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‘A Variation of Voices’
Frank O’Connor, 1922-1939

by

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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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2010
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Summary

Frank O'Connor – short-story writer, poet, playwright, novelist and literary critic – filled an important role in the cultural debates of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. My thesis concentrates on his more critically neglected writings in the early decades of his career (1922-1939). I argue that his concerns and interests in these decades provided the foundational themes and stylistic focus of his mature work. O'Connor's reputation, and critical examinations of his writings, has fallen into decline in recent decades. This decline is one of the aspects considered in this thesis.

'A Variation of Voices': Frank O'Connor, 1922-1939 is divided into four chapters, with each chapter containing six to seven sections. After a general introduction to O'Connor's significance in twentieth-century Irish literary and cultural debates, the following chapters analyse O'Connor's literary production between his first venture into publishing during the turbulent year of 1922 and his departure from the Abbey Theatre in 1939. Censorship; the Irish language; the discourse of re-Gaelicisation; the role of the Catholic Church; Free State government policy; Ireland's national literature; republican politics; the importance of the reader; various social issues including poverty, illegitimacy and loveless marriage; and the development of Ireland's national theatre: O'Connor fearlessly attempted to play an active part in public discussion of these areas over the course of his career. O'Connor's involvement in the conflicts of the time is reassessed; the more neglected aspects of his oeuvre, across a variety of genres, are reappraised; his relationships with other members of the Irish intelligentsia are inspected; and new readings of some of his better-known work are proffered. The thesis also engages in extensive archival work and explores some manuscript collections which have previously received little or no
attention. The result is an exhaustive and original investigation into the early work of one of Ireland’s most distinguished and underrated men of letters. ‘A Variation of Voices’: Frank O’Connor, 1922-1939 is a detailed argument for a fuller critical examination of O’Connor’s work.
Acknowledgements

I should like to express my warmest thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Paul Delaney, for all his support and encouragement in the writing of this thesis. I am grateful to him for the unfailing thoughtfulness of his readings, for the many words of criticism kindly spoken, and for his patience.

My family has demonstrated an unwavering belief in my abilities, and for this I owe them a great deal. To my mother and father I owe my pre-eminent debt; my special gratitude to them for their unstinting support during the years of work on the thesis. Dad, you are dearly missed. I should like to dedicate this work to them.

To my brothers and sisters, I also owe a great deal of thanks. Their encouragement, help and interest bolstered the completion of the project. Thanks also to Ciara, Darragh, Hugo, Heather and Emma for providing cherished and fun distraction.

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In Harold Macmillan’s ‘Foreword’ to a collection of essays on Frank O’Connor, he provided an overview of the writer’s life and work:

Frank O’Connor had two names and lived a life of many facets. Yet everything he did, however unexpected or even contradictory it might seem, was informed by the same single-minded and passionate integrity. The young Irish rebel and the mature war-time friend of Britain, the eccentric librarian, the enthusiastic man of the theatre and the meticulous self-taught scholar, the sonorous translator of Irish poetry and the superlative short-story writer, the inspiring public lecturer and the dogged master of the seminar – all were unquestionably the same unique and original man.¹

The collection of essays was published just three years after O’Connor’s death. It was edited by one of O’Connor’s friends, Maurice Sheehy, and it mainly consisted of elegiac but discerning contributions by friends and colleagues of the writer. Macmillan’s foreword captures something of O’Connor’s personality as well as the significance of his achievements. Forty years later, this summation of O’Connor’s accomplishments is still germane.

A brief consideration of O’Connor’s life and work will help to situate his significance in twentieth-century Irish literary and cultural debates. Born Michael O’Donovan in Cork in 1903, he became a prolific writer under the pseudonym Frank O’Connor. In a literary career that spanned forty-one years (from 1925 to 1966) he produced eleven collections of short stories. He also published two novels, one book of original poetry, seven books of translated Irish poetry, a biography, an autobiography, three travelogues on Ireland, eight plays, two selected anthologies of

Irish writing, five books of literary criticism, and over three hundred articles and reviews on cultural, social and political issues. O'Connor additionally gave his attention to a great deal of radio work which included talks, dramatic productions, and broadcasts of his short stories. He was also actively involved in a myriad of letter debates in Irish newspapers from the 1920s to the 1950s. Within two years of his death in 1966, the second volume of his autobiography, an eighth book of translated Irish poetry and a sixth book of literary criticism appeared. Fifteen more collections of his short stories were published posthumously. While some of these publications were selected editions of previously collected stories, many of them contained unpublished material or uncollected magazine/literary periodical stories, or new drafts of previously published stories. O'Connor also left behind a lifetime of almost daily-written correspondence to family, friends and colleagues, and an extensive collection of papers. He was a driven and prodigious writer.

It is rare to encounter a general twentieth-century short-story anthology, and rarer still an Irish short-story anthology, which does not include a story by Frank O'Connor. As early as 1936, The Irish Times declared that there was 'nothing to be gained by comparing his work with that of other masters of the short story: he is master among masters himself.' Following the publication of his debut collection in 1931, O'Connor's exposure in America was considerable and he was always widely reviewed, generally in positive terms. From 1945 until his death, he was a regular contributor to the prestigious New Yorker periodical and, by the time of his death, he was widely recognised a master of the genre and one of Ireland's most important short-story writers. In addition, O'Connor's extensive translations of Irish-language poetry have been considered by Alan Titley 'among the very best translations of Irish.

poetry’ that are available today. His translations have also been acclaimed by scholars such as Daniel Binchy, Brendan Kennelly, Douglas Sealy, Anthony Cronin and David Greene. O’Connor’s literary criticism is also not without acknowledged merit. In his own lifetime, he was persistently solicited to write literary reviews for respected journals such as The New York Times Book Review, The New Yorker, The Irish Times, Yale Review and The New Statesman, among others. O’Connor’s The Lonely Voice (1962) is still in print and remains a seminal study of the short-story form. His introduction to the book and his theory of ‘submerged population group’ is often disputed, cited, or used in contemporary examinations of the genre. O’Connor’s selection and introduction to Modern Irish Short Stories is also still in print and repeatedly appears on short-story modules in universities across the world. His introduction to Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man remains controversial but engaging, and has been republished several times. Towards An Appreciation Of Literature remains relevant and readable for a general introduction to literature. His literary history of Ireland, The Backward Look (1967), was also recently hailed as one of the ‘three magisterial books’ in twentieth-century Irish scholarship. Lastly,

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9 Deane, Seamus, Public Interview with Conor McCarthy, Mater Dei Institute of Education (Dublin: November 2007). The other two books that Deane included in this group were Vivian Mercier’s The
O'Connor's biography of Michael Collins – *The Big Fellow: A Life of Michael Collins* (1937) – is still in print and is a text that scholars of the period have regularly engaged with in Irish historical studies.

O'Connor was intellectually formed in the world of the Irish Literary Revival and pre-independence revolutionary nationalism, and he came of age during the War of Independence and the Civil War. It is well known that O'Connor, along with other writers of the post-independence period – including Sean O'Casey, Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Faolain, Flann O'Brien, Mary Lavin and Patrick Kavanagh – was the principal means by which a counter-Revival aesthetic was launched. It is also a critical commonplace to note that these writers played a dominant role in the development of an oppositional perspective on Church and State discourse throughout this period. O'Connor’s relationship with the country of his birth was therefore complex and conflicted. The war experiences marked the beginning of O'Connor’s transformation from a romantic nationalist adolescent, in love with the idea of adventure, to a more realistic young man. He became disillusioned with, and frequently and bitterly fought against, Free State government and Church policies, but he was also a young adult who retained a deep love for his country, its people, culture and traditions. O'Connor’s impulse to circumvent what he considered the limitations of Irish life was coupled with a desire to reconcile his aspirations for Ireland with the country’s socio-political reality.

These conflicts also extended to his relationship with Irish nationalism. O'Connor maintained a sympathetic attitude towards ‘heroic’ pre-independence nationalism, but he also displayed vacillating, at times unequivocally harsh, opinions on post-independence nationalism – a nationalism which he generally associated with

the Catholic bourgeoisie that presided over Irish society. Despite O'Connor's recurring and often public criticism of Catholic bourgeois nationalism, he also regularly spoke about what he saw as the 'tragedy of Partition'. In an article for the *Sunday Independent* in 1944, for instance, under the pseudonym 'Ben Mayo', he commented:

> The people are bewildered because they are divided and they have been divided ever since the split and the civil war. We shall not see the end of Partition until they are reunited. *It has been proved over and over again that the united strength of Irish nationalism is immense* ... Before anything more can be done to unite all Ireland, Irish nationalism must become once more a united force.

O'Connor's opinions on post-independence Church and State policy resulted in him believing that an overly pietistic and conservative state was the main obstacle to achieving a united country. Little attention was given by O'Connor to the fact that 'perceived cultural difference' between Ulster and the rest of the country 'was one of the factors leading to partition in the first place'. Nor did he seem to realise that this perception had in part led to a deep determination by Ulster Unionists to uphold partition. Regardless of O'Connor's calls for a united Ireland in his cultural criticism, he seldom sought to engage with the reality of Northern Ireland or to think through this conception of a united Ireland in his creative work. Moreover, in his travelogue of Ireland, *Leinster, Munster, and Connaught* (1950), the province of Ulster is noticeably missing. Of course, this absence can be explained by the fact that a separate travelogue on Ulster had been published the previous year by the same

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10 Mayo, Ben [O'Connor, Frank], 'Partition – the people are bewildered says Ben Mayo'. *Sunday Independent* (7 May 1944); repr. in *The Journal of Irish Literature*, IV:1 (January 1975), 128 [O'Connor's emphasis]. O'Connor served up this opinion behind the 'mask' of Ben Mayo, but he would also reiterate this stance on several occasions in later years, particularly in his talks in American universities: see, for example, Matthews, James, *Voices: A Life of Frank O'Connor* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 340.

publishers of *Leinster, Munster, and Connaught*. In O'Connor's book, Donegal is featured as one of the counties' surveyed and he locates it as the 'next-door neighbour to the six counties of Ulster.' One of the few occasions where O'Connor contemplated Ulster's cultural traditions was in his literary history of early Ireland in *The Backward Look*, and this engaged exclusively with the pre-colonial period. For a former anti-Treaty soldier, O'Connor's writings indicate that he had imaginatively internalised the partitioning of Ireland. His post-independence nationalism instead amounted to an ambivalent attitude toward the Free State, and his ambivalence stemmed from his frustration with Church and State rule. It was this frustration, alongside his love of the country, which manifested itself in complex and conflicted portrayals of Ireland in O'Connor's creative and critical work.

One such area was his exploration of religious beliefs and practices in Irish society. O'Connor continually questioned what he perceived as the oppressive role of the Catholic Church in Irish society, but he also wrote several sensitive depictions of priests in his short stories (examples are given in Chapter One). In addition, his work communicated the belief that the contemporary presence of traditional beliefs and customs could lead to social stagnation and sexual sterility, and this attitude was exemplified in stories such as 'A Thing of Nothing' (1946) and 'A Bachelor's Story' (1955). Instead, O'Connor utilised the past as a perceived yard-stick with which to gauge post-independence cultural developments, in plays such as *Rodney's Glory* (1929), *The Invincibles* (1937) and *Moses' Rock* (1938). Despite his tendency to use the past for comparative contemporary analysis, O'Connor's writings also display his own deep interest in Irish cultural history. Throughout his career, he mounted a

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relentless campaign to encourage a public reading of the Irish past, and he considered the past capable of providing the post-independence nation with a rich, internationally respected, cultural heritage if properly preserved. This is exemplified by a number of projects with which he was involved: his selection of traditional Irish beliefs in *A Book of Ireland* (1959), for example; his descriptions of Ireland’s national monuments in *Irish Miles* (1947) and *Leinster, Munster, and Connaught*; his assessment of Ireland’s literary history in *The Backward Look*; and his eight collected volumes of translations of mainly early medieval to nineteenth-century Irish-language poetry. Implicit in O’Connor’s writings are contradictory opinions about Ireland. O’Connor carried this conflicted attitude into his personal life: in his work as a Free State librarian; his time spent as a director on the board of the Abbey Theatre in the mid-late 1930s; his work for the Ministry of Information and the BBC during World War II; his teaching at Trinity College, Dublin, and Harvard, Northwestern, Stanford and Berkeley universities; and his already-mentioned engaged publications. The work of O’Connor comprises a cultural history of mid-twentieth-century Ireland as it was implicated directly in the friction and accord that engulfed Irish life in these decades.

As one would expect, O’Connor’s name habitually features in cultural studies of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. However, this attention is never extensive and, in spite of O’Connor’s importance to literary and cultural debates, his work has suffered from critical neglect in recent decades. The reasons for this neglect are various. Until the appearance of a collection of articles in America in 1998, edited by Robert Evans and Richard Harp, whose primary motivation in publishing the book was ‘inspired by a desire to create and re-new interest’ in O’Connor, the most comprehensive book-length study was William Tomory’s monograph, *Frank O’Connor* (1980). A survey

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of the secondary material available on O'Connor is revealing. Tomory's scholarship is useful in terms of the overview he provides of O'Connor's writings and his close readings are insightful. However, Tomory pays little attention to the broader social and political contexts and this is crucial in any elucidation of O'Connor's work. Robert Evans and Richard Harp’s collection is wide-ranging in its focus and includes some original and interesting essays. Nonetheless, it is an uneven publication overall and nearly one-fifth of the book comprises undergraduate students' summaries of O'Connor's creative writings. Apart from a collection of essays which the present writer edited in 2007, Frank O'Connor: Critical Essays, just two other book-length publications on O’Connor have appeared to date. Maurice Wohlgerlenter’s Frank O’Connor: An Introduction (1977) contextualises aspects of O’Connor’s work but provides a rather weak analysis. Wohlgerlenter’s version of Irish cultural life ranges between sentimental interpretations and obtuse generalisations with little substantiated evidence. Take, for example, his analysis of O’Connor’s short story, ‘Father and Son’:

What O’Connor attempts to stress, apparently, is that fathers and sons need not confront each other in anger and disdain, as is so often the case in Irish households ... Fathers need not be wolves, nor sons bleating lambs. If only they could learn that life begins with the word! But O’Connor certainly is not oblivious to the fact that, among Irish fathers and sons, such civility is rare. Somewhere, the word, spoken softly, clearly, sympathetically, is being lost. And it may not always be due entirely to the Irish fathers themselves. Like fathers everywhere, they expect, but rarely receive, some recognition and even appreciation for their efforts. Those very expectations may be a cause for some of their bitterness and brutality.16

This style of critical interpretation is typical of the entire book. The only other available monograph is Michael Steinman’s Frank O’Connor at Work (1990). O’Connor constantly revised his stories, even those already published, in his lifetime, and this is because of his never-ending strivings for perfectionism in the form.

Steinman’s study provides close textual criticism on variant drafts of seven of O’Connor stories. It is a valuable exercise in that it traces the development of O’Connor’s craftsmanship over the course of his writing career, and illuminates more concisely what O’Connor was attempting to achieve in each of these stories. Substantially more critical attention needs to be paid to the act of revision in O’Connor’s work, and this could include tracking the development of the stories at manuscript level, but, for now, Steinman’s monograph is the only publication available on the subject.

Two periodical issues on O’Connor have also been published. Michael Steinman’s special issue of *Twentieth Century Literature* in 1990 contained some useful articles, as well as interviews with and about O’Connor, while James Matthews’s special issue of *The Journal of Irish Literature* in 1975 published a selection of O’Connor’s writings in a variety of genres. Moreover, Cork writer and actor, James McKeon, published a popular, warmly appreciative biography of O’Connor in 1998 but it is the American scholar, James Matthews, who has thus far published the only critical biography. Matthews’ biography is comprehensive and should be commended for its extensive investigation. However, Matthews also interpreted most of O’Connor’s activities in a rather harsh light. As John C. Kerrigan points out,

The only full-length biography of O’Connor is thorough and honest, yet completely dispiriting. It aims at a psychological approach but ultimately fails ... Matthews seems to take a moral stand against O’Connor with gratuitous offhand remarks throughout the book ... it is ironic that the life of an author known largely for his comic sensibility is represented by such a depressing book.

This researcher would also contend that Matthews’ analysis of some of O’Connor’s most important creative works is often cursory and unenlightening; an abundance of O’Connor’s more minor writings are also ignored. A substantial amount of the biography is taken up with Matthews’ speculations regarding O’Connor’s psychological state at various points in his life. The most useful aspect of Matthews’ four hundred and fifty page biography is the in-depth chronology it provides of O’Connor’s life and work.

Of course, the difficulty with writing a biography of O’Connor, or indeed surveying the secondary source material available, is that a complete bibliography has yet to be published. Instead, two select bibliographies have appeared to date. Evans and Harp’s collection helpfully contains a more up-to-date select and annotated bibliography by Kerrigan, and he situates it in tandem with the still informative select bibliography that was first published in Maurice Sheehy’s edited collection, *Michael/Frank* (1969).²⁰ Like any selection, however, both bibliographies are limited in scope; both also contain some classification errors.²¹ Kerrigan’s bibliography provides an informative list of libraries that are currently holding O’Connor papers in their Special Collections, and this illustrates the immediate problem in producing a

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²⁰ Kerrigan, Ibid., 397-446; Sheehy (ed.), *Michael/Frank*, 168-199. McKeon’s publication also includes a select bibliography but it seems to be based on Maurice Sheehy’s publication. Classification errors in Sheehy’s edition are repeated in McKeon’s work.

²¹ In relation to the Kerrigan bibliography published in *Frank O’Connor: New Perspectives*, it dates the first publication of *My Oedipus Complex and Other Stories* as 1969 instead of 1963; *Moses’ Rock* was first performed on 28 February 1938 and not 25 February 1937; *Time’s Pocket* was not written in collaboration with Hugh Hunt; O’Connor served as a director on the Abbey Theatre board from 1935-1939 and not 1937-1941; O’Connor’s *Paris Review* interview with Anthony Whittier was first published in 1957 and reprinted in 1958, while the bibliography provides a date of 1959 with no reference to the fact that it is another reprint date; apart from the mention of *Three Old Brothers and Other Poems*, there are no other listings for O’Connor’s original poetry, despite numerous references to the original poetry in the *Frank O’Connor: New Perspectives* chronology by John M. Burdett and Robert C. Evans. The chronology also contains some errors: the original poem ‘Peasants’ (1922) is listed as a short story; the original poem ‘Mozart’ is listed as an article. In relation to the Sheehy bibliography, the translation ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’ is listed as an original poem; the translation ‘The End of Egan O’Rahilly’ is listed as an original poem; the translation ‘The Stars are Astand’ is listed as an original poem; the original dramatic poem ‘At the Wakehouse’, *Theatre Arts Monthly*, x (June 1926), 412-414, is not listed; the original poem ‘Peasants’ (1922) is listed as a short story; the original poem ‘Mozart’ is listed as an article.
complete bibliography as O’Connor’s papers are scattered over numerous library collections. Mugar Memorial Library in Boston University has one of the largest and most significant collections. The library purchased the papers from O’Connor’s first wife, Evelyn Bowen, in 1969 but the collection has yet to be catalogued and the papers are randomly stored in boxes. Another important collection is in private ownership, held by O’Connor’s second wife, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy. The extensive number of documents, stored in boxes and filing cabinets, are also not properly catalogued. One of the most notable aspects to the O’Donovan Sheehy holding is a vast collection of letters by Frank O’Connor. The letters contain a wealth of information on O’Connor’s professional and private concerns but, because so little scholarly work has been performed on the collection, the letters are not properly organised, dated or annotated, and obviously have yet to be published. O’Donovan Sheehy recently donated part of this collection to University College Cork but the papers are not currently available for scholarly perusal; Boole Library is not due to begin cataloguing this donation until 2012. The fact that O’Connor was such a prolific writer, and the lack of a complete bibliography as well as the difficulty with examining his papers, partially explains why there is a scarcity of secondary source material available on the writer. However, this does not fully answer the question as to why O’Connor has suffered from critical neglect.

It would appear that the vast majority of scholarly work on O’Connor was published between the late 1960s and early 1980s and was chiefly of American authorship. A number of articles and edited publications have appeared in recent years, but it would seem that it is mainly because of American interest (which accounts for nearly all of the unpublished postgraduate theses on him) that his work has managed to survive into contemporary criticism. O’Connor’s most successful
creative works were in the short-story genre, a genre that seems to have attracted substantially less critical attention in Irish Studies than any other form of creative writing. Internationally, introductions to and stylistic theorising about the short story has produced several publications but these publications contain for the most part little or no mention of the Irish practitioners of the form (Joyce excluded).

Irish short-story writers produced their own studies of the genre, including O’Connor’s influential study, The Lonely Voice (1962), and Sean O’Faolain’s The Short Story (1948), and Irish writers also began to receive more critical attention with the appearance of such edited publications as Patrick Rafroidi and Terence Brown’s The Irish Short Story and James F. Kilroy’s The Irish Short Story: A Critical History.

Yet, the long shadows cast by the three ‘giants’ of twentieth-century Irish literature, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, seem to have focused most of the attention away from the genre. Joyce’s Dubliners and Beckett’s More Pricks than Kicks were largely ignored in the early days of Joycean and Beckettian criticism; in the case of Yeats, examination of his short fiction has been scant and has tended to focus on his occult interests in the late nineteenth century. There is also a prevailing attitude in the world of fiction publishing that the short story belongs to ‘the domain of apprenticeship … before the writer matures into the more serious version of the

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23 Rafroidi, Patrick & Terence Brown (eds), The Irish Short Story (Lille: Université de Lille, 1979); Kilroy, James F. (ed.), The Irish Short Story: A Critical History (Boston: Twayne, 1984).

24 Yeats’s short fiction was collected and introduced in this context in: Watson, G.J., W.B. Yeats: Short Fiction (London: Penguin, 1995). More recently, however, Yeats’s short stories have been assessed within the context of a fin de siècle modernist Irish short-story tradition: see Ingman, Heather, A History of the Irish Short Story (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 55-70.
saleable fiction writer – which is the novelist'. This devalued status has perhaps transferred into academia and resulted in a dearth of material on the subject.

Furthermore, from very early in his career O’Connor was critically established as an old-fashioned realist. O’Connor always loudly proclaimed his admiration for nineteenth-century realist writers such as Gogol, Maupassant and Chekhov; he especially professed the influence of Ivan Turgenev on his writing. ‘Old-fashioned realist’ was a term that, while not always meant to sound derogatory, helped to build O’Connor’s reputation as a dated and perspicuous writer, who wrote simple, funny, popular stories – or ‘coloured balloons’ as Patrick Kavanagh once termed them. The consensus seemed to be that his work did not merit academic explication. All of O’Connor’s fiction and drama, with the exception of a few stories set in England and which were mostly based on the experiences of the Irish diaspora, were placed in a local Irish setting (he once said that this was because he knew to a syllable how everything in Ireland can be said). Despite his belief in the subversive potential of place in the Irish short story (as discussed in Chapter Two), it was this strong sense of place that ultimately led to him being labeled as dated. Moreover, he was well known for his sometimes visceral criticisms of Irish life throughout his career. This did not endear him to the social and political establishment. Several of his books were banned over the years; he also endured an unofficial ‘blacklisting’ by the State authorities during World War II. The pressures of enlisting nationwide support and perpetuating a neutral consensus during the war years ensured the disappearance of O’Connor’s lucrative radio work, and O’Connor and his family endured financial hardship throughout the 1940s. At one stage, he was publicly denounced as an ‘anti-Irish Irishman’ in an editorial of the Irish Press (15 December 1949) for an article he had

just published which revealed some of the true social conditions in Ireland ('Ireland' in *Holiday*, 6 December 1949). O’Connor eventually went into exile in America for most of the 1950s where his career flourished (this explains much of the American interest in his work). When he returned to Ireland in September 1961, he gradually began to receive recognition and was awarded an honorary doctorate by Trinity College, Dublin, in July 1962. This reappraisal of his worth was all too brief and he died on 10 March 1966.

In the years following his death, O’Connor’s work continued to receive critical attention. Of course, not all of the reviews were positive and the reputation of being a dated and simplistic short-story writer began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Writing in 1978, Richard J. Thompson identified O’Connor’s worst faults as ‘a lack of complexity, occasionally muddy and ill-conceived plots, and a cloying nostalgic cheerfulness.’ A few years later Kevin O’Sullivan wrote that:

> the Ireland of today is no longer the Ireland of O’Connor’s stories. In O’Connor the Irish countryside still retains an almost pastoral quietude, the country town an almost medieval isolation, the people turned in upon themselves in amity or envy, indifferent for the most part to the world beyond their vision ... All that has since changed as it was bound to change with the intrusion into O’Connor’s Ireland of the modern world.

Terence Brown has noted this modern critical reception and has asserted that it has been:

> increasingly difficult for O’Connor to get his due as a writer in the new Ireland that has come into existence since Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, and since the Celtic Tiger roared in the 1990s, that knows little of the high romance which inspired a revolutionary generation, nor of the disillusionment and frustration of the first four decades of independence.

