CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Killing the bats: O'Brien, abjection, and the question of agency
Authors	Coughlan, Patricia
Publication date	2006-04-01
Original Citation	Coughlan, P. (2006) 'Killing the Bats: O'Brien, Abjection, and the Question of Agency', in Laing, K., Mooney, S. and O'Connor, M. (eds)., Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives, Dublin: Carysfort Press, pp. 171-195. isbn: 978-1788749589
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	http://carysfortpress.com/theatre-2/edna-obrien-new-critical-perspectives/
Rights	© 2006 Copyright remains with the authors
Download date	2026-11-02 00:54:52
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14832



UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Edna O'Brien: *New Critical Perspectives.* Ed. Kathryn Laing, Sinéad Mooney, and Maureen O'Connor. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006. 171-195.

Killing the Bats: O'Brien, Abjection, and the Question of Agency

Patricia Coughlan

The *OED* defines the noun "abjection" as follows:

1. The act of casting down; abasement, humiliation, degradation. *Obs.*
2. The condition of casting down… downcastness, abjectness, low estate.
3. The action of casting off or away; rejection.
4. That which is cast off or away; refuse, scum, dregs. Usually *fig.* of persons.

and the past participle "abject" with the sense 1. of "cast off, cast out, rejected. *Obs.*", and the sense 3. of "down in spirit or hope; low in regard or estimation, degraded, mean-spirited, despicable". It illustrates the obsolete noun "abjectedness", defined as "downcast condition; abasement; abject state or condition" with a 1660 citation from Robert Boyle's *Seraphic Love*: "[Christ] from the height of Glory… sunk Himself to the bottom of Abjectedness, to exalt our condition to the contrary extreme" (69).

My title refers to the following episode in O'Brien's trilogy, which takes place after Kate Brady has been forcibly brought home from Dublin to her father's tumbledown farmhouse. It is well after the death of her mother:

> …I swept the seven lonely, empty bedrooms because bat droppings dotted the floors.
>
> "There's two bats upstairs", I said to my father, merely making conversation.
>
> "Where?" He jumped out of bed and went upstairs in his long underpants, grabbing the sweeping brush on the way. He routed them out of their brown winter sleep and killed them.
>
> "Bloody nuisances", he said, and my aunt swept them onto a piece of cardboard and burned them downstairs in the stove. She said that we must do something about the rooms. The walls were all damp and mildew had settled on some parts of the wallpaper. But we just closed the doors and hurried down to the kitchen, where it was warm".[1]

I think this scene is an allusion to a well-known passage in Chapter 5 of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man:*

> And yet he felt that, however he might revile and mock her image, his anger was also a form of homage. He had left the classroom in disdain that was not wholly sincere, feeling that perhaps the secret of her race lay behind those dark eyes

[1] Edna O'Brien, *The Country Girls Trilogy*. London: Penguin, 1988, 278. Subsequent references will be abbreviated as *CGT*.

> upon which her long lashes flung a quick shadow. He had told himself bitterly as he walked through the streets that she was a figure of the womanhood of her country, a batlike soul waking to the consciousness of itself in darkness and secrecy and loneliness, tarrying awhile, loveless and sinless, with her mild lover and leaving him to whisper of innocent transgressions in the latticed ear of a priest.[2]

In O'Brien's bat scene, Kate's father kills the bats without compunction, getting out of bed to do so: one might say that they are abject*ed*. They have not disturbed Kate, she has not minded them, but *he* feels a compulsion to destroy them, despite (or because of?) the dilapidated and indeed abject state of his whole life. In the real world bats come into a house only if it is uninhabited; in this case they have done so because it is no longer properly maintained within the social order but forsaken, becoming empty. One way to read the allusion is to say that their killing indicates, via the Joyce allusion, that there will be no "waking to the consciousness of herself" by Kate (often called "Cait", short for "Caithleen") as long as she remains at home in her father's house, where her potential awakening is blocked and the otherness of her independent being cannot be accommodated. O'Brien deploys Joyce's image, but also goes beyond it: the notorious blindness of bats is emblem, in his narrator's mind, of women's *embodying* "the secret of her race", but also of her incapacity to *know* that "secret" as even the brashly overconfident Stephen Dedalus will come to know it. O'Brien also plays subliminally, as she does throughout the trilogy, with the intermittent suggestion that we can see Kate Brady as a figure for the nation.

I propose that the discussion of the abject affords an extraordinarily fertile medium in which to grow, so to speak, experimentally, some interpretative cultures in relation to O'Brien's life's work.[3] The abject is not a neat category: it can be represented by material objects, or by the process of abject*ing,* as an act or a series of acts, by the encounter with that which has been (perhaps incompletely) abject*ed*, and finally by the experience of abject*ion*, whether as a conscious psychological state or as a phenomenon relegated to the

[2] James Joyce*, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. 1916. London: xx, xx.
[3] Despite the currency of the notion of abjection in the fields of literary and feminist theory, there has been surprisingly little exploration of this as an interpretative strategy within O'Brien criticism. But see Kitti Carriker's pioneering "Edna O'Brien's 'The Doll': A Narrative of Abjection", *Notes on Modern Irish Literature* 1, 1989: 6-13, which deals with one 1979 story, and Lorna Rooks-Hughes, "The Family and the Female Body in the Novels of Edna O'Brien and Julia O'Faolain", *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 22, 2, 1996: 83-97.

unconscious since infancy. This latter sense invokes Julia Kristeva's theorization of the concept in 1980, which has initiated an extensive body of writing and which I draw on.[4]

