

Orpheo, Eurydice, and Co.

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At the Lesbian Lives Conference XI: The Lesbian Post-modern, in Dublin in 2004, Eibhear Walshe gave a paper entitled *Us writing chaps: Kate O'Brien and Irish Gay Men's Writing*.⁷ When he stated how peculiar it was that Kate O'Brien had been close to a number of Irish gay men but had no lesbian connections in Ireland, a member of the audience interrupted the talk: What about Lorna Reynolds? She was voicing the surprise of many of us (it was Louise C. Callahan, author of a play based on the life of O'Brien *Find the Lady*). O'Brien did know a number of lesbians in Ireland, certainly through her connections to the literary and visual arts communities, but the extent of the links between queer activists, artists, and writers will not become clear until unprejudiced biographical research is undertaken as a matter of course and on a wide scale in this country. A review of Walshe's biography of O'Brien mentions other contemporary Irish lesbians in feminist and republican circles, such as Kathleen Lynch, Madeleine French Mullan, and Helena Moloney, but accepts Walshe's claim that the novelist had no connection with them (O'Donnell 2006). The fact that even Walshe, a sympathetic critic who has done much to reassess the role of queer writers in Ireland, has problems accessing relevant data, underlines the seriousness of the problem. In another way, as Tuula Juvonen pointed out at the same Lesbian Lives

Conference, her own research on queer Finnish women in 1950s and 1960s met with awkward silences and half veiled allusions, but it is possible to approach this failure as a challenging success (2004). For one thing, it questions our need to deliver heroic lesbian scripts to a lesbian audience, it highlights the obstructiveness of rigid definitions, and it underlines the unhelpfulness of non-relational fantasies attached to the postmodern subject (ibid.).

Where can a historian begin her search? One obvious place is the avant-garde artistic community, which was rather porous in the period between the establishment of the Irish state and the 1960s (as it had been before). Walshe mentions that O'Brien hung out with the bohemian set of the Gate theatre, founded by a gay couple who represented the most visible queer referent in Dublin for decades. But this was not a self-contained world. The partnership of Hilton Edwards and Micheal MacLiammoir was to Dublin theatre what the partnership of Mainie Jellet and Evie Hone had been to painting, as Bruce Arnold (1991, 154) succinctly put it. Jellet and Hone parted ways in the 1930s after introducing cubist and abstract painting to Ireland and the UK, but remained at the centre of a women-dominated group of visual artists in Dublin. O'Brien certainly knew one of them, May Guinness, who painted her portrait in the

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cubist style.¹ Just as Jellet was a lifelong friend of Elisabeth Bowen and had connections to the Gate, Blanaid Salkeld, actor at the Abbey and playwright at the Gate, also had connections to the visual arts. Although her work remains out of print, Salkeld was an excellent poet, and gems such as *As for Me*, opening with Lapsed Latinate and half-lucid Greek (1955), exemplify many writers' ongoing difficulties, and determination, in gesturing towards an expression of queer desire in the Ireland of the 1950s. O'Brien may have spent much of her life outside Ireland, but she remained in touch with a number of alternative networks in the country. For example, she was a member of the Women Writers' Club, founded by Blanaid Salkeld. O'Brien was the guest of honour at the Club's annual dinner in November 1946 (and was also there to celebrate its golden jubilee in 1958), which included speeches by MacLiammoir and Reynolds to celebrate the success of *That Lady*. O'Brien met Reynolds at this event and, a few days after, asked her to lunch. It is not merely Irish lesbian history and culture that has been neglected, the political and artistic contribution of Irish women is yet to be assessed in full. As Gerardine Meaney (2004, 81) points out: [O]ne does not really need to see photographic and newspaper evidence (though it helps) of Jacob, O'Brien, Macardle and Sheehy Skeffington sitting down to dinners and awards ceremonies together to postulate a critical culture that was woman-centred, dissident, active and well aware of its political limitations.

