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Diarmuid Whelan

- 1 Perhaps Stefan Collini wasn't looking over his shoulder in *Absent Minds* when he challenged the notion that "intellectuals begin at Calais"¹, but in many ways there is no better riposte to the charge than O'Brien. It is fair to say that however much one might contest his arguments or dismiss his prophecies, O'Brien was the embodiment of a man animated by ideas and set in motion by words. Ultimately he wrote himself into the national dialogue with his vivid unearthing of the link between mentality and action. He himself seemed to be a challenge to the Irish stereotype, with his non-native accent and cool rationalism allied to a steely rigour. This of course was nowhere near the truth. He was a man given in equal measure to thirst, mirth, and volubility. In the end he was utterly absorbed by his own emotions (as many a fall-out with once fast friends testified), his own personal preoccupations, and his peculiar familial tragedy. It was this sense of family, of what his clan, the Sheehys, "should have been" (leaders of a Home Rule Ireland), of how low they fell (shabby genteel ethos amidst furniture repossession), that came to have a resonance beyond his own life. O'Brien's contribution was to take his unique personal fable and translate it into a national morality tale with lasting political relevance.
- 2 O'Brien's importance may be gauged by the obituaries from December 2008 which referred to O'Brien's passing as "the closing of a chapter in history"². "Ireland's restless conscience" was gone, and with it Ireland "lost its greatest 20th-century public intellectual"³. Even a far from uncritical observer remarked that while he was the author of "just two competent stage plays, Conor Cruise O'Brien was the most important public man of letters Ireland witnessed since W. B. Yeats died in 1939"⁴. Possibly the view that best captures both his stature and mode was Brian Fallon's in the *Guardian*: "probably the most pugnacious Irish intellectual since George Bernard Shaw"⁵. More caustic voices from the past captured his ability to inspire and befuddle. One critic commented after his entry into national politics in 1969 that he was viewed as the "golden calf of the Irish left." The

same writer suggested that his exalted position “would be less disturbing if [the left] did not simultaneously try to portray him as its Moses⁶”. Throughout his varied career this capacity to inspire and enrage was O'Brien's hallmark – whether it was his first appearance on the national political stage at a Labour Party conference in 1938 when he was howled down for his criticisms of General Franco, or his vilification in the English press at the time of his recall from Katanga in the Congo in 1961. Subsequently he became an established figure in post-colonial debates in the UK, and anti-Vietnam protests in New York. But it was with his return to Ireland in the late 1960s, his election as a Labour Party TD and elevation to his position as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in 1973 that he truly divided opinions. In that era he became the scourge of the Provisional IRA and the censor not just of journalists but of the nation's history. His defeat in the 1977 election removed him from the political arena proper but in no way did it silence him⁷. If anything his interventions became more vociferous, to the point that he was described by one Fianna Fáil minister as “an intellectual terrorist⁸”.

O'Brien and all things French

- 3 And yet over time Ireland's own view of its history, its nationalism, and ultimately its associations with Britain and Northern Ireland, all rowed in behind O'Brien's original points. We can begin to substantiate such a lofty claim by returning to O'Brien's inner musings and to look at the role all things French had in the formation of these. The depth of this is hinted at in *Playing the Harlot*, a *roman-a-clef* by the late writer Patricia Avis about her life and relationships with a string of notable lovers (including Richard Murphy and Philip Larkin). In it she penned a barely disguised portrait of O'Brien whom she had a brief affair with in the mid-1950s. She gives the O'Brien character a disfigured arm and makes him a Scotsman, but in all other details the portrayal is vividly accurate. O'Brien comes across as a memorable and driven character who studied through his evenings and holidays, was ruthless in his diplomatic position and ran up large debts. In terms of his worldview there is a clear indication of his patriotic fervour which would be correct for the O'Brien of that era (fresh from his anti-partition propaganda activities), but also of a desire to bypass England and go straight to France for its political and intellectual direction : “He talked about freedom like a Frenchman, about justice, order and anarchy, and just occasionally, about Scotland, which he would, she suspected like to see attached (in a highly liberal fashion) to France, if anywhere⁹.”
- 4 This strong affinity for France wasn't simply a reflexive anti-Englishness, but a Francophile streak which had been in his family background for the previous two generations. His grandfather the MP David Sheehy and his grand-uncle the ‘Land League priest’ Eugene Sheehy were both educated in France and Belgium. O'Brien's mother Kathleen Sheehy and her other sisters, most notably Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, had all lived and studied in Amiens. The Amiens link was again taken up in the next generation, both by O'Brien's cousin Owen Sheehy Skeffington, who married into the recipient family, and O'Brien himself, who spent several summers there. It was the beginning of a lifelong passion for French culture and the French language. Both his wives referred to his fondness for holding forth in French and interspersing his talk with his “Gallicisms” or “Conor's French noises”. Even though I have made the point elsewhere that Irish figures strongly in his upbringing and intellectual formation, there is no doubt that he was both emotionally and intellectually immersed in French¹⁰. Even in the immediate aftermath of

his mother's death he recalls the day after her passing : "sleeping on the camp-bed [...] trying to read Brunetière, crying myself to sleep¹¹." Another example shows he was keeping abreast of French military reversals : "The Germans are in Boulogne today [...] this is awkward as it will probably prevent me getting the Dirb edition of the works of Proust. I ordered them from Paris three weeks ago¹²."