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Brown has concluded that 'it perhaps takes time for a writer like O’Connor who was so much of his time and place to be appreciated by succeeding generations.' By the end of the twentieth century most of O’Connor’s books were out of print. Recent events in Ireland and Britain would indicate a new interest being attached to O’Connor’s work. This is partially illustrated by the setting up of the annual Frank O’Connor International Short Story Festival in 2000 by the Cork-based Munster Literature Centre. The largest international monetary prize for a short-story collection is currently The Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, which is also organised by the Munster Literature Centre and in association with The Irish Times since 2006. Attention is also being given to his writings with the republication of his study of the short story, The Lonely Voice, in 2003. A new collection of his short stories, selected by the British writer Julian Barnes, was recently published by Penguin Classics, My Oedipus Complex and Other Stories (2005). Penguin also republished his autobiographies as a two-volume book, An Only Child and My Father’s Son (2005), and this publication was introduced by Declan Kiberd, who stated that the ‘volumes are justly counted among the classics of Irish writing’. In addition, a new Everyman edition of his writing was published in 2009, The Best of Frank O’Connor. These various ventures would suggest that O’Connor’s work will survive for a new popular readership in the twenty-first century. However, the critical attention remains limited and the aim of this thesis is to redress some of this imbalance.

Section one of Chapter One of this thesis returns O’Connor to his formative years in the lead up to the War of Independence and Civil War; it thereafter

contextualises him within the socio-political background of the 1920s. In section two of the chapter, O’Connor’s initial ventures in publishing in 1922, in the short-lived republican periodical *An Long*, are traced and analysed; O’Connor’s collection of unpublished original poetry up to 1923 is also evaluated in this section. O’Connor wrote a substantial number of original poems in the 1920s; he also gave a great deal of attention to translations of Irish-language poetry, which was published in *The Irish Statesman*. O’Connor taught himself Old Irish, Middle Irish and Modern Irish and his eight books of translated poetry traverse all three strands of the language. O’Connor did publish one original poem, ‘The Rosary’, in *The Catholic Bulletin* in 1923 and the third section of the chapter provides an evaluation of this poem, in addition to an account of the journal and the ritual of the Rosary; this is framed by an appraisal of O’Connor’s critical opinion on readers’ responses to literature. The fourth section of the chapter critically evaluates O’Connor’s poetry from 1923 to 1926. The original poetry was primarily sourced in the Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy private collection and the chapter provides the first sustained examination of O’Connor as poet. Dates are suggested, where necessary, for a number of these poems and close textual readings are provided. Some of the poems were posthumously published (but not reviewed) in the O’Connor special issue of *The Journal of Irish Literature* (1975) and the McKeon biography. Editorial differences between the manuscripts and the publications of relevant poems are traced in this chapter. The conclusions reached are significant. The poems that O’Connor wrote during the Civil War provide a clear insight into his thoughts whilst fighting as an anti-Treaty soldier. Up to now, scholarship has had to rely on memories of this experience in *An Only Child* (1961). In addition, by the time O’Connor published his first collection of short stories, *Guests of the Nation*, in 1931, he had moved away from republicanism. This thesis argues that O’Connor’s decision
to move away from his republican beliefs was not just inspired by his experiences in the War of Independence and Civil War, as is the standard critical explanation. Instead, a close examination of O'Connor's unpublished poetry reveals that he creatively explored his nationalist convictions and his war experiences throughout the 1920s. It was within his poetic work that O'Connor worked out his thinking on the subject, and it is this that is reflected in his more mature writings. The decision to turn away from Catholicism in the 1920s resulted in O'Connor struggling to comprehend his spirituality, and his difficulties can be similarly traced in the unpublished poetry from this time. This chapter further argues that the foundational themes in his mature writings were first propounded in his unpublished poetry. Finally, the standard critical perception of O'Connor and poetry is that he was an excellent translator and a bad poet; this research suggests instead that O'Connor's original poetry has literary merit.

Chapter Two advances an investigation of O'Connor's literary criticism in the 1920s. It was also within this time-frame that he would part ways with his former mentor, Daniel Corkery, and develop his friendship with George Russell. Details of this friendship are introduced in the first section of the chapter. In the second section, the Irish Ireland and re-Gaelicisation debates of the 1920s, particularly as they took place in the pages of The Irish Statesman, are inspected and their influence on O'Connor is examined. O'Connor's literary criticism is scrutinised in the third section of this chapter. His role in The Irish Statesman debates, and the consequent impact on his developing literary theories, is appraised. O'Connor's theories would manifest themselves more clearly in his mature criticism and the chapter traces the trajectory of his literary philosophies throughout his career. O'Connor's attitude toward Irish-language literature, the Irish Literary Revival, the influence of Corkery, literary realism, the notion of a national literature, and censorship are examined in the final
three sections of the chapter. Several of O’Connor’s private letters from this period are referenced. Held in the O’Donovan Sheehy collection, part of the research for this chapter necessitated the cataloguing and dating of some of the letters. An extensive archival search was also enacted in the research for the chapter and previously unsourced O’Connor material, some of which was published under his initials or the part Irish-language version of his real name, Michael Ó Donnabháin, has been included for perusal. The chapter makes the argument that it was in O’Connor’s early literary criticism that he first evinced theoretical formulations that he consistently maintained in his mature criticism. The debates of the 1920s also had a profound impact on the young writer, so much so that the experience left a lasting impression on his mature criticism and his creative writings.

In section one of Chapter Three, O’Connor’s progression from poetry to the short-story genre is charted. This section argues that an important part of this progression stemmed from the influence of the short stories O’Connor was reading at the time, and a description of this reading is mined from several archival sources. Section two provides a brief analysis of the short-story tradition, from the oral storytelling tradition to its present form. Within this exploration, styles, themes, writers and secondary sources are surveyed. The impact of this tradition on O’Connor is also reviewed. The development of the short-story genre in the aftermath of World War I, as well its rise in post-independence Ireland, is considered in section three, and this is framed by an examination of O’Connor’s theories of the short-story form as well as his growing disillusionment with the Church and State. Close textual readings of O’Connor’s early short stories, which were published in *The Irish Tribune*, *The Dublin Magazine* and *The Irish Statesman*, are undertaken in section four. The chapter makes the argument that his short-story reading during this period is borne out in the
craftsmanship displayed in these stories. The thematic concerns also result from this reading as well as the issues raised in his literary criticism. This is further exemplified in his first collection and new readings of the stories in *Guests of the Nation* are proffered. The critical reception of the collection when it was first published is also detailed. *Bones of Contention* (1936) is reappraised in section five. O’Connor’s ability as a short-story writer, the critical reception of his second volume and his social and political concerns at the time, is inspected. His parallel career as a librarian is also looked at. Section six of the chapter provides an overview of O’Connor’s career as a short-story writer and argues that the debates, reading material and issues that he concerned himself with in the 1920s and 1930s were central to his development as a short-story writer. This chapter is the longest in the thesis and this is perhaps apt given that O’Connor is best known as a short-story writer.

The final chapter of the thesis focuses on what could be considered the most neglected aspect of O’Connor’s *oeuvre*, his playwriting. A sustained archival investigation was attempted and the chapter evaluates work by O’Connor that has hitherto been ignored. Personal letters by O’Connor facilitated this examination and a dating process was also performed with this material. O’Connor’s initial dealings with the theatre in Cork, a history of the Abbey Theatre in the 1920s, and the circumstances behind O’Connor becoming a director of the national theatre are explored in section one. O’Connor’s theories of the theatre are evaluated in section two. His time on the Abbey board and achievements whilst a director are examined in section three. O’Connor’s early efforts at playwriting in the late 1920s are examined in section four. These plays were never staged and secondary material barely exists. Close attention is therefore afforded the plays, and these are read with a view to O’Connor’s social and political interests at the time. His four staged plays are
reviewed in section five and the critical reception of these plays is also detailed. As three of these plays constitute a historical trilogy, the readings are underpinned by a consideration of their historical references. O’Connor left the Abbey under difficult circumstances and the internal dispute is reappraised in the final section of the chapter. The chapter argues that O’Connor made a noticeable contribution to the Abbey during his short tenure; it also claims that had he persisted with playwriting, O’Connor had the ability to become a noteworthy dramatist.

The lack of a complete bibliography and the sparseness of available secondary material played a part in determining the focus of this research. What distinguishes this thesis from previous monographs on O’Connor is that a detailed archival investigation forms a large component of the research methodology. The thesis engages with a body of O’Connor’s critical and creative work that is not listed in the published bibliographies and has hitherto never been examined. In addition, the thesis has extensively sourced contemporary reviews of his work that have also not been detailed in the published bibliographies. Furthermore, the thesis re-appraises material that has not received critical analysis for decades.

Because of the scale of O’Connor’s output, the time-period examined was also an important consideration in the research for this thesis. The thesis concentrates on O’Connor’s work and life between the years 1922 and 1939. Of all the decades in his writing career, O’Connor’s writings from the 1920s have received practically no critical scrutiny. Critical analysis invariably begins with the publication of his first short-story collection, *Guests of the Nation*, in 1931. Yet, the 1920s was an industrious decade for O’Connor, particularly in the area of original poetry, short stories, and literary criticism. The condensed time-span allows for a narrowing of focus and provides an opportunity to more closely engage with the details of that
period. Moreover, an analysis of O’Connor’s work from the 1920s reveals that his more mature and better known literary works had their genesis in these early writings. In particular, his involvement with post-independence re-Gaelicisation debates had an enduring influence. The thesis argues that the social and political events of this decade, as well as the reading material from the 1920s, shaped O’Connor’s mature short-story writing style. Previously unexamined early short stories reveal that O’Connor had already developed what would become his signature technique before he wrote his better known collections.

O’Connor’s writings from the 1930s are also included within this thesis for a number of reasons. Two of O’Connor’s best collections were published in this decade, *Guests of the Nation* (1931) and *Bones of Contention* (1936). The impact of earlier debates and stances is clearly discernible in these two collections and the thesis analyses how his 1920s mindset manifested itself in his 1930s short stories. One of the most neglected areas of O’Connor’s work also dates from the 1930s – his playwriting as well as his time spent as a director on the board of the Abbey Theatre. What emerges from the concentrated time-span is a study of O’Connor and genre, as his experiments with genre were most prolific in the 1920s and 1930s. Because O’Connor experimented with so many literary genres at different stages of his career, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine all of his endeavours. Even still, this thesis provides an in-depth investigation of O’Connor’s work across a variety of literary forms, and moves beyond a narrowly-defined focus on his career as a short-story writer.
Chapter One

The Unpublished Poetry

O’Connor, the War of Independence and the Civil War

The seeds of Frank O’Connor’s intellectual and artistic endeavours were planted during the years of political revolution in Ireland. He came to consciousness at a time when the country was undergoing its protracted and bloody transition from a colonial state to an independent modern nation; this had a profound effect on the fledgling writer. While it was his former national schoolteacher, Daniel Corkery, who initially turned him away from reading English public-schoolboy stories, and stimulated a curiosity in both European literature and all-things Irish, it was the events of the 1916 Rising that sparked O’Connor’s interest in Irish cultural nationalism. In his autobiography, *An Only Child* (1961), O’Connor recalled that his initial reaction to the 1916 leaders was one of confusion and upset, but this changed as more details about the Rising emerged in the media:

The daily papers showed Dublin as they showed Belgian cities destroyed by the Germans, as smoking ruins inhabited by men with rifles and machine guns. At first my only reaction was horror that Irishmen could commit such a crime against England ... It was a difficult situation for a boy of twelve with no spiritual homeland but that of the English public schools, and no real friends but those imaginary friends he knew there ... The English shot the first batch of Irish leaders and this was a worse shock, for the newspapers said – the pro-British ones with a sneer – that several of them had been poets, and I was in favour of poets ... most of his [Patrick Pearse’s] poetry had been written in Irish ... I still had an old primer that had been thrown in a corner, and I started to re-learn all that I had forgotten. A revolution had begun in Ireland, but it was nothing to the revolution that had begun in me.1

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1 O’Connor, Frank, *An Only Child* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 154-55. O’Connor’s attitude was typical of popular sentiment at the time: ‘The uncertainty, bewilderment, hesitancy and ambiguity that characterised many reactions to the first fragmentary reports were quickly replaced, in the light of new information, by mingled feelings of despair at the folly of the rebels, pride in their gallantry, and
The 1916 Rising inspired the young boy to educate himself about the cultural history of the country. Through this education, O’Connor came to believe that he had finally found a sense of belonging, a badge of identity.

In *An Only Child*, O’Connor’s reflections on this period aligned his newly-determined journey towards adulthood with the country’s path to independence, with the internal ‘revolution’ becoming a psychological turning-point for the writer. Feelings of frustration, loneliness and alienation dissipated as the young O’Connor immersed himself in the pages of Irish legend, history, language and literature. Interested especially in the Irish language, O’Connor sought out Daniel Corkery, who advised him to join the Gaelic League. O’Connor discovered Corkery’s first collection of short stories soon after this, *A Munster Twilight* (1916), sought his old teacher out again and eventually became part of Corkery’s small intellectual group, the Twenty Club; all of this cemented O’Connor’s sense of pre-independence nationalism. O’Connor joined up as a Volunteer in the War of Independence but, due to his relative youth, saw little military action; he played mainly a propaganda role for the anti-Treaty side during the Civil War.

O’Connor would later recall his memories of the War of Independence and the Civil War in his autobiography.² The last chapter of the autobiography focused attention on the Civil War, and has received praise from the Irish historian, J.J. Lee, for conveying ‘the fetid atmosphere’ of this ‘sordid struggle’.*³ Yet, perhaps because of O’Connor’s youth and lack of combat action, the overall tone of the narrative is often ironic and light-hearted; in contrast to this, Sean O’Faolain’s account in his

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autobiography, *Vive Moi!* (1963), is much grittier in tone and harsher in detail.⁴ O’Connor’s tone is also perhaps suggestive of his temperament by the time he came to write his autobiography. As Ruth Sherry points out, O’Connor’s first published account of the Civil War – an essay called ‘A Boy in Prison’ (1934) – covers the same ground ‘but differs in emphasis and is darker and more bitter in many details than the later version’.⁵ In February 1923 O’Connor was captured by Free State soldiers and held in Gormanstown Internment Camp just outside Dublin until December of that year. O’Connor never went to university but he later considered this period in his life as rich an education as anything a college could have offered him, as he became acquainted with men like Frank Gallagher, Sean MacEntee, and Sean T. O’Kelly.⁶ By the time he left prison, O’Connor’s attitude was in the process of transformation. One result of this change was the beginning of a shift in attitude towards organised religion and governmental politics. As he later stated in his autobiography, ‘what we [both sides of the Civil War] were bringing about was a new Establishment of Church and State in which imagination would play no part’.⁷ He began to view the Catholic Church and the Free State government as dominating forces in Irish society, and this too had a deep impact on the emerging young writer.

Along with O’Connor’s witnessing of atrocities committed during the Civil War, a hunger strike organised by the anti-Treaty prisoners in Gormanstown also

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⁴ See, for example, O’Faolain, Sean, *Vive Moi!* (1963; Boston and Toronto: Atlantic Monthly Press; repr. 1964), 175-179.
⁶ Gallagher later became editor of *The Irish Press* and went on to write an account of the Civil War in *The Four Glorious Years* (1953) and an examination of partition in *The Indivisible Island* (1957). Sean MacEntee had been educated as an engineer but was also a lover of art and literature and had published some poetry; he introduced the nineteen-year-old O’Connor to the poetry of Heine during this time of internment. He became Minister of Finance in Eamon de Valera’s government in 1932. Sean T. O’Kelly later became President of Ireland in 1945.
influenced his new line of thinking. The purpose of the hunger strike was to embarrass
the Free State government into releasing the prisoners or, at the very least, to initiate a
politically expedient situation that would break the stalemate that had been caused by
Eamon de Valera’s ceasefire order (as the prisoners were left in a temporary political
vacuum with the anti-Treaty side’s refusal to officially surrender and the Free State
government’s reluctance to release these soldiers):

the sizeable anti-Treatyite faction had yet to accept the legitimacy of the state …
Although the fighting stopped in April 1923, the government still had to house
about 10,000 internees, some of whom went on hunger strike. There was no
official willingness, despite protestations from prominent clergymen, to allow an
early mass release.*

O’Connor, along with just two other republican prisoners, bravely voted against the
thousand or so men in his camp who were for the hunger strike of November 1923.
He thought it an absurd idea and doomed to failure. It is quite possible that O’Connor
was also influenced by the political rhetoric of *The Irish Statesman* as he regularly
received a copy of the journal in Gormanstown, and George Russell had written an
editorial denouncing the hunger strike and questioning the thinking behind it. The
strike was eventually called off and O’Connor witnessed the debasement of his fellow
prisoners as they clambered on top of each other in the rush for food. It left a lasting
impression. Years later, O’Connor recalled that:

We knew we should never again find ourselves with so many men we respected
and we felt their humiliation as though it were our own. In the years to come,
travelling through the country, I would meet with the survivors of the period … ‘The Lost Legion’ I called them. There they were in small cities and
towns, shopkeepers or civil servants, bewildered by the immensity of the

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9 Russell, George [AE], ‘Notes and Comments’, *The Irish Statesman* (3 November 1923), 227. In the
second edition of *The Irish Statesman* in September 1923, Russell supported strategies that sustained
the Treaty and this inevitably aligned the journal with Cumann na nGaedheal policy.
10 For more information on the hunger strike, see: Ferriter, Diarmaid, *The Transformation of Ireland
The experience intensified O’Connor’s disaffection with idealistic politics, provoked a strong sense of estrangement from his current convictions, and consequently increased his belief in the importance of maintaining individual liberty at all costs. In 1952 O’Connor would write his memories of prison into a short story that was pointedly entitled ‘Freedom’. In terms of his intellectual and artistic development, O’Connor’s lifelong struggle with the role of the State and Catholicism in Irish life, and his conflicted yet deeply engaged relationship with the country and the people, had its roots in his Civil War experiences. It was this tension of contraries that became central to his writings, and this was to prove an intrinsic leitmotif.

1920s Ireland

Ireland in the 1920s was a country that was attempting to consolidate itself in the aftermath of the dramatic upheaval of the war years. The road to war had been a time of romantic idealisation and for younger men in rural Ireland a time of adventure and possibility. As O’Connor remembers his Volunteer days: ‘If it was nothing else, it was a brief escape from tedium and frustration to go out the country roads on summer evenings, slouching along in knee breeches and gaiters, hands in the pockets of one’s trench-coat and hat pulled over one’s right eye.’ Post-independence Ireland was a notably different affair. Conservatism and a concentrated imperviousness to sources of pluralism became the dominating aspect of the Free State’s policies. The Cumann na nGaedheal government was primarily focused on stabilising the country, via

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fiscally-tight economic policies, and setting in place a system that was devoted to the
defence of a model rooted in social and religious homogeneity. Despite the post­
revolutionary settlement (the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921) which provoked a civil war, 
partition in fact aided the homogenisation of the twenty-six counties, resulting in a 
predominately rural, conservative Catholic State which was ‘marked by a profound 
continuity with the social patterns and attitudes of the latter half of the nineteenth 
century’, according to Terence Brown. Moreover, there was a relative coalescence 
between rural and urban society, in part because of the geographical backgrounds of 
many civil servants and politicians, but also because of the movement of 
labour between town and country, which was to strongly effect the development of 
the new State:

The values and familialist social structures of the farm world were transferred to the 
shop and town, thereby ensuring that the cultural and political influence of the 
small and strong farmers in the country was augmented by that of the grocers and 
small-traders of the town ... The combined forces of these two social groups in 
modern Ireland, the farmers and the tradesmen, together with such of their 
offspring as could find roles in the professions was enormously influential in 
fashioning the political, social and cultural moulds of the independent state. 
Their economic prudence, their necessarily puritanical, repressive sexual mores 
and nationalistic conservatism, encouraged by a priesthood and Hierarchy 
drawn considerably from their number, largely determined the kind of country 
which emerged.

There were also many similarities between the main political parties and their 
respective movements towards a more moderate brand of nationalism in the first 
decade of independence; the principal differences lay perhaps in their memory of the 
Civil War and the Catholic Church’s support for the elected Cumann na nGaedheal 
party. However, while the Catholic Church supported the pro-Treatyites during the 
war, Church-State relations in the aftermath of independence appear not to have been


straightforward. The enforcement of the new regime’s sanctioned executions of anti-Treatyites, according to John M. Regan, ‘awoke [Catholic Church leaders] to the fact that they had mortgaged themselves to a Government which fell short of their own professed Christian principles.’\textsuperscript{16} In spite of this, the Catholic Church sought to help to reinforce the legitimacy of the State. The Church’s support for the post-Treaty State was perhaps to be expected as the Church aimed to use its ‘religious capital’ – which constituted the loyalty of the majority of the people – in exchange for other forms of capital, namely social, economic and political.\textsuperscript{17} This took the form of business influence, access to the power of governmental authority, and a dominant presence in Irish social networks and educational institutions. The State was also quick to draw on the reserves of social legitimacy enjoyed by the Church at the time. Newly-elected politicians openly expressed their personal piety and publicly reinforced the idea that they were the elected representatives of a Catholic state. The Church focused its strongest concerns on the area of sexual morality. This was an abiding concern during this period, and modern dancing, the cinema, divorce, foreign fashions, ‘company-keeping’ at dance-halls, ‘bad books’, English newspapers and cheap magazines: all became targets of pastoral denunciations.

Alongside the religious safeguarding of morality, the Irish intellectual climate was distinctly underwhelming. While ‘the political, institutional and constitutional history of the new State is decidedly more advanced than either cultural or intellectual historiography’,\textsuperscript{18} the general consensus seems to be that the intellectual history of the early decades was largely undistinguished. Irish universities provided only modest


\textsuperscript{17} For more details on this notion of religious capital, see Inglis, Tom, ‘Religion, Identity, State and Society’, Cleary, Joe and Claire Connolly (eds), \textit{The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 62.

contributions to intellectual thought in this decade. The country had a political culture that was conceptually weak; there was also an intellectual inertia in society and the risen bourgeoisie seemed more concerned with 'respectability' than the development of the mind. Inadequate funding was provided for most cultural and artistic institutions and innovations (projects concerned with the revival of the Irish language were the notable exception). The education system was largely managed in defence of the social structure and governmental policy, and 93% of children did not advance beyond a national school education. Most importantly for the writers of the period, the advance of a censorious culture, culminating in the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929, retarded the development of Irish literature; in addition to this, there were few outlets available for cultural and social expression at this time.\(^\text{19}\) Ireland in the 1920s, in short, was a place where a conservative brand of politics, a mostly stagnant and unimaginative economic policy, a policing of sexual matters, poor living conditions, Spartan allocation of finances for those less fortunate in society, and a generally anti-intellectual attitude was established. This was the world in which Frank O'Connor first began to write.

O'Connor's war experiences marked the beginning of his passage from romantic adolescence to more independent realistic adulthood, but he was an adult who also developed a mixed attitude towards his country. His love for Ireland was sustained in the aftermath of the War of Independence and the Civil War but O'Connor also became increasingly disillusioned with Free State government and Church policies. His more immediate concern on being released from prison, however, was to find a job, and this was not an easy task since he had fought on the

‘wrong side’ during the Civil War – ‘since I had taken the loser’s side I found that ex-gaolbirds like myself did not get whatever positions were available under the new government.’ He did, however, benefit from the new government’s Irish-language revival policy. The intensified use of Irish in primary schools after February 1922 meant that teachers, a large proportion of whom knew little Irish, had to undergo crash courses to familiarise themselves with the now ‘recognised … national language’ of the State. O’Connor had already gained a qualification as an Irish-language teacher, having attended a Gaelic League Summer School in 1919; he had also spent a few weeks teaching in the Cork countryside before the war put an end to this work. Even though the pay was meagre, he resumed this role for a few months after leaving prison, teaching Irish to the teachers at a local Protestant school in Cork city. O’Connor’s standard of Irish had greatly benefited from his continued study of the language while he was interned. It was during this time that O’Connor struggled to find his own literary voice, and he would spend the first decade of his writing career doing this: ‘Although he could not see it at time’, William Tomory has observed, ‘for a decade O’Connor served an apprenticeship to the literary and dramatic arts, his creative abilities being challenged by the demands of one genre after the other.’

In the 1920s O’Connor’s conscious ambition was to become a poet, though in fact he was learning how to write across a much wider range of literary forms.