From my own first readings of O'Brien, when she was banned and therefore already an object of danger and excitement before one opened the books, I have always been struck by the extraordinarily frequent mentions of bodily scenes and of items eliciting disgust. In those days, of course, the transgressiveness of her work was deemed above all to reside in its alleged obsession with sex, but in fact the number of specifically sexual scenes in, for example, *The Country Girls* or *The Lonely Girl* is not large, and the content of these scenes is not really calculated to inflame the passions, being the very reverse of romantic; I have no doubt that many of my coevals must have read her with disappointment. These texts, and much of her later work, especially when it uses Irish settings (as for example the remarkable 1982 collection *Returning*), instead of offering titillation, dwell rather on a constellation of scenes, topics and physical facts which are emotionally distressing. In this essay I shall not focus primarily on the sex as such (what there is of it). My subject is the building-blocks and small-scale constituents of many fictional scenes, items and motifs which are either unmentionable in polite society, or which it was in the 1960s *felt to be* disgusting (the largest category), or indelicate, or a breach of respectability to describe, or advert to at all, let alone by a young woman writing. Let us list them: mud, dust, grease, urine and faeces (human and animal), the penis and testicles unclothed (*CGT* 164 & 319), a stillborn calf hanging dead from its mother, afterbirths human and animal (*CGT* 322), the difficult delivery of a mare in foal; the exact bodily signs of a sexually transmitted infection: "She smelt it…the dark mesh of hair had a blight… a nest of sobs now with ugly yellowing tears…" (*AWM* 148); a village street ankle-deep in cowdung after a fair and a pub floor flowing with porter from an opened tap ("Irish Revel" '62); a can of milk offered a young girl for drinking but visibly filmed with dust (*CGT* 93), young woman planning to apply veterinary ointment made for cows' udders to make her breasts grow (*TCG 99-100)* an adult who wets his bed (*CGT* 168), the Holyhead boat pulling away from Dún Laoghaire pier described as "like a hundred lavatories flushing" (the boat is called the *Hibernia*; *CGT* 374); the live-in workman "making his water" in a tin and throwing the contents out the window onto the cement outside, which is rendered "green and slippery" (*CGT* 4, 8) the heroine's mother getting off her bicycle to "do a pooley", unconcealed, on a country road (*CGT*

[4] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*. 1980. Tr. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, *PH* in subsequent references.

477); the same character's half-hearted washing of *one* hand after urinating in a strange house or a hotel, while "at home she just held her legs apart over the sewerage outside the back door, where they also strained potatoes and calf meal" (*CGT* 477); the convent episode which involves the unwitting barring by one schoolgirl of the nuns' entry to their private toilet, and her friend's deliberate obscenity to get them expelled, which begins (and the beginning is all we hear): "Father John put his long thing…" (*CGT* 103-5). As O'Brien readers will know, I could easily multiply these instances by a hundred.[5]

In a word, O'Brien deliberately flouts the laws of respectability both by the sheer extent and by the character of her fictional attention, not just to the exact description of bodies (once again, animal and human), but, rather more, to that which is filthy, disgusting, repulsive. It is as if, in the very texture of her prose, she implacably refuses prettified, decorous surfaces in the social world, and insists upon the actuality of filth and the inextricable constancy of human dwelling with, within, around and about it. At the end of the "pooley" episode I've mentioned (in which a male cyclist comically arrives on the scene just in time to witness the exposure and the event itself), the scene concludes with the following summary:

> Ah, childhood, Kate thought; the rain, the grass, the lake of pee over the loose stones, the palm of her hand green from a sweating penny that the Protestant woman had given her. Childhood, when one was at the mercy of everything but did not know it. (*CGT* 478-9)

Evidently the discourse of nature, and, by extension, visibly throughout O'Brien's work, the received image of nature in the West of Ireland (the tourist motifs of wistful, lonely beauty and aesthetically agreeable wildness, here rudimentarily represented by "the rain, the grass"), these are being sharply subverted by the insistence upon physical grubbiness and disorder, earthy bodiliness, and impoverishment emotional and financial.[6] And the whole is placed in childhood, whose disempowered and ignorant state is expressly noted. Such ideological subversion is certainly one motivation for the proliferation of "pee" and other waste products, but I shall argue that it is not necessarily their primary or only interest in these texts. Furthermore, the abject and abjection, if we may so name such

[5] The mare's delivery is in *Down by the River*, London: Phoenix,: 1996, 69-70 (henceforth *DBTR*); the genital infection in *August Is a Wicked Month.* 1965. London: Penguin, 1987, 148 (henceforth *AWM*).
[6] See also *CGT* 494, when Kate, asked at a London party where she is from, thinks of a landscape wholly turned towards death, abject: "Ireland, she said. The west of Ireland. But did not give any echo of the *swamp* fields, the dun *treeless* bogs, the *dead deserted* miles of country with a gray *ruin* on the horizon: the places from which she derived her sense of *doom*" [emphasis added].

passages, continue to make their appearance as structuring elements on the level of narrative imagery in later fictions, not all of them set in Ireland, though I shall not develop this here.

To explain the uses of abjection theory in understanding O'Brien's vision, it is necessary to consider the specific character of Kristeva's thinking. The general currency of the terms "abject" and "abjected" is often only a rather vague rehearsal of her fundamental and remarkable argument. One of her main innovations in psychoanalytic theory is her positing that we constitute our subjectivity and enter the symbolic order, a patriarchal domain, by disavowing the lived body, and with it the maternal, as abject. This process of abjection, as she defines it, marks a stage in the pre-Oedipal development of the subject. These exclusions form the basis of Oedipal subjecthood and of Cartesian duality, splitting or polarizing mind from body, meaning from being, and subject from object. It is a sacrificial logic that nevertheless lays the foundation for identity (as conventionally understood).[7] Kristeva used classical psychoanalytic theory as her point of departure in developing her abjection theory: I would argue, however, that while apparently working within this quintessentially patriarchal model, she silently turns it against itself, ultimately offering a deeply ironic and dissenting interpretation of the constitution of the self within gendered structures, an interpretation very different from the principal, patriarchal account of culture in Freud, Lacan, and the founding ideology of Catholic Ireland.