- 5 While in college he visited France twice before the Second World War broke out and two vignettes from those trips give an idea of the young Francophone O'Brien. In a diary by a friend of his, Flann Campbell, O'Brien is entered in the "*Dramatis Personae*" of their voyage across France as "The Dark One". While this intriguing sobriquet suggests a whiff of sulphur, there is no ambiguity about O'Brien's brains. He is described simply as "the scintillating intellectual of our party." He is also "an entertaining talker, slight cynic and a good looker." On a practical level O'Brien "speaks excellent French (he would almost pass for a native) and does most of the bargaining for us." On a separate visit to France O'Brien "eloped" with his girlfriend of the time (and future wife) Christine Foster. His future father-in-law tracked the couple down to the town of Port-de-Piles and

came over here after us to see that I didn't offer her any violence. On hearing that my intentions were honourable he fell on my neck and got soused and invited the mayor (Socialiste) the instituteur (SFIO) and Christine (Fabian Soc) and me (FAI) to dinner. A splendid demonstration of working class solidarity ! I had a terrible argument with Mr. Foster whether Baudelaire was a greater man than Jesus Christ and why the O'Briens burnt Derry in 1033. He is going home to-day. Thank Baudelaire¹³.

- 6 O'Brien's memorable insouciance continued when he returned to Trinity. As chair of the Modern Languages Society his inaugural address was on the obscure topic of "Après Port-de-Piles Quoi ?" The tongue in cheek address was delivered to the small audience of friends who knew the personal circumstances behind the title. Nevertheless it is one of the first, if obscure, examples of a lifelong tradition of sparking various intellectual flints off his personal milestones. It is the first stirring of what would become his signature technique of auto-history, O'Brien's pattern of enmeshing some meaty matter of politics or history with his own biography. The style that informs his work on Yeats's fascism (with its anecdotes about his father in Yeats's company), *States of Ireland*, and his Irish history from the 1990s *Ancestral Voices* all began somewhere between a *soirée* in provincial France and that November night in Trinity.
- 7 In addition to O'Brien's fondness for inserting himself into his prose he can also claim consistency in a determination to be seen as a writer. To write professionally was a clear childhood objective, and whatever the subject matter or the flux in his views over the years, the thread of writing was always there. From a very early age there seems to have been a happy mix between a physical compulsion and something like an almost spiritual urge to write : it is there in his mother's letters describing her four year old tapping away at the typewriter and it is there also in his college diary with its almost exalted mumbling that "it is good to write words with a pen." From the same diary we can tell he has a keen desire to become a professional writer. However, after having his poetry rebuffed by Seán O'Faoláin – "killed by Cork realists" as he memorably put it – he endeavoured to make his way in the world through the various avenues of journalism, literary criticism, and history. Remarkably he attempted all three endeavours simultaneously, at the cost, it seems in retrospect, of his marriage. In offering a reason for their marital break-up, his first wife remarked that "Conor was always writing", adding, rather magnanimously, that "Conor was incapable of writing a bad sentence¹⁴".

- 8 O'Brien's journalistic endeavours span his entire writing career. Even in his final years when his judgement had deserted him, he insisted on a desire to continue writing up to his death. He began his career in his third year in college when he wrote weekly columns for the *Irish Times* describing the various happenings in Trinity. Within a few years his first published pieces appeared in *The Bell* as examinations of various other media titles like *The Irish Independent* and *The Catholic Standard*. Throughout his life journalism kept the finances flowing and served as an outlet for his attempts to get his political points across in memorable debates with other intellectuals, or simply to try and persuade the reading public of the merits or demerits of a particular course of action. In this he was highly effective. Yet it is the other two avenues of expression, history and literary criticism and his debt to Camus and Michelet that are perhaps both more problematic and also more rewarding in terms of understanding O'Brien.