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Early Writings

O’Connor’s first attempt at writing amounted to a translation of Joachim Du Bellay’s sonnet, ‘Heureux Qui Comme Ulysse’, which was published in a local political weekly in 1920.23 O’Connor also mentions in his autobiography An Only Child that he wrote a prize-winning essay in Irish on Turgenev in 1923. He submitted the Turgenev essay to a national competition while in Gormanstown and won first prize, worth seven pounds, which he never received. Details of the competition or a copy of this essay appears to not have survived in O’Connor’s papers, but this is hardly surprising given that he was imprisoned when he sent off his perhaps only copy to the competition. What O’Connor fails to mention in An Only Child is that in the same period he also contributed four poems to the short-lived republican periodical, An Long. An Long was founded by Corkery’s ‘Twenty Club’ in Cork. James Matthews, O’Connor’s biographer, has described the periodical as ‘virulently Republican’.24 It ran for only three issues (May to July 1922) before being suppressed by the Free State. Both O’Connor and O’Faolain’s autobiographies mention the Twenty Club but make no reference to An Long. The standard critical introduction to Corkery, Patrick Maume’s ‘Life that is Exile’: Daniel Corkery and the Search for Irish Ireland (1993), also provides no mention of An Long, but it does contain a short synopsis of the Twenty Club.25 O’Connor’s poems in the first issue (published under the initials of his

23 O’Connor, An Only Child, 89. Du Bellay was a sixteenth-century French poet and ‘Heureux Qui Comme Ulysse’ is about a traveller who is thinking fondly of home; home means more to him than all the famous sights he has seen on his travels. O’Connor’s romantic nationalism at the time perhaps influenced his decision to translate the poem. The attempt to trace this translation has been unsuccessful to date; there is little information to work off as no further details on the weekly paper or the date are given in the autobiography; O’Connor does mention in An Only Child that the translation received praise in an edition of the Sunday Independent but this edition has not yet been located and no other details have been found in the O’Connor collections or secondary sources examined for this thesis.
real name, M.O D.) were ‘Invictus’ and ‘Mozart’. ‘Invictus’ is a simple two-stanza poem:

You say ‘for this the heroes died.’
Oh little mouths that damn the dead.
If none yo27 lying boasts denied
Surely the dead would have replied
For Ireland’s soul instead.

Ah! Take the offerings that they give
With grateful hearts and cringe before,
And see your soldiers, fugitives
In heaven and hell join hands and live
And raise the flag once more.

The date of publication indicates that the poem was a protest at the ratification of the Treaty in the Dáil on January 14 of that year. The poem is a lament over the betrayal of Ireland’s dead rebels. It is clear from the poem that O’Connor’s mindset at the end of the War of Independence was noticeably different from his eventual repudiation of romantic nationalism in his later years. Some of the language in the poem – little, damn, lying boasts, cringe – illustrates O’Connor’s anger over the Treaty. ‘Invictus’ is also the name of a popular poem by the nineteenth-century English poet, William Ernest Henley. Henley’s poem was originally untitled when it was first published in 1888 but it was subsequently republished under this title in 1900:

‘Invictus’ by William Ernest Henley.28

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

27 The poor quality of the print has resulted in this word being almost impossible to make out, except for ‘yo’.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
    I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
    My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
    Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
    Finds and shall find me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
    How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
    I am the captain of my soul.

As well the rhythmic emulation of Henley’s poem, it would appear that O’Connor was making deliberate reference to sentiments expressed in the earlier ‘Invictus’. Despite ‘going through the wars’ – albeit in Henley’s case, this was as a victim of tuberculosis in childhood, suffering the amputation of a leg as an adolescent, and dealing with an infection in the other foot as a young man – his spirit was not conquered. O’Connor’s poem reveals that he was still very much caught up in his pre-independence republicanism. The poem urges Irish political leaders to respect the suffering and sacrifice that republicans had made and to continue the fight for full independence. O’Connor declared in an interview in 1957 that he had fought on the anti-Treaty side during the Civil War simply because that was what all the writers of the time were doing; it was not for any republican reason. The poem suggests otherwise and shows that his political ideology at the time was staunchly republican.

O’Connor’s second poem in the same issue, ‘Mozart’, is a juvenile sonnet, which celebrates freedom, love and nature:

All day the drifting rain-sheet rose and fell
    Above the streets and houses, the slow hours

29 For more information on Henley and ‘Invictus’, see: Cohen, Ibid., 191-196.
Like fettered convicts crept into the cell
Of night, then softly came the fragrant showers
Of your clear melody unchangeable,
The paths of spring, the incense, and the flowers.

The persona, while dealing with grey skies now, is optimistic that the fragrant spring showers will bring a fresh outlook. This is perhaps a symbolic reference to the hope that the looming threat of civil war would dissipate. ‘Peasants’, which was published in *An Long* in June 1922, is also a sonnet.\(^{31}\) As mentioned in the Introduction to the thesis, two select bibliographies of O’Connor’s *oeuvre* have been published by John C. Kerrigan and Maurice Sheehy; James McKeon also published a bibliography which appears to be based on Sheehy’s edition. There is no mention of ‘Peasants’ in Kerrigan’s work but the other two bibliographies class it as a short story, perhaps mistaking it for an earlier edition of O’Connor’s 1936 short story of the same name. There is also no mention of it in Matthews’ biography, perhaps because it was published under an Irish version of O’Connor’s real name, ‘M. O Donnabhain’. Similarly, ‘Mozart’ was also classed as an article in Sheehy and McKeon’s bibliographies and not mentioned at all in Kerrigan’s bibliography.\(^{32}\) ‘Peasants’ is comparable in tone to ‘Mozart’, and is full of admiration for the land’s labourers whose hearts are like the heart of this ‘broken earth’, and despite the ‘darkness’ behind them, their ‘feet tramp to the sound/ Of harpstrings/ ... / The vastness of the sky filled with their calls.’ It provides a romantic image of Irish peasants who, despite the dark times, are proud patriots of their country. O’Connor’s depiction of the peasants reveals that he was still very much influenced by Corkery’s brand of cultural


nationalism at this time. In the third issue of *An Long*, in July 1922, O’Connor contributed a three-quatrain rhymed poem with a four-beat (basically iambic) octosyllabic line, ‘Un Peu de Musique’.\(^{33}\)

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Slowly along the ivory keys
   Your listless fingers stray in a dream,
Like bubbles bursting on a stream
Of rich unbroken harmonies.

Ah, leave your magic there, the gloom
   In dim cascades falls everywhere,
And come, the clean depth of the air
Waits us outside this silent room.

The Heaven drains its cup of lights
   Above us and its peace is ours,
Softly the street-lamps shake like flowers
Upon the altar of the night.
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This is another pointed reference to civil war but this time the tone is patently melancholic. The Civil War had been raging for a month by this time and this explains O’Connor’s gloomier depiction. The speaker talks to an unnamed second person, a pianist who cannot find the enthusiasm to play, caught as s/he is in a surreal situation, a darkening ‘silent room’ that has no space for music. The light is failing and death looms for all of them. What these early published poems display is O’Connor’s apprehensions over the country’s progression towards civil war. He had not yet achieved command of his own creative voice but these poems reveal an already strong awareness of craftsmanship. What also survives from these early years is a collection of manuscript poetry that O’Connor never published. The known surviving manuscripts, a list of which was published in Maurice Sheehy’s bibliography, are located in Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy’s private collection of

\(^{33}\) M. O’D [O’Connor, Frank]. ‘Un Peu De Musique’, *An Long*, 1:3 (July 1922), 4. O’Connor’s line formatting of the poem in 1922 has been preserved in the reproduction here; this methodology is maintained for all poems reprinted in the thesis.
Of this published list of fifteen poems there are two poems currently missing from the uncatalogued collection, ‘An Old Woman Leaves the Workhouse’ and ‘The Sonnet’. A selection of these poems was posthumously published in the O’Connor special issue of The Journal of Irish Literature in 1975, which also included a new previously unmentioned poem, ‘The Shadow’.

**The Unpublished Poetry – Part I**

From the outset of his career O’Connor was drawn towards poetry; it was the genre to write in to express his creative imagination. Sean Hendrick remembered that:

> From the time I first met him Michael’s chief and almost only ambition was to become a poet, and hardly a day went by without a poem or two being turned out by him, and indeed for some years from 1924 onwards it remained poetry, either original or translations from the Irish poets.

Sean O’Faolain also recalled O’Connor’s penchant for poetry during these early years: ‘He had, and has, a magnificent reading voice and a bottomless memory, and he would stalk along reciting Gaelic and English poems’. It was the genre that O’Connor was most captivated by as a young teenager – ‘I did care madly for poetry, good and bad, without understanding why I cared’. Despite a youthful immersion in a broad and eclectic range of reading material, expanded at a later date by Corkery...

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34 Sheehy, Michael/Frank, 178-179.
35 Matthews, James (ed.), ‘A Frank O’Connor Number’, The Journal of Irish Literature, IV:1 (January 1975), 19-25. O’Connor rarely dated any of his writings and this thesis is largely indebted to the dating research that was completed on the poems by Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy, Prof. Maurice Sheehy and Prof. James Matthews. Any difference of opinion that the present writer has in relation to dates is explained in the following pages.
36 Born in 1900, Sean Hendrick was working as an insurance clerk in Cork when he first met O’Connor in 1919. He had called to see him, with a letter of introduction from Corkery, with the proposal of starting a literary and debating society. While this debating society did not materialise, O’Connor did persuade Hendrick to join the Volunteers and they both served as members of A Company, 1st Cork Brigade of the IRA. It was the start of a lifelong friendship. After the Civil War, Hendrick contributed various articles to The Irish Statesman and the Dublin Magazine, was co-founder with O’Connor of the Cork Drama League, and for the rest of his life was heavily involved in the cultural life of Cork.
38 O’Faolain, Vive Moi!, 236.
who introduced him to a variety of mainly nineteenth-century poetry and prose writers (which included Browning, Shelley, Chekhov, Turgenev, Whitman and Tolstoy), O'Connor humorously remembered his reading taste as having a marked attraction for poems about death and dying:

Though my love of poetry sprang from my mother, my taste, I fear, was entirely O'Donovan. Nature would seem to have intended me for an undertaker’s assistant, because in any book of verse I read I invariably discovered elegies on dead parents, dead wives, dead children, and, though my knowledge of poetry expanded, that weakness has persisted, and my favourite poems would be bound to include Bridges’ ‘Perfect Little Body,’ Landor’s ‘Artemidora, Gods Invisible,’ De La Mare’s mighty poem on the suicide that begins ‘Steep hung the drowsy street,’ Hardy’s great series on his dead wife, and a mass of Emily Dickinson.

His attraction for the poetry of Blake too, and the associative definition of the poet as a romanticised revolutionary, also perhaps fitted with his own republican spirit at the time and spurred him in the direction of poetry.

This captivation by the theme of death is evident in the earliest surviving poem, ‘An Chros’ (‘The Cross’), which was written in Irish in 1921 while O’Connor was serving as a Volunteer in the War of Independence. According to Pádraig Ó Liatháin, the poem was written in a mixture of Old Irish compounded words (which O’Connor invented in the work) and modern Irish, in an eighteenth-century Irish-language poetic metre that had a combination of either three or four vowel stresses per line. It is a five-quatrain conceit that focuses on the literal death of Christ on the cross:

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40 Ibid.
42 I am indebted to Pádraig Ó Liatháin, Department of Irish, Trinity College, Dublin, for his assistance in providing a rough translation of this poem. While I am aware that this prose translation is committing the ‘Heresy of Paraphrase’, it is, I would argue, a worthwhile project in terms of allowing one to gain an insight into O’Connor’s thinking during the War of Independence. On this notion of the ‘Heresy of Paraphrase’, see Matterson, Stephen & Darryl Jones, Studying Poetry (London: Hodder, 2000), 79.
The persona of the poem is nearby during the crucifixion and observes the poor people’s hope that Jesus still lives, in spite of his dying in front of their eyes. The dispassionate speaker urges the people to accept the death; s/he has looked inside Christ’s temple and the ‘arrogant crowd’ had not failed in their task. Resurrection has not taken place – Jesus is dead and can no longer hear them. The final stanza is particularly nebulous and perhaps means that this type of killing is a recurring event. The ‘man of arrogance’ could be God, or an anonymous figure of authority, and the speaker, while slightly mocking him, is also highlighting his/her own helplessness in the situation. God, for reasons of perhaps pride, allowed the crucifixion of his son, and the death of sons is a daily cycle. As the poem was written during the War of

43 The modern standard of spelling for Irish did not exist when O’Connor wrote this poem, but there are some errors in grammar in the poem too. I am indebted to Conall Ó Murchadha for this point.
Independence, O'Connor's representation of the crucifixion could be read as a conduit metaphor for depicting the officially-sanctioned killing of loved ones. The third-person 'her' in the third stanza could be Jesus's mother, representing mothers everywhere mourning the death of their sons.

Even in a prose translation, the language appears laboured and affected in places, with the presence of no less than six exclamation marks culminating in a poor poetic attempt at introducing heightened emotion. O'Connor's use of his own creatively-compounded Old Irish vocabulary would indicate that he was attempting a type of imitation of Early Irish religious poetry but it could also mean that this was not a poem intended for the contemporary public reader, or rather that it was not intended as any sort of public commentary on religious beliefs. The poem could be read as the first step in O'Connor's growing personal disillusionment with the tenets of nationalism and Christianity; this is especially pertinent if one links the poem to his autobiographical admission that this began to develop during the war years. The most interesting aspect to the weak poem is the presence of an outsider as the alienated speaking voice, since the 'lonely voice' was a theme that would eventually come to dominate O'Connor's entire body of work. This is the only known surviving work that O'Connor wrote during the War of Independence.

'My Last Duchess' (1922/23), O'Connor's next poem, was dedicated to 'Eily Gould.' Eileen Gould was Sean O'Faolain's girlfriend at the time and would eventually become his wife in 1928; all three were good friends in these early years. It is a forty-three-line poem written mainly in a heroic couplet rhyming pattern. The poem has an overt female persona which was unusual in O'Connor's original poetry (or in his translation choices for that matter – 'The Old Woman of Beare' and Lament

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for Art O’Leary are obvious exceptions). The female voice attempts to describe to a restless young man the charms of Cork city, while he longs to escape to Florence. Colourful and vivid images of Christmas-time are evoked. She brings him to the church and they observe the innocent beauty of a young boy giving his toy to the baby in the crib. The landscape and ancient history of the country are mentioned too but the young man remains unimpressed:

‘Our fathers had much honour where we tread,
And where this people’s hearts beats is no cold.’
And when one day I left out fold on fold
My long black hair and half to tease him tied
It back like the hair of some young Geraldine bride
We’d seen in an old family picturebook,
He fixed me with his cold despairing look
And said, ‘Those Irish lords were surely strong,
They left such ruins for a tinker’s song!’
Florence for him! Or is he satisfied
Having another woman by his side?
He would remember, never having known
Love as a thought that bears no brooding on.

Finally, she challenges him to observe the city in all its morning glory:

‘To school the heart,’ I told him, ‘rise at six
With me for Mass and watch the city’s tricks,
For still it claims an earlier morning hour:
Late as it closes in, with the first flower
It sends its petals forth, and street and lane
Quiver at morning’s call and fold again,
And stretch to the full, and bells break overhead,
And pious folk on clanging pathways tread,
And Shandon shakes the night mist from his head.’

This is the most ordinary everyday image of Cork that she encapsulates in her examples, but these lines are the most lyrical in the poem. The poem ends at this point so one never knows if the young man changes his attitude towards his native city. What the poem would seem to represent is the internal struggle that was taking place

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46 This was something that O’Connor himself had done as a small child and he recalled this memory again in An Only Child, 136-37.
in O'Connor at this time, between his desire to flee Cork for what he considered 'civilisation' and his loyalty and love for the place. It is the quotidian details, the people and their customary habits, that materialise as having the strongest hold on the young poet’s imagination while he engages with his contradictory attitude towards Ireland.

However, the title provides an intertextual reference to Robert Browning’s poem of the same name and suggests that O'Connor had more in mind than simply creating a colourful image of Cork city. O'Connor’s poem has a similar technical style to Browning’s as both comprise rhyming pentameters. Both poems also employ enjambment, as sentences do not always conclude at the end of lines. Both are dramatic monologues and both have a speaker, a listener and an occasion. Both also convey portraits: Browning of the Duchess but also of Renaissance society, and O'Connor of Cork city. There are differences too: Browning’s poem is thirteen lines longer, has a male persona and the listener never speaks. In Browning’s poem, the speaker is based on Alfonso II, the Duke of Ferrara. His dead wife is the ‘last Duchess’ and, while entertaining an emissary who has come to negotiate the Duke’s marriage to the daughter of another powerful family, the Duke shows him a portrait of his last wife. The majority of the poem is taken up with his biased revelations about her. Art, sex and violence are intertwined in the Duke’ recall. For the reader of the poem, the intellectual exercise involves interpreting the picture of the Duchess that the Duke creates and thus forming an opinion of both characters. The dramatic monologue allows the reader to see the Duchess from her husband’s perspective but Browning inserts enough inferences to suggest that the Duke is a dominating, homicidal character. A second, more appreciative, image of the Duchess emerges

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from the reader paying close attention to the words. The moral judgement is left to the reader. In a similar fashion, it is not the young man that the speaker is trying to convince in O'Connor’s poem. It is the reader that must judge Cork and decide for him or herself. History, religion, family, landscape and the way of life: each in turn is either a Joycean net or a home-based attraction. O'Connor leaves the monologue open-ended and subject to a reader’s contemplation. However, the dedication to Eileen Gould (and it was unusual for O'Connor to include a dedication) does suggest an authorial sympathy with the Duchess; because O'Connor’s poem has a female speaker, it also intimates that O'Connor ultimately favoured the attractions of Cork over a more cosmopolitan location. ‘My Last Duchess’ was not a bad poetic effort by O'Connor but he never attempted to publish it.

‘On Guard’ (1922) was O’Connor’s first venture into creatively representing his combat experiences during the war. The young soldier in the poem is equivocating about his role in the war and, in a second-person narrative, questions each aspect of his current identity, which is ‘Part-soldier, part-dreamer, part-lover’. The soldier queries his ‘madness’ in standing guard over an empty ‘great house’ on a dark wet night, where his fellow-soldiers are stationed:

Night, under trees with a rifle,
Dawn, with a drizzle of rain –

Part-soldier, part-dreamer, part-lover
That dawn will not come again.

Your comrades are talking or resting
In the great house that shines through the trees
Where only the lamps and tall mirrors
Are left of the old revelries.

48 O’Donovan, Michael [O’Connor, Frank], ‘On Guard’, Poetry File, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin. 1922 is the date given by Maurice Sheehy on the actual manuscript, held in the O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, and in his bibliography in Michael/Frank, 178. James Matthews gives the date as 1925 in The Journal of Irish Literature, 23, but gives no reason as to why he altered the date. The thesis has made the decision to largely comply with Maurice Sheehy’s dating; Matthews never published a bibliography.
Your comrades are resting or talking; 
You shoulder the weight of your gun
And join in the madness of guarding
A house to which no man will come.

And dawn anchors over the city,

Not laughing but furtive and staid –
How great is your folly, part-soldier,
To carry a rifle unpaid.

Dawn comes, as it came the first morning;

Depeopled and cold is the earth –
How great is your folly, part-dreamer,
And folly the pain of your birth.

In the poem, the soldier feels that his task of guarding an empty ‘big house’ is symbolic of his role in the war; his life has become devoid of meaning and is detached from any real purpose. His folly in joining up has resulted in a painful awakening to the reality of the war-time situation. When the ‘part-lover’ side of the soldier is addressed, it is unclear to whom the poem is referring when the object of his love is depicted:

She sleeps in a coolness of linen,
And no man has slept by her side –
How great is your folly, part-lover,
To dream she would care if you died.

This virginal female is unaware of his suffering and loneliness; the present-simple and present-perfect tenses for sleep imply that she continues to remain in an oblivious state throughout the war. ‘She’ is perceived by the soldier to be unconcerned about the possible mortal consequences of his situation, and no other reference to her is made throughout the poem. She could be some young girl he adored from afar, or a girl from home that he had to leave behind; she might also be O’Connor’s attempted depiction of ‘Cathleen Ni Houlihan’, uncaring about the personal sacrifice the young
soldier is making for her. As dawn approaches, he makes the decision to keep his soldier's post but he is aware that youth is passing while he is engaged in fighting a war he is no longer sure of; uncertainty and loneliness pervade the poem:

Oh, shoulder your gun in the darkness,
   And tramp up and down in the rain –
Part-soldier, part-dreamer, part-lover,
   Your youth will not come again.

The poem displays O'Connor's efforts to experiment with form and contains a mixture of stanza lengths with an overall irregular rhyming scheme, no strictly defined metre and a varied line-length pattern. This perhaps was an attempt to play with poetic form to indicate mood - there is an unpredictable rhythm and an unstructured disharmony to the shape and feel of the poem. An observation by Thomas Flanagan regarding O'Connor's short stories also rings true for this early poem: 'a darker thread ... runs through the stories, connecting them and carrying us to what was to remain a centre of his moral vision - a detestation of the abstract, of abstraction as it acts upon and against character.'^49 'On Guard' gives a direct insight into O'Connor's own feelings while he was engaged in fighting for an abstract ideal. The soldier's sense of alienation from his military activities aligns itself with O'Connor's mature recollection of his experience: 'My soldiering was rather like my efforts at being a musician; it was an imitation of the behaviour of soldiers rather than soldiering.'^50 'On Guard' set the stage for later prose depictions of the War of Independence and the Civil War in O'Connor's first collection of short stories, *Guests of the Nation* (1931).

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^50 O'Connor, Frank, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 149.
‘Ambush’⁵¹ (October 1922) also anticipated some of the stories in *Guests of the Nation*, especially the story ‘Laughter’. The latter half of that story, where the young men fail in their attempted ambush of a Free State lorry, is the entire focus of this poem and details a real Civil War experience of O’Connor’s, which he shared with Sean O’Faolain (Whelan in the poem), another Irregular named Vincent O’Leary, and Sean Hendrick. The poem is prosaic in style and it is only the actual arrangement of the words on the page that give the impression that this is a poem; it could easily be read as a short story and provides the first hint of O’Connor’s eventual abandoning of poetry in preference for the short-story form:

We crouch in the darkness,
In the wet grass
In the failing rain,
Whelan and Sean and I –
Vincent carries a bomb.

Whelan wears yellow gloves,
I see them hanging dead from his left hand,
In his right hand he carries
A dark revolver.
No one has passed beneath the lamp,
Darkness, dreariness, only
The broad bright window
Of the publichouse opposite
Has life. There they are singing but
We do not speak a word.
Dreariness. The wet cloth hugs my knees.

Suddenly a low hum;
Nerves tauten.
Closer, closer,
Louder, as if the general judgment
Drove in a Lancia car,
To our undoing
Churning the mud.

Something blots the bright window;

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⁵¹ O’Donovan, Michael [O’Connor, Frank], ‘Ambush’, Poetry File, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin. An exact copy of the manuscript poem was published in Matthews (ed.), *The Journal of Irish Literature*, 19-20. A complete version was also published in McKeon, *Frank O’Connor*, 44-5; however, there are a few minor differences in line positioning between this and the original manuscript.
The revolver leaps in my hand,  
Like a thing gone wild;  
Something cracks close to me.  
The, after an age,  
The bomb peals,  
A dark figure runs beside me breathing heavily.

The singing has ceased,  
The broad bright window is shattered,  
The lovers in the lane disturbed are hurrying homeward  
And to the four young men hurrying homeward  
An old woman speaks,  
‘Pardon me, gentlemen, but has something happened?’  
And Vincent, doffing his hat, says mildly,  
‘No, madam,  
It is merely the old lady in the corner shop  
Who, being deaf,  
Amuses herself by blowing paper bags.’

The misery, tension and isolation that the anti-Treatyites feel while they wait to ambush an unnamed target is explicitly expressed in the poem. O’Connor was more forthcoming in the short story, ‘Laughter’, about the details of their attacking a Free State army lorry. The ‘darker thread’ that Flanagan observed in the short stories is present in this poem but it is also comical in tone (and this is repeated in ‘Laughter’ and is present in its title). O’Connor may have been ‘more bitter’ in his first published non-fictional Civil War memory, ‘A Boy in Prison’ (1934), and, when Michael Steinman republished this article in 1990, he classified it as ‘one of O’Connor’s darkest recollections’, suggesting that it was ‘perhaps too close to the 1923 [sic] experience for its bitterness and pain not to be transformed.’\(^2\) But ‘Ambush’ reveals that O’Connor tried to maintain something of his humour during the actual war, and this is retained in his later fiction.

‘Night In The Cottage’\(^3\) (1922/23) takes a different poetic turn and explores the terrain of love and desire. Again, O’Connor experimented with stanza, metre and line-

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\(^3\) O’Donovan, Michael [O’Connor, Frank], ‘Night In The Cottage’, Poetry File, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
length patterns and this six-stanza poem is completely unrhymed. A young couple are at home at night in their cottage and their relationship and sex life is a silent affair. The cottage and the language are symbolic of the couple’s lack of communication:

The fire is guarded
The wheel is still,
Cows in byre,
The house is silent.

All day has she sung,
Moving about the hearth,
An old song,
Telling of one that sits
All the long winter through,
Unthought of, undesired.
And now she stands
By the white dresser,
And for him pours the milk
And cuts the griddlecake.