I shall focus on those aspects of the theory which are most relevant to the interpretation of O'Brien. Recent feminist thought has pointedly and rightly rejected the Cartesian and subsequent Freudian impasses which deliver an atomised selfhood, seen as destructively severed from the body, the other, and the world; feminist theorists have proposed far more productive alternative narratives of subjectivity. [8] But O'Brien's pervasive melancholy answers much better to the old, constitutively misogynist structures, which had after all formed the social order she so sceptically appraised, in the Ireland of the

[7]In what follows, apart from Kristeva's own writings I have drawn on discussions of the conceptual field of abjection by Mary Jacobus, *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Psychoanalysis, Art and Literature*, London: Routledge, 1995; Kelly Oliver, *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, especially 225-7, Tina Chanter, "Viewing Abjection: Film and Social Justice", http://www.orlando.women.it/cyberarchive/files/chanter.htm, accessed 15 April 2005, and Karen Coats, "Abjection and Adolescent Fiction", *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 5, 2 1999: 290-300.
[8] See for instance Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics*. London: Routledge, 1997; Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. New York: Pantheon, 1988.

four middle decades of the last century, and Kristeva's analysis of these structures is a singularly powerful one.

Kristeva argues that within the context of infant development, the constitution of the child's subjecthood depends upon its alienation from its lived, actual body, and the setting up of an imaginary anatomy. Those caring for an infant establish categories of waste, disgust, and repellence, as well as their opposites of prettiness, pleasure, and attractiveness or beauty, by means of their handling and management of the baby's bodily products and its contact with things in the world. Practically speaking, this is, of course, done in the service of hygiene and of basic socialization and acculturation, but its effects exceed these physical requirements. Kristeva observes how gender is central to these processes: caregivers have generally been female, and so these first experiences of objects which must be relinquished and thrown away – that is, abjected – are mediated by mother-figures. The mother herself is the child's first object. However, having given birth and fed the baby, she has an overwhelming physical presence and felt continuity with it; she therefore occupies a dual, and strongly paradoxical or contradictory, role. She is *both* the agent of culture who teaches the necessity of abjection and enacts it for the child and upon the products of its own body, *and* herself one of those physical objects (bodies) which must be abjected for the infant to establish its own subjectivity. As Kristeva puts it, "maternal authority is the trustee of th[e] mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (*PH* 72). But it is also true that *the mother herself* is primary among those things which must be abjected.

"Normal" development, in the classical psychoanalytic narrative, subsequently proceeds by, and depends on, intervention by a third: the father, who will breach the dyad between mother and infant and stand for the symbolic order of the culture outside that dyad. This is especially relevant to O'Brien's fictions, where the father-function tends, destructively, to be strong and weak at the same time: weak in empathy and protective love, strong in regulation, assertions of control, and the making of inappropriate emotional demands. Kristeva asserts that "the subject will always be marked by the uncertainty of its borders… and these are all the more determining as the paternal function is weak or even nonexistent…" (*PH* 59, 63) In the *ur*-narrative of infancy, the crucial role of the paternal presence is defined as enabling the child (by the father's power of prohibition against incest) to separate itself from the mother. The resulting formation of a superego -

site of guilt, inhibition, and law - must, or is supposed to, leave certain things outside.[9] According to the textbook account, the child's original longing for its mother's body must be relinquished in favour of the desire for a more acceptable other or object. This, however, is always imagined as more complete than its realization in actuality, and which is forever just beyond the person's grasp.[10] This totalised object of desire is represented successively by partial objects of demand, in what Lacan sees as a play of successive substitutions, like those of signification or meaning in the structuralist theory of language.[11] However, the process of psychological development is not a straightforward linear one, and it may – perhaps even must – always fall short of completion: Kristeva's stress on the porousness, the inefficiency, of the prescribed events is one of her most inspired insights. So the effecting of abjection in infancy is often incomplete, and the abject(ed) can surface intermittently in adult experience, where it is no longer subject to the laws of infantile amnesia, since pre-Oedipal experience is always unconsciously present to the subject.

Furthermore, the incapacity of an ego – a person's self – to perform abjection, and thus form objects according (as it were) to the prescription, may produce a desire (which we may label "regressive" and call "abject" in all senses) to *fuse with* the Other rather than to sustain a painful state of subjectivity and difference from the other: and in this case the Other of desire is wishfully – and, as so often in O'Brien's narratives, disastrously – projected as of one substance with the ego, that is, as maternal. Kristeva defines as "abjects" people who fail to form active, ego-based external objects of desire, and who persist as "the fascinated victims of abjection… if not its submissive and willing ones" (*PH* 9). Kate Brady and many or most other O'Brien heroines seem singularly well described as such psychologically abject characters, whose very being seems defined by a kind of global abjection, whose ultimate result is a destructive wish for self-abjection: such self-annihilating desires seem to define their very being.[12] They "refuse to or cannot sublimate the death drive, and hence are compelled to enact and re-enact it".[13]

---

[9] If the ego forms *o*bjects of desire, the superego forms *a*bjects ("To each ego its object, to each superego its abject" (*PH* 2).