Camus and Michelet

- 9 O'Brien's unusual historical approach owes a great deal to the influence on him of the French historian, Jules Michelet. In "Michelet Today", an extended article written in the mid 1950s, O'Brien juxtaposes the arguments of "history-as-science" against what he feels to be the higher worth of "history-as-art"¹⁵. For O'Brien, the root of Michelet's greatness was that he felt passionately about history. What distinguishes him is that he said clearly and openly what he felt. O'Brien contrasts this with the case of "some Buster Keatons of historiography who can attain genuine and total impassivity : they record the facts and nothing more. Yet what facts, and why record them ? How select the facts if you care nothing about them, one way or another ?" O'Brien then sketches the scenario, an increasingly familiar one nowadays, of a fallacious separation which is accepted by historians. This is where the "opinions hot and strong, go into newspaper articles, radio, television; the serious historical writing is tightly buttoned, ostentatiously unemotional." For O'Brien, to accept this belies any grasp of human psychology. To reasonably expect historians to manage this is to believe in "fabulous creatures". In truth, what "history-as-science" historians rebuke in Michelet is his unguarded expression of prejudice and emotion, which O'Brien thinks we should be grateful for, as it puts us on our guard. In a line that O'Brien would adopt as his own, Michelet tells us precisely where he would have stood, beside whom he would have sat, and where he would have fallen on all the great issues of the day¹⁶.
- 10 For this reason Michelet is, in O'Brien's view, an inherently honest historian. Yet he goes on to say that to call Michelet "an honest historian would be only a play on words unless he is also found honest in relation to the facts, unless he consistently relates events which do not suit his thesis"¹⁷. At this point O'Brien makes a distinction between Michelet as historian of the Revolution, and Michelet as historian of the general events outside the Revolution. In the former, he is "remarkably honest, because he is anxious to be just to all parties, is acutely concerned and even torn by their disputes"¹⁸. In the case of the latter, he clearly fails, because for Michelet "international relations is hardly more historical than a Punch-and-Judy show". For O'Brien, Michelet's critics have however insisted on this aspect too much. Surely he should be considered on the basis of the bulk of his work. In writing as he did Michelet ignored the point of view of the enemies of the Revolution because he was too busy trying to understand the revolutionaries' concerns and psychology. When viewed on this basis alone, Michelet manages to be just and skilful to

all parties. By way of riposte, O'Brien taxes the scientific historians with themselves being prone to the very same emotionalism. O'Brien points to one critic who found Michelet's attitude to Robespierre and his cohorts "positively repulsive", who could not comprehend Michelet's "sentimentality about the bloody maniacs." Another example relates to those historians who *blame* Michelet for "'helping to form the intellectual background of French communism'" This, as O'Brien neatly points out, is one of those unscientific lapses into "judgements from the standpoint of today¹⁹".

- 11 Ultimately, O'Brien contrasts the two types of history. "History-as-science" is seen as a "sedative, leading to the resignations of agnosticism". "History-as-art on the contrary is a stimulant, enriching and embittering contemporary conflicts²⁰". The explanation of Michelet's passionate involvement is to be located in the simple cultural difference between the French view (seeing their historians as themselves involved in the historic process), and the Anglo-Saxon or Nordic critic who sniffs at such emotionalism. The conundrum for O'Brien is that :

In practice the man who believes himself to be prepared to modify his opinions in accordance with the evidence cannot help interpreting the evidence in accordance with his opinions. If he is scrupulous the dilemma will paralyse him²¹.

- 12 If we return to "Michelet Today" what is subliminally at odds with the Anglo-Saxon / Nordic view could easily be interpreted as not just the French tradition of *l'histoire engagée* but also an equivalent Irish historical tradition. The Irish view of history-as-art with its connection to the long Irish struggle with the English and its own tradition of *l'histoire engagé* from the seventeenth century to the present would receive unexpected validation. O'Brien no doubt would repudiate the essay in later years because of where it would put him in the Irish historical debate : alongside other historians whom he viewed as validating and inciting what he called "tribal self-righteousness and ethnocentric arrogance". This aside, what remains is an enthralling view of one brilliant historian being re-interpreted by an aspiring one. O'Brien in the late 1950s disdains prophecy, and yet even then sees Michelet's prophecies more as healthy curses. He would later become synonymous with repeated warnings of civil war in Ireland. In another nod to his future incarnation O'Brien evinces an *et alors ?* attitude toward polemics. For him the cost of vented spleen outweighs the non-defense of the values under attack. And yet most of O'Brien's fascination and the approbation is reserved for Michelet's honesty surrounding the Revolution itself. In conveying the dynamism of the flux and the fury of the French Revolution, we can see O'Brien's enthusiastic endorsement of what he would try to achieve himself in many later historical works.
- 13 What light does O'Brien's work on Michelet shed on his own writings ? The answer depends on what we choose to see as O'Brien's French Revolution. O'Brien's writings should be evaluated in the light of a particular section of Irish nationalism over the past hundred years. To run the rule over his own evaluation of Michelet, we could say that in O'Brien's portrayal of the Irish nationalist tradition, he certainly found something which stimulated his interest, and which he pursued relentlessly. In his identification with this tradition he for a time defended it well, and gave those of other traditions pause to think. While it can be said that O'Brien was brilliant and fully engaged, he certainly took sides. While it would never be fair to accuse O'Brien of chauvinism, can it be said that he never resorted to the level of Punch and Judy shows ? His moral polarisation of the various parties in the 1970s and after certainly has hints of this. Finally, it would be hard to say that O'Brien's participation as a practising politician or as an exponent of *l'histoire engagé*

honed his judgement. Sadly he ceased conveying the confusion of history as it happened and the nuance disappeared. The varied interactions, the mutability of the characters and questions, the richness of the issues and opinions – all those fine qualities exemplified by Michelet – atrophied to a single explanation : religion; a lone culprit : the Catholic Irish; a sole judgement : wrong; and one future : doom.