Deep within him as in all
Stirs the waking heart of earth;
Deep as in bare wall and tree,
As in floor and darkened fire,
As in her that plaits for sleep
Golden tresses of her hair
All the pulse of being trills,
One in darkness and desire,
One in body’s death and life,
One beneath the appletree,
One beneath the thoughts of men.

It is night time but instead of physical contact and the fulfilment of the couple’s sexual needs, the reader encounters unarticulated feelings and sexual inhibitions. The girl’s frustration is expressed through an ‘old song’ she sings in the daytime that conveniently depicts her situation, and this might suggest that the couple have inherited a cultural tradition of sexual dissatisfaction in marital life. Plaiting her hair for bed instead of loosening it could be an old, and by this stage forgotten, habit but it does intimate carefulness and control in bed, despite the undercurrent of longing in the constricted body. O’Connor’s attempts to deal with the taboo subject of sex could
be commended, if one considers the rhetoric of restrictive sexual morality that was beginning to dominate the Catholic Church’s ideological thinking at the time of writing. However, the implied suggestion is that a social climate of sexual inhibition did not just begin with the Catholic Church’s post-independence preaching; instead, it reaches back into the past, to values that were inherited from the previous century. In the post-Famine years, according to Terence Brown, ‘an extraordinary degree of apparent pre-marital chastity [and] marital abstemiousness’ became the pattern of rural Irish life, due to ‘a calculating sensitivity to the economic meaning of marriage [and] an almost Darwinian capacity to adapt in the interests of survival’.

O’Connor’s work subtly touches on this phenomenon of nineteenth-century sexual puritanism and its stretching into the twentieth-century marital bed. The poem shows that O’Connor had poetic promise as it rather skilfully captures a discrete insight into the young couple’s sex life. ‘Night In The Cottage’ also demonstrates that, at this early stage, he was already willing to engage with contentious social issues in Ireland. He was willing to push at the boundaries, even in this tentative way, of what was considered acceptable literary subject matter. He would, of course, take this interest in the institution of marriage, and the idea of martial sexual difficulties, even further when he translated Brian Merriman’s comic masterpiece, *Cuírt an Mheán Oiche* (1945).

O’Connor’s translation was banned while Irish-language editions did not suffer a similar fate. O’Connor would also explore the theme of sexual frustration in his novel, *Dutch Interior* (1940), which resulted in its banning too.

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55 O’Connor, Frank, The Midnight Court, A Rhythmical Bacchanalia from the Irish of Bryan Merriman (Dublin: Maurice Fridberg, 1945). His interest in the subject partly explains why he championed the work of short-story writer Mary Lavin, who strongly examines Irish puritanism in her work.
His interest in the subject was continued in ‘Duet’ (1922/23)\(^{57}\), which is a dramatic dialogue. This time the poem takes the form of a conversation between an unnamed man and a no-nonsense country girl. The man’s desire is openly expressed this time, but the girl responds by threatening him with ‘nettles in your bed’. This notion of nettles being used to dampen sexual ardour dates back to a legend associated with St. Kevin, the sixth-century hermit who founded the monastic settlement in Glendalough, Co. Wicklow.\(^{58}\) O’Connor was already perhaps familiar with this legend as the theme of sexual temptation for monks and their attempts at resistance is evident in Early Irish poetry. One such example is a poem that O’Connor translated, ‘A Prayer for Recollection’:

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How my thought betray me!
    How they flit and stray!
Well they may appal me
    On great judgment day.

...

Through august assemblies
    Groups of gamesome girls
Then through woods, through cities,
    Like the wind in whirls.

...

Rule my thoughts and feelings,
    You who brook no ill;
Make me yours forever,
    Bend me to your will.

Grant me, Christ, to reach you,
    With you let me be
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\(^{57}\)In Matthews’ biography, he again alters the date of the poem from the manuscript and the Sheehy bibliographical date; he instead inserts a date of 1924 but once more gives no reason for his alteration. See: Matthews, *Voices*, 37.

\(^{58}\)In local Irish legend, according to Bridget Haggerty, ‘Kevin was blessed with good looks, and unconsciously he won the affections of a beautiful maiden named Kathleen who is said to have had “eyes of most unholy blue.” Ignoring the fact that he was bound by holy vows, the bold Kathleen followed Kevin into the woods; when he felt her presence, he threw himself into a bed of nettles; he then gathered a handful of the burning weeds and scourged the maiden, [Kevin is claimed to have said the] “fire without extinguished the fire within.”’, ‘St. Kevin – Founder of Glendalough’, www.irishcultureandcustoms.com/ASaints/kevin.html. Accessed 22 December 2010.
Who are not frail nor fickle
Nor feeble-willed like me.\(^5\)

The unnamed man in ‘Duet’ is possibly a monk but his passion is undaunted by the threat of nettles. In the manner of grandiose romantic images that are reminiscent of Christy’s declaration of love to Pegeen Mike in Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, the speaker proclaims that even Finnbarr would leave behind his island and God for this girl:

> For you, even when you dress and blow the fire,
> Leaning over the slow-turning wheel,
> Watching with clinging lids the white ash leap,
> For you, a loop of drowsy girlish limbs,
> Finnbarr had left his island, set his sail,
> And let his lantern on some ghostly prow
> Steering to the black mountain’s foot. For you,
> Had your cross, sleepy eyes looked in his fire,
> He had left God to tend an empty house,
> And never taught great England how to spell,
> And never gathered nettle for his bride.\(^6\)

O’Connor is very likely referring to Saint Finnbarr, a seventh-century Irish hermit who lived on an island in Gougane Barra in Cork, where he founded a renowned centre of learning. The inference that the monk (who is the patron saint of Cork city) would turn his back on his religious vocation if he too looked into the girl’s eyes was a mischievous claim by O’Connor. Moreover, in Early Irish poetry and in the St. Kevin legend, the female actively attempts to lure the monk away from his celibate vocation; in contrast to this, it is not the actions of the female in ‘Duet’ that is to blame for the sexual temptation but the man’s own desires. ‘Duet’ is unsuccessful as a

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\(^6\) O’Donovan, Michael [O’Connor, Frank], ‘Duet’, Poetry File, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin. The poem has never been published. In the manuscript there are several corrections made to the tenses in relation to Finnbarr leaving his island, where O’Connor changes the verbs from present conditional to past perfect or past simple. The rather unclear handwriting gives the impression that O’Connor was trying to portray a sense that Finnbarr had already left his religious vocation because of his desire for the girl. The tense-agreement corrections are confusing, especially in the lines where ‘had’ her eyes met his, he ‘had left’ God; it suggests that ‘Duet’ is an unfinished poem.
poem but its theme as well as several other autobiographical poetic endeavours would eventually serve as material for his 1930s short stories. The depiction of a man’s sexual attraction while observing a farm girl at her work reappears in ‘September Dawn’ in *Guests of the Nation* and it is based on an experience of O’Connor’s, while on the run during the Civil War.\(^6^1\)

‘For The End (Gormanstown 1923)’ is also in large part autobiographical but it is a better poetic effort.\(^6^2\) It was written during O’Connor’s internment in Gormanstown when the Civil War was nearing its end. It is also the only available surviving work from this phase of O’Connor’s life.

Hush lips and breath!
For the great play of Death
Is ended: the lights fade
And silent, shade on shade,
Back to bare streets and grey
Each takes his way.

Hush! Heart be wise,
For a dream is in your eyes
Of men you have seen live;
Their earnestness may give
Joy yet, and trust,
And spirit in the dust.

Hush heart your cries!
When the swift light dies
Does the play end?
Nor voice, not laughter send
An echo, not their names
Who died bring answering flames?

Life seems such common stuff
When plume and sword are off
But here, O heart
Motley and grey no more have part
This play was Life, this hour
Of light and power

\(^{61}\) O’Connor, *An Only Child*, 231.

\(^{62}\) O’Donovan, Michael [O’Connor, Frank], ‘For The End (Gormanstown 1923)’, Poetry File, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin. The poem was published in McKeon, *Frank O’Connor*, 51-2; it is an exact copy of the original handwritten manuscript except for a comma in the title that was inserted into the publication. McKeon’s version was based on the copy that was also published in the *Journal of Irish Literature*, 21, and which was taken from a typescript copy donated by Sean Hendrick to the Cork Museum in 1969.
The theatrical quality that O'Conner gives to the revolutionary years in the poem aligns with his mature autobiographical reminiscences: 'the Irish nation and myself were both engaged in an elaborate process of improvisation ... the country had to content with a make-believe revolution, and I had to content myself with a make-believe education, and the curious thing is that it was the make-believe that succeeded.' The dramatic production was now over and, while his imminent release and the ending of the war were considered a relief, there was an anti-climatic sense of forbearance in his contemplation of life now on the outside: 'The poem is a sigh of resignation for the passing of Romantic Ireland.' The heroic men he met throughout this time have given the young man cause for hope for Ireland's future but there is also a more cautious attitude in place. The transformation of the idealistic, romantic O'Connor into a more circumspect, realistic young man had started. The poem reflects on all those who died in the two wars. In a style reminiscent of Yeats's 'Easter 1916' (with its emphasis on Irish revolutionaries' names), the speaker wonders about the type of reaction the names will evoke in people now that the make-believe is over; would the passion that had been present during the revolution disappear in post-independence Ireland? The omission of a final punctuation mark is perhaps a deliberate effort by O'Connor to suggest that the answer to this question is something in process; the matter has not been resolved and no conclusion has been reached by the end of his time in Gormanstown. A sense of closure for the reader is not provided. Despite these fears, there is also a more optimistic note at the end of the poem. Upon leaving prison, O'Connor was sufficiently enthusiastic about the new State to think

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64 Matthews, *Voices*, 35.
that, while life might now seem more tedious, the colourful, spirited nature of the revolutionary drama could have a lasting positive effect on the country.

For the rest of the 1920s, O’Connor was to write at least ten more unpublished poems that have been traced to date. Of these poems, as mentioned, ‘An Old Woman Leaves the Workhouse’ and ‘The Sonnet’ have since gone missing. Five of the poems are undated in Sheehy’s bibliography. Of the five undated poems, the most difficult one to date has been ‘Of Lus na Gaoithe’s Fall From Grace’. The poem was most likely written between the years 1926 and 1929. The poetic content appears to be influenced by Irish-language poetry, which O’Connor had begun to translate in earnest from 1925. From this time too, he became a regular reviewer of Irish-language books for *The Irish Statesman*. One such book he reviewed in 1926 was Percy Arland Ussher’s translation of Merriman’s *Cúirt An Mheán Oiche*.65 The titular name, ‘Lus na Gaoithe’ (flower of the wind), is the Gaelic name for an Irish wildflower. Merriman used the Gaelic name of an Irish wildflower in *Cúirt* to depict one aspect of the young girl’s emotional state – ‘magairlin meidhreach’ (lady’s tears).66 It could be possible that O’Connor obtained the idea from his reading of *Cúirt*, as ‘Of Lus na Gaoithe’s Fall From Grace’ is the only time that he used the name of an Irish wildflower in the title or content of a poem. Judging from this, it could be estimated that the poem was written in late 1926/early 1927. The six remaining unpublished poems – ‘Theocritus On Sunday’, ‘Life’, ‘Philosophy’, ‘Priest’, ‘The Shadow’ and

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65 O’Connor, Frank, Review of *The Midnight Court, translated from the Gaelic by Percy Arland Ussher, The Irish Statesman* (9 October 1926), 114.
66 The Irish name for wildflowers can have several regional variations, and Merriman’s use of the name could also have been used with one of these variations in mind. The more international English name for Magairlin Meidhreach is Early Purple Orchid; its Latin name is *Orchis mascula*. The more international English name for Lus na Gaoithe is Wood Anemone; its Latin name is *Anemone nemorosa*. 
'On A House Shaken By The Land Agitation' – were all written between 1923 and 1926.

'The Rosary'

O'Connor eventually published a collection of poetry in 1936, *Three Old Brothers and Other Poems*, which contained a mixture of original poems and translations. The majority of these poems had been previously published in *The Irish Statesman* in the late 1920s, and *Three Old Brothers* is a largely undistinguished collection. Aside from O'Connor's first brief foray into the world of published poetry in *An Long*, 'The Rosary' (1923) is the only remaining original poem that he published in the 1920s which did not end up in his 1936 collection.  

When byre and house with sleep are dim,  
And all their fields are drained of light  
They say the Rosary for him  
Who walks the darkening hills to-night  

From voice to voice the rich prayers swell,  
Seeds of such strange and splendid fruit,  
Oh Rosary of pain you tell  
Of hearts Life trampled underfoot  

With 'pray for us' and 'full of grace'  
The links of sacrifice are bound  
In chains of prayer that hold this race  
From battle-ground to battle-ground.  

Above the altar and the priest,  
Above the organ-chant of faith  
The human heart climbs up, released  
In ecstasy that mocks at Death  

Here Faith that is not Faith but more,  
And Hope more holy and more wise,  
And Charity all blend and soar  
In temples freed of human eyes.

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The use of the rosary as a binding Irish ritual is denoted and expanded on in the poem. It was, of course, the devotional act that enjoyed immense popularity in Irish Catholic homes since the time of the ‘Devotional Revolution’ in Ireland. In his seminal article, ‘The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1859-75’, Emmet Larkin pointed out that people in Ireland practised a more localised form of religious belief before the Great Famine. In the quarter-century following this catastrophic event, Catholic Church syncretism set new standards for religious behaviour and people were encouraged to increase their devout performance. This form of piety became such a core part of the religious life of the Irish laity that, within a generation, the Church had affected nothing less than a devotional revolution. Previous to this revolution, according to historian Kevin Whelan, a vernacular Catholicism had been deeply rooted in the social formations that would be most directly affected by the Famine, the agrarian poor. The ensuing trauma of the Famine and the corresponding decline of vernacular religion, popular culture and the Irish language resulted in:

- a cultural vacuum that was filled by the more ritualistic practices associated with the devotional revolution – the institutionalisation of mass-going, new devotional practices such as novenas, forty-hour devotions and the exposition of the host ...
- a stricter social discipline [was] part of the revolution ... The devastation wrecked by the Famine strengthened the church’s hand in imposing its modernising crusade. Catholicism invaded the vacated cultural space and solved an identity crisis by offering a powerful surrogate language of symbolic identity in which Irishness and ‘Catholicism’ were seen as reciprocal and congruent.

The apparition of Mary in Knock, County Mayo, on 21 August 1879, which led to Knock becoming an internationally recognised Marian Shrine, influenced a resurgence of Marian piety. A consequence of this was that the rosary became the touchstone for Irish Catholics’ devotional identity and, unlike many other Catholic

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devotions; this prayer does not require the mediation of a priest and can easily be performed in the home.70

The sense of a domestic religious community praying together, regardless of their geographical location, is depicted in O’Connor’s poem and the cultural assumption is that it is the rosary that will be said in prayer. While the country rages in civil war, domestically the families pray for those caught up in the battle. The anonymous ‘him’ in the first stanza does not reveal which side of the battle the family is praying for; instead there is the sense that right across the country voices are raised in prayer for all who are suffering because of the war. There is a spiritual reunification of the people through this domestic religious act, which takes place outside the confines of the politically-biased Church, as they speak directly to their spiritual mother and father in heaven, their highest form of religious authority. O’Connor was in prison for just two months when this poem was published. A positive interpretation of this Catholic act of devotion is unusual subject matter for him and his recourse to the rosary perhaps reveals that O’Connor was feeling rather frightened and lonely in the initial stages of his imprisonment. News of republican executions was also continuing to seep into prison and the feeling of helplessness and frustration grew more intense among the internees; O’Connor’s wish for reconciliation between Irish people is evident in the poem.

What is particularly surprising is the fact that O’Connor published his poem in The Catholic Bulletin. According to Terence Brown, this ‘anti-Protestant’, ‘anti-Semitic and pro-Mussolini’ periodical ‘had longed waged a battle against Irish writers

70 For more information on the apparition of the ‘Blessed Virgin’ in Knock and the survival of Marian piety into the twentieth century, see Cleary, Joe, Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007), 180-184. John McGahern’s 1990 novel, Amongst Women, illustrates the long-lasting devotion to the rosary that was still present within the homes of Irish families. Although McGahern was also exploring domestic relationships in the novel and the father, Moran, had his own reasons for insisting on the family praying together every night, it was without question the rosary that was the act of piety performed.
on the grounds of their alien immorality and pagan un-Irish philosophy’, and displayed a ‘xenophobia which characterized its attitude to most Irish writing in English and which fuelled the fires of its demand for censorship’.\(^7\) Susannah Riordan has dubbed the ideological thinking behind the periodical as ‘rabid paranoia’.\(^7\) Tom Clyde has described it as the bible for the strand of Catholic nationalism that was ‘right-wing, conservative [and] strongly Gaelicised’, and remarked that it held ‘selectively patriotic beliefs which were to become the official ideology of the Free State’. Clyde is also dismissive of its importance in the literary history of Irish periodicals:

Despite its huge sociological and historical importance, the terms of reference of the *Catholic Bulletin* divorced it almost entirely from all that was interesting, stimulating or important in writing ... It is not too much of an exaggeration to state that not a single important book was reviewed in its pages, nor did there appear a single poem or story from any author of note. To students of literature, it must represent a powerful negative presence, and an example of the kind of thing against which Irish writers had to struggle during these years.\(^7\)

Why then would O’Connor deign to publish, albeit under the initials M.O.D, in such a periodical? There is no easy answer to this question. His official biographer, James Matthews, deals with the poem by ignoring it, despite the fact that he previously published it in the O’Connor special issue of *The Journal of Irish Literature* in 1975. McKeon’s biography published the poem in its entirety but provides no interpretive commentary.\(^7\) Nearly all of O’Connor’s unpublished poetry underwent a similarly disregarded fate, even when the poems are mentioned. Interestingly, O’Connor himself neglected to mention ‘The Rosary’ in either his autobiography or in the scant number of his letters that have survived from this period of his life. The answer might

\(^7\) McKeon, *Frank O’Connor*, 50-1.
simply lie with his own inexperience in terms of locating more appropriate outlets for his writing. But O’Connor elsewhere remarked that his awareness of standards in literary periodicals was already in place from an even younger age.

By the time I was fourteen it was clear that education was something I would never be able to afford. Not that I had any intention of giving up even then. I was just looking for a job that would enable me to buy the books from which I could pick up the education myself. So, with the rest of the unemployed, I went to the newsroom of the Carnegie Library where on wet days the steam heating warmed the perished bodies in the broken boots and made the dirty rags steam and smell. I read carefully through the advertisements and applied for every job that demanded ‘a smart boy,’ but what I really hoped for was to find a new issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Spectator*, *The New Statesman*, or *The Studio* free ... but as often as not some hungry old man would have toppled asleep over it, and I was cheated. The real out-of-works always favoured the high-class magazines at which they were unlikely to be disturbed.75

Perhaps the answer to the question, then, lies in O’Connor’s own relationship with the Church at this time. McKeon does mention that O’Connor had been ‘excommunicated from the Catholic Church because of his Republicanism. He was refused Mass and the sacraments; in an act of youthful bravado, Republican youngsters walked defiantly out of the Church ... he abandoned the Church [and remained] very critical of the institutional Church all his life.’76 It could be the case that O’Connor’s poem was an attempt to subversively implant a small scission between the periodical and its Irish Catholic readers. In the first editorial of *The Catholic Bulletin* in 1911, the journal stated that it was ‘sanctioned and approved to the last page by the Catholic ecclesiastical authorities’. The fact that *The Catholic Bulletin* was established ‘with the blessing of the church hierarchy to help guide the readers of Ireland away from sinful influences and toward wholesome, church-approved material’ is significant.77 Usually, only one poem per issue was included and O’Connor’s poem was obviously approved for publication and therefore read by the more zealous Catholics in Ireland.

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76 McKeon, *Frank O’Connor*, 52.
at the time. Despite the devotional nature of the poem, a subtle marginalisation of the authority of the Church is also present in ‘The Rosary’. In prayer, ‘the human heart climbs up’ and rises ‘Above the altar and the priest,/ Above the organ-chant of faith’ and reaches ‘Hope more holy and more wise/ ... / In temples freed of human eyes.’ The ‘organ-chant’ could be a wily reference to The Catholic Bulletin itself, and the poem could be said to encourage readers of the periodical to look beyond what was in front of their eyes.

O'Connor’s conflicted attitude towards the Church and the Free State was also extended to his theories of readership and the material conditions of reception in the post-independence decades. In later years, he would argue that artists represent ‘nothing’ in their work but he would also strongly argue for instrumentalism in art, which would result in a literature that could somehow inspire social change. Here was a writer who continually spoke of the primacy of technique in writing considerations but, paradoxically, was someone who would also view the writer as a social ‘reformer’. O’Connor saw the writer in the role of medium for readers. In a Yeatsian vein, he viewed the writer as one who could access the shadowy world of what is hidden in the readers’ unconscious: ‘All that the artist knows is that he is a sort of transformer station for them; that his place is in the doorway between the two rooms with the lights of consciousness partly dimmed ... He is half medium, half critic’. His writing of the material conditions of reception pointed always to an Irish setting. O’Connor engaged with his perception of Irish Church and State control over the reading audience, and his critical theories about the act of reading tried to undermine the institutionalising of the contemporary reader. He linked the private act of reading to the broader socio-political context, and an important aspect of his opposition to any

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78 O’Connor, Frank, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 162.
79 O’Connor, Frank, ‘Charles Dickens’, The Irish Times (8 September 1945), 5.
80 This point is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.
attempt at control over reading was located in his theory of the short-story form, a

genre which he frequently likened to poetry:

Interviewer: Why do you prefer the short story for your medium?
O’Connor: Because it’s the nearest thing I know to lyric poetry – I wrote
lyric for a long time, then discovered that God had not
intended me to be a lyric poet, and the nearest thing to that is
the short story. A novel actually requires far more logic and far
more knowledge of circumstances, whereas a short story can
have the sort of detachment from circumstances that lyric
poetry has.

In another interview he compared his writing of a short story to the act of writing
a poem:

O’Connor: I write my stories as though they were lyrics. I can manage the
mechanics of writing easily enough but I like to get the
essence, the spirit of a story down in about four hours – in any
old rigamarole [sic] (I’ve got to catch it like a poem). And then
I polish it endlessly ... 
Interviewer: Have you written any novels?
O’Connor: Two novels – both of them awful. It’s not my metier. You see I
would call myself a spoiled poet. I write my stories, as I’ve
suggested, as a lyric poet would write his poems – I have to
grasp all my ideas in one big movement. I am a violent,
emotional man, and novels require meditation and a more
plodding day-to-day kind of energy.

According to O’Connor, the form of the short story (which includes lyric poetry,
according to his own theoretical pronouncements) enables social opposition as it
functions as ‘a private art intended to satisfy the standards of the individual, solitary,
critical reader ... [who will] see into the shadows’ of the story. Although at times
O’Connor declared that art was primarily concerned with aesthetics, he nonetheless
also believed that the gaps and omissions inherent in the short-story form left a far
greater onus on the reader to complete the picture proffered; it created space for the

81 O’Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 148.
82 Longley, Michael, ‘Frank O’Connor: An Interview’, TCD (1 November 1963); repr. Twentieth
Century Literature, 36:3 (Fall 1990), 273.
reader’s ‘moral imagination’ and ‘moral judgment’ to dilate into social considerations. For O’Connor, this art form demanded a direct relationship between the writer and reader in specific historical conditions. As he later stated in an interview in 1957: ‘Dragging the reader in, making the reader a part of the story – the reader is part of the story. You’re saying all the time, “This story is about you – de te fabula”’. The ‘superior’ reader, he believed, particularly at a local homologous level, could recognise and critique the way of life that was being presented in a story.

O’Connor’s creative writing was so much of its time and place that it might, he hoped, stimulate readers’ critical engagement with life in mid-century Ireland. This in turn might subvert Church and State hegemony, not in any radical socially transformative way but more in terms of the development of organic intellectuals who could actively debate the social and political issues of the day and provide domestic dissent to the official position. Throughout O’Connor’s writing life, his impulse to circumvent what he saw as the limitations of post-independence Irish life was coupled with a desire to reconcile his aspirations for Ireland with the country’s socio-political reality, and this impulse was intimately connected to his theories about the act of reading itself. ‘The Rosary’ appears to be O’Connor’s first attempt at cultivating a direct relationship with Irish readers and, by publishing in The Catholic Bulletin, he seems to have been aiming to reach those very readers who were already incorporated into supporting the control of reading by Church and State.

If this was the case, the fact that O’Connor subsequently ignored the poem is perplexing. Contemporary reactions to the poem are not available and perhaps the point was missed in the intended readers’ reception; one might ask whether O’Connor became associated in any way with zealous Catholicism because of the poem and its

85 O’Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 162.
place of publication. In any case, no correspondence about the poem appears to have survived and O’Connor’s private letters provide no answers. It is notable that O’Connor made no other attempt to reach readers through the unpublished body of his early poetry. In a surviving letter to Geoffrey Phibbs, O’Connor writes: ‘My book to McMillan [sic] but no answer yet.’ This comment provides a tantalising glimpse of what might be a possible reference to a collection of his early poetry, for if such a book existed, the contents surely comprised O’Connor’s original poetry as he did not have a sufficient body of material in any other genre at this point. To date, however, no other reference to this ‘book’ has been traced.