[10] The original longing for the mother, if it has not been relinquished, is allegedly a nostalgic one, turned towards death (*PH* 112).

[11] See Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan* (London: Free Association Books, 1986), 121. In literature, this pattern of repeated deferral is characteristic both of Proust, who influenced O'Brien, and of her own fiction.

[12] Thus when Kate visits the psychiatrist she "resented telling about her marriage. It not only violated her sense of privacy, it left her empty. Life after all was a secret with the self. The more one gave out the less

The theory of abjection is not confined to the sphere of individual development; it also has strong social-structural implications. The division of objects into dirty and clean is always one laden with cultural significance, and the designation of parts of the physical body as more and less proper or improper inscribes cultural values on social bodies. In the 1930s Georges Bataille discussed the concept of abjection as a *physical* state to which the poor are consigned by those in power. He remarked that where, for example, infants are contaminated by snot and infested by lice, this is the result of neglect and destitution rather than some innate quality, as class prejudice might tacitly imply. He also, however, showed a dialectical insight into the psycho-social function of the assignment of the status of filthiness to some, when he described it as a phenomenon of social apotropaism (meaning a gesture of aversion, setting up a boundary between people and/or classes). I abject you to confirm my own subject-ness. Thus privileged groups in society use their power to draw boundaries between themselves and others coded as unclean.[14] Kristeva argues that at the still more general level where cultures construct and maintain their ideological and symbolic systems, such differences are also elaborated to set up boundaries of community and nation.[15] The working of this process is very clear in the zealous policing of Catholic, familist and nationalist ideology in that Ireland of the 1930s and '40s which saw Edna O'Brien's formation in childhood and adolescence.[16]
Abjection is something that "disturbs identity, system, order". Yet what is abjected we do not cause simply to go away; the abject person or group "operate[s] at the social rim" (*PH* 4, 65). Indeed, as Bataille argued dialectically, the presence of the abject is required by ideology, paradoxically to sustain by its very exclusion the constructs of the symbolic order. Yet the fragility of these constructs is keenly felt, and they are haunted by their abjected others. This fundamentally paradoxical character of the abject is inherent in Kristeva's theory. She thematizes the *operation* of abjection as foundational to the

---

there remained for the centre – that centre which she coveted for herself and recognized instantly in others." (*CGT* 475) One can only covet what one does not possess: Kate in her desolation has abjected her own subjectivity.

[13] Coats, 298.

[14] Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes II: Écrits posthumes 1922-1940* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 219 ; Kristeva *PH* 64.

[15] See Coats, 2-3. Freud famously argued in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1931) that civilization is founded on such exclusions. In Kristeva's view "identities, communities, and nations" are "permanently brittle" constructs because they are "built on abjection, which haunts their borders" (*PH* 13, and see Oliver 225-6).

[16] While discussing film, Tina Chanter might almost be describing O'Brien's writing when she writes that "[f]rom beneath the unbroken surface of skilful verbalization the outburst of abjection… calls for interpretation" ("Viewing Abjection: Film and Social Justice", http://www.orlando.women.it/cyberarchive/files/chanter.htm. Accessed 15 April 2005.

sustaining of both self and society, while the *condition* to be abject tends to subvert both. When art theorist Hal Foster asks whether the abject is "disruptive of subjective and social orders [and] a crisis in them", or "foundational [and] a confirmation of them", the answer must be "both".[17]

It is central to my argument that O'Brien's work can be productively understood in both these ways, in its relation to Irish ideologies from the 1960s to the 1990s. On the one hand, it confirms the existence, and plays out the specific operations, of Irish social exclusions and prohibitions: those of personal freedoms including that of religious *dis*belief, women's social and sexual agency, sexuality as pleasure and play, for instance. On the other hand, it simultaneously disrupts and subverts them in the very act of representing them. A study, in Irish media archives, of the way Edna O'Brien was herself received – attacked, critiqued yet simultaneously displayed as flagrant – in the Ireland of the later 1960s would show how she fulfilled this dual role as a transgressive public figure, herself the object of abjection, placed "at the social rim" of a culture she was still felt to "haunt".

Another important aspect of Kristeva's theory is that, while one must perform necessary acts of abjection to constitute oneself, in infancy (and indeed in a continuing way in adult life, to sustain oneself in being), and those acts of abject*ing* and the process, mood and condition of abject*ion* are painful, disorientating crises, yet on occasion and in certain contexts, by virtue of their very power to destabilize, they are potentially sublime and/or aesthetically inspiring. Kristeva quotes a remark by Proust (a writer with marked similarities of theme to O'Brien) that "if the *o*bject of desire is real, it can only rest upon the *a*bject, which is impossible to fulfil" (my emphasis; *PH* 21). An important aspect of the theory of abjection is precisely the role Kristeva believes it plays in artistic production. Drawing on the essentially paradoxical character of the abject, she sees it as capable of expression and representation in aesthetic work, where the dark, negative energies responsible for abjection can be transmuted by aesthetic form into poetic language, image, or dance, which can articulate affects beyond the codes of the symbolic. She argues that "[t]he artistic experience is rooted in the abject [which] it utters and by

[17] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (New York: October Books, 1996), 156. Here I also draw on A. Smith, "Kristeva, Sherman, Butler and the Abject". www.http://english.cla.umn.edu/alumni/asmith/Sherm4.htm. Accessed 30 March 2005.