- 14 To turn to O'Brien's other outlet – his literary criticism – the novelty again lies in his political interest crossing over traditional boundaries. Garrett Fitzgerald once tried to sum up O'Brien's role by suggesting an interesting dualism. O'Brien, he felt, was “more of a literary intellectual than a political philosopher. However, he suggested that it was O'Brien's uniqueness to be a political philosopher in Ireland when all our intellectuals are literary ones²²”. This interesting tension is compounded by O'Brien's own proclivities. As much as he studied languages and literature in college, and as much as he was consciously building a career for himself as a literary critic, the pull of politics was always stronger for him. This might lead some to suggest that he got his literary criticism wrong. However, another view would be that it made it increasingly potent. One classic example of this is the charge behind his essay *Passion and Cunning* that Yeats had fascist sympathies. Another less heralded example is an earlier attempt to do an equivalent of the Nuremberg trials in his first book *Maria Cross* – a collection of essays on the imaginative patterns in a group of Modern Catholic writers. Ultimately this literary/political crossover compulsion within O'Brien is exemplified in his treatment of Camus. In his writings on Camus, O'Brien cuts to the political centre at the heart of Camus's output. Yet in doing so he abstracts from Camus a viewpoint which he would apply to Ireland's relationship with ‘the Troubles’. Ultimately O'Brien's take on Camus translates into a genuine intellectual contribution for an entire society.

- 15 We can begin to uncover this by looking at a frank admission by O'Brien of Camus's importance to him.

The real significance, and the source of the appeal, of the work of this period (the forties) is not one of revolt but one of affirmation. To a generation which saw no reason for hope it offered hope without reason. It offered a category the absurd – in which logical, psychological, philosophical, and even social and political difficulties could be encapsulated and it allowed the joy of being alive, in the presence of death, to emerge. It was neither a revolutionary message, nor a specially moral one; but it was a singularly sweet and exhilarating message to a whole generation who were also pleased to think of itself as revolutionary and moral. I belonged to that generation and if I scrutinise that message now with the wary eyes of middle age, I am no less grateful for having received it in my youth²³.

- 16 From the frankness and honesty of it, we can say that Camus had a profound effect upon O'Brien both intellectually and emotionally. We can also note that O'Brien's primary concern was for a considerable time bound up with somehow trying to be both “revolutionary and moral”; a proper compass one might suggest for an intellectual, if an ill-fitting one for an academic and less still for a civil servant. The best place to understand O'Brien's view of Camus is O'Brien's 1970 monograph *Camus*. This book, which has been described by several commentators as O'Brien's best, is an overview of Camus's oeuvre and life. It is written very much with the colonial perspective in mind and continually interrogates the output of Camus against the background of his birthplace, Algeria. The book itself has three stages, corresponding to the years surrounding each of Camus's best known works – *L'Étranger*, *La Peste*, and *La Chute*.

- 17 Initially O'Brien's opinion of *L'Étranger* was not that high. The main reason for the negative judgement arises from the colonial perspective which O'Brien employed to evaluate Camus. To put it simply, O'Brien felt that Camus's representation of Algeria was untruthful. The greatest fiction in *L'Étranger* was the idea that a jury of his peers would convict Meursault of murdering a native Algerian ("It implicitly denies the colonial reality and sustains the colonial fiction²⁴.") The second chapter on Camus, *The Plague*, deals with *La Peste*, which for O'Brien is an allegorical sermon on reactions to Nazism. O'Brien sees a flaw in the novel in that Camus fails to recognise that Nazism is also a form of colonialism. For O'Brien, the irony is that although the action takes place in Oran in Algeria, the Arab population and an appreciation of the French treatment of Algerians is entirely absent. O'Brien points out that Camus never included the native Algerians in his fiction. Although the Arab quarters are mentioned, they are never visited and play no role in the story. O'Brien surmises that this oversight encapsulates Camus's attitude to the colonial predicament :

Eight years after the publication of *La Peste* the rats came up to die in the cities of Algeria, with the eruption of the boils and pus that had been working inwardly in the society, and this eruption came precisely from the quarter where the doctor, and by implication Camus, never looked. The source of the plague is what we pretend is not there and the preacher himself is already, without knowing it, infected by the plague²⁵.