Lorna Reynolds (1911-2003), in her survey of *Women in Irish Legend, Mythology and Life*, wondered: I do not know whether it is I who am drawn to these bold, passionate women, or that there are so many of them that one

can not avoid lighting on them. (Reynolds 1983, 23.) I am prepared to bet it is the latter, yet there are too few critics making it their priority to discuss these bold and passionate women' and the mark they made in Irish culture. Reynolds herself ended the long standing critical neglect of Kate O'Brien's work in 1987, with the publication of the first ever full-volume study of the novelist, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*. Reynolds (1987, 83) explained that she had shared with O'Brien a memorable and stormy friendship, and supplemented the partial biography that opens the study (covering the period from O'Brien's birth to her marriage), by peppering the literary analysis that follows with veiled biographical references and innuendo. O'Brien bought a house in Galway and moved there following the advice of Reynolds, who was a frequent visitor there, among a group of people that included gay friends and ex-lovers, such as Enid Starkie, who, Reynolds recalls, landed in the village of Clifden in drag (as a French sailor) to O'Brien's dismay. Reynolds (ibid. 68) explains: Kate O'Brien understood very well what Dorothy Osborne's brother meant when he said, It is a part of good breeding to disguise handsomely'. O'Brien was not adverse to outing others, and pointed to the queer leanings of many a historical figure in her novels and non-fiction books, including the critically neglected *English Diaries and Journals* (1943), and her biography of Saint Teresa of Avila (1951), a study yet to be acknowledged as an important example of lesbian historiography (Mentxaka 2005). Yet, as Emma Donoghue (1993, 37) explains, during her life and after it, Kate O'Brien, her family, biographers, critics, and friends all colluded to keep her in the closet.

Donoghue (1994, 170), the critic who has done most to publicise the lesbian literary heritage in Ireland, gives a list of writers of lesbian leanings predating O'Brien's work who have now fallen into obscurity: Anna Brownell Jameson, Emily Lawless, Frances Power Cobbe, Sarah Grand, Eva Gore-Booth. It is crucial to remember that parallel to the queer necessity of safety, there is a queer hunger for connection which transcends generational barriers. Historians seeking to investigate say, Irish lesbian culture in the 1950s, must not only expand their search horizontally, but also vertically, cutting across decades as much as through contemporary networks. Lorna Reynolds was a student when she first read and admired the work of the established novelist Kate O'Brien, yet the age difference did not prevent them from becoming enmeshed in each other's lives. O'Brien stayed with Reynolds whenever she came to Dublin, and they also spent time abroad together, meeting in Italy for example, as the novelist was researching *As Music and Splendour* (Reynolds 1987, 89). After analysing the importance of the lesbian content in this novel, where two female opera singers begin an affair after performing as Orpheo and Eurydice, Emma Donoghue (1993, 5152) quotes from a poem by Reynolds with the recurring line You, Orpheus, me, Eurydice. Donoghue declines to comment on the obvious autobiographical link, with the kind of reticence that mars the impact of much of Walshe's important new research in his biography *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (2006). Walshe is considerably more forward when discussing lesbian attachments in his public papers and in articles such as the invaluable *Invisible Irelands*, focused on the webs of interconnected relation-

ships in [O'Brien's] life (2006, 42). Yet Walshe declares in the biography (2006,111; see *Invisible Irelands* 2006, 46) that there is no evidence of Kate making connections with other Irish lesbians at this time, as she always had done in London Ireland simply had little or no lesbian community, to claim later that *As music and Splendour* provid[ed] in fiction what was absent in reality, because the 1950s was a time when there was little or no Irish lesbian culture or community in Ireland (ibid. 130). Actually, O'Brien's last novel does not portray a lesbian community, but a lesbian relationship flourishing within a sexually adventurous and (relatively) tolerant artistic community.

Lorna Reynolds was not just an inspiration for the lesbian affair in *As Music and Splendour*, Reynolds *wished for this to be known*, as is clear by her decision to publish Eurydice in *Arena* in 1963, a sort of bitter postscript to the novel. Reynolds (1983, 23) was self-assured and temperamental, and the cut-throat world of academia provided many an opportunity to test both traits; taking on the tyrannical head of UCD Michael Tiernan at staff meetings may have prompted the advice given to new lecturers at the university: Beware of Lorna Reynolds. (Ibid.)² She was also a distinguished scholar, the first to point out that Synge's peasants were in fact archetypes, the first to highlight the influence of Nietzsche on Yeats, the first to underline O'Brien's feminism, and a lone voice reappraising the Romantics at a time when they were out of fashion. Reynolds was also an able poet; never letting an opportunity for incisive comment pass by, she marked the historical visit of the pope to Ireland by publishing a poem on a part-time biker and his girlfriend Grainne, praying for success to