the same token purifies" (*PH* 243). This is another formulation strikingly applicable to the aesthetic effects of O'Brien's dark fictions, so often denied the status of "real" literature in mainstream, especially Irish, criticism: a neglect more than careless or accidental, but perhaps occasioned by an anxiety to distance their capacity to embarrass by instantiating so many awkward little dirty moments, while simultaneously refusing and almost dreamily marginalising the big, prescribed themes of nation and more or less oedipal identity. During the 1990s Rosalind Krauss and others further theorized the aesthetic abject within art criticism, though following Bataille somewhat more than Kristeva, as "a kind of feminine sublime, albeit composed of the infinite unspeakableness of bodily disgust: of blood, of excreta, of mucous membranes". Commenting in particular on Cindy Sherman's work, Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois observes that within this theorization of art, "the abject is ultimately cast… as multiple forms of the wound. Because, whether or not the feminine subject is actually at stake in a given work, it is the character of being wounded, victimized, traumatized, marginalized, that is seen as what is at play within this domain".[18]

What of the view that Kristeva's theory of abjection is itself misogynist, and not just the patriarchal acculturation process she traces? At this level, too, there is a clear analogy with O'Brien, whose work has also sometimes been rejected by feminists.[19] Considering Kristeva first, if we think of the mother as the first abject, does this perpetuate that classic patriarchal binary according to which the (normatively masculine) subject must wrest his individual being from a threatening, engulfing maternal figure, and the mother's constitutive fate is to be abjected, discarded and left behind as waste product, in order for that subject to attain his selfhood? Would this merely recapitulate the pathologies of patriarchy? Some feminists, soon after *Powers of Horror* appeared, did specifically challenge Kristeva's vision as perpetuating the archaic mother in positing the notion of a struggle for subjectivity against the maternal figure. Some see her as sustaining the pervasive misogyny of the psychoanalytic fathers by seeming to accept the designation of femaleness as that which must itself be abjected in order for subjectivity, and therefore

[18] Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E.W. Krauss, "The Destiny of the *Informe*", in *Formless: A User's Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1997. 238. This discussion makes an illuminating distinction between abject and *informe*.
[19] Chanter's remark that Kristeva "does not have uncomplicated liberatory potential" might be applied to O'Brien also.

culture, to develop.[20] Subsequently, however, Mary Jacobus and others have convincingly rebutted such views, showing that Kristeva's subordinating of the castration complex in favour of a prior engagement with the maternal is a decisive displacement of the phallic.[21] Besides, it is naïve not to distinguish between *describing* and *endorsing* the widespread attribution in cultures of "abject or demoniacal power" to the feminine, and the "exclusory prohibition" therefore applied to women *in patriarchy* (*PH* 64). Kristeva does describe, and indeed goes further to anatomize this attribution, but does not endorse it or the system which depends upon it. Moreover, as I have said, a key insight in her vision is the incompleteness of the abjection process and the repeated re-emergence of the maternal, the abject, the feminine, of all that is supposed to have been excluded by the formation of subjectivity. I see Kristeva, therefore, not as the *advocate* of abjection, but as its searching and eloquent *analyst*: it is pointless to shoot the messenger. And likewise in O'Brien's case, she does not *celebrate* the abjection of the maternal and of Ireland in her work: she rather chronicles, agonizes, and mourns over it. There is a parallel in the work of Jean Rhys, another eloquent writer of abjection, in whose work it is beside the point to seek healthy female role-models and upbeat endings. Rhys' achievement and her triumphant demonstration of feminine agency, like O'Brien's, are to be found in the aesthetic brilliance and emotional penetration *of the writings themselves* as articulations of abjection.

I have argued from the outset that we should resist a reductionist approach to the presence of abject items in O'Brien: I believe they are not accounted for by a notion of realist transcription (such an argument might run: "ah sure, in County Clare in the 1930s they weren't too bothered about keeping clean"). A literalist reception of her fictions by, say, a reader of *The New Yorker* (where a very large number of the short stories first appeared) might, then, have decoded such motifs simply as evidence of poverty and deprivation. This would obviously be a serious over-simplification amounting to a misinterpretation, and another element of Kristeva's conception is actively helpful in escaping such reductionist readings and indeed in suggesting a further dimension in the interpretation of O'Brien. Kristeva drew significantly on a prior classic of anthropology, Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, written during the same years as O'Brien's trilogy,

[20] See Jennifer Stone, "The Horrors of Power: A Critique of Kristeva". Francis Barker *et al.*, eds. *The Politics of Theory*. Colchester: University of Essex, 1983. 38-48.
[21] Mary Jacobus argues that "abjection shifts the emphasis from an oedipalized matriphobia associated with castration anxiety toward the earliest processes of subject formation" (*First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995. 99).

which analyses the vital cultural role of notions of pollution.[22] Douglas observes that ritual defilement and taboo are not opposites, but an indispensable part, of the sacred, considered as a (mental, symbolic) realm. The notion of defilement operates especially in religious contexts, which are – or were – at the core of cultures, and cannot be adequately or appropriately accounted for on the merely practical level, by what she calls "medical materialism" (i.e. the coincidence of certain food taboos or cleansing rituals with modern ideas and practices concerning hygiene or disinfection). Douglas argues that "we would expect the most materialistic-seeming cults to stage at some central point in the ritual cycle a cult of the paradox of the ultimate unity of life and death. At such a point pollution of death, treated in a positive creative role, can help to close the metaphysical gap" (176); she also describes how "[t]he central act in the ritual of mourning [among a Lake Nyasa people] is actively to welcome filth. They sweep rubbish onto the mourners" (177). That which is tagged as dirty is thus used structurally to elaborate and sustain a culture's own sense of order. Douglas' work marked a milestone in understanding the great significance, on the level of cultural symbolization, of dirt and waste matter. Like Kristeva's own emphasis on unconscious anxieties and half-repressed desires, this adds another suggestive layer to our possible interpretations. It is especially suggestive in its possible reconnection of the maternal, via the ineluctable bodily, with the larger realm of the sacred, rather than assigning it the negative, daemonic position demanded by its disavowal. The role of the maternal is vital in O'Brien, and it by no means retains a merely or simply abject character, as we shall see.