- 18 According to O'Brien, in the immediate years after the Second World War Camus was "the most brilliant and influential figure on the non-communist left in France." Through his works he had come to represent a figure of Godless holiness, and to be seen by some as the archetype of the "just man". O'Brien's interest lies in taking a contrary vein to the lionised view of Camus. He begins by pointing out that Camus had initially been highly sceptical of forms of anti-communism, a view O'Brien shared. As the war grew more distant, Camus increasingly focused his attention on the threat of violence to the state and society. His reaction to this began to take an expressly anti-communist form. As O'Brien says, he "grows to forget²⁶" his distrust of political anti-communism. Against the backdrop of the beginnings of the Cold War, revelations of Stalinist practices, and a blurring of the truth on behalf of both communist and anti-communist camps, Camus came to the viewpoint that "lies and violence have their home with communism because it is legitimised by a philosophy of history²⁷". This was to be expanded upon in his essay *L'Homme Revolté*.
- 19 The publication in 1951 of *L'Homme Revolté*, with its formulation that "violence and lies have their home in Communism²⁸", led to the famous split between Sartre and Camus. However, this split was to magnify with their diverging responses to crises in Indo-China, Suez, Hungary, and ultimately the Algerian war. In these situations, the implications of Camus's estrangement from the left can be seen. Sartre's position was that Frenchmen who hated terror and oppression – the "lies and violence" that were obsessing Camus – should turn their attention first to their own war: Indo-China and after the French capitulation at Dien Bien Phu, Algeria. It is this question of priority, psychological as well as political, that came to press most heavily on Camus. Innocuous as it may sound, it is only when viewed in the light of the actual situations that this choice of priority came to be paralysing :

Camus's position in the fifties was one of extreme intellectual and emotional difficulty and tension. He had written about freedom, justice, violence, and revolt in abstract terms and asserted principles which he presented as both of fundamental

importance and universal application. He never altogether abandoned this language and he continued to write about politics in the tones of a severe moralist. Yet his actual positions were political and partisan. The violence of the Hungarian rebels and of the Anglo-French expedition in Egypt raised no problems. It was 'violence on the right side': precisely the logic he rejected on the grounds of a rigorous morality, in relation to revolutionary violence. Freedom was an absolute for the Hungarians and their violence in asserting their will 'to stand upright' was 'pure'. The violence of the Algerian Arabs, who thought that they were making the same claim, was 'inexcusable' and the nature and degree of the freedom to be accorded to them was a matter to be decided by France, in the light of its own strategic needs – a plea which was irrelevant when made by Russia²⁹.

- 20 For O'Brien, Camus tacitly supported the repression in Algeria "since he consistently opposed negotiation with the actual leaders of the rebellion, the F.L.N." Camus maintained that negotiation with the F.L.N. would lead to "the independence of Algeria controlled by the most implacable military leaders of the insurrection; that is to say, the eviction of 1,200,000 Europeans of Algeria, and the humiliation of millions of Frenchmen, with the risks involved in that humiliation³⁰". What was needed was the suppression of the F.L.N., and after this process of 'pacification', a period of 'Free association' would follow. Camus foresaw that this required French military victory over the insurgents. For O'Brien, Camus

remained in fact a Frenchman of Algeria and what seemed to be the increasingly right-wing positions of his later years were latent in his earlier silences. The only public statement of Camus on the subject of the Algerian war which has the ring of complete candour is one that he made in Sweden in December 1957 just after he had received the Nobel Prize: "I have always condemned terror. I must also condemn a terrorism which operates blindly, in the streets of Algeria for example, and which one day may strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice but I will defend my mother before justice³¹."

- 21 With his final novel, *La Chute*, Camus seems to grow apart from the left-wing intellectuals and the aspirations they once shared. The universals which infused his language are set aside for what O'Brien describes as a "more conservative, more organic" view of life³². In the anti-hero Clamence, Camus produces an artistic response to his own political quandary. He manages in a way to close the circle with his estranged relationship with Algeria in a manner that is personally compelling for O'Brien's own political quandary. Camus "faces his dilemma between mother and justice with unmatched imaginative integrity³³". Camus's defection was "a defeat for an entire generation", and a political move that led many to "feel horror at the moral capital of *La Peste* supporting Algerian repression³⁴". Yet as O'Brien points out "it was in the very personal circumstances of Camus's life that this choice had to be made. And although Sartre's choice in defending the Algerian cause, involved the risk of his life, Camus's choice was the harder for it involved his entire life's moral, emotional, and intellectual capital³⁵".
- 22 What, it might be asked, has this to do with O'Brien? First of all we can see clear similarities. A persistent trait of O'Brien's which derives from his reading of the Sartre and Camus controversy is the question of priorities: that intellectuals must look to their own area of responsibility before condemning others. This question of "priority" is one strong influence on O'Brien but Camus's example goes deeper. Many might be tempted to see O'Brien's own much criticised "conversion", or decision to criticise the history and society of the Republic, as similar to Camus's choice of mother before justice. A persuasive case can be made that O'Brien chose his particular form of political inheritance instead of the universals which tripped off his tongue in the 1960s. And yet