The Unpublished Poetry – Part II

Of the rest of O’Connor’s unpublished poetry, the date for ‘Theocritus on Sunday’ is given as 1923-1924 in the Sheehy bibliography, but a reading of the poem would suggest that it was composed sometime in the early months of 1924. O’Connor was released from prison in December 1923 and spent the next few months attempting to re-integrate back into the social life of Cork. This was not made any easier by the accusations of traitor that were flung at him on the street for refusing to support the hunger strike while interned, or by the fact that he was criticised by people for

86 Geoffrey Phibbs was the Head Librarian of Wicklow Carnegie Library when O’Connor first met him in 1925. He was also a poet and his first collection, *Withering of the Figleaf* (London: Hogart Press, 1927), was published under his real name. All subsequent creative writing was published under the name Geoffrey Taylor. Phibbs had married the Irish modernist painter Norah McGuinness in 1925 and he changed his name to Taylor in response to his father’s disapproval of the union. O’Connor became friends with McGuinness too; the marriage broke up in 1929 and O’Connor’s dismay and upset over this event is evident in *My Father’s Son*, 67-71.

87 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Geoffrey Phibbs (Wicklow: October 1925), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin. Like his other writings, O’Connor rarely dated any of his letters. This letter appears to have been written in October 1925. It is one of the easier letters to date and verify as it is written on Wicklow Carnegie Library headed notepaper and mentions his imminent move back to Cork (which took place in December 1925). It also refers to an article he published in *The Irish Statesman* in the same week as the letter and this was most likely ‘Literature and Life. The Poet As Professional’, *The Irish Statesman* (3 October 1925).

88 In the Macmillan Archive in the British Library, there is no entry under O’Connor or O’Donovan in Section U. Letter Books: 55846-55908, or Section Z. Records of MSS: 56000-56026. It is a complex archive and an exhaustive search has not yet been possible, as not all of the archive is indexed.
refusing to attend mass. It is his loss of faith that most concerns him in this poem.

‘Theocritus on Sunday’ is awkward in execution but remains interesting for the fact that O’Connor was exploring the emotional impact of turning away from Catholicism:

Hammer-haunted the city sleeps, shrouded in violet,
It’s Sabbath sleep. I, too, haunted, am at rest.

Radiant through sunless streets, as if for outing drest,
Girls go their way to Mass. Be sure I have not yet
Forgotten you. I lie alone here on the hill,
And think of you, and wish the day more still,
And wish the wind would fall and be your breath,
And wish the bells would cease and be your call –
You more than all!

Indeed, indeed, for you
I wish myself again with my old faith
That I might dream as these, religious, do,
And as your sailor father must have done,
Turning the holy images to the wall
To punish them – when your mother did not come!

A lonely voice pervades the poem, as the speaker watches the local girls make their way to mass. Feeling distant and alienated, the speaker wishes that he still had his religious beliefs. Despite the wish to still connect with the ‘faithful’ and be part of this imaginative world, there is no longing expressed for a spiritual re-connection to his religion, his faith is gone. That religion could act as a barrier between the sexes is a notable theme in the poem, and the title of the poem provides further insight into O’Connor’s thinking at this time. Theocritus was a third-century BC Greek poet and O’Connor’s juxtaposition of the speaker with this classical figure places him outside the history of Christianity. Moreover, one aspect of Theocritus’s bucolic poetry was the emphasis on how to gain a deeper sense of spirituality while discovering the true significance of one’s life (the classical poet advocated repudiation of the city and
retreat to the countryside). The fact that O'Connor used the Greek poet’s name in the title of the poem indicates an admittance of his own search for spiritual significance outside the realm of Catholicism. Furthermore, in the years preceding Theocritus, after the fall of Athens and the conquests of Macedonia, Greek literature seemed on the decline. The centre of intellectual life was removed from the city, which seemed to provide little stimulation for the evocation of poetry, until the appearance of Theocritus; one crucial aspect of Theocritus’s poetry was his realistic focus on aspects of everyday life. In the case of Ireland, the romanticism of the Literary Revival had provided an emotional impetus in the fight for independence, but romanticism was a literary style that lost its usefulness in the aftermath of revolutionary upheaval. The young writers in post-independence Ireland instead embraced an emphasis on everyday situations and events, and realism became their preferred literary style. O'Connor seems to be declaring this fact by classifying himself as Theocritus. Like Greece in this ancient poet’s time, post-independence Ireland was also a country not noted for its intellectual stimulation. The poem seems to contain a bold suggestion from O'Connor that, like Theocritus, he might save his country’s literary reputation.

‘Life’ (1924) is a nine-quatrain poem that is loosely structured with an abeb rhyming pattern. An awkward attempt was made by O’Connor to write this poem in the vernacular of a ‘rover’, who voices his belief in the freedom of wandering through life and keeping a young heart. Death is the only thing the rover fears but he condemns the fact that religion has such a strong hold on the youth: ‘too many young

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91 This point is discussed in more detail in Chapters Two and Three.
people/ Makes free with roman collars’. Instead of Death taking someone like him who loves life, he wishes that it would take those who are afraid to dance with life, and he selects scholars, poets and priests as the groups more deserving of Death’s attention:

    O, I do say to Death, Take Them!
    And then I falls to curses,
    And says, To Hell with scholars,
    And poets and their verses!

    And God I wish the odds would change,
    And Death would take the scholars
    And poets and priests, and stick his hook
    In bows and roundy collars,

The presence of the exclamation marks suggests that O’Connor was jesting and there is a certain tongue-in-cheek quality to the poem, but the fact that he selected poets and scholars as part of the group that do not live ‘life’ seems odd. This might be a humorous declaration of independence from the poets and scholars of the Irish Literary Revival. ‘To Hell’ with them and the strand of cultural nationalism that they had espoused, especially since it had had such a disturbing influence on O’Connor’s recent past. The persona of the poem asks God that these older priests, poets and scholars ‘take their years in order’ and ‘let me go’ now to enjoy life and the ‘kiss around a comer’. What makes this interpretation uncertain is the fact that O’Connor did not indulge in intellectual or literary detachment on leaving prison; instead, he immersed himself in writing poetry and cultivating knowledge of matters social and political. An engagement with the tenets of the Revival and his efforts to articulate an alternative literary style are also evident in his post-independence literary criticism. His letters and articles in *The Irish Statesman* from these years are manifestations of

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this occupation. Perhaps O'Connor is speaking to himself in the poem as he very much considered himself an aspiring poet and intellectual; the poem might be a reaction to his internment and a form of objective self-encouragement to start enjoying life, now that he is free from prison and able to wander freely.

O'Connor's concern with spiritual matters and his growing unease with questions of faith are evident in 'Philosophy' (1924). This is a more technically assured poem in comparison to his previous efforts and is written mostly in iambic tetrameter verse form. There is a regular rhyming pattern of abcbdd in each of the four stanzas, although the pattern is a combination of assonate rhymes, eye-rhymes and half-rhymes. Poetic techniques such as enjambment, caesura and parallelism are also present, in order to structure the poem into the shape of a dialogue. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between four young men and an old man while they reveal their 'philosophical' thinking on God's defining characteristics. The first young man passionately claims that 'He' is our friend, to which the old man agrees:

‘Our friend He is,’ a young man cried,  
‘Or would He shape the gracious earth  
For feet of clay to tread, if He  
Cared not a straw for death or birth?’  
The old man said at that wild cry,  
‘Friend is the name we call Him by.'

In contrast, the three other men alternatively characterise ‘Him’ as a foe, a hunter or a spoiler:

I who am young said, ‘Foe not friend!’

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93 See, for example, Ó Donnabháin, Michael [O'Connor, Frank], Letter to the Editor, The Irish Statesman (13 June 1925), 270; O'Connor, Frank & Geoffrey Phibbs, Letter to the Editor, The Irish Statesman (21 November 1925), 342; O'Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, The Irish Statesman (12 December 1925), 438; O'Connor, Frank, Article, ‘Literature and Life. An Irish Anthology’, The Irish Statesman (12 June 1926), 379-380. O'Connor's writings in The Irish Statesman are dealt with in more detail in Chapter Two of the thesis. Further evidence of this intellectual occupation are to be found in his personal letters to Sean Hendrick from 1923-1929, a selection of which was published in Matthews (ed.), The Journal of Irish Literature, 41-52.
'Or have you never supped on sorrow?
Or do you think of all that's here
There's one is like to laugh to-morrow,
And sip no tears to salt his food?'
The old man said, 'The word is good!'

And a young man with a maiden's eyes
Said, 'He's a hunter, and He sets
Sorrows like snares along our path
To draw some wanderer to His breast.'
The old man thought: 'A snare,' he said,
'May surely bring a bride to bed!'

'Indeed His gifts are spoiler's gifts,
He lures the restless ships to land
For fuel: the beauty of the world
Is but a lantern in His hand!'
And this a young man also said
While his father mumbling prayed:

Spoiler and Hunter, Foe and Friend,
Give us peace of Thee now and to the end.'94

A changing generational reaction towards God is represented here, with the older generation still possessing a humbler, more devout 'philosophy' of God, and the younger (perhaps war-weary) generation seeming more cynical and disappointed. Yet, their belief is still present and the actual existence of God is not denied. While their thinking on the matter does not engage on a strongly intellectual level, their simple pronouncements display the fact that opposing theological 'philosophies' are developing in this younger generation. It is no coincidence that O'Connor wrote this poem at a time when he was not only shifting away from the previous generation's set of cultural values, but when he was also feeling alienated from many of his own generation. He still believed in God, though he was unsure what shape this belief would eventually take; his repudiation of religion was more concerned with the

94O'Donovan, Michael [O'Connor, Frank], 'Philosophy', Poetry File, Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin. The final two lines in the poem were underlined, indicating O'Connor's possible plea for respite from his spiritual struggle at this time.
strictures of the Catholic Church. He was to recall this time of spiritual change many
years later:

But the following Sunday I found I did not want to go to Mass ... and a girl ... said bitterly when I met her in the street: 'I hear you don't believe in God any longer.' Though this wasn't true, it took me some time to realize what Mother had seen in that first glimpse of me [when he arrived home from prison], that I had crossed another shadow line, and make [sic] me wonder if I should ever again be completely at ease with the people I loved, their introverted religion and introverted patriotism.95

O'Connor's conflicted religious attitude was in part composed from what he perceived as the overly-controlling role of the Catholic Church in Irish social affairs. His creative and critical explorations of religious beliefs and practices continually interrogated the dominating effect of the Church on Irish society. Despite this judgement, as mentioned in the Introduction, O'Connor also wrote some of the most discerning portraits of priests and bishops available in the canon of twentieth-century Irish literature.96

The fact that O'Connor could write such nuanced portraits of Irish priests, while simultaneously denouncing the moral stranglehold that the Church deployed, demonstrated his ability to cultivate a sensitivity towards the vocation of priesthood while remaining critical of the encompassing institution. This ability was already apparent in 1925, when he wrote 'Priest':

The sins of all the countryside

Build their nests within my brain
They the rooks and I the tree,
With the light they go from me,
In the night they come again.

Mary’s sin and Michael’s sin,
I have learned to know them all;
Anger scarcely moves me now;
Let them come or let them go,
I am patient. Let them call

Let them sing their one black tune
That I know, note by note,
But one thing and then like God
I shall hold and feel no load
All the world within my coat.

When girls tell of lads and kisses,
Turning indifferent eyes on me
As if I were no man at best,
God, and rage has left my breast,
I shall be perfect – like a tree!

The technical proficiency displayed in ‘Philosophy’ did not manifestly improve in any real sense in the ensuing months. Again, there is a regular rhyming pattern, utilising assonate, half and eye rhymes. The metre is less defined and ranges from trochee tetrameter lines to inserted cretics in several lines. The poem is written from the perspective of a priest and the loneliness and difficulty of his vocation is delineated in a sympathetic manner. It is the Act of Confession that is the most frustrating aspect of his duties, listening to the same repetitive venial sins has become a tedious act. Passion has been replaced by tolerance and there is little sign of an emotional engagement with the salvation of his congregation’s souls. Instead, despite his boredom and his feeling exploited, a determination is articulated in the poem to consummately perform his duties as a priest. He is aware that people come and go, depositing their sins in the confessional box and oblivious to the man behind the

collar. His sexual emasculation, through the vow of celibacy, is made all the more potent for him by the sexual indifference displayed by young women towards him. Undeterred, he has surmounted his frustration and aims to become like a ‘tree’. This appears to be a rather improbable metaphor at best, but it could mean the priest wants to remain strong and rooted in his vocation while providing detached, unemotional and solid spiritual guidance to his people; his role will be to give shelter and protection to his congregation regardless of his personal situation. While one does not know what type of tree O’Connor had in mind (an oak or alder, for example, would have very different defining characteristics), the most likely explanation for his use of this metaphor is to be found in Early Irish literature. O’Connor had begun his Irish-language translations at this stage and the tree metaphor imitates its usage in ninth-century Irish poetry. As Robin Flower has noted of this poetry, there was a tendency to ‘always treat the chieftain eulogized as an abstract compendium of princely qualities rather than as a being subject to the ebb and flow of the more ordinary impulses.’ He translates a poem from the Book of Leinster to illustrate his claim and one stanza incorporates a tree metaphor:

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\begin{align*}
\text{A stately tree, a glowing} \\
\text{Jewel whom strife embolden;} \\
\text{A silver sapling growing} \\
\text{From soil of princes olden.}\end{align*}
\]

In ‘Priest’, the central figure will not be subject to the ‘ebb and flow’ of common desires, and the importance that the priest attaches to his status in his community is affirmed.

While O’Connor sometimes made attempts to write sensitively from the perspective of a priest, he also often satirised the hypocrisy of Irish society which

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contravened the moral teachings of Christianity. A good example of this is his 1926 poem, ‘On A House Shaken By The Land Agitation (With apologies to W.B. Yeats)’.

My Lord begat two stalwart boys
That did not bring his spouse to bed;
He paid their way, they went their way,
And he went his – My lord is dead.

His sons they wed as they thought fit,
Two women of the roads they got,
The neighbours’ girls they could not get,
But years went by and men forgot.

My Lord’s true son died well it seems,
In London, in a house where queens
With ivory bellies and gold hair
Were paid king’s ransom for their dreams.

His bastard grandsons, nothing worth,
Defile the house that gave him birth,
And scream and haply quarrelling shed
The rottenest blood that cursed the earth.\(^9\)

Sexual relationships between the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the Catholic Irish in the past, and the lingering inheritance of these relationships in the twentieth century, are part of the subject matter of the poem. The more contentious issue of illegitimacy, and the social stigmatisation of the children born out of these illicit affairs, is the primary focus of the poem. Sexual activity outside the confines of marriage was frowned upon, particularly after the Famine, and this lasted well into the twentieth century. Control of female sexuality was more strictly enforced as an ‘illegitimate’ child could have economic repercussions for the entire family:

To ‘destroy a girl’s character’ in the countryside is to upset the pattern of family and community life by overthrowing the possibility of an orderly change in farm succession. Much more than a shooting or a fight, a sexual irregularity which cannot be righted in a match is capable of destroying the intricate mutual obligations and expectancies of rural familism ... The country people’s attitude

\(^{9}\) O’Connor, Frank, ‘On A House Shaken By The Land Agitation (With Apologies to W.B. Yeats)’, Poetry File, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy, Dublin.
toward illegitimacy and pre-marital intercourse, one and the same to them, reflect well the disturbances they occasion.100

A child ‘begat’ with the local Anglo-Irish landlord would have meant certain disgrace for a vulnerable peasant girl. Apart from moral censure, the girl would also have been ‘declassed’ and her standing in the local community would have been reduced to a lower category. This would result in severely reduced marriage prospects for her family, and the declassing would have also been transferred to the ‘illegitimate’ child, hence O’Connor’s reference to the fact that the two ‘bastards’ could not ‘get’ neighbours’ girls but had to settle for women ‘of the roads’. However, if the mother of these children had been of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy stock, it is unlikely her offspring would have been reduced to this level of social status. The intimation is that the mother was a local Catholic girl. While the father of illegitimate children usually did not suffer the same social condemnation, and an Anglo-Irish landlord would have suffered comparatively little if any at all, O’Connor makes the point that male offspring were also stigmatised in local Catholic communities. O’Connor was mocking Ireland’s class system in the poem, and was also highlighting the severe social and emotional damage that the slur of illegitimacy inflicted on innocent children; this became a theme that he would return to on a regular basis in his short stories.101 In this instance, the taunting tone of ‘My Lord’ appears to lay the initial blame on the more socially powerful members of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Ireland’s class-based society thereafter would consider his ‘bastard’ one-quarter Anglo-Irish and three-quarters poor native Irish grandsons ‘nothing worth’. Described


as obnoxious with an unenviable moral and genetic heritage, it was the grandsons’ degenerate mixed blood, directly caused by class inequality and social stigmatisation, which was considered by O’Connor the ‘rottenest blood that cursed the earth’.

O’Connor was also, of course, directly referencing Yeats’s 1910 poem, ‘Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation’, which explains his apology to Yeats in the title. Roy Foster has commented on Yeats’s fixation with eugenics in the late 1930s and observed that:

the eugenicist beliefs of WBY’s old age were driven by fears about educational and cultural decline rather than by racial prejudice … WBY argued for limitation of family size among the poor, ‘the stupider and less healthy’. The educated classes, he suggested, might have to wage war upon the ‘uneducatable masses’ in order to withhold from them the undeserved affluence which would enable them to breed uncontrollably.

According to Yeats, eugenics would allow for ‘the best bred from the best’ and it was a statement that, as Foster points out, echoes through work such as ‘Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation’.102 David Dwan contextualises Yeats’s poem within nineteenth-century concerns over the rise of democratic societies. Historians such as W.E.H. Lecky ‘believed that the very ethos of democracy was antithetical to the idea of cultural excellence’, and Dwan notes that Yeats held a similar view: ‘his antidemocratic disposition duly converged with a nostalgic commitment to an aristocratic order’. Yeats believed that ‘the decline of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy under the agrarian revolution had contributed further to the rise of democratic vulgarity.’103 His poem laments the degeneration of the dominant élite in Irish society, who embodied

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cultural excellence and were the 'best knit to the best'.

Yeats's idealisation of the Anglo-Irish in the poem, 'high laughter, loveliness and ease', is utterly undermined in O'Connor's depiction. Instead, the notion of Anglo-Irish 'breeding' is played upon, in a eugenic as well as a social sense. The destructive impact of Anglo-Irish action in O'Connor's poem lasted for generations. It was not just agrarian revolution that brought about the decline and dispersion of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the poem reminds the reader, the class's own behaviour played its part. O'Connor's writings, overall, do not engage with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and this early work is one of the rare occasions which provide a sense of his thoughts on the subject. The poem also indicates that O'Connor's mature, anti-élitist, anti-intellectual, liberal, democratic outlook was already taking shape in the mid-1920s.

'Of Lus na Gaoithe's Fall From Grace' (1926/1927) is a further continuation of O'Connor's engagement with the themes of sin and sexuality. There is perhaps a veiled reference to homosexuality in the nine-quatrain poem, in relation to an old man who is a 'flower of the wind', Lus na Gaoithe:

Of Lus na Gaoithe's fall from grace:
Then in his three and eightieth year,
He slept one night in a strange place,
And him a strange young man slept near.

And Lus na Gaoithe ere he slept
Thundered, being both deaf and old,
'Pity, O Christ, on all that sin
This hour of peace throughout the world!'

And when the day struck one he woke
And cried, 'Have mercy, Lord, on men,
And most on those that sin this hour!' —
He had sworn an angel said, 'Amen'.

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106 This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.
The old man spends the remainder of the night in a state of disturbed sleep, anxiously waking up to ask God for forgiveness and pity on ‘all the race of men’; this seems to be granted to him by the angel’s reassuring voice. The final lines appear to entail the old man reasserting the ‘rightness’ of males and females sleeping together:

The speckled dawn crept up the pane,
And down the whiteness of the wall,
And touched the young man’s face in sleep,
And Lus na Gaoithe hushed his call.

‘And wept and thought, ‘My plague on grace!’
And ‘Sweet, sweet, sweet-forever –
Night that mocks the saint with dreams
Brings boy and girl in sleep together!’

The poem is a rather feeble effort by O’Connor, but it does suggest that he was trying to subtly depict the angst, apprehension and loneliness felt by gay men in Ireland, at a time when homosexuality was outlawed and these men faced social marginalisation and excommunication by the Church. God’s representative, the angel, responds sympathetically to the old man’s admittance of his sexual identity, which he had repressed in his long life. Lus na Gaoithe, a flower of the wind that can swing in any direction, is a man that is steeped in the social censorship of his time, as well as in his religious faith. He therefore cannot comprehend or believe in a divine acceptance of his sexual orientation and he opts for self-alienation. Homosexuality is an unusual theme in O’Connor’s work and, like ‘On A House Shaken By The Land Agitation’, the poem is a rare insight into his thoughts on the subject. His novel, The Saint and Mary Kate (1932), which was written just a few years after ‘Of Lus na Gaoithe’s Fall From Grace’, also examines conflicting claims of sensual and spiritual life. Phil’s religious faith is portrayed as a perversion of natural instinct in the story. His sexual desires are strictly repressed due to his pious beliefs and, again like Lus na Gaoithe, the ‘Saint’ at the end of the novel denies his sexual self and reaffirms his faith.
In O’Connor’s writings, a more common concern was his relationship with the reader. His awareness of the reader is an obvious motif in ‘The Shadow’ (1926):

I leave my songs to you
  Who come, and come what may,
When I am dead these songs
  Are all of me that stay.

And now I say no more,
  For dreams were all my store,
And what I would say now
  Were but a dream the more

To you who hide somewhere,
  Shadows in shadowy lands,
O, I shall say no more
  Who knows her where she stands,

And walks from street to street,
  And finds the sunshine mellow,
And gossips with old friends –
  O my friends in the shadow

This shadow leaves unsaid
  What you shall say together,
Walking the lanes in summer
  Or winter in good weather.

There is a fare-thee-well tone to this poem but it is unclear whether the persona is bidding farewell to life or to the creative act itself. What he will leave behind is his work but there is a sense that these ‘songs’ might produce no future meaningful affect on readers. His place in social memory will be as a ‘shadow’ to those unknown readers in unknown places, particularly readers of the future. Historical distance will exist between the poet and future reading audiences, and his work will have difficulty bridging this. Whether the persona is bidding farewell to life or to his work, a poignant note enters the poem with the realisation that once the poet is gone, future

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107 O’Connor, Frank, ‘The Shadow’, Poetry File, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy, Dublin. Atypically, there is an exact date recorded on this manuscript – 12 January 1926. The poem was first noted and published by Matthews in The Journal of Irish Literature, 24.
lives will not be depicted by him; he will not be the one to represent other people’s voices.

Not long after O’Connor wrote this poem, he published an article in *The Irish Statesman* which focused on literary reputations and he argued that one’s literary reputation lies outside one’s own control. The contemporary critic’s interests, the impact of history, the passing of time, and the social concerns of the day, O’Connor remarked, were contributory factors in stimulating a reader’s curiosity in any writer’s work:

> The vicissitudes of a reputation are an uncanny quantity in the art of criticism. For Longfellow, whom the young pre-Raphaelites set so high in their gallery of immortals, higher than Wordsworth, or Milton, or Isaiah even, no critic of to-day would say a good word. And when a reputation is being made or unmade, which of us can say that his own judgments are concerned purely with fundamentals, if such there be, and are not dictated to him by a Time Spirit moving outside himself.\(^\text{108}\)

In the same article, he singled out the early eighteenth-century poet, Egan O’Rahilly (Aodhagán Ó Rathaille), who (despite the fact that little is known about him - ‘Over O’Rahilly’s work, as over his life, there is a shadow’) was a writer that ‘has most successfully bridged the gap of time and thought that lies between his day and ours’.\(^\text{109}\) O’Connor very obviously based his description of Ó Rathaille on Daniel Corkery’s account of the poet in his study *The Hidden Ireland* (1924).\(^\text{110}\) Corkery’s chapter on Ó Rathaille portrayed him as man that little is known about, who suffered in life and died in poverty and ‘desolation of spirit’. More pertinently for O’Connor, Corkery also claimed that of all the Gaelic poets, it was Ó Rathaille that ‘gave intensified and rarefied utterance to what was in the heart of the people’, and he

\(^{108}\) O’Connor, Frank, Review, ‘Literature and Life. Egan O’Rahilly’, *The Irish Statesman* (30 January 1926), 653. This article was a review of Séamus Ó hAodha’s recent book on Ó Rathaille, and O’Connor used the opportunity to delve into the subject of readers’ responses.