The complexity of abjection theory in its possible applications to these fictions exceeds the cruder kind of explanations from ideology (though it does not, of course, displace ideological critique in O'Brien). By "explanations from ideology", I mean the constellation of ideas to do with her evident intention to debunk the mystique of Ireland by representing women's experience from women's viewpoint, her pointed and satiric resistance to the Irish iconic feminine – Virgin Mother, Mother Ireland, Cathleen Ni Houlihan – and accompanying constructions of Irish womanhood, whether in the ideology of 1930s, '40s and '50s Ireland itself, or in its external or quasi-external stereotyping by others.[23] Furthermore, the continuing work of constructing specifically

[22] *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966. It may be significant that Douglas' own world-view, like O'Brien's, was formed within Catholicism. I thank Éamonn Ó Carragáin for this observation.

[23] See the following passages, either associating or identifying Kate metonymically with Ireland: "I could hear the bulrushes sighing when he said my name that way, and I could hear the curlew too, and all the

feminist understandings of the writings has now well advanced beyond its initial stages, and as the present volume shows, is becoming sufficiently subtle and complex to get beyond the biographical author's own disavowals of a feminist position.

One other way comes to mind of accounting in part for the prevalence of dirt, mud, urine, etc., in the texts. This is the hypothesis of a Joycean influence, which I invoked at the outset in the specific instance of the bat motif. Both writers show an especial tendency challengingly to name what used to be called the "lower" bodily functions: sex, defecation, menstruation, and so forth. But upon closer analysis, it emerges that O'Brien's litanies of such items are quite different from Joyce's: there is far more disgust and far less celebration of appetite, gratification, or pleasure. The *a*ffect differs markedly. In Joyce's case his flagrant fetishizing of female bodily effluents and his closely related coprophilia are both evidently important aspects of his individual erotic life (shown in his letters to Nora Barnacle, as well as in the fiction itself). While both writers exhibit a degree of masochism in terms of erotic mood (O'Brien) or stimulus (Joyce), gender polarities sharply differentiate both their erotic expression, and their representations of the nature of human attachment in general.

In place of Joyce's maternal-erotic, the erotical construction of the Other in O'Brien's writing is the figure of the chill, superior, older male figure who is represented in language suggesting a sacred or even godlike being: angelic, pale, cool, ascetic, and distant. The structure is that of romance (Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester, and their later avatars Rebecca and Max de Winter, for instance).[24] ("[His] (Mr Gentleman's) face had that strange holy-picture quality that made me think of moonlight…" (*CGT* 261); "I used to think he was God" (*CGT* 262); "always the same remote, enchanting smile"; "that look of his which was half sexual, half mystic" (both *CGT* 163); Eugene "reminded me of a saint's face carved out of grey stone which I saw in the church every Sunday" (*CGT* 185). A rich and powerful lover in a later story also has a "graven" face.[25] A scene in "The Love Object" intriguingly merges the abject – a lover's semen on the woman's

---

lonesome sounds of Ireland." (*CGT* 163); "Ireland, she said. The west of Ireland. But did not give any echo of the swamp fields, the dun treeless bogs, the dead deserted miles of country with a gray ruin on the horizon: the places from which she derived her sense of doom" (*CGT* 494).

[24] Romance's near relative, Victorian melodrama, figures at story level in the trilogy, where Kate and Baba are attending the performance of a classic example, *East Lynne,* when Kate is called out to be told of her mother's death (*CGT* 39).

[25] There is also "…the priest with the soft eyes and the austere, Christ-like, disciplined hands" (*AWM* 72), and the heroine herself reflects how she desires "being with a certain kind of man that controlled and bewitched her" (*AWM* 81).

body: "I'll have to wash… her stomach, smeared as it was" – with food and a displaced masochistic allusion: "She was thinking of egg white in its various stages of being whipped" (*AFH* 89). O'Brien recurrently stages the sexual relationship of such an older, wealthier, dominant male character with a young, uncertain and emotionally abject female one (these disparities are often further encoded in terms of differences of class or of nationality, where the woman's rural Irishness is an important aspect of her subordinate status). The man's aesthetic disdain, claim to superior rationality and education (*CGT* 323), his sarcasm, and the woman's over-abundant physicality ("the literary fat girl" (*CGT* 184), "your fat bottom" (*CGT* 242)) and her untidiness and seeming lack of capacity for order, recapitulate the abasement of the needy lover, her emptiness and abjection, before the absolute fullness of the lofty beloved (who denigrates the heroine as "bred in Stone Age ignorance and religious savagery"; *CGT* 344-5). Such clear traces of masochistic affect appear in all the rehearsals of love-affairs: the lofty, super-rational, scornful and controlling – in a word, sadistic – character of all the love objects: the unreachable Godlike figures who supply, well to excess, the deficit of paternal authority in the original family of the typical O'Brien female protagonist. This is an inescapable structure. When, in "The Love Object", the lover "happened to say that he had *a slight trace* of masochism" (my emphasis: the elaborate casualness itself signals unease), the woman promptly reverses their roles (the phrase used) in love-making and asserts: "He was not my father. I became his mother" (*AFH* 152). In this story, whose title pointedly and sardonically invokes Freudian discourse, O'Brien is consciously playing with the psychoanalytic binaries. It is as if there were only two options, according to which a woman's male sexual partner must perform as either her father or her son, confirming Freud's melancholy observation that human love is out of phase, and also unsettlingly reinscribing the scene of adult sexuality as a mere replaying of childhood's gendered antinomies.