there are problems with the validity of the parallel³⁶. Northern Ireland is not Algeria. The analogy could possibly hold in the Anglo-Irish war period, when it was a case of two historic entities, and a process of decolonisation. However, in 1970s Ireland, with three governments, two of these at varying stages in the process of decolonisation, and with different claims being put forward, it is a little harder to see an analogy with the Algerian colony's fight for independence. Even if we allow the parallel, O'Brien's relation with Northern Ireland is not similar to Camus's with Algeria. For O'Brien to claim the mantle of Camus – interestingly a thing he never did – he would have had to be a London based Northern Protestant.

- 23 If O'Brien's writings up to 1970 were to be examined, taking into account his role as anti-partition propagandist and anti-colonialist, his choice of mother would lead to one of active support for the nationalists in Northern Ireland (he was approached in 1969 to run for the seat which Bernadette Devlin ultimately won). However, there is an equally valid but alternative reading of the choice of mother. This suggests that if O'Brien chose the familial over the universal, like Camus, there are strains *within* O'Brien's intellectual inheritance that he needed to choose between. O'Brien carries conflicting arguments within himself, which are almost antithetical. In his particular case we can make an argument that O'Brien's task was to choose between "mother" and "father". I would argue that he ultimately chose "father". This implied a more selective assessment of his past, with a conscious privileging of his father Francis Cruise O'Brien's agnostic and cosmopolitan traits over the Catholic and nationalist Sheehy part on his mother's side. Viewed in this light, the crucible of a choice again underlines the importance of personal histories to O'Brien. To return to the situation itself, we can see that O'Brien's initial reaction was to actively support the nationalists in Northern Ireland. To see why O'Brien took the road he did, we need to go beyond this mother-justice choice. We need to look at what Camus said in *L'Homme Revolté*. By doing so we can, if nothing else, understand what is meant by justice.

- 24 O'Brien's first review of *L'Homme Revolté* shows that he had mixed feelings about the book³⁷. Years later in his 1970 monograph on Camus, he came to accord it far more weight. Even still there is a certain distrust of it as it is explicitly anti-communist. Nonetheless, it can be shown that *L'Homme Revolté* is the bed-rock upon which O'Brien's subsequent critiques of the IRA and of Irish history are founded. It is significant that while he was working on Camus, the violence in the North was beginning to escalate. It was also at this time that he co-wrote *A Concise History of Ireland*, while also keeping notes which would appear in *States of Ireland*. Writing about *L'Homme Revolté* in 1970 O'Brien refers again to the view that came to obsess Camus in the Cold War period : "the idea that violence and lies have in some special sense their home among the communists because they are legitimised by a philosophy of history³⁸." O'Brien goes on to say that the central argument of the very long first part of *L'Homme Revolté* resembles that of Yeats's short poem, *The Great Day* :

Hurrah for Revolution and more Cannon-shot !
A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again !
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on³⁹.

- 25 O'Brien commented :

Camus unlike Yeats, approves the revolt of the beggar on foot. What Camus rejects is the continuation of the lash, and more especially the justification of the lash in

terms of the philosophy of history, the superman, or the dictatorship of the proletariat⁴⁰.