the Virgin and then rejoic[ing] that her period had come (1981, 25). It is everyone's loss that her work has received no critical interest and remains uncollected. She was proud, of being a fighter, and of her work, and late in life (1972) still referred to her MA thesis on the Doway bible with pride. In 'A Literary Study of the Doway Bible', she argues that considered as literature rather than as translation, it is impossible to deny to the Doway Bible an enormous superiority over the Authorized version (1935, 113) and, writing in 1935, she goes on to highlight the two biblical passages that are key referents in queer literature, claiming that the tender and pathetic note of the Doway Bible is at its loveliest perhaps in the famous passage from the Book of Ruth (ibid. 115), which she quotes and analyses, to add later that [t]he whole of the Lament of David for Jonathan in the Doway has the same elegiac sweetness and poignant mournfulness as the Ruth passage. (Ibid. 119.)

Like Ruth and David, the figure of Orpheo is another recurrent theme in queer art. The co-protagonist of *As Music and Splendour*, Clare (Eurydice', generally taken to be an autobiographical portrait), is possibly lesbian, while her lover Luisa (Orpheo') may be lesbian or bisexual, which is less consequential than the fact that Luisa is invariably considered by critics to be bisexual, promiscuous, and *therefore* a villain. A recent article by Kay Inckle has provided the first thorough analysis of the love between Luisa and Clare as utopian lesbian narrative, in that their open relationship is based on trust and generosity, and is favourably compared to the heterosexual pursuits of the co-protagonist Rose (2006). The words 'lesbian' and 'bisexual' do not appear in the work of O'Brien who, as

Donoghue (1993, 39) notes, never makes a special plea for lesbians, but a grand argument for moral accountability and tolerance, arguing, over and over again, for sexual self-determination. In her last novel *Duarte*, Luisa's male lover, explains to Clare: 'Luisa has never been in love with me as you know. And indeed it would have been wrong and grotesque had she been. [- -] What Luisa thought she was doing when she made me her lover was to set up guards for herself against a kind of love she knew about already and which frightened her [- -]' / Clare answered slowly. / She told me that always she has been attracted to women and afraid of the attraction.' (O'Brien 2005, 296.) This suggests that one's orientation/preference is not only unrelated to sexual behaviour, but may be defined by one's ability *to fall in love* with men, women, or both. Our enlightened times have failed to theorize the force of such an argument, drafted by O'Brien in 1956. Musical training is presented in the novel as an allegory of love, of the negotiations and compromises required to develop and express one's pitch, of investigating musical forms to discover if they resonate with one's temperament, and of adapting this knowledge to the demands of the world. A single relationship may take an individual through a number of roles Clare becomes' Ifigenia (another lesbian referent), Alceste, Eurydice. Becoming a good singer is an on-going process, and like any personal erotic and emotional history, much depends on the people one encounters. One can not sing (coded as 'sin' through the novel) an opera alone, it is a collective achievement. We need to know more about the interconnected artistic, intellectual, activist networks that shaped O'Brien as a person and a writer. There are a number of

possible directions that future researchers could take. One is queering if Reynolds was lesbian or bisexual, and if she had a relationship with O'Brien that went into *Mary Lavelle* from where the characters of Luisa and Clare are developed (Mentxaka 2004) and *As Music and Splendour*. Reynolds certainly wanted us to think so. And there is no reason that I can see to ignore her wish.

Notes

1. Aintzane Legarreta Mentxaka is currently completing a PhD thesis on Kate O'Brien's novel *Mary Lavelle* (1936) at University College Dublin. Her work is informed by feminism, anarchism, and queer theory. She is an IRCHSS Government of Ireland Scholar. The author gratefully acknowledges funding received from the 'Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences'.

I am grateful to Louise C. Callaghan for alerting me to this painting.

2. [A]s I grew up, and more especially when I found myself in the academic world and gradually discovered what a cut-throat place it was, I realized that gentleness and self-control would not get one far. I reverted to type, I am afraid, and became rather like those bold resolute women [in Irish mythology and literature] I have been telling you about. I became a politician of the academic world, allowed my naturally quick tongue full play, carried the war into the enemy's camp, and acquired the reputation of being a terrible woman'. This I was told by a colleague who joined the staff of University College Dublin about that time and was warned against me. Beware of Lorna

Reynolds,' she was admonished, she's a terrible woman and will stop at nothing.' We became very good friends. (Reynolds, 1983, :23.).

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