\(^{109}\) Ibid.

asserted that this was because of his lyrics, on which ‘his fame [was] first built, on them it rests.’ O’Connor declared in his article that Corkery as a critic wrote of Ó Rathaille ‘more lyrically than most people to-day dare write of Shakespeare.’ O’Connor also reserved unstinting praise for Ó Rathaille’s lyric poetry, and located the reason for a continuing modern readership of Ó Rathaille in the emotive as opposed to the intellectual quality of his poetry. According to O’Connor, it was not the intellectual concerns of the early eighteenth century but the emotional impact of Ó Rathaille’s lyric writing – ‘personal, yet detached; intense, yet beautifully wrought’ – which appealed to a twentieth-century readership. It was a distinction that O’Connor would adopt in his creative work as well as in his mature literary criticism. What was becoming clear in early 1926, from his composition of ‘The Shadow’ and his *Irish Statesman* article on Ó Rathaille, was that O’Connor was grappling with the question of what type of writer he would be. One of the issues of importance to him was his own developing artistic style and the place he would occupy in Irish literature.

**O’Connor as a Poet**

O’Connor continued to write some original poetry in the late 1920s. However, he increasingly turned his attention towards the translation of Irish-language poetry, poetry which was an abiding passion for him. O’Connor’s work in this field produced eight books of translations over the course of his career. His first translation was in

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111 Ibid., 156, 171.
113 Ibid., 655.
114 This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.
115 O’Connor, Frank: *The Wild Bird’s Nest: Poems from the Irish by Frank O’Connor with an essay on the character in Irish Literature by A.E* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1932); *The Fountain of Magic* (London: Macmillan, 1939); *Lords and Commons* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1938); *Lament for Art O’Leary* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1940); *The Midnight Court* (1945); *Kings, Lords, & Commons* (1961); *The Little
The Irish Statesman in 1925 when he published a verse translation of ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’. The publication of ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’ was also the first appearance of the pseudonym that he would use for the rest of his writing life, Frank O’Connor. Michael O’Donovan began using the pseudonym, composed of his own middle name and his mother’s maiden name, soon after the controversy that took place following the publication of Lennox Robinson’s short story in To-Morrow, ‘The Madonna of Slieve Dun’ (August 1924). Robinson was accused of blasphemy (the country girl in the story had been raped and then claimed she had been ‘visited’ in the same way as the Madonna), and he was forced to resign his position as secretary and treasurer of the Advisory Committee to the Carnegie Trust in Ireland. O’Connor later claimed that as a trainee public librarian he was worried that his own job might also be at risk because of his writing. Michael O’Donovan had previously published poetry under ‘M. O D’ and ‘M. O Donnabhain’ in An Long (1922) and The Catholic Bulletin (1923). While changing his name was due, as he claimed, to the Robinson controversy, it was also perhaps in part actuated by a contemporary literary trend as AE, Brinsley McNamara and Sean O’Faolain, amongst others, had also changed their names. O’Connor’s eventual choice of pseudonym might have been influenced by


117 This controversy was also mainly responsible for the closure of this short-lived literary magazine, edited by Frances Stuart and Cecil Salkeld.

118 O’Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 163.

119 These writers had varied reasons for using pseudonyms. Frank Shovlin points out that George Russell’s initial pseudonym was ‘Aeon’ but due to a misreading by one of Russell’s printers, the name appeared as AE with a question mark after it, which was thereafter adopted by the writer. Russell claimed in a letter that he was shy when young and did not wish anybody to know what he wrote. The more common explanation for the proliferation for pseudonyms in Irish writing in the early decades of the twentieth century is given by Paul Doyle. In his correspondence with O’Faolain, O’Faolain informed him that Gaelic had become associated with the rebel cause, and many enthusiasts changed their names to the original Gaelic forms. Padraic O’Farrell claims that MacNamara chose the pseudonym on an impulse for a stage-name when he appeared in his first lead role in 1910 in the Abbey Theatre (the role was as Denis Barton in R.J. Ray’s The Casting Out of Martin Whelan). The pseudonym incorporated the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s middle name and a relative’s surname. See: Shovlin, Frank, ‘The Pseudonyms of George W. Russell’, Notes and Queries, Oxford
the fact that he thought the Irish and English versions of his name too similar and therefore too risky, especially considering the erotic undertones of ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’.  

While his work as an original poet dramatically declined in quantity in the late 1920s, as he concentrated on producing translations, short stories as well as a number of plays, he did write a few more original poems in the early 1930s. This resulted in the publication of *Three Old Brothers*, which is a collection of these poems as well as the poems and translations that had been published in *The Irish Statesman*. His biographer sums up the collection by stating that:

> By the middle of the thirties O’Connor had come to accept both his limitations as a verse maker and his inclinations toward prose fiction. By that time, however, he had written a respectable pile of poems, to say nothing of his translations, so when his agent apprised him of the possibility of doing a ‘slim volume’ for a poetry series published by Nelson, O’Connor decided to print the best he had, and call an end to his career as a poet.  

In his article, ‘Frank O’Connor’s American Reception’, Robert C. Evans provides a detailed archival investigation into O’Connor’s critical reception in the United States. In the 1930s ‘most of his first American reviewers responded enthusiastically to his work’, Evans notes, ‘and O’Connor’s positive reception in America eventually helped ensure his status as one of the most influential Irish writers in the mid-twentieth century.’ One aspect that is also notable about this reception, and which is not remarked on by Evans, is that all of O’Connor’s 1930s’ writing, except *Three Old Brothers*, received comprehensive attention from American periodicals. Similarly, all

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of the critical readings available on O'Connor's poetry concentrate on his work as a translator. One such article was by Geoffrey Taylor [Geoffrey Phibbs], 'The Poetry of Frank O'Connor', published in 1945. In this essay, Taylor largely dismissed O'Connor's original poetry and contended that his best poetic work was his translations. O'Connor's translating 'genius' is not reflected in the original poetry, Taylor commented, as O'Connor is predominantly a craftsman in this field:

He does not readily invent or present a poetic situation as Hardy or Browning or the old Ballad-writers did ... in daylight they seem a trifle thin ... [they] lack imaginative form and their excellence is an excellence of detail rather than of truth in total composition ... the larger picture, the setting for these details, tends to go out of focus.

Taylor provided little evidence of his claims and did not in any meaningful way engage with the poetry. He devoted one and half pages to the original poems and the rest of the article concentrated on O'Connor's translations. Taylor was right about O'Connor's craftsmanship, however, and O'Connor himself admitted his obsession with the craft of writing: 'I was cursed at birth with a passion for techniques'. A more positive review of Three Old Brothers was provided by the poet Austin Clarke in The Times Literary Supplement in 1936:

the best poems in this collection are those in which he is inspired not only by a personal sense of native tradition but by that rustic convention which has prevailed almost too exclusively in modern Irish verse. The title piece is a vigorous dramatic ballad and show's Mr. O'Connor's humorous grasp of oddities, while 'Alone,' in which a poor old woman meditates upon the grandeur of her funeral, has a quiet idyllic charm.

124 Taylor, Geoffrey [Phibbs, Geoffrey], 'The Poetry of Frank O'Connor', The Bell, 11:3 (December 1945), 779-787.
125 Ibid., 780-781.
126 O'Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 156.
127 Clarke, Austin, Review of Three Old Brothers and Other Poems, 'Mr. O'Connor's Poems', The Times Literary Supplement (20 June 1936), 52.
O’Connor’s own belief about his poetic ability, that he was not good enough to become a professional poet, probably best explains why he turned to translations as the medium to best satisfy his poetic ambitions. Translating Irish-language poetry became an aspect of his oeuvre in which he was to gain considerable respect and recognition.

However, despite the scant attention that has been accorded to O’Connor’s original poetry to date, this research would suggest that it is important for critics to provide some assessment of this aspect of his body of work. This chapter reveals that it was in his poetry that O’Connor dealt with his loss of faith and his attitude towards Catholicism, the Church and its supporters, and this attitude would thereafter be sustained in his critical and creative work. O’Connor’s poetry also supplies readers with the most direct and revealing insights into his state of mind during the Civil War and marks the beginning of his gradual disillusionment with the tenets of nationalism and republicanism. The subject matter of his poetry – the ‘lonely voice’, sexuality in Ireland, the decline of an intellectually engaged society, children born outside wedlock, and a veering towards realistic depictions of the ordinary and everyday in Irish life – would become some of the foundational themes in O’Connor’s work in later years. At the same time, O’Connor also wrestled with the influence of the Irish Literary Revival in this body of work, and the usefulness of the Revival in these post-independence years. His early awareness of a writer’s relationship with his readers is also present in this poetry, so much so that O’Connor struggled in his poems to locate his own literary style while contending with notions of literary posterity. It can be argued, therefore, that O’Connor’s original and largely unpublished poetry in the 1920s was the place where he first apprehended his literary voice.
Chapter Two

O’Connor’s 1920s Literary Criticism

O’Connor, George Russell and *The Irish Statesman*

While Frank O’Connor maintained his poetry-writing apprenticeship throughout the 1920s, his professional apprenticeship came to an end in early 1925. Having spent six months working as a trainee librarian in Sligo, he was transferred to Wicklow on 1 February. O’Connor was assigned as an assistant librarian to Geoffrey Phibbs in order to help organise the opening of Wicklow County Library. Relieved to be leaving behind what he considered a dreary backwater, O’Connor was enthusiastic about the move and found his new surroundings to be a pleasant place to live. However, he ran into immediate difficulty with the local priest who was opposed to the new library—a reaction to the previous year’s Carnegie Library controversy over Lennox Robinson’s story in *To-Morrow*. O’Connor deftly outwitted the resistance by appealing to the priest’s nationalistic spirit. His outmanoeuvring of local clerical dissent impressed his new boss and ensured the beginning of their close friendship. In fact, O’Connor’s friendship with Phibbs would prove to be of important significance for his literary future.

Just three years older than O’Connor, Geoffrey Phibbs was a knowledgeable bibliophile as well as a budding poet. He was as obsessed with poetry as O’Connor and theirs was a friendship that cultivated this passion. In the second volume of his autobiography, O’Connor captures a wonderful impression of the man and paints a
restless, inquisitive and fearless personality.\(^1\) In contrast to O’Connor, Phibbs wrote poems at a fervent pace and his first collection was published in 1927.\(^2\) Terence Brown, while noting the faults in Phibb’s poetry, praises the energy and observes a ‘tone of delicious disrespect, a fine aristocratic explosive rudeness which set them apart from the poetry being so earnestly composed in 1920s Ireland.’\(^3\) Nonetheless, both young poets took themselves very seriously, to the point where Phibbs launched a manifesto against Yeats in part because Yeats had mistakenly addressed him as ‘Coulter’; O’Connor dutifully signed it. It was this harmless manifesto that was responsible for O’Connor gaining access to Dublin’s literary circles and, more notably, capturing the attention of George Russell (AE), then editor of the weekly *Irish Statesman*. Upon hearing of Russell’s slighting of their manifesto, they called to his office in late February to protest and O’Connor warmly recounts this first meeting:

Phibbs, like many of the younger writers, despised Russell, whom he regarded as an old windbag. I was prepared to do the same, but, while we were still arguing, Phibbs said, ‘The difference between your generation and ours is that we have had no youth.’ ‘Oh, really!’ Russell replied with an air of great concern, and I disgraced myself by a roar of laughter in which Russell joined. One of his favourite quotations was a phrase from the *Three Musketeers* – ‘I perceive if we do not kill each other we shall be good friends’; and I think at that moment Russell and I decided we should be friends, for as we were leaving he put his arm around my shoulder and said, ‘Send me something for the paper.’\(^4\)

O’Connor left that meeting with the prospect of a new friendship and an offer of publication in the journal; this would turn out to be his translation of ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’.\(^5\)

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2 Phibbs, Geoffrey, *Withering of the Figleaf* (London: Hogart Press, 1927). As previously mentioned in Chapter One, all subsequent writing was published under the pseudonym Geoffrey Taylor.
5 O’Connor, Frank, ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’, *The Irish Statesman* (14 March 1925), 11. As detailed in Chapter One, this was also the first appearance of his pseudonym.
For a former anti-Treatyite irregular, it was a brave move for O'Connor to publish in the periodical. From the beginning (and over the course of its seven-year run) the Irish Statesman was a pointed critic of Irish republicanism. Russell’s editorial style was consistently supportive of the Free State government while a sympathetic stance towards the minority population of Southern unionists was maintained in the journal. Ruminating on the achievements of the Irish Statesman near the time of its closing down, Russell confirmed its political bias: ‘It helped to stabilize opinion at the start of the Free State and I think Ministers realize the help it gave and were grateful. It was at first the only paper which gave the Free State a reasoned support.’ On the other hand, Russell was no mere cog in the party political machine: ‘what ministers want is a strong party organ to back them up right or wrong. I could not do that.’ Russell was accurate in his reflection as, while the Irish Statesman supported strategies which upheld the Treaty, it never became an official mouthpiece for the Cumann na nGaedheal government. Instead, the journal advanced a crucial platform whereby a multiplicity of critical opinion on the country’s political, economic and cultural affairs emerged, albeit authoritatively mediated through the editorship of Russell. In particular, one of the areas where Russell diverged from governmental schemes was in relation to the re-Gaelicisation policy.

Strategically, ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’ was an astute first submission from O’Connor as a translation of an early medieval Irish poem would have appealed to Russell’s literary sympathies, his own poetical efforts being deeply influenced by, among other interests, ancient Irish myth. A translation of an Irish-language poem would also have been an attractive submission to Russell as, while he was not opposed to a revival of the Irish language per se, the state-sponsored attempted re-

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Gaelicisation of the country concerned him. He feared that it could lead to a further segregation of the Anglo-Irish minority in the post-independence period. Russell did have a smattering knowledge of the Irish language as he had undertaken to learn the language out of a sense of parental responsibility back in 1900, but he had no interest in editing a bi-lingual periodical and had stated as such in a short note in the Irish Statesman just two months before O’Connor’s translation was published: ‘Though we believe in a bi-lingual country, bi-lingual journals are irritating to those who subscribe to them.’ Russell’s assertion was printed in response to an on-going debate in the journal in the mid-1920s, with the Irish Statesman discussion forming part of a much larger national debate that took place over the Free State’s policy of re-Gaelicisation. It was a debate that D.P. Moran had once described as the battle of two civilizations (Gaelicisation versus Anglicisation).

The Re-Gaelicisation Debates

Moran’s journal, The Leader (1900-1971), was a determined organ for Irish Ireland ideology, a nationalistic cultural ideology that can be best traced to the address of Douglas Hyde in 1892 on ‘The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland’. For this de-Anglicisation to succeed, Hyde had contended that Irish people should support the country’s own cultural traditions – in language, literature, sport, dance and dress:

> with a view to de-Anglicising ourselves … I would earnestly appeal to everyone, whether Unionist or Nationalist, who wishes to see the Irish nation produce its best – surely whatever our politics are we all wish that – to set his face against this constant running to England for our books, literature, music, games, fashions, and ideas. I appeal to everyone whatever his politics – for this is no political matter – to do his best to help the Irish race to develop in future upon Irish lines, even at the risk of encouraging national aspirations, because upon

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8 AE, Editor’s Note, The Irish Statesman (24 January 1925), 626.
Irish lines alone can the Irish race once more become what it was of yore – one of the most original, artistic, literary, and charming peoples of Europe.

Hyde had urged ‘Irish Irishmen’ to strongly resist the decline of Gaelic traditions and Irish Irelanders were to the forefront in the re-Gaelicisation debate. The Irish language and consequently ‘Irish literature’ were therefore strongly contested sites in the post-independence Irish identity ‘battle’. One of the more detailed *Irish Statesman* discussions on the subject took place in the immediate months preceding O’Connor’s first publication in the journal. Thereafter, several of O’Connor’s critical publications in the late ’20s engaged with the topic so it would seem reasonable to claim that his writings were influenced by this *Irish Statesman* debate. In his original poetry at the time, O’Connor struggled with the decision of whether to write in Irish or English; it therefore could be possible that the *Irish Statesman* deliberations were also a mitigating factor in his ultimate decision to write in English as well as to become such a prolific translator of Irish-language poetry.

It was Sean O’Casey who had sounded one of the first notes of discontent in the *Irish Statesman* in late 1924, when he complained about the State’s education policy.

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10 From the bibliographical information currently available, curiously, despite O’Connor’s proficiency in the Irish language, he generally refrained from writing in Irish except for one short story: O’Connor, Frank, ‘Darcy i d’Tir na nOg’, de Bhaldraithe, Tomas (ed.), *Nuascéalaíocht 1940-1950* (Baile Atha Cliath: Sairseal agus Dill, 1952), 24-32. O’Connor’s short story ‘Darcy in the Land of Youth’ (1949) is not a translation of the Irish-language story. Irish-language radio broadcasts by O’Connor, which in reality were translations of a few of his English-language short stories as well as autobiographical reminiscences from *An Only Child*, were eventually published in 1976: O’Connor, Frank, ‘Fiche Bliain d’Oíge’, ‘Nodlaig as Baile’, ‘Leabhar a Theastaigh Uaim’ and ‘Oiche Shamhraidh’, Mac Aonghusa, Proinsias (ed.), *Aeriris* (Baile Atha Cliath: An Clóchomhár, 1976). It would appear that O’Connor confined his creative writing interest in the Irish language to his extensive translations into English. The research for the rest of this Chapter would suggest that – due to the re-Gaelicisation debate, his own lack of respect for contemporary Irish-language literature, as well as the possibility of a broader readership and concerns about making a living from his writing – O’Connor made a decision in the 1920s to henceforth write mainly in English. His decision, as well as the ‘loss’ of other Irish writers to English, was lamented by proponents of Irish Ireland: ‘Peadar O’Donell, Sean 6 Faolain, Frank O’Connor, and Sean O’Casey are a great loss to the language. They gave their all embellishing English literature.’, Criostóir Mac Aonghusa, *UCG Irisleabhar* (1939-1940), 33-34; quoted in O’Leary, Philip, *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State: 1922-1939* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004), 439.
of compulsory Irish. Since 1922 a substantial amount of State finances had been directed into supporting the re-Gaelicisation policy. Sponsorship of literary prizes for works in the Irish language, the training of teachers and the setting up of the Free State publishing agency (An Gúm) in 1926 to produce Irish-language books, formed a significant part of the State’s budget. O’Casey deemed it a waste of resources by the Cumann na nGaedheal government, especially in relation to Irish children who lived in what were considered to be some of the worst slums in Europe at the time. D.P. Moran charged O’Casey, who was still a member of the Gaelic League, with betraying his ideals: ‘If Mr O’Casey does not hate Irish he certainly dissembles his love with great efficiency.’¹¹ ‘T. O’R’, in response to a remark by Russell on January 3, that ‘Irish literature is of interest only to “a few scholars who find in it things which throw light on the pre-Latin civilization”’, accused him of ‘hostility’ to the Irish language and challenged Russell to give his opinion on ‘Gaelic’.¹² Russell responded to the accusation with a carefully worded article in the same issue. Denying the charge of hostility, he explained his original comment as meaning simply the level of European interest in the language. More polemically, he countered that the interest was limited especially if one compared it to ‘the interest awakened by the Anglo-Irish writers.’ Russell’s article proceeded to directly engage with some of the rhetoric of post-independence Irish Ireland arguments, in particular the attitude that Irish literature written in English was ‘alien’¹³:

¹¹ D.P. Moran, The Leader (20 December 1924); Quoted in O’Leary, Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 446.
¹³ While this attitude was common enough among Irish Ireland supporters, it was also not the only opinion in the movement. Several Irish Irelanders had a more open and nuanced outlook on Irish literature written in English, including some of the more prominent writers and scholars of the period, such as Liam Ó Rinn and Aodh de Blácam. For a detailed insight into the attitudes of the Irish Ireland movement towards the English language, see O’Leary, Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 407-457. O’Leary’s book is particularly useful for highlighting the fact that Irish Ireland ideology was not simply a united, one-dimensional anti-English set of beliefs.
It is a mere freak of criticism to call [Anglo-Irish] literature ... ‘Colonial’ ... It is only a section of their own countrymen who discard the heroes of Anglo-Irish tradition as aliens, and who would impoverish the national culture by sweeping them aside. We assert that the intellectual achievement associated with the Anglo-Irish has been a great one, an achievement of which any country might be proud, and it is only the ignorant who waive it aside as savages might throw away precious ores of which they were unable to discern the uses. Our desire is that the Irish people shall have as rich and varied a culture as possible, and if we discard these we are intellectually as poor as church mice in regard to the things which interest men in the modern world.\(^\text{14}\)

Obviously believing that he had sufficiently dismissed those ‘savages’ amongst the members of the Irish Ireland movement, Russell relented and affirmed the *Irish Statesman*’s commitment to: ‘Our Gaelic inheritance ... [which is] necessary for the preservation of a distinct nationality.’ Clearly reaching out to those in the Irish Ireland movement who were more open to Irish literature written in English, Russell cleverly reiterated Irish Ireland beliefs in the article:

> The distinctive character even in Anglo-Irish literature would be lost in a generation or two if the language was not preserved. The salt would be lost that gives its savour to what is best in the Anglo-Irish literature. Into that, sometimes in idiom or phrase, sometimes in choice of subject, and almost always in moral life, the influence of the Gaelic soul is apparent.\(^\text{15}\)

One of the main aims of the Irish Ireland movement was to prevent Gaelic cultural degeneration and the majority of Irish Irelanders believed that this could be achieved through a cultivation of *Gaelachas*. *Gaelachas*, which could be broadly defined as the Gaelic spirit or mind, was the ideological essence of the Irish Ireland movement and one ‘point on which there was considerable agreement was the notion that *Gaelachas* was deeply rooted in the Irish past and most accessible through a study of the language, traditions and cultural expressions from that past ... Irish was [therefore]


\(^{15}\) Ibid.
most valuable as a link to ancient qualities in danger of being lost. The ‘Gaelic soul’ of Irish cultural identity was what was sought and it was through language that Irish Irelanders believed they could fully realise Gaelachas. The Irish language and Irish-language literature became in a sense utilitarian tools in this Gaelachas ideal; it was on this basis too that Irish literature written in English was allowed a degree of acceptance by the Irish Ireland movement:

certain Irish writers, despite their unfortunate choice of linguistic medium, were somehow blessed with a ‘Gaelic note’, an ineffable tinge of Gaelachas that could to some extent transcend language and thus at least in part redeem their literary efforts for the Gaelic nation.

It would seem that Russell was aligning his ‘salt’ metaphor with Irish Ireland’s ‘Gaelic note’; his article, therefore, was above all a shrewd appeal on behalf of Anglo-Irish literature to the cultural and political proponents of the re-Gaelicisation policy.

Frank O'Connor claimed in his autobiography that it was his radio broadcasting in the late 1930s that revealed to him the importance of speech when writing his stories – in other words, that his characters’ phrases and idioms should ring with the tone of man’s actual speaking voice. In his creative writing, O’Connor would consistently seek to portray the intonations of living speech:

that’s what I’m all the time trying to hear in my head, how people word things … I cannot pass a story as finished unless I connect it myself, unless I know how everybody in it spoke … If I use the right phrase and the reader hears the phrase in his head, he sees the individual.

However, despite his assertion of a radio influence, he had already begun to write about the importance of capturing Irish speech in Irish literature in his critical writing for the Irish Statesman. Notwithstanding a possible influence by the Revivalist

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16 O’Leary, Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 44.
17 Ibid., 413.
literary cultivation of Hiberno-English, O’Connor’s engagement with the notion of living speech in the pages of the *Irish Statesman* suggests that the ‘salt/Gaelic note’ linguistic characteristic appealed to his artistic sensibility; he in turn incorporated this into his critical and creative work. One could also suggest that O’Connor’s emphasis on the importance of the ‘backward look’ to Ireland’s past and his long-fought battle to preserve the country’s ancient heritage also has its roots in the mid-20s re-Gaelicisation debate, and these points will be returned to later in the chapter. It was at this time in O’Connor’s life that he began to transfer his affections from his first literary father-figure, Daniel Corkery, to his second one, George Russell. In *An Only Child*, O’Connor revealed the fact that Corkery had been a profound influence on him as a young boy and teenager. While O’Connor does not give credence in his autobiography to Russell having an analogous depth of influence, he does cite him as another father-figure. The earliest evidence available in writing, of when O’Connor began to firmly pull away from Corkery’s influence, occurs in the exact period when O’Connor’s friendship began with Russell. In a letter printed on Wicklow County Library notepaper, O’Connor writes: ‘If you see Corkery make my excuses to him about not going to see him before I went away – in fact make every excuse you like except the real one.’ While there is no way of fully knowing what the ‘real’ reason was, the timing is telling and intimates that the father-figure transfer had started. An examination of Russell’s thinking during this period would indicate that it is possible to trace his critical influence on O’Connor, with the most visible impact occurring in relation to Russell’s modernisation vision of a post-independent Ireland.