O'Brien's work recalls not just the Kristevan abject, but its distant part-ancestor, the syndrome of the Christian mystic, abasing her/himself before a God impossibly distant and frequently unresponsive: *Deus quia deus absconditus est*. In these writings the self-humbling devotee (whose gender can vary, a Juan de la Cruz or a Teresa) prostrates herself before the distant and unimaginably perfect God-figure who shows His love by making His servant suffer. Kristeva discusses such "borderline subjects" who, she says, provide propitious ground for a sublimating discourse, aesthetic or mystical rather than

scientific or rationalist (*PH* 5, 7, 207). At the start I cited Boyle's image of a self-abasing Christ who "from the height of Glory… sunk Himself to the bottom of Abjectedness, to exalt our condition to the contrary extreme" to serve as a reminder of the role of self-prostration in this intense mystical erotic.

In *The Country Girls*, Kate hears of her mother's death while attending the performance of a melodrama; taking up another strand in Kristeva's argument, I turn, finally, to the mother-daughter bond as represented in O'Brien's work. As is evident to all readers, the theme of mother-child relations is central to her vision, and this has an obvious relevance to the potential of abjection as an interpretative approach.[26] I approach the mother-daughter relationship in the texts' narration of it, as a willed intersubjective connection which is part of conscious emotional experience, not only as an impersonal tension of unconscious drives involving the infant's impulsion towards, or perhaps expulsion into, subjectivity. It is the most intense form of attachment which the texts focus on, far more deep, wrenching and occasionally ecstatic than specifically sexual woman-to-man connections. Sharply conflicted, it involves opposite imperatives: in one direction to escape, to form and free the separate self and disavow the maternal other, and in the other to remain attached, to resist at all costs the process of detachment from and relinquishing of the mother, and indeed to long for total (re)union with her. This longing is exceptionally strong in the universe of O'Brien's fictions, and I see it as an instance of that desire for fusion with the other, overriding the aim of individuation and precluding the allegedly appropriate abjection of the maternal, which Kristeva describes. Profound and fierce feeling attends this represented relationship: in text after text it is revisited in only slightly altered forms. In *The Country Girls*, first volume (as it was to become) of the trilogy, the mother as a character is physically abjected very early on, dying by drowning (a death many times invoked, sometimes narrowly escaped, by characters in O'Brien's fictions), but never really emotionally relinquished. In later texts, long and short, the mother is permitted to live on into the adulthood of the female protagonist and the business of abjecting her remains to be transacted painfully, sometimes bitterly, with resentment and remorse.

[26] One, the more extensive and in general the earlier preoccupation, is the mother-daughter relationship, which is closely bound up with O'Brien's representation of Irish identity and being; in this discussion I focus more on this than on the other, mother-son bond.

This key and originary instance of self-other attachment is a whole wider topic in itself, with implications for O'Brien's representations of Irishness; I consider it here only from the specific perspective of abjection, though with the potential quality of profound meaning which the Kristeva-Douglas theories seek to explore. To use Freud's terms, this is not object-love but identificatory attachment. Indeed, the attachment represented in several of the texts seems almost literally identification, a fusing with or felt return to the one (mother's) body. "A Rose in the Heart of New York" (1978) is an especially clear example:

> Her mother's knuckles were her knuckles, her mother's veins were her veins… her mother's body was a recess that she would wander inside forever and ever, a sepulchre growing deeper and deeper… she would simply wave from that safe place, she would not budge… They slept side by side, entwined like twigs of trees or the ends of the sugar tongs…[27]

Later, the narrator recalls herself "trembling" when her mother goes "to her father's bedroom for a tick, to stop him bucking"(*AFH* 385); and "[a]t the beginning of sleep and at the precise moment of waking, it was of her mother and for her mother that she existed" (*AFH* 387).[28] Later in the story, however, she is sent away to school and, piqued, replaces the mother "with a new idol: a nun" (*AFH* 389). This is the hinge of the story, and after that it's a case of increasing distance, ending with the savage resentment and estrangement of the adult daughter whose own marriage has now failed. For her part, after a lifetime of abuse from a drunken husband, the mother disbelieves in love between the sexes: "there was only one kind of love and that was a mother's love for her child… There passed between them a moment… dense with hate" (*AFH* 399). The daughter returns to the family house only for her mother's funeral, and the story ends like this:

> Their life together and all those exchanges were like so many spilt feelings, and she looked to see some sign or hear some murmur. Instead, a silence filled the room, and there was a vaster silence beyond, as if the house itself had died or had been carefully put down to sleep. (*AFH* 404)

In this fine but desolating passage, the very fact of the relationship itself seems abjected – "spilt" – from a world devoid of any "sign" of possible renewal. Against the

[27] *A Fanatic Heart: Selected Stories.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984. 380.

[28] The vocabulary combines the childish ("tick") and the bestial ("bucking"), a term both for animal high spirits and, in Hiberno-English, for rage, which economically indicates the abusive character of the marriage: the effect of the whole is to disavow and sideline the parents' sexual life in favour of the mother's and daughter's life together. The scene is Oedipal, or would be if the daughter was a son, but the tone of dark emotional intensity contrasts sharply with that which Frank O'Connor devises for his child-narrator in the genially humorous "My Oedipus Complex" (1950).

apprehension of "a vaster silence beyond", the concluding phrase heartbreakingly recalls, but only in metaphor, the quintessential gesture of nurturance and maternal love of an infant: "carefully put down to sleep".

A discussion of abjection and laughter in O'Brien would also yield dividends, though it is beyond the scope of this essay. Her texts produce vividly comic moments from contexts often involving the loss of control or of balance, which defy or transgress the proprieties. These moments commonly have a Rabelaisian character: this is true, for instance, of the scene where Kate's mother gets off her bicycle to pee in the ditch, at which point a strange man comes unexpectedly on the scene and collides with her, inadvertently thrusting his front wheel between her legs. This strand of humour is associated especially with Baba, Kate's alter ego in the trilogy who combines a malicious, manipulative streak with a spirit of reckless, joyful transgression, and performs as comic mask to Kate's tragic one.

Finally, what of the question of agency, the last word in my title? The relentless marketing of O'Brien as a risqué writer about sex, a kind of incarnate Molly Bloom, is a distraction.[29] So is the (closely related) presentation of her as a figure who with difficulty freed herself from a benighted, brutish, backward and oppressive Ireland, to inhabit advanced, liberal, modern and enlightened England. The real struggle in the trilogy, and indeed in the work as a whole, is not between, on the one hand, repression, regulation, the alcoholic failed father, prudery, coercive virginity, the Irish countryside as a cultural and emotional nowhere, and, on the other, urban modernity, relative anonymity, apparent freedom, and sexual opportunity. It is between the different forms of alienation represented by *each* of these opposites, which are both still under the Law of the Father, and the possibility for a woman of autonomy, the right to attempt self-completion and the capacity to play out one's life for oneself, to seek love and recognition: in a word, agency. Kate Brady is not less, merely differently, regulated and abject in her Dublin or London lives than in the west of Ireland, and she has escaped one controlling father-figure only to find another.

After she first has sex with Eugene Gaillard (*CGT* 316), she feels "no pleasure, only some strange satisfaction that I had done what I was born to do", and on the next page

[29] Rebecca Pelan's essay in this volume very effectively charts the construction of this figure by the publishing industry and the media in Britain and the U.S.

we find her longing for her mother's nurturing love (recalled in the small caring gesture of blowing on the child's soup to cool it). At the story-level, Kate Brady never sheds guilt, self-culpabilization, the sense of sinfulness and moral inadequacy, the judgement of herself as bad mother, and, above all, her emotional abjection. That procession of female characters who people O'Brien's fictions, with Kate at their head, are all more or less examples of what Kristeva calls a "*de*ject": one of those "borderline personalities" who dwell in abjection (*PH* 8).[30] But, as I have earlier argued about Jean Rhys, their author can nevertheless on occasion attain the sublime on their behalf, and the reader can recognize and experience this at the higher level of fictional discourse. The very expertise of these characters in crisis experiences, in doing without stable boundaries, can make them vessels for forms of vision which creatively unfix and decentre the symbolic order. Sometimes the characters themselves are given access to that vision and the power to express it, though characteristically in melancholy vein. It is at such moments of vision that O'Brien is at her most Proustian, most a classical definer of loss, of always-and-never relinquishing, never completely abjecting, the desired object (or its predecessor or its anticipated successor), and most aware of the profoundly symbolic character of all our desires. I conclude with some instances:

> I went alone to the nearest restaurant… thinking how lucky I was to be my own mistress, to be saved the terrible inclination of wanting to possess while being possessed, of being separated from myself while being host to another.
> ("The Return" (1981), *AFH* 459)

> I did not care. Only one thing was uppermost in me and it was flight, and in my fancies I had no idea that no matter how distant the flight or how high I soared, those people were entrenched in me. ("The Bachelor" (1982), *AFH* 69)

> I thought how untoward his gloom was and how his melancholy had cut him off from others. In him I saw a glimpse of my future exiled self.
> ("The Bachelor", *AFH* 72)

> Sitting there, I wanted to be both in our house and to be back in my grandmother's missing my mother. It was as if I could taste my pain better away from her, the excruciating pain that told me how much I loved her. I thought how much I needed to be without her so that I could think of her, dwell on her, and fashion her into the perfect person that she clearly was not.
> ("My Mother's Mother" (1982), *AFH* 32)

[30] The resilience of Baba is, of course, an important counter-weight, also at story-level, to Kate's emotional abjection and self-abnegation: in this connection O'Brien's alteration of the original ending of *Girls in Their Married Bliss* (1964) for the 1988 publication of the trilogy as one volume is highly significant: Kate's suicide by drowning would seem to tilt the balance decisively towards the abject and turn the whole towards death.

> At that moment I realised that by choosing his world I had said goodbye to my own and to those in it. By such choices we gradually become exiles, until at last we are quite alone. ("The Connor Girls" (1981), *AFH* 16)

Ultimately, we need to remind ourselves that Edna O'Brien, writer, is more and other than the sum of all her protagonists. We have seen how her fictions dedicatedly, even obsessively, rehearse loss and abjection in all the meanings we have explored: but it is the *heroines* who lack, and struggle for, agency, and who over and over again realize their states of abjection, and the acts of abjecting which have produced those states. The *author* must be distinguished from them, by the very fact that she attains agency in the act of imagining and writing them. She has thus entered fully into the symbolic, that place of symbol-making so heavily coded masculine in the culture which produced her and in the psychoanalytic narrative. In that virtual realm of the aesthetic, which endlessly returns to the originary instances of suffering and loss, she stages abjection, darkly, with desperate humour, unevenly to be sure but with persistent insight and beauty. And in her most effective texts, she thereby transforms and transcends it. As Kristeva puts it:

> [D]iscourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confronts that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject. (*PH* 6)