- 26 Now in Ireland there has not been much scope for the superman, or the dictatorship of the proletariat. There has, however, been a philosophy, or interpretation, of history which has given rise to many an action. It would seem that this philosophy, and O'Brien's interpretation of it, would constitute the motif of all his later writings.
- 27 This becomes particularly clear when we read that *L'Homme Revolté* questions the notion of "violence legitimised by the ethos of past revolution"⁴¹. Furthermore the text of *L'Homme Revolté* is replete with examples of the language which O'Brien would later introduce to an Irish audience. In borrowing the language, he swapped republicanism for communism and translated the violence and lies legitimised by a philosophy of history into a specifically Irish context. Evidently O'Brien saw an Irish parallel with the themes in *L'Homme Revolté*, and distilled and mapped them onto Ireland. Arguably, the entire inspiration and content of O'Brien's later writings on Irish history, indeed his rationale for criticising republican violence, can be seen to derive from the concerns of Camus in *L'Homme Revolté*. The ethos of past revolution, the philosophy of history, the specific language and accusations about violence and lies deriving from past precedent, however well they fit, however apposite they may now sound to Ireland in the wake of O'Brien's critique from the 1970s, all initially came from Camus and especially *L'Homme Revolté*.
- 28 At present there is some awareness of the influence of Camus in O'Brien's development, although this still revolves around one reading, which is the mother-justice choice⁴². As stated, the parallel between Ireland and Algeria is unsatisfactory. It belongs to an earlier period of Irish history, and would look better above the head of Shaw or Yeats, if it is to be anyway analogous to Camus's relation to Algeria. Moreover, to force a choice between mother and justice is to entirely miss the O'Brien critique. It is only when the repercussions of violence in the North are felt in the South, after events such as the Arms Trial, that O'Brien chooses. But it must be pointed out that his critique is *for* the Republic in terms of audience, and for the Republic in terms of defending it from illegitimate contestants like the Provisional IRA. What does O'Brien do in 1970 and after? However sceptically some may view it, he, adapting Burke, loves his "own platoon": his family, friends, neighbours, his compatriots, the Republic. In short he, like Camus, chose "mother".
- 29 We might also ask: what is justice in an Irish context? Does O'Brien supposedly dispense with it? Certainly most of the universals which infuse his writings of the 1960s, and especially the collection *Writers and Politics*, are jettisoned. The view which he comes to accept is the "more organic, more conservative" one of Camus, which can later be seen in O'Brien's fondness for Burke. Yet when Camus wrote about justice in *L'Homme Revolté* in 1951 he was not addressing colonialism or Algeria, he was addressing communism. The text of *L'Homme Revolté*, which is an enquiry into what legitimised the Nazis and Stalin – philosophical murder – is riddled with the word justice. The important thing to note here is that this is exactly what O'Brien concerns himself with from 1970 on. Justice and the philosophy of history are, according to Camus and as interpreted by O'Brien, incompatible. By locating the philosophy of history in the tradition of Tone, the Fenians, Pearse and the IRA, by squaring up to the ethos of violence legitimised by past revolution, and by using the language of *L'Homme Revolté* in all subsequent writings on Ireland, O'Brien is explicitly and consciously choosing justice. Viewed from this angle one could without any irony say that O'Brien chose mother and justice.

- 30 While O'Brien might consciously or otherwise have adopted Camus's critique and to an extent tried to borrow his mantle of the just man (before being exasperated with the opprobrium it brought him and threw it away with some well timed detonations in 1970s Ireland), they are very different writers. Despite O'Brien's attempt to base his critique on Camus, there are significant differences in their manner of conceiving the world. While Camus is described as "hardly a philosopher at all", he shows that he is not only conversant with all the philosophers of his time and before, but that he is acutely interested in the intellectual capital behind the events. He may view things historically, but it is only to provide a scheme for his probing of the thoughts that concern him. O'Brien on the other hand is profoundly historical. While interested in the notions in people's heads, the results of this probing are used to inform his historical conception. Possibly the most basic difference between the two intellectuals is simply that of originality. Camus is an artist, O'Brien is a critic. Camus conjures up provocative solutions, while portraying people and problems which pervade and endure. While he may reach his metaphysical position of hope through intelligence, the inspiration which guides it, and the aspirations contained within, rely on a rare perception informed by pure intuition. O'Brien, who is no less intelligent, gets nowhere similar. There is exhortation but it rings hollow. The positions of eminent worth are derived from others. The tone is of prohibitive ethics, the scope is limited, its substance negative.

Conclusion

- 31 This is not a criticism. Readers can determine for themselves the value of O'Brien's oeuvre. They may make their own decision regarding its provenance, and according to their own tastes judge its originality. They should not, however, have doubts as to its effectiveness. If the limited scope does not make for art or permanence, it found its audience. The ethical stance was necessary when the civic notions of the public were being appealed to over the more attractive allure of sentiment and history. The negativity arose naturally out of the context, and perhaps also from the innate pessimism of O'Brien. Ultimately it is the fuel of that pessimism, a particularly personal tragedy that a true portrayal of O'Brien must return to.
- 32 While the rancour of some engagements in the public domain still lingers, there is no doubt as to the importance of his "activities" in the long term. An obituary of O'Brien in the *Irish Times* saluted his overall achievement with the view that while his political career "looms largest in recent Irish memory, his critical, cultural and historical activities form part of a lasting legacy⁴³". But in bringing the three threads of his life's activity together it is important to bear in mind the caveat about O'Brien which I mentioned at the beginning, which is the presence of the personal in the writings of this intellectual. So much of his perspective was governed by the early family influences which shaped him irrevocably. In this case there is no doubt but that the child became father to the man. As one critic put it his perceptions were enhanced because "he understood Ireland's 'ancestral voices' intimately⁴⁴". This was the source of the strength of O'Brien's insights. His best books, *Parnell and his Party*, *States of Ireland*, some would argue *The Great Melody*, but above all *Camus*, are so powerful precisely because he applies to them the lesson that his own life taught him – we cannot escape what we have come from. Whether it was drinking deep from the intellectual wells of his youth, penetrating into the true social reality behind Camus, or "enriching and embittering contemporary conflicts" with

“history-as-art”, it was his life’s irony that the intellectual and his ‘matter’, the hunter and his quarry, would live cheek by jowl.

NOTES

1. Stefan Collini, *Absent minds- Intellectuals in Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.
2. Jenny McCartney, “Farewell to Ireland’s Restless Conscience”, *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2008.
3. Frank Callanan, *Sunday Independent*, 21 December 2008.
4. W. J. McCormack, “Conor Cruise O’Brien : Irish intellectual with a long career as journalist, politician, literary critic and public servant”. *The Independent*, 20 December 2008.
5. Brian Fallon, “Conor Cruise O’Brien”, *The Guardian*, 19 December 2008.
6. D. R. O’Connor Lysaght, *The Lace Curtain : A Magazine of Poetry and Criticism* (1969), p. 61.
7. Admittedly he went on to serve in the Seanad. However he resigned his seat after two years in which time he made practically no contribution.
8. Brian Lenihan (Snr.), *The Irish Times*, 11 October 1991.
9. Patricia Avis, *Playing the Harlot* (London, Virago, 1996), p. 176.
10. See author’s *Conor Cruise O’Brien : Violent Notions* (Dublin, 2009), esp. “Mother”, p. 31-46.
11. O’Brien’s College Diary. Entry for May 24 1940. O’Brien Papers UCD, P82/328/48.
12. *Ibid.*
13. O’Brien to Owen Sheehy Skeffington, late July 1938. Sheehy Skeffington Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 40,489/4.
14. Author’s interview with Mrs. Christine Hetherington (née Foster), Dublin, 20 January 2003.
15. Conor Cruise O’Brien, “Michelet Today”, in *Writers and Politics*, London, Chatto, 1965, p. 42.
16. “A thing I always had in mind approaching it [history] was ‘What would you have done chum ? – what side would I have been on ?’”. Magill April 1986. Quoted in Fintan O’Toole, “Profile of Conor Cruise O’Brien : the Making of a Liberal”, Magill, April 1986.
17. O’Brien, “Michelet Today”, p. 49.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
22. Author’s interview with Dr Garrett FitzGerald, Ranelagh, Dublin, 12 November 2003.
23. O’Brien, *Camus* (London, Fontana, 1970), p. 29.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

28. *Ibid.*
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
  30. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
  31. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
  32. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
  33. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. *Ibid.*
  36. He himself rejected the parallel twice. See his Letter to Irish Press, 18 May 1970 and also his essay "Violence in Ireland : Another Algeria ?" , *New York Review of Books*, 17.4 (23rd Sep. 1971). See also the draft of "The People have risen" , in O'Brien papers UCD P82/ 259(4).
  37. O'Brien, "Monsieur Camus changes his climate", *Writers and Politics*, pp. 65-71.
  38. O'Brien, *Camus*, p. 53.
  39. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
  40. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
  41. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
  42. See Declan Kiberd's discussion of Camus and Cruise O'Brien in *Inventing Ireland*, London, **Cape**, 1995, p. 558-560; Terence Browne, *Ireland : A Social and Cultural history 1922-2002*, London, **HarperCollins**, 2004, p. 272-275.
  43. *Irish Times*, obituary of O'Brien, 19 December 2008.
  44. Jenny McCartney, "Farewell to Ireland's Restless Conscience", *The Telegraph*, 20 December 2008.
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ABSTRACTS

In this article, the author wishes to outline some of the key ideas employed in the writings of Conor Cruise O'Brien, perhaps the preeminent intellectual of post-war Ireland. Rather than look at the broad range of his career, she investigates several influences upon O'Brien arising from his connections with France. In particular she attempts to scope out the strong French links into which he was born, while also looking at two key influences upon his mind : Camus and Michelet. Both left a strong impression on the manner O'Brien approached his task as public intellectual in Ireland in the 1960s up to his death in December 2008.

L'auteur souhaite cerner quelques-unes des idées majeures employées dans les écrits de Conor Cruise O'Brien, sans doute la figure intellectuelle la plus marquante de l'après-guerre en Irlande. Plutôt que d'embrasser l'ensemble de sa carrière, cet article examine plusieurs influences subies par O'Brien en raison de ses liens avec la France, et revient notamment sur l'atmosphère familiale imprégnée de francophilie dans laquelle O'Brien est né, ainsi que sur deux auteurs qui eurent une fonction déterminante dans sa formation intellectuelle : Camus et Michelet. Tous deux ont laissé une empreinte profonde sur la façon dont O'Brien, depuis les années 1960 jusqu'à sa mort en 2008, a toujours envisagé son rôle d'intellectuel public en Irlande.

INDEX

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