraging reminiscence provides a safe space in which to be "transported back" into the past. Her favourite reenactment is the unexpected meeting in which the subway of the everyday—the pedestrian—is miraculously enlivened by the lovers' passage, in the only possible direction, upwards to the light and heart of things.

That the narrator is in love with love, or with the idea and image of herself in love, is demonstrated by the extreme self-consciousness with which she realises, and recounts, each stage of the affair. For instance: "When he left I felt quite buoyant [. . .] I looked a little wanton," and "I could feel myself making little petrified moves denoting love, shyness; opening my eyes wide to look at him, exuding trust" (1968b, 16, 17). This love is shown, as stagings are, to depend upon an artificial framing that must be carefully attended to so that time and space both expand and contract—enabling the transfixion of the audience by a staged scene, from which they are separated, apparently taking place in present time. The audience is both the narrator herself and the imaginary one (the reader) needed to validate the composition of her interior world. Such narratorial direction maximises love's estranging effect, and it is this estrangement—of the speaker from herself, of herself from the everyday—that she wants to safeguard but, by virtue of her need of it, plays a major part in causing to slip away.

O'Brien characterises her concern with memory, love and sexual failure as obsessive, but her work is probably better read as hysterical in the sense that Lacanian psychoanalysis allows. For Lacan as it did for Freud, hysteria speaks in bodily symptoms a larger dissatisfaction with social structures—including sexual relations—by insisting on what those structures profess to have left behind. More specifically, the hysteric refuses to move beyond maternal separation because she discerns in social structures a debt to the maternal body that it is women's task to repay, although this is by no means always, nor even often, a conscious wish (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1978, cited in Evans 1991: 167-8).

The hysteric is "afflicted and blessed," to quote O'Brien, because she gets her satisfaction from affliction, but her affliction marks desire's displacement from the field considered normally or naturally sexual to another bodily zone. This in turn makes it difficult for the hysteric to accept a position as the love object of another, since she is unconsciously committed to provoking new desire in herself and others. At the same time, her inability to 'change places' structurally and inhabit a previously untried position in relation to others' desires condemns her to acts of repetition. She can make a point with political implications, but at the price of forgoing the achievement of her own desire. Thus hysterics have often been seen as sacrificial figures. In drawing attention to social

sites where feminine desires are problematised by historical causes that remain unresolved, the hysteric may eventually play a part in causing historical changes. Sadly, however, such change is seldom experienced as a reward.

In a discussion of Irish poet Medbh McGuckian, Clair Wills astutely notes that “the theory of the feminization of Irish society” means that “the divisions between private (feminine) authority and the public and political sphere are drawn differently in Ireland” than elsewhere, so that “it may be that work which turns ‘inward’ on to and into the female body” and feminine concerns is not “disengaging from public and political discourse” as might otherwise be thought (1993: 66). This is partly because “feminine and familial ‘privacy’ in Ireland is oriented towards a public and political domain” (1993: 68). Ireland’s feminisation crosses the divide public/private, both British imperialism and Irish nationalism having portrayed the Irish feminised, overtly and covertly, at different times to different ends (see Jones and Stallybrass 1992; Innes 1993; Aretxaga 1997: 146-69; Weekes 2000).

O’Brien’s angle on the feminisation of Ireland problematic is heightened by the trope and experience of exile, which is inseparable from her work’s nostalgic qualities and the central role given in her fictions—as theme and method—to memory. To read O’Brien through the rubric of hysteria, then, is to look again at her fiction’s insistence on the “private” sphere of sex and love and the representation of Ireland as backward or lost home, and to read them as elaborations of a question that is still unanswered. In what ways can a woman whose country is experienced as maternally repressive—both as a repression named maternal in the forms of mother Ireland or Holy Mother Church, and of maternal experience in terms which exceed such political ideals—articulate her relation to her homeland? Perhaps only by insisting on renewing a conversation, with her readers, about thwarted love.

Let us look more closely at the fiction’s emphasis on the allegedly private nature of sex and love, and its nostalgic portrayal of Ireland, considered through the hysterical theme of sexual dissatisfaction. A story that has gained approval from critics for its concentrated power is the title text of the collection *A Rose in the Heart* (published in England as *Mrs Reinhardt and Other Stories*), a tale whose portrayal of physical and emotional hunger in terms of violence both magnetises and repels. The story, “A Rose in the Heart of New York,” treats a woman’s relationship with her mother, from the daughter’s birth in rural Ireland to her mother’s death when the daughter is in middle age. From the start the relationship is shown to centre around food, which fails to assuage a greater hunger for love and meaning that both mother and daughter seem to share.

The narrative begins in December, “Jack Frost in scales along the outside of the windows giving to the various rooms a white filtered light,” rooms which are “cold inside, and for the most part identically furnished”:

The room with no furniture at all—save for the apples gathered in the autumn—was called the Vacant Room. The apples were all over the floor and in rows along the curb of the tiled fireplace. Their smell was heady, many of them having begun to rot. Rooms into which no one had stepped for days and yet these rooms and their belongings would become part of the remembered story. A solemn house, set in its own grounds, away from the lazy bustle of the village. A

lonesome house it would prove to be, and with a strange lifelikeness as if it was not a house at all but a person observing and breathing, a presence amid a cluster of trees and sturdy wind-shorn hedges. (1979a: 141)

The rotting apples and the December setting introduce the Catholic theme that is at the heart of the story, where sin, (Christ's) birth and death are implicated in each other. "More infants died around Christmastime than in any other month of the year," we are told as the midwife hurries up the drive to deliver the child, hearing from halfway up the mother's "roaring and beseeching to God" (1979a: 141). The apples, signifying fleshly temptation and postlapsarian suffering—for woman, the curse that she will give birth in pain and agony—presage how the desire for food and maternal nurturance are inseparable from the material and spiritual vacancy of the family, throat deep in rural misery and despair. The mother's womb which is "sick unto death" is like the house's empty room which is full of the odour of decay. Two earlier children have died at birth, nameless and forgotten "in a graveyard [. . .] among strangers and distant relatives, without their names being carved on the crooked rain-soaked tomb" (1979a: 143-4). The daughter's birth is difficult and is resisted by the mother, who wishes "to be nothing, a shell, devoid of everything and everyone" as the child comes "hurtling out [. . .] a mewling piece of screwed-up, inert, dark, purple, misery" (1979a: 144-5).

The mother's absence of desire spells death for her child: they suffer the same illness (bronchitis) and are afterwards linked by food, though the consumption is mechanical and far from nourishing:

The food was what united them, eating off the same plate using the same spoon, watching one another's chews, feeling the food as it went down the other's neck. The child was slow to crawl and slower still to walk but it knew everything, it perceived everything. When it ate blancmange or junket it was eating part of the lovely substance of its mother. (1979a: 147)

The terrible knowledge the child has inherited is that the mother is "everything" in the sense that there is nothing and no one beyond her towards which the daughter can look forward. The daughter cuts her fingers so the mother can suck and soothe them, a sign of her legacy of suffering and death. The mother's body is a tomb which bars her path to language:

Her mother's knuckles were her knuckles, her mother's veins were her veins, her mother's lap was a second heaven, her mother's forehead a copybook onto which she traced A B C D, her mother's body was a recess that she would wander inside forever and ever, a sepulchre growing deeper and deeper. When she saw other people, especially her pretty sister, she would simply wave from that safe place, she would not budge, would not be lured out. (1979a: 147)

It is significant that the child finds her mother the source and end point of signs (“A B C D . . .”), just as there is no recognition, from the men, of a symbolic category to which the daughter might belong (“the salesman said was it a boy or a child, although he had just been told that it was a daughter” (1979a: 145)). As Lacan says, for language to have meaning, a child’s cry must pass “from the organism to the subject,” must become the expression of demand rather than need, and for this it must discern in the mother a desire that goes beyond it so that the world can be experienced as that which opens up and welcomes, gradually enabling the passage from maternal dependence into the albeit inadequately compensatory domain of language and signs (Shepherdson 2000: 67). If the child’s every cry is answered then “the demand for love is crushed,” the subject sent “back to sleep, where he haunts the limbo regions of being” (Lacan 1977: 263, quoted in Shepherdson 2000: 68; also 194).

Julia Kristeva argues that the feminine signifies both loss and longing: the fantasy of maternal origin as homely—our lost home—but also that within us which is foreign or unhomely, rendered alien by the loss language opens in experience. While accession to the world of common meanings—the social domain, the field of language—means everybody loses, Kristeva claims that female subjects encounter particular difficulties in representing this loss on their own terms (1989, 28-9). Hysteria, in this understanding, dramatises the condition of all would-be female subjects in so far as they must work out a relation both to the fictions of primal loss signified by femininity and to the experience of the loss itself. It is the lack of a representable relation or space between these two that a story like “A Rose in the Heart” and others like it seem to mourn.

O’Brien has her own version of the psychoanalytic tale, stated baldly in a much quoted moment from an early interview with Nell Dunn:

The reason I think on the whole that women are more discontented than men is not just that they get old sooner or that they have the vote, or that they haven’t the vote, or that they bleed, but that there is, there must be, in every man and every woman the desire, the deep primeval desire to go back to the womb. Now physically and technically really . . . a man partly and symbolically achieves this when he goes into a woman. He goes in and becomes sunken and lost in her. A woman never, ever approaches that kind of security. (1965, quoted in Eckley 1974: 30).<sup>1</sup>

That O’Brien is ambivalent about the kind of security made available to a man through sexual engagement with a woman (“he goes in and becomes sunken and lost”) is evidenced by the role accorded sex in her fiction. As Mary Gordon notes, echoing the thoughts of many others: “In [O’Brien’s] stories no one is an innocent, and everyone must suffer. Ireland can be left, but the curse of sex hangs over the head of all the world” (1984: 38). One wonders whether a woman’s “never approach[ing the] kind of security”

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<sup>1</sup> O’Brien gives the measure of the difficulty, for women, of assuaging this desire in an interview with Philip Roth. “If you want to know what I regard as the principal crux of female despair,” she offers, “it is this: in the Greek myth of Oedipus and in Freud’s exploration of it, the son’s desire for his mother is admitted; the infant daughter also desires its mother but it is unthinkable, either in myth, in fantasy or in fact, that that desire can be consummated” (1984: 40).



made possible for a man through sexual union with her is not more of a blessing than a curse.

And this, too, is a hysterical feature of O'Brien's fiction: her portrayal of sex as disgusting, shot through with overtones of human finitude and decay (Lukacher 1989). Love is longed for but, being linked with sex, is at the same time like a room into which no one steps for days, whose fetid vacancy "become part of the remembered story" of familial legacies of suffering and pain. Love is both the hope for deliverance from this world, and the means by which, each time, the heroines' high ideals are laid low. There is no transubstantiation of feminine flesh by a differential term, nothing to stand between the woman and her longing for the mother country. Again and again in her narratives the equation mother land and maternal body is suggested, and each time it is to characterise both as irretrievably lost.

Can such literary repetition have a political function? Seamus Deane describes the history of Irish literature as, if not boring, then "nevertheless deeply involved with the experience of boredom" and repetition. Citing Daniel Corkery, Deane suggests that, from the cultural nationalist's point of view in the early twentieth century, "one can only look forward to a series of regenerations and recessions, booms and busts, all of which are directed towards the same end—the emergence of Ireland as its own subject, rather than the repeated re-emergence of Ireland as an object of the scrutiny of others."<sup>2</sup> These others, Deane observes, "need not be foreigners," and are as likely to be the Irish themselves: "endlessly engaged with the problematic of Ireland-as-such; endlessly entrapped between representing it as a quaint other to imperial normality, or as a radical otherness for which no canonical system of representation is sufficient" (1995: 156).

Of course, what Deane is describing in terms of monotony here is not so much the experience of boredom as boredom, of having nothing to do, but rather the monotony of having the same things happen over and over, the back and forth, the boom and bust, of Irish history as it is bodied forth in the recognisable themes and patternings of Irish literature. As Adam Phillips observes in his essay "On Being Bored," what seems on the surface to be blankness or absence of affect, in boredom, "is actually a precarious process" in which a person—his example is a child—can be "both waiting for something and looking for something, in which hope is being secretly negotiated" under cover of a relatively mild disaffection. "We can think of boredom as a defence against waiting," Phillips writes, "which is, at one remove, an acknowledgement of the possibility of desire" (1993: 73, 80).

While Deane suggests that the repeated manipulation of the paradigm of the Irish as being uniquely outside or containable within (English) time and history becomes historically monotonous, it is not unproductive, leading eventually "to an alteration in the [Irish] aesthetic" which had been part of that paradigm (1995: 157). The Irish aesthetic, that is to say, is identifiable by its success or failure at capturing the "national spirit" or "recapitulat[ing] in itself a phase of that spirit's development," a spirit whose vital energies are sourced from an imagined time beyond historical time, the cherished time of

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<sup>2</sup> As Deane observes, Corkery, in *The Hidden Ireland* of 1924, "provides a long perspective on the proposed Irish re-revival. . . . The place of revival is Ireland; but such a place is also a time. The often unremarked discrepancy between development and underdevelopment that allows different peoples inhabiting the same historical moment to inhabit different chronologies is adapted in colonial and modernist discourses to argue that the time of the nation is a sacral time, one that has been broken by history and now must be repaired by aesthetics" (Corkery 1924: 169, 24, 12, cited in Deane 1995: 152).

ancient vigour that is the lost love object of all nationalism. But the spirit, “so conceived, always had its social counterpart in the national character; and the national character, even when understood as a distillation in exemplary form of that spirit, was always prone to petrification,” witness the paradoxically enduring stereotype of the Irish as reliably feckless, incoherent, passionately violent, backward-looking, and so on.

To extend Deane’s point a little further, we could say that while all nationalism depends upon a mythical ‘pre-temporal’ time—which in Ireland’s case involves the mythos ‘Mother Ireland’—it must yet rely on recognisable types, or stereotypes, to signal it. And the repetition of these stereotypes may in turn suggest that this earlier, primeval time is unable to be fully represented, that an impasse of some kind blocks new kinds of symbolisation, thus producing the repetition. In the case of Ireland we could say that this impasse is material, since it is the land which has always known invasion that is thus pressingly real—concretely fought over, divided, and present—but also temporally unintegrated within a progressive national narrative.

Irish land is temporally unintegrated into national narratives because it is feminised by two paradigms or mythic structures that each claim a bit of it in reserve in opaque form and these paradigms are, furthermore, sometimes at odds with each other. The myth, common in other cultures also, of the mother land that gives life to the nation does not always rest easily with that of the Mother Church that provides symbolic sustenance. Yet in both paradigms some part of the land—or the Church that claims to have made the land meaningful—is mystically remaindered. The mother land gives life, as it were, eternally, absorbing the blood of wars but never expiring. The Church, meanwhile, relies upon a maternity in the form of the Virgin Mary that is sacrificial, yet bloodless and wordless and thus without a means of articulation. The Church is a mother who speaks on behalf of other mothers, even that of its own messiah.

O’Brien’s particular fixation—woman destined to remain unsatisfied, or fulfilled only by her yearning for, and memories of, love—is, in turn, an exaggeration of a feminine stereotype. I say exaggeration, because its repetition, along with O’Brien’s theatrical renditions of herself as a writer destined to suffer for her art (1984: 39; 1989: 59; 1992: 48), draws added attention to it. Hysteria also tends to take a commonplace kind of feminine behaviour to extremes, manifesting an exorbitance of appetite (Evans 1991: 125; Lacan 1993: 178; Soler 1996; Bronfen 1998).<sup>3</sup> This stereotype might, like the nationalist typifications Deane observes in an earlier period of Irish fiction, “be exaggerated to the point where the paradigm itself”—in this case it would be woman lost for love, longing after man, but also mother Ireland, hungry for redress—“began to break down” (1995: 157). “The exaggeration of petrification,” after all, is the mode of hysteria. O’Brien’s conflation of the hysterical and nationalist models of identity, the one locked in combat with the mother, the other with the land, suggests the common cause of female subjectivity and the Irish nation. Both are bound to a mother figure who, in O’Brien’s stories, has been disabled, by the very parameters of representation, from offering hope to her daughters within its terms.

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<sup>3</sup> Anorexia nervosa, for instance, is for Lacanians a hysterical disorder in so far as the injunction on women to control their appetites—both oral and sexual—is taken literally, producing the impossible to sustain combination of a subject surviving on the lack which feeds its own desire (Shepherdson 2000: 192-4).

Yet while O'Brien's heroines are hysterical in taking to extremes the requirement that women be emotionally susceptible to consumption by love, and while she is not content to idealise this state, a bedrock is certainly reached such that change does not eventuate. Deane suggests that the repetition of type eventually alters the paradigm through which Ireland (or woman), is seen, but first the repetition must be noted. Psychoanalysis calls this effect that of the symptom, the way we choose "something [. . .] instead of nothing" (Žižek 1989: 75; 1992: 325), the cast into which we pour the substantial meanings of our lives.<sup>4</sup> The risk is that the cast then sets and becomes binding, which is why the symptom is also read as a demand for enlivening interpretation from another—the analyst, or reader—a demand to observe its repetitions and to wonder, too, what lost love objects might be buried or signalled, as yet unmourned, beneath the symptom's whine.

It is not clear whether O'Brien's unhappy heroines find dissatisfaction because of an addiction to the pleasures of their own private theatres of memory, a failure to exchange maternal conversation for other, socially viable kinds, or whether memory is a refuge from the travails of love and the difficulties of understanding between the sexes. In O'Brien's fiction hysteria as feminine excess—whether of desire, of loving, of maternal dedication or dissatisfaction—problematizes distinctions between before and after, then and now, making clear causes difficult to identify. Perhaps all that we can say with certainty of her protagonists is that they consistently raise the problem of origins that seem unable to be symbolised. The female speaker in "How to Grow a Wisteria" (in *The Love Object*) is aware she has chosen "a man who insisted on exile" because he is "someone she would never really know" (1968c, 93). Yet the memories which assail her, and which come between herself and her lover, eventually develop into a fear of radical uncontainment, so that her unconscious attempt to forestall the question of her own desire by choosing dissatisfaction has the opposite effect. She sees "herself spilling her way across rooms, dance floors, countries, continents" (1968c: 98).

The daughter in "A Rose in the Heart," by contrast, can only mime genuine feelings. Yet her grief is also grief for a life that never got started. Catching up with the funeral procession to the house of her dead mother:

She cried the whole way through the lakeside town and sobbed as they crossed the old bridge towards the lovely dark leafy country road that led towards home. She cried like a homing bird. She was therefore seen as a daughter deeply distressed when she walked past the file of mourners outside the chapel gate, and when she shook the hand or touched the sleeves of those who had come forward to meet her [. . .]. She thought, they think it is grief but it is not the grief they think it is. It is emptiness more than grief [. . .]. It is not a false grief but it is unyielding, it is blood from a stone. (1979a: 174)

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<sup>4</sup> Keira O'Hara makes the same claim regarding the character Mary in the story "Irish Revel," who also chooses "a prop against the void." Like Mary, Martha "chooses a painful something over a more painful nothing" (1993: 319).

The “lovely dark leafy country road” is a fantasy of coming home to Ireland, an Ireland that, in this story, is haunted, unconcealed by a tourist board facade. We are alerted to suffering’s harsh, recalcitrant cause, a cause that is hidden by the appearance of grief (“she was therefore seen as a daughter deeply distressed”), but which is also beyond, lost outside of, the healing effects of time. The protagonists of both stories (“A Rose . . .” and “How to Grow . . .”) are afflicted by emptiness, nothingness, but a nothingness that violently assails, that marks the spot of a death that cannot be properly grieved because the suffering has not yet been incorporated, buried, returned to earth. They are lovers and places defined by war.

The speaker at the end of “Forgetting” is possessed by an “indescribable melancholy” at once “sorrowful and nourishing,” which is at the same time a harbinger of death. Yet, this speaker is committed to it:

It was not that she wanted to eschew fate, it was simply that she wanted to be the container of it and of all that must yet happen to her. She saw [her lover] as she had once seen him in a green cloak, which he wore to please her, and being slightly unaccustomed to it, his cigarette was held a little awkwardly, and the memory of the floods of future memory that were yet to be, stabbed her and she began to cry . . . She would never forget him, she did not want to forget him, he could be part of her, and this invisible presence would be inside her like a watch, ticking and hidden, a source of faithful, imperishable energy. (1979b: 195)

At the close of “The Love Object” it is the reader, or listener, who is addressed, and who is enjoined to wonder:

I suppose you wonder why I torment myself with details of [my lover’s] presence but I need it, I cannot let go of him now, because if I did, all our happiness and my subsequent pain—I cannot vouch for his—will all have been for nothing, and nothing is a dreadful thing to hold on to. (1968b: 46)

These hopeless lines are, nonetheless, also a perfect rendition of the symptomatology of love. For, although we prefer to imagine love as a situation in which two people share a common experience, a common fantasy, love is more often driven by an exchange of desires in which, because each lover extends to the other a desire for that which is as yet unformed—a shared future, different from the past—nothing substantial is being exchanged, necessarily. Of course, substantiality does accrue to lovers as a result of the desiring process. But, like the circuits of repetition Deane identifies as constituting the myths of nations, it does so as a result of attempts to stabilise and simplify desire by housing its repeated circuits within recognisable fantasy frames—houses and marriages, or, in O’Brien’s protagonists’ case, obsessive memories. That O’Brien’s heroines admit their attachment to “almost nothing”—or nothing itself in the case of the protagonist of “A Rose in the Heart”—indicates that on some level they are aware of the damaging

effects of the circuits of the human drives, and the deadly appeal they may hold for feminine subjects.

Our unconscious drives, the repetitious cycles of which can seem to assuage the terror of there being no limit to our sexual desires, also bind us to historical patterns. In this way they revisit, although they seldom resolve, questions about our—national or maternal—origins. While O'Brien's vexed, halted heroines convey the fact that love is an experience in excess of itself, they are unable to go further and use that recognition to forge a new paradigm. Politically, we might wonder whether this is due to the way in which Ireland's origins are vexed by varieties of maternal myth intersecting with, but seldom nourishing or enabling symbolisation for each other. O'Brien's women remark repetition and indicate that they know something about its historical causes. Yet O'Brien's readers may note that these women also seem to prefer the unconscious consistency of repeated suffering over an admission that it is nothing but shared uncertainty that ignites desire.

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