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It was no coincidence that one of the most vigorous debates in the *Irish Statesman* on re-Gaelicisation took place in the early months of 1925, as the aim to have the Irish language taught at all school levels was further strengthened by the foundation of the Gaeltacht Commission on 27 January. Russell had realised that Irish was being primed to take the position of the State's language. He feared that this would lead to a regression in the modernisation of Ireland and its contact with what he saw as progressive European contemporary thought:

Our education should be such that it will open to us all that lies behind us in our own land and make it accessible to everybody, but it should open to us world culture no less. We must be bi-lingual if both objects are to be achieved. We need world culture no less than we need Irish culture. The last cannot by itself suffice for us. The cultural implications in the word *Sinn Féin* are evil. We are not enough for ourselves. No race is. All learn from each other. All give to each other ... We must not be afraid of world thought or world science. They will give vitality to our own nationality. If we shut the door against their entrance we shall perish intellectually, just as if we shut the door against the Gaelic we shall perish nationally. It is the crossing of cultures and races which gives them vitality.21

As is evident from the rest of this article, Russell saw Anglo-Irish scientific and cultural achievements as the most significant in the country's history, in terms of garnering world interest. It was Anglo-Ireland that would, therefore, best attain the modernisation of Ireland: 'if we discard these [achievements] we are intellectually as poor as church mice in regard to the things which interest men in the modern world. Science, philosophy and literature *dealing with modern problems* are practically non-existent in the literature written in Irish.'22 Gaelic Ireland, whilst usefully providing a 'salty' colouring of individuality in the country's cultural endeavours, was effectively anachronistic in any attempted performance on the world stage. Re-Gaelicisation of the country would, Russell believed, lead to obscurantism and effectively 'shut the door' to social and economic progressiveness.

21 AE [Russell, George], 'The Gaelic and the Anglo-Irish Cultures', 587.
22 Ibid., 586 (AE's emphasis).
Russell’s engagement with the subject continued in the following weeks, and related articles from other writers and scholars also appeared in the *Irish Statesman*. This was no mere act of intellectual entertainment as ‘the journal was designed to be a vehicle by which Russell’s ideas could be translated into actual policy.’

From the outset, Russell carefully assembled a powerful set of institutional figures to write for the *Irish Statesman*, in order to bolster its reputation and authority. One such figure was Edmund Curtis, Professor of History at Trinity College, Dublin, who regularly reviewed Irish historical publications as well as Irish-language drama productions. Just two weeks after Russell’s article, a lengthy piece by Curtis on the subject of Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literature appeared in the *Irish Statesman*. Ostensibly, it was a review of Corkey’s *The Hidden Ireland* which had been just published at the end of 1924. O’Connor’s literary father-figures were going toe-to-toe in the re-Gaelicisation debate as Corkey had used the publishing opportunity to decry this notion of progressiveness.

In *The Hidden Ireland*, the cultivation of *Gaelachas* was alluded to by Corkery, in that it should be one of the main priorities of the post-independence State; the revival of the language, and consequently the preservation of Irish-language literature, was a necessary component in accessing the ‘soul of a people’.

Corkery defined and directly attacked what he perceived to be a threat to this Gaelic soul – which he named as an Ascendancy creed:

> The natives are a lesser breed ... If they have had a language and literature, it cannot have been a civilized language, cannot have been anything but a *patois* used by the hillmen among themselves; and as for their literature, the less said about it the better ... What pains one is to come upon an Irishman who cannot speak either of the Irish language or Irish literature or Gaelic history except in some such terms as the Ascendancy in Ireland have taught him. In his case the

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23 Allen, Nicholas, *George Russell (Æ) and the New Ireland, 1905-30* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 154.

24 Nicholas Allen suggests that it is possible that Corkery had Russell in mind when he criticised the ‘Progressives’ in Irish society in *The Hidden Ireland*. See Allen, Ibid., 178.

Ascendancy have succeeded; they have created in him the slave-mind ... To revive Irish, cry the Progressives – Progressives! – is to stay the wheels, to put the hands of the clock back. They are filled with a vision of whirring wheels, glistening belts, flying argosies, – a mechanical world, its speed ever accelerating, its output ever increasing! One can indeed imagine a multiplicity of languages as making for confusion among barbarian peoples; but if we, with all those mechanical aids to boot, cannot carry on smoothly under such conditions as did not ever in the world’s history entirely prevent commerce and traffic – surely all our pains to invent have been in vain? ... Even an old outworn language digged out of the earth – who can measure its latent power or forecast its influences? Fragments of stone have been picked out of the ground by field labourers: they have so shaken, so disturbed, so inspired, so coerced the whole art-mind of Europe ever since ..."26.

If Nicholas Allen is correct in his assertion that Corkery had Russell in mind when he mentioned the ‘Progressives’,27 this contribution to the re-Gaelicisation debate could be in part read as an admonition to Russell’s previous pronouncements on Gaelic Ireland. That Edmund Curtis was solicited so quickly to review The Hidden Ireland was perhaps Russell’s strategic counter-attack. It was in the main a positive review but Curtis also made some provocative claims; he painted an image of the world of Gaelic Ireland as alien to the modern reader: ‘it is for Corkery to lead us into their world as a whole, a world not easy for us to comprehend’. More pointedly, he refuted the notion that it was the Anglo-Irish who was responsible for the decline of the language and he cast the villains as belonging to the native Irish caste: ‘native Irish has been dead for a couple of generations’, thanks in no small part to Daniel O’Connell – ‘the appointed wizard of anglicisation’. Instead, the Munster poets that Corkey revived ‘are stars of the Gaelic twilight’ and the language of these twilight poets ‘is but a ghost’.28 In the same issue, T. O’R’s response to Russell’s article was published and this stimulated even further correspondence.

26 Ibid., 9-11.
27 See footnote 24.
Dismissing Russell’s imputations of trying to shut the door on world thought and consequently starve Irish minds, T.O’R welcomed the opportunity to read ‘what is best in English or any other literature’ but summarily dismissed any claim that Ireland could have to the literary achievements of Irish writers who wrote in English:

Our literary men who write in English are our intellectual emigrants. Their cultural capital is London ... it would be very gratifying to persuade ourselves that the English literature produced by various writers from Swift to Shaw was really ‘Irish.’ But no good will come of vainly coveting what is not ours; and if we are poor, let us at least be honest. If our population is small, and our modern literature not at all so fine as we should like it to be, there is no reason for us to hang our heads in shame, for the blame is hardly ours.29

While there was a difference of opinion among Irish Irelanders concerning the canonical place of Irish writing in English, T.O’R’s claim was typically articulated by a majority within the movement. His comments highlighted some of the fears and anxieties that were at the very heart of Irish Ireland’s attitude towards Anglo-Irish literature. There was a general acceptance that Irish-language writing was in a stage of growth and a significant modern literature was not yet available. Politically, Irish Ireland argued that writers in the Irish language needed to be supported, their work published, bought and read, and monetary prizes awarded; it was hoped that this would encourage more writers to write in Irish once they realised that an artistic living could actually be made from the language. As a result, the increased output of creative work would help save the language and awaken further interest in it. The international reputation achieved by writers such as Swift, Shaw, Yeats, Synge and later Joyce deeply concerned Irish Irelanders as it was felt that this would authenticate English as the country’s literary mode of expression.30 Russell’s response was to hone in on this very insecurity as he simply asked that Anglo-Irish writers be respected for the world

30 For more on this aspect of Irish Ireland, see O’Leary, Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 1-22.
glory they had achieved for the country, in comparison to writing in a language where there were not even enough readers ‘to pay for the cost of printing their books.’ More astutely, he named those very writers and included Corkery in his impromptu canon of Anglo-Irish writers. A second letter, strategically placed underneath Russell’s reply, supported his refutation and asked that the term Anglo-Irish be dropped altogether as these were ‘Irishmen writing Irish literature in the present-day language of the Irish people.’ Further debate in the pages of the journal continued in the weeks leading up to O’Connor’s first translation in the journal, with the points made mostly rehashing what had already been noted.

The 1920s Literary Criticism

O’Connor’s initial contribution of a translation therefore aligned itself firmly with Russell’s editorial and cultural interests at the time, and his translations continued to be published right up until the *Irish Statesman*’s final issue on 12 April 1930. Russell’s cognizance of O’Connor’s bi-lingual ability proved serendipitous for him as O’Connor soon began to receive offers to review Irish-language cultural endeavours. Moreover, O’Connor published a letter in the *Irish Statesman* just a few months later and his subject matter displayed evidence that he had been following the journal deliberations. This was the first time that O’Connor entered into a public epistolary debate and it was the start of a critical methodology that he returned to frequently

32 A.M., Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Statesman* (31 January 1925), 657. This letter did diverge from AE’s opinion in that A.M. thought that a bi-lingual country was unachievable; however, the letter ends with the assertion that the current education policy would not produce great works in the Irish language and instead more money should be spent on encouraging scholarship in Gaelic studies, and the reproduction of the classic Irish-language texts. This too would have suited AE’s polemic.
throughout his writing career. O’Connor’s letter was a response to a correspondence between Geoffrey Phibbs and Russell, where Phibbs had criticised the diction of young Irish poets and Russell had questioned the poetic validity of confining oneself to the language of common speech. O’Connor’s reaction was to praise the simple words of Irish-language poetry and criticise what he called ‘literary language’. It was the language of common speech that produced the most emotive response in readers, he argued, and not the ‘juggler’s tricks’ of literary phrases such as those used by ‘Mr. Yeats’:

After all, are not words the first test of an artist’s sincerity? ... writing in English the cult of beautiful words has become so much a part of us that we have forgotten what sincerity meant to a man like David O’Bruadar ... for O’Bruadar knew if his poem were to go home to the heart his words must be winged things and not the lame sickly orphans whose only shelter is the dictionary.  

The letter potently touched on some of the very issues that Russell had been recently debating – the importance of Gaelic literature, the achievement of Anglo-Irish writers, and which of these literary traditions were ‘authentically’ Irish. Russell did not rise to the bait. In fact, O’Connor had an ulterior motive in his polemical correspondence but only revealed this in a private letter to his friend, Sean Hendrick. He wrote to Hendrick for support ‘in a matter of pure necessity’ and asked him to write in to the Irish Statesman under an assumed name. They were attacking the ‘literary language of our Dublin friends’ and he requested that Hendrick help them ‘dispose of the Irish Literary Renaissance in a suitably undignified manner!’  

Ironically, in the same letter, he mentions that he was holding on to a copy of Ulysses for Hendrick as he was

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34 Ó Donnabháin, Michael [Frank O’Connor], Letter to the Editor, The Irish Statesman (13 June 1925), 270. O’Connor had published this letter under the Irish version of his surname but it would be the last time that he did this. He did not meet Yeats until the autumn of that year so it was not a case of circumspection. O’Connor had already published ‘Suibhne Geilt Speaks’ so perhaps he wanted to disassociate his writing in English from the points he was making in the letter.

‘afraid to send it through the post’.\(^{36}\) Post-independence anxiety of influence was evidently a source of concern to these young aspiring writers. Alienation from the romanticisation of the Literary Revival was also a mitigating factor and the ‘giants’ of this period, in particular Yeats, were the target.

What the public letter also revealed was O’Connor’s love of Irish-language poetry and his early commitment to the role of speech in artistic writing. Repeatedly, he returned to the matter in his cultural criticism throughout the 1920s. In a review of an Irish-language book on the birds of Ireland, O’Connor used the opportunity to note again the lyrical benefit of capturing speech in writing: ‘The Irish is free and vigorous – not cramped by narrow grammatical rules. Irish as spoken in West Galway.’\(^{37}\) He raised the point again in an article two months later but this time he had modified his opinion of the seventeenth-century poet Dáibhí Ó Bruadair:

O’Bruadair was a great poet with qualifications; and in the qualifications lies the tragedy. He was a professional poet and knew it. In his work, his intellect, his wit, his consummate mastery of the technique of verse, are always dominant. It is only at certain moments that the crust is broken, that we see behind the intellectual personality the personality of emotion, the passionate lyric power ...

Here is the poet that tradition remembers.\(^{38}\)

Ostensibly, the article was a review of an excerpt from Sean O’Faolain’s MA thesis on the poet, published by Cork University in *Earna*.\(^{39}\) O’Connor praised O’Faolain for prioritising the lyric personality over the intellectual personality; in other words, it was the simple lyrical poetry that appealed to O’Connor and not the ‘literary’

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\(^{36}\) O’Connor was initially favourably disposed toward Joyce in the 1920s but this gradually changed over time. In later writings on Joyce, O’Connor tended to criticise him for his ‘intellectual’ style. He classed him as a Ph.D writer – only those writing theses would read him. For a comparison between early and late O’Connor criticism of Joyce, see: O’Connor, ‘Joyce – The Third Period’, *The Irish Statesman* (12 April 1930), 114-116; O’Connor, ‘Introduction’, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Time Reading Program, 1964), xv-xxi.

\(^{37}\) O’Connor, Frank, Review of *Saoghal Éanacha* by Tadhg O Ceallaigh, *The Irish Statesman* (1 August 1925), 664.

\(^{38}\) O’Connor, Frank, Article, ‘Literature and Life. The Poet As Professional’, *The Irish Statesman* (3 October 1925), 111.

\(^{39}\) O’Faolain, Sean, ‘Deich mbliana d’fhás i mBeatha Fhile’, *Earna* (17 March 1925), 26-33.
craftsmanship. The lyrical poetry was what charmed readers, O’Connor indicated, and it was for this reason that Ó Bruadair was still remembered. O’Connor’s opinion would be reflected in his future translations choices. As Alan Titley has noted, he was:

distinctly uncomfortable with the literary poetry from the mid-seventeenth-century onwards ... Consequently, we only get the very best of Ó Rathaille from him, one solitary poem by the great word-musician Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin, and nothing at all by the who of whos of Irish poetry in the late seventeenth century, Dáibhi Ó Bruadair. 

O’Connor did translate a poem of Ó Bruadair’s in his *Irish Statesman* article – ‘Is Maírg na Fuil ‘na Dhubhthuata’ – but did so only to dismiss its ‘lofty’ air and prove his point. Curiously, he compared the intellectual craftsmanship of Ó Bruadair to modernist literature: ‘so much mischievous arrogant craft ... And again one smiles, thinking what form the Expressionists, Joyce and the rest have produced, more modern, more ecstatically ridiculous than the forms used by this cynical tatterdemalion of the seventeenth century.’ O’Connor’s lifelong artistic interests were beginning to accumulate and his mature critical division between the intellectual and the instinctive writer was being formed. It was the moral, humanist instinct and not intellectual stylistics that was the more valuable in literature, according to O’Connor.

As a critical theory it rather too neatly divides writing into these two camps, and O’Connor’s initial formulations in the 1920s would ultimately result in an anti-modernist stance. Moreover, these early literary theories became a keystone for his mature criticism. In the 1950s and 60s, O’Connor argued that ‘lofty’ literature

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41 O’Connor, ‘Literature and Life. The Poet As Professional’, 111.

42 For a more detailed analysis of O’Connor’s attitude toward modernist literature, see Taaffe, Carol, ‘Frank O’Connor on Irish Modernism’, Lennon (ed.), *Frank O’Connor: Critical Essays*, 205-217.
alienated the ordinary reader: ‘the moment it starts getting so intellectual that it gets beyond the range of people and reduces them to academic formulae, I’m not interested in it any longer.’\(^{43}\) Whether it was the ‘rhetorician’s dream’\(^{44}\) or ‘university man’\(^{45}\) that was Joyce, or the more cerebral poetry of Ó Bruadair, the style did not represent a communication between the writer and the reader regarding the object. Instead, ‘the relationship is between the writer and the object, and it is now the reader who is the third party, present only by courtesy.’\(^{46}\) Readers’ response, his attitude toward modern experimental writing, common speech, simple language and the importance of the lyrical quality in literature: these matters would eventually play a dominant role in O’Connor’s later cultural criticism as well as his creative work. Russell’s desire for a more cosmopolitan Ireland, the re-Gaelicisation debate in the *Irish Statesman*, and the subject matter of O’Connor’s earliest literary criticism for the journal, resulted in an influence that would be interwoven into his mature writings.

**O’Connor and Irish-Language Literature**

The *Irish Statesman* deliberations on Irish literature did not stop, of course, in March 1925 and the topic of re-Gaelicisation continued on and off throughout the life of the periodical. O’Connor became directly involved when he and Phibbs claimed in a brief but vague letter that Yeats was not an Irish poet.\(^{47}\) More tellingly, the second letter they published asserted that they were not prepared to discriminate between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literature – it was all one subject. However, what distinguished

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\(^{43}\) O’Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 155.


\(^{45}\) O’Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 155.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 199.

\(^{47}\) O’Connor, Frank & Geoffrey Phibbs, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Statesman* (7 November 1925), 270.
writers such as Goldsmith, Yeats, Wilde and George Moore from ‘Irish’ writers such as Mangan was that Mangan:

wrote in an Irish tradition, with the aid of a working knowledge of Irish, and often in modes derived from the Irish poets. He was born, lived and died in Ireland, and wrote exclusively for an Irish public. [It is because of this that Mangan’s poetry is] not so regarded in England … [he] wrote in a tradition alien to the English mind."

It is not surprising that this time Russell was enticed into a serious reply as the two young librarians were trespassing on ground that Russell was actively trying to patrol. Once more, Russell argued that confining literature ‘within the limitations of the traditional’ stagnated the creation of ‘fresh beauty’ and correspondingly impoverished a national literature. Poetry was incorrectly ‘a form of patriotism’ to this ‘twain’; instead, literary value was derived from a poet’s genius, not daubing writing with ‘local colour’ which makes it ‘unintelligible’ outside the poet’s environment. Misunderstood poetry was also the result of poor poetry as works of genius were appreciated in any country. Russell did not clarify what he meant by the term traditional except to imply that it was ‘the already-uttered’; in this context, he seemed to view the traditional as a static summation of what had been previously achieved by Irish writers in terms of language, style, and imagination. Herbert Palmer joined the dispute when he asserted that Yeats would never be considered an English poet. His letter traced an older Irish literary influence in Yeats’s work and placed him as the ‘central pivot in the creation of a new National Irish Literature’; this modern Irish literature had its roots in the heroic past, was patriotic, and should be understandable to everyone. It was the less creative writers that ‘committed themselves to a too

48 O’Connor, Frank & Geoffrey Phibbs, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Statesman* (21 November 1925), 342.
49 AE [Russell, George], Editor’s Note, *The Irish Statesman* (21 November 1925), 342.
50 Herbert Palmer (1880-1961) was an English poet and critic. His works include collections of poetry such as *Summit and Chasm* (1934) and *Season and Festival* (1943), and criticism such as *Post-Victorian Poetry* (1938).
exclusive and narrow national outlook.' He ended his letter with the humorous suggestion that Blake, Villon, Poe and Heine were Gaelic writers because of the musical rhythms in their work, and which 'we naturally expect to find with poets whom we term "Irish"'. Russell and Palmer were on friendly terms at the time but whether Russell solicited Palmer to write this letter is not evident in the collection of selected letters by AE that has been published, as only one letter to Palmer is available. However, that he was writing to Palmer about the dispute around this time is clear from an unpublished letter to Palmer in the same month, when he wrote: 'I like literary controversies ... I am trying to nurse them up here among the younger men.' As one of the younger men, O'Connor alone responded to both Palmer and Russell and in this letter he articulated his ideal for a national literature.

Significantly, O'Connor expressed an opinion on the functional nature of a national literature that would be reiterated in future writings:

A nation like an individual has a mind of its own, and if at any time that mind is blotted out, as it has been in Ireland, the nation becomes like a man who has suddenly lost all memory of his previous experience; it is not responsible for what it does or what it dreams, for its mind must be forged anew in other experience. To me Mr. Yeats's work is part of the national irresponsibility, and I praise Mangan and I praise Synge, because in them the national memory has survived. Now, what do I find wrong with Yeats? I find this: that never, at any time or for any occasion whatsoever, does his art come into touch with life, with the world around us. And it is by an artist's attitude to life that we can judge what part he has or will have in the national memory ... [Yeats's poems have] no real trouble of spirit behind them; in a word, they are complacent ... I do object to the assumption of Herbert Palmer and others that this verse represents Irish literature, that in reading the Lake Isle of Innisfree they are doing ample justice to the twelve centuries or so during which the Irish race set down its trouble about the terrible mystery of life. And to tell the truth, I am not very much bothered whether or not Irish literature will be ... 'modern and understandable to everybody — to London as well as to Dublin.' ... [Tomas Costello's poems, for example] are troubling poems ... and I will not have what is middling good in English bartered for what is bad in Irish.  

52 Russell, Letter to Herbert Palmer (29 December 1925); Quoted in Summerfield, That Myriad Minded Man — A.E., 232.
O’Connor plainly saw literature as a created reservoir for the history of a country; in other words, stored within the literary output of Ireland was the cultural and political history of the island. Therefore, the national memory of a country could be found in its literary canon. According to O’Connor, Irish writers should consequently write with a national consciousness and their work should contain within it the reality of Irish life. His early definition of a national literature sowed the seeds for a theory that O’Connor continued to develop in his later cultural criticism. Over forty years later, Ulysses, for example, was predominantly valuable to O’Connor in ‘its description of the poetry of everyday life in the first decade of this century; and as that Dublin fades into history, this aspect will seem more and more important’. Literature was not simply an aesthetic experience for the reader; instead, its functional responsibility was instrumental. Historical memory and its accumulative effect on a country’s national identity – that is, the amassed layers of cultural and political references that build up over the centuries – could be found in its literary canon.

Unfortunately, O’Connor never fully clarified his philosophy of cultural memory and how he viewed it working in relation to literature. Instead, what one is left with are scraps of soundings from his publications. Some of the more useful examples available are his declarations in relation to the early twentieth-century French writer, Marcel Proust. O’Connor admitted that his reading of Proust influenced his thinking on memory and in 1945, in a short book that displayed what he appreciated in literature, he wrote that Proust’s work elucidated many things that had troubled him in relation to contemporary literature. His attraction for the work of Proust could partially be located in his perceived view of a Proustian scorn for literary

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54 O’Connor, Frank, The Backward Look, 209.
intellectualism. Yet, his interpretation of Proust’s literary memory theories remained tantalisingly brief: ‘the essential realities of literature are not contained in the conscious mind at all, but in memory and the subconscious mind from which the writer dredges them.’ It is when one examines his earlier criticism in the Irish Statesman that his Proustian comment is somewhat explicated, as O’Connor engaged with the notion of literary memory in reviews of two translated volumes of À La Recherche du Temps Perdu. O’Connor positioned Proust as occupying the same level of artistic achievement as Turgenev (one of his most admired writers), in terms of giving the reader ‘so much insight into the human soul.’ Rather surprisingly, he also claimed that all Proust needed to invent was the action in a text – ‘the externalizing of emotion’, as the emotional currents in a work of art came from within the artist himself. However, O’Connor’s remark can be contextualised within his initial Proustian pronouncements. Memory was what preoccupied O’Connor in the first review and he professed that Proust’s ‘magnificent’ and ‘melancholy’ prose had expressed the ‘phantasmagoria of his own mind.’ Proust had managed to artistically depict the memory of a soul in his literary characterisation, using the ‘eye of memory rather than the eye of imagination.’ It was during this literary retrospect that ‘fiction ends and music begins’. Citing Turgenev, O’Connor declared ‘that memory had penetrated into regions where music alone could follow it.’ It would seem that what O’Connor was driving at was the conviction that creative writers alone could access and portray the stored memory in a human’s subconscious. If one combines this

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notion together with his proclamation in his 1925 *Irish Statesman* letter – that a country’s cultural memory was collected in its national literature – and apply it to his emphasis on the importance of Irish-language literature in the same letter, it would appear that O’Connor saw the primary significance of Irish-language literature as containing a historical legacy of cultural memory. In his view, an amalgamation of both Irish-language and Anglo-Irish literature into one national literature therefore provided a precious path to Ireland’s past. However, O’Connor was not simply espousing a version of the *Gaelachas* ideal. Despite the apparent proclivity in the *Irish Statesman* letter toward Irish Ireland arguments, O’Connor was in fact articulating Russell’s belief – that the country could be modernised through its literature. This implementation of Russell’s convictions would manifest itself more palpably in his mature criticism.

Tellingly, his original title for *The Backward Look* – his broadsweeping survey of Irish literature in both languages – was *The Search for the Past*. The key difference between him and his father-figure Russell was that O’Connor saw Irish-language literature as a necessary component in the modernisation process. He patently stated as such in *The Backward Look* when he averred that his aim in this book was based on a pronouncement by Samuel Ferguson:

[Ferguson] realized before anyone else and more clearly than anyone else that literature in Irish was an essential part of the education of any Irishman and tried to make it so … his criticism of Irish literature is as true today as when he wrote it in 1840 … What Ferguson is arguing is that the aim of any civilized nation must be cultural identity, and cultural identity can be achieved only by a total acceptance of a common past … Ferguson was clearly right. A hundred and twenty years later one can say without being contradicted that no nation in the world is so divorced from its own past as Ireland.  

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60 O’Connor, *The Backward Look*, 150-151 (my emphasis).
Notwithstanding O’Connor’s love of Irish-language poetry, his affiliation with this notion that a ‘civilized’ society had its roots in its past cultural identity was what also drew him toward Irish-language literature. The evolution of modern Ireland could not occur without it. His and Phibbs’s declaration in their second letter to the *Irish Statesman*, that Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literature was all one subject, had its source in this perception that both literary traditions were necessary to access Ireland’s past and, in turn, establish post-independence Ireland’s modern cultural identity.

O’Connor more trenchantly articulated his opinion on Ireland’s national literary tradition in a dispute with Corkery, alongside Sean Hendrick and Sean O’Faolain, in the pages of *The Irish Tribune* in 1926. The Cork-based newspaper was ‘conceived as a nationalist alternative to George Russell’s Dublin-based journal the *Irish Statesman*’. Its ethos was also unambiguously Irish Ireland. From the outset, the editors stated that ‘we are opposed to anglicisation and alienisation alike in morals, culture, language and industry’. Corkery was a regular contributor during the nine months of its existence. In the same month that Corkery became its literary editor, he and Sean Hendrick contributed articles on the notion of Ireland’s national tradition. Both articles seemed to have adhered to the newspaper’s Irish Ireland ethos, in that they both appeared to espouse a *Gaelachas* ideal. Corkery spoke of ‘the Spirit of the Nation’ and cautioned that those that refused to embrace the Gaelic soul were condemning themselves to a life on the margins of Irish society. A former Volunteer, Hendrick rather inchoately positioned Ireland’s republican cause as transcending reason; instead, it was an intangible pact between soul and spirit. The ‘spiritual

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61 Delaney, ‘‘Fierce Passions for Middle-Aged Men’: Frank O’Connor and Daniel Corkery’, 61.
62 ‘Foreword’, *The Tribune* (18 June 1926). Quoted in Delaney, ‘‘Fierce Passions for Middle-Aged Men’: Frank O’Connor and Daniel Corkery’, 61. Originally titled *The Tribune*, the name was changed to *The Irish Tribune* after the first four issues were published.
symbols’ of Ireland – nationalism, republicanism and religion – were strengthened by Ireland’s stormy troubles, located in ‘the winds and rains of tradition’. Both writers seemed to locate the ‘soul/spirit’ of Ireland’s national tradition as permanently situated in the past.\(^{64}\) Dismissing their contributions as sentimental, ‘a deluge of drivel’ and ‘muddy thinking’, O’Connor engaged with their notion of tradition. As was already evident from his *Irish Statesman* letters, O’Connor saw the national tradition as a combination of past attainments as well as contemporary modern endeavours. His recognition of the traditional importance of past achievements in the Irish language perhaps explains his concession that he ‘understands what Mr. Corkery desires and I respect the desire’. However, his adoption of Russell’s modernisation concept underpinned his strongest criticism of their articles:

> I do not believe that the spirit of the nation ... is a permanent and unchanging thing ... A nation, sir, is only a nation while it is absorbing life into itself, while it is absorbing individuals into itself. I am not so foolish as to imagine that we can have a nation without the national tradition, that is to say, without the sum of what we have learned, but neither am I foolish enough to think that without our national tradition we cannot have a bus service ... The truth is that we need our national tradition in the making of our national philosophy. It is not that tradition is itself a philosophy, for what is it but the sum of certain experiences.\(^{65}\)

In contrast to Russell’s loosely articulated definition of the traditional as the ‘already uttered’ (in his *Irish Statesman* rebuttal to O’Connor just a few months previously), and in opposition to Corkery and Hendrick’s positioning of the traditional in the past, O’Connor offered a much more fluid definition of a country’s national tradition. According to O’Connor, national tradition was not a static concept but a continuous and ever-growing amalgamation of past and contemporary experiences. This notion of national tradition as constantly evolving is an interesting idea and, it could be


suggested, O’Connor arrived at it from his reaction to the re-Gaelicisation debate. Moreover, Paul Delaney has argued that O’Connor’s concept of the traditional is ‘strikingly contemporary’ and ‘anticipates the recent claims of many cultural theorists’.66 Stuart Hall is cited by Delaney as one such example, whereby Hall has asserted that identities and traditions ‘undergo constant transformation … far from being eternally fixed in some essentailised past, they are subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power … [tradition and cultural identity therefore] belong to the future as much as to the past’.67 O’Connor, of course, reiterated this theory in his mature work, and his dedication to his children in The Backward Look – ‘look back to look forward’ – is illuminated within the context of Hall’s comments. If one takes Delaney’s point into account, O’Connor’s premise is therefore of critical relevance nearly a century after publication. O’Connor’s notion of mutable tradition and cultural identity has been borne out by more recent critical studies in relation to Ireland. Richard Kearney, for example, has described the country as a place where identities are always in transition, and Declan Kiberd has posited Irish identity as having a hybrid status, located between the Gaelic and Anglo-Irish worlds.68

When O’Connor wrote his Irish Tribune letter, he was back living in Cork, having started in the new position of Head Librarian of Cork County Library the previous December. Despite now living again in the same city as his former mentor, it did not make for any improvement in his deteriorating relationship with Corkery, and his critique could only have exacerbated things. Corkery responded to his letter;

66 Delaney, Paul, ‘‘Fierce Passions for Middle-Aged Men’: Frank O’Connor and Daniel Corkery’, 65.
however, without engaging with O’Connor’s argument, Corkery rejected his assertions as the product of ‘a very immature mind’ with little ‘control of himself’.  

O’Faolain defended O’Connor and insinuated that Corkery’s provincial stance belonged to the past. Ireland’s national tradition was not ‘intact’ and ‘my generation, which is not Mr. Corkery’s generation’ would play their role in giving the country its national tradition.  

His correspondence was matched by a series of articles for the newspaper on the Irish language. Just one week earlier, O’Faolain had also attacked Corkery; that time the rather outrageous charge was that *The Hidden Ireland* had done ‘more to retard Irish education than three centuries of foreign rule’.  

O’Faolain had previously outlined his preference for what he described as the aristocratic tradition in Gaelic literature. Consequently, eighteenth-century poetry was ‘peasant patois’ and ‘decadent drivel’. The writer and Irish Ireland sympathiser, Aodh de Blácam, championed Corkery and argued that Corkery had instituted the foundational rules for any future discussions of Irish literature. This time, it was O’Connor who defended O’Faolain but noticeably not on the subject of his friend’s preference for Irish-language ‘aristocratic’ poetry. Instead, he rather slyly observed that a book of eighteenth-century poetry had yet to be published and, for this reason, de Blácam’s claim that eighteenth-century poetry was of great literary importance was null and void. It was a fact that would have touched a raw nerve with people like de Blácam, who were acutely aware of the paucity of Irish-language publications.  

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70 O’Faolain, Sean, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Tribune* (23 July 1926), 23.
72 O’Faolain, Sean, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Statesman* (5 September 1925), 816.
75 This point will be returned to later in the chapter.
course for this reason that the recently established An Gúm had been set up.\textsuperscript{77} According to O’Connor, Mr. Corkery’s book was ‘valuable not for its principles but for its enthusiasm.’ It was the ‘mature art’ which ‘the Synges and the Russells and the Yeats have produced’, that had set the literary standards in Ireland’s national literary tradition and not the ‘insignificant scribblers’ in contemporary Irish-language literature.\textsuperscript{78} On the one occasion in the 1920s, when O’Connor reviewed contemporary Irish-language fiction, which was his review of León Ó Broin’s collection of translated and original short stories, his critical conclusion on the original stories was unequivocally dismissive:

They read like the work of a man who had read nothing but bad magazine stories in English; there is no observation, no capacity for remembering the appearance of people or things, no ear for the subtleties of speech one notices every day in the tram. It is astonishing that writers of Irish, men who have accepted the most living thing in Ireland to-day, seem to be completely incapable of putting life into their own work.\textsuperscript{79}

In relation to the *Irish Tribune* debate, while Corkery had ignored O’Faolain’s jibes, he did respond to O’Connor, once more to dismiss O’Connor’s foolishness and immaturity.\textsuperscript{80} The correspondence finished at this point.

O’Connor’s remarks in both the *Irish Statesman* and the *Irish Tribune* appear inconsistent. On the one hand, he was arguing that Ireland’s post-independence modern identity could not be formed without recourse to the country’s Irish-language literature. It was a reservoir for the country’s cultural memory and hence its traditions; as a result, the country’s art needed to ‘come into touch with life’. If there was a


\textsuperscript{78} O’Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Tribune* (13 August 1926), 23.

\textsuperscript{79} O’Connor, Frank, Review of ‘Beal na hUaighe by León Ó Broin’, *The Irish Statesman* (29 September 1928), 77.

\textsuperscript{80} Corkery, Daniel, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Tribune* (27 August 1926), 22-23.
national consciousness in certain Irish-language texts, even if it was of poor quality, it was of more value in terms of national cultural memory than what was good in English. This was especially the case when Anglo-Irish literature (Yeats, for example) did not relate to the world around Irish people. On the other hand, any notion of a homogeneous Irish spirit or soul was dismissed as ‘drivel’ by O’Connor. He was fighting for his right to an individualised vision of Ireland, and for literary standards to be maintained. O’Connor was caught between two sets of beliefs, which could loosely be grouped as Corkery’s and Russell’s ideals for a national literature. In a sense, his writings for the Irish Statesman and the Irish Tribune show that he combined these ideals and pushed them further by arguing for one national tradition, which included Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literature, a tradition that incorporated the past but also remained open to modernising itself.

This 1920s supposition on the subject would be sustained in his mature work. As highlighted by Alan Titley, O’Connor had polemically asked in his introduction to The Backward Look if ‘there is such a thing as an Irish literature, or is it merely two unrelated subjects linked together by a geographical subject?’ Titley regretfully notes that the majority of writers and scholars do not think like O’Connor: ‘Unlike most other writers on this topic, O’Connor concluded that he was dealing with one subject and that this merited a unified approach. Very few people have followed him down this road’. Indeed, Vivian Mercier rather cautiously conceived of a unified tradition in 1962 but warned the reader to be ‘wary of assuming a greater homogeneity between the two literatures than actually exists.’ In contrast, Pádraigin Riggs and Norman Vance have observed that ‘[m]uch scholarly work remains to be done … in investigating the two bodies of writing and in establishing points of

82 Titley, Ibid.
接触。84 O’Connor had already come to this conclusion back in the 1920s and he upheld it for the rest of his scholarly career. Philip Edwards, Professor of English literature in Trinity College, Dublin, in the early 1960s, described O’Connor’s belief in the homogeneity of Irish literature and credited him with initiating the innovative idea of setting up a School of Irish Studies in the university:

his attitude to the problems of literature was to be sudden and bold: the opposite of the cautious academic approach ... He envisaged a series of lectures on the literature of Ireland, in Irish as well as in English, and he thought that TCD should take the lead in establishing a school of Irish studies, in which departments of language, literature, history, and archaeology could combine.85

O’Connor’s series of lectures would be amalgamated and posthumously published as _The Backward Look_ in 1967. On the opening page of the book, he declared that Ireland was the only ‘civilized’ country in the world that had no chair of national literature and students passed through Irish universities with little knowledge of the country’s culture.86 The ‘backward look’ opinion that he voiced so boldly in the 1960s can be traced back to its origins in his engagement with the re-Gaelicisation issue in the post-independence national identity debates. It led to his emphasis on continuity in Ireland’s literary production from the medieval to the contemporary period, and to his instrumental stance on the functional aspect of a national literature. While O’Connor may have been dismissive of contemporary Irish-language literature, his criticism aimed to improve its literary standard in order to maintain its place of importance in Ireland’s literary canon; he was, of course, also including contemporary Irish literature written in English in his linear catalogue. As the Celtic Studies scholar Daniel Binchy observed: ‘All his life he loved scholarship in Irish, and in later years it

86 O’Connor, Frank, _The Backward Look_, 1.
became almost an obsession with him ... he cherished the *Eigenart* of the Irish mind, the "otherness" that expressed itself for so long in Irish and more recently in English." O'Connor had deemed in the 1920s that the modernisation of post-independence Ireland was in part located in establishing Ireland's unique cultural identity. This was located in its national tradition — a national tradition that encompassed its evolution up to and beyond contemporary times — and it was in both Irish-language and Anglo-Irish literature, O'Connor reasoned, that one could most fully access this uniqueness.

**Literary Instrumentalism**

Historiography was the overarching framework for all of O'Connor's literary criticism. While the text itself deserved its own attention, he argued that a more insightful reading was only possible when historical circumstances were taken into consideration: 'I am not, of course, arguing against textual criticism, merely suggesting that it will be more successful when it takes into account the minds of men who wrote these remarkable stories, and the circumstances in which they wrote...

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88 The concept of instrumentalism is used with John Dewey's writings in mind. Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher and educator. He rejected authoritarian teaching methods, regarding education in a democracy as a tool to enable the citizen to integrate his or her culture usefully. In 1916, he used the word instrumentalities to define his thinking in relation to theories of knowledge. As he said: 'Knowledge is not just something which we are now conscious of, but consists of the dispositions we consciously use in understanding what now happens. Knowledge as an act is bringing some of our dispositions to consciousness with a view to straightening out a perplexity, by conceiving the connection between ourselves and the world in which we live ... since democracy stands in principle for free interchange, for social continuity, it must develop a theory of knowledge which sees in knowledge the method by which one experience is made available in giving direction and meaning to another. The recent advances in physiology, biology, and the logic of the experimental sciences supply the specific intellectual *instrumentalities* demanded to work out and formulate such a theory. Their educational equivalent is the connection of the acquisition of knowledge in the schools with activities, or occupations, carried on in a medium of associated life.' Dewey, John, *Democracy and Education* (London: Macmillan, 1916), Institute for Learning Technologies, Digital Text Projects, Accessed 27 July 2010, http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/Projects/digitexts/dewey/d_e/chapter25.html.

Taking Dewey's concept into consideration, this research employs the word instrumentalism in relation to the notion that the reading of literature could educate people about the world around them; literature could also elucidate readers' own experiences for them, by provoking an understanding of their own relationship with life.
them. More perceptive readings would result from this approach, according to O’Connor. However, his theoretical formulation was not just aimed at achieving a deeper appreciation of any literary text. Literature’s relationship to historical circumstances was also educationally important in his view. While O’Connor had transferred his affections from Corkery to Russell in the mid-1920s, Corkery continued to hold sway over his critical imagination in the ensuing years. Corkery’s ruminations on the role of literature and his assertion that art allows one to gain a more meaningful understanding of life, hence its inherent instrumental nature, was echoed by O’Connor. In relation to the reader’s response to the text, Corkery had claimed that:

For us to be so translated as even for a moment to be able to see into the life of things, is surely to be improved; that is, instructed, and not any longer what we have been. The object of all teaching is improvement, and great art, willy-nilly, achieves that object.

The corresponding contention by O’Connor is striking:

[LI]terature with its events which are almost real events … enables us to form a completer picture of life than we could ever hope to do without it … That, then, is literature, not a substitute for life but a completion and an explanation, which, if it always lacks the intensity of real experience, frequently makes up for it in profundity.

O’Connor’s reader-response theory was fully formed when he wrote these words in 1945, its roots going back to Corkery’s pronouncements as well as to his initial thinking on the subject in his writings for the *Irish Statesman*. The instrumental element to literature defined his largely negative attitude towards modernist literature, his receptiveness to Irish-language literature, and, importantly for his own creative

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writing, his attraction to a realist aesthetic. Russell’s argument that Ireland could be modernised through its literature also had its place of influence. O’Connor adopted this stance and applied his educational policy to it. Literature could socially instruct and inform Irish readers, he believed, and this could in turn stimulate a greater critical engagement with post-independence life.

As a result of his burgeoning critical theory, O’Connor was to launch his criticism of Revivalist romanticism and modernist literature on the grounds of a realist stylistic. His stance was not without precedent. Literary realism became one of the dominant modes of expression in the post-independence period and, as Joe Cleary has observed, it was ‘defined in opposition both to the poetic and heroic aesthetic modes associated with the Revival and to the linguistic and formal experimentalism of Irish modernism.’  The idea O’Connor was espousing, that life could be ‘known’ through literature, had its origins in nineteenth-century literary realism. The intellectual underpinning of this mode was influenced from the mid-nineteenth century onwards by the discourse of thinkers such as Darwin, Marx, Claude Bernard, and early Freud. It resulted in a realist aesthetic that has as its philosophical belief the notion that ‘what happens in this world is explicable in terms of the mechanical laws of biology, physiology, economy or psychology’. Literary practitioners of the form were viewed in a sense as scientists, that their works of art could clinically examine and expose ‘the deeper “laws” that governed human behaviour’. Turgenev, for example, a writer whom O’Connor deeply admired, believed that ‘the genius of a great writer can

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92 Cleary, Joe, Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007), 111. Cleary admits that ‘the distinction between realism and naturalism has never been fully clear, and the two terms are often used interchangeably.’ He further contends that there are many different varieties in the realist mode, ‘of which naturalism is only one current’, Cleary, Ibid., 112. On the basis of this argument, this research will use the term ‘realism’ as an all encompassing reference to this particular aesthetic mode, while remaining cognisant of the fact that it is an umbrella term for a literary style that contains within it a broad range of characteristics. The focus of the Chapter on O’Connor’s literary criticism does not allow for a close examination of this literary style. For a more detailed analysis, see Cleary, 111-179.

93 Cleary, Outrageous Fortune, 114.
discover life’s “living truths” . . . “[t]o represent, accurately and with power, the truth, the reality of life is a writer’s highest happiness” . . . This perception would have fitted with O’Connor’s own argument – that literature is a completion and explanation of life – and it is easy to see why he was attracted to the realist aesthetic. That O’Connor also believed in the reforming nature of society – in other words, that humans were not simply determined by immovable societal forces but were capable of agency to change their environment – also pinpoints the extent to which he resembled nineteenth-century realists. Despite criticism that the genre has received, in terms of the perception that it did not allow for progressive political agency and avowed instead a dogma of determinism , the realist discourse of the previous century did have a reformist aspect to it. In order for social conditions to improve, they must first be understood and practitioners of the aesthetic viewed it as an unmasking method. The genre attempted to validate two postulations:

that the state of man had to be improved, and that human conditions are determined by the operation of material causes which can be traced, recorded, understood, and, finally, controlled . . . [in literature, the] more helpless the individual and the more clearly the links in an inexorable chain of causation are defined, [the more] the need for reform is proved.

O’Connor’s definition of literature as providing a ‘completer picture of life’ for the reader slotted neatly into the reformist element of the realist literary convention.

Stylistic experimentation in modernist endeavours, he thought, did not provide a

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95 ‘In philosophy, determinism has generally been contrasted with free will ... that our choices are determined by other forces, and our actions, therefore, can be accounted for in, for instance, causal terms’, Edgar, Andrew & Peter Sedgwick (eds), Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 90.
deeper explication of post-independence social issues. Its literary language excluded any reformist impact on the reader. As O’Connor, and others such as O’Faolain, O’Casey, O’Flaherty, and Kavanagh – who all in their respective ways experienced disillusionment and disappointment with post-revolutionary conservative Ireland – saw it, the rallying cry for post-independence literature was not to make it radically new but to portray reality with a greater fidelity. Again, it was an ethos and situation that was notably similar to some of O’Connor’s nineteenth-century literary realist heroes. Chekhov and Maupassant, for example, wrote during the Russia of Alexander III and the France of the fin de siècle: ‘an age of scepticism, of tedium, and of that ‘conglomerated mediocrity’”.  

It would appear that disillusionment with contemporary society drew these Irish, French and Russian writers toward a realist aesthetic. Moreover, the nineteenth-century literary realist representation of reality portrayed it ‘as organically emerging from the historical processes which determine[d] the life of that period’. As Turgenev in particular saw it, a work of art sprang ‘organically from the life of a nation’ and an artist’s work could be ‘a progressive factor in the development of ... society’. These concepts fitted with O’Connor’s own historicist and instrumentalist theories. In other words, O’Connor’s argument that the historical memory of a nation naturally impacted on contemporary reality, his idea that the historical circumstances of a writer’s epoch had a deep bearing on the work, and his belief that art could play an instrumentalist role in social development and reform: all these theories resonated with strains of nineteenth-century literary realism’s suppositions and indicates his deep philosophical adherence to this form.

Irish realist writers’ stance, in opposition to contemporary Irish modernists such as Beckett, Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey, was also reflective of a broader European debate in the 1920s and 1930s on the aesthetic and political values of realism versus modernism. In the Soviet Union, socialist realism became the official aesthetic; Fascist régimes as well as the Soviet Union regarded modernist art as bourgeois profligacy. Because of this, modernism tended to be regarded at this time as a resisting form to political assimilation. However, realism was also viewed as the aesthetic capable of offering strong interpretative criticism of social issues and state policies. In the case of Irish writing, it was the allure of proffering critique, rather than campaigning for political revolution, that held the greatest appeal for writers such as O’Connor and O’Faolain. The workings of power in Irish society, social experience, and an anti-Revivalist agenda could be most effectively portrayed in a realist work of art, they believed, and it led to a favouring of this literary form. Unlike the Revival, it was a not a stance that was championing radical social and political change. O’Connor, O’Faolain and O’Flaherty had all been directly involved in the military struggle to establish the Irish Free State. In this context, it is perhaps explicable why their writings were not promoting radical political upheaval; it was more a case of offering sustained criticism on post-independence Irish political and cultural institutions. As Cleary has discerned, realism:

after the Irish Civil War may have proved one of the most vigorous strands of domestic literary social critique, but it is also a mode of writing inflected with a strong sense of post-revolutionary disenchantment and commitment to ‘realism’, with all of that word’s connotations of shedding extravagant delusions and adjusting sights to what was feasible … it was to become a literature of domestic dissent and social critique, but these were elaborated essentially in terms of a desire for normalization, not radical transformation. For Sean O’Faolain … Ireland had had a surfeit of ‘romantic’ revolutionary dreaming. That revolutionary moment was now over, it was high time for Irish society to wake

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100 For more on this aspect of realism and modernism, see Cleary, Outrageous Fortune, 140-141.
from its fantasies and face its impoverished reality. This was the new grammar of
literary enterprise and cultural critique.\textsuperscript{101}

While radical change was not the agenda, post-independence realist writers did have
reform in mind. Their writings did not endow characters with individual agency and
the charge of literary determinism could be applied to their works. However, in the
case of O’Connor for example, the focus for reform tended to be on the
instrumentalist influence on the reader. Turgenev had similarly believed in the
cognitive impact of art on the reader: ‘[f]iction’s contribution to knowledge is mainly
so-called “types”, aesthetic universals which help man to know himself and his
society … [and these types are] created directly from observed socio-historical
reality.’\textsuperscript{102} According to O’Connor, realist writing could instigate readers’ recognition
of contemporary problems and thus motivate their engagement with social debate
and reform.

O’Connor’s advocacy of ‘simple language’ in the \textit{Irish Statesman} is also better
understood within the context of the nineteenth-century literary realist sense of
language. A conception of language as forming a transparent medium of literary
representation was his realist ideal. Turgenev had advocated a language of ‘clarity’
and ‘simplicity’.\textsuperscript{103} Chekhov and Maupassant had similarly advanced a language of
‘synthetic simplification … [both were] equally remote from “bookishness … [t]hey
avoid[ed] all that [wa]s affected, pretentious or posing”’.\textsuperscript{104} Moreover, O’Connor’s
labelling of Joyce as the ‘rhetorician’s dream’ echoes Turgenev’s account of
Gončarov’s novel, \textit{The Precipice}: ‘Rhetoric, nothing but rhetoric’. Turgenev’s
pejorative use of the word ‘literature’ – ‘“Oh this literature, how it reeks of literature”’

\textsuperscript{101} Cleary, Ibid., 141-142.
\textsuperscript{102} Terras, ‘Turgenev’s Aesthetic and Western Realism’, 25.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{104} Lavrin, Janko, ‘Chekhov and Maupassant’, 1-2.
and his praise for Tolstoy—"[his] greatest virtue is precisely that his stuff smells of life"—also strongly foreshadows O'Connor's 'literary language' and art coming 'into touch with life' critique of Revivalist and modernist literature. For O'Connor, the language used in any literary text should unambiguously present a lucid portrayal of the artist's vision of life; the reader should be able to easily 'unmask' the language in order to comprehend the text and correspondingly gain access to 'a completer picture of life'. The resultant influence on the reader could therefore inspire social reform.

The idea that literary realism viewed language as a transparent tool through which to view the world has since come in for sustained attack in the 1970s and '80s, with developments in literary theories such as structuralism and post-structuralism. The belief that language could accurately mirror the world and realism could present itself as a window on to reality was undermined by Saussurian conceptions of language as a rule-governed signifying system. It was, of course, a development that took place long after O'Connor's time. Moreover, the account of the language of literary realism in these 1970s and '80s criticisms tends to be generalised and does not allow for its variety. Maupassant, for example, rejected the notion of photographic realism; instