CHAPTER SIX

“A nice Catholic girl ruined by a dirty foreigner”

Foreign and Domestic Censorship in Edna O’Brien’s The Country Girls Trilogy

Dan O’Brien

The early novels of Edna O’Brien have often been depicted as passive victims of the Irish Censorship Board, banned for their sexuality and not their politics. This chapter will argue that these texts actively criticize government censorship through delineating the culture of silence in Irish society that undergirded it. It will further consider how O’Brien’s work tackles censorship not only in its Irish state-backed guise, but also in a variety of its more transnational manifestations: the ‘Red Scare’ in America, Hollywood’s Hays Code, and the self-censorship of the publishing industry. The presence of a ‘Jewish’ character in O’Brien’s trilogy – who occupies a liminal space between Ireland and the outside world – will be used as a vector through which to probe her condemnation of both Irish and international censorship. To help elucidate the scope of this wide-ranging attack, O’Brien’s fiction will be set in dialogue with contemporary Jewish-American texts she was reading at the time she wrote the trilogy.

The Country Girls trilogy – The Country Girls (1960), The Lonely Girl (1962), Girls in their Married Bliss (1964) – forms an extended bildungsroman that follows two Irish girls, Baba Brennan and Caithleen Brady, as they grow up in 1940s and ’50s Ireland, moving from their rural village and Catholic convent school to Dublin and finally London. The trilogy forms a social satire on the malignant
influence of the Catholic Church and the economic and social failures of the Irish state. Despite this, O’Brien has often been accused of ignoring political and historical themes in favour of a narrow focus on female sexuality. Such strictures presume that these themes are mutually exclusive, ignoring the fact that sex was highly politicized in mid-century Ireland and that, in Heather Ingram’s words, O’Brien’s writing sets out to “challenge her nation’s particular brand of gendered nationalism.” The Irish authorities used the control of sex to keep the Irish both religiously and racially ‘pure’; any outside influence was treated with extreme suspicion. O’Brien’s fiction rejects this cultural autarky, drawing attention to both the external world and the many marginalized identities within the nation that contradicted the fantasy of a homogeneous Gaelic utopia disseminated by Eamonn De Valera, who ran the country for the vast majority of the 1932–59 period and remained an overwhelmingly conservative influence up until and beyond his death in 1975. At a 1966 Limerick lecture debating censorship, O’Brien was asked by a female member of the audience, “Why do you live and write in England? Isn’t there enough experience here? Is it because we are a Christian society?” The idea that the Irish nation was a shining beacon of Catholic faith on a planet succumbing to materialism, Communism, and perversion was a commonly held and officially enforced perception in Ireland at this time. Obscenity, indecency, and immorality swarmed around the island, ready to seep in from the godless nether regions of England and Europe. In the eyes of her devout opponents, O’Brien, domiciled in England, was not only susceptible to but, worse, a purveyor of pernicious foreign sexuality.

In conjunction with attacks on her supposed lack of political awareness, O’Brien continues to face disparagement for an over-reliance on autobiography. An early and representative example appears in Terence De Vere White’s review of The Lonely Girl:

> What I fear is that Miss O’Brien (vide her failure to bring her heroes to life) is drawing for material like a spider from her own inside. Her writing is egocentric.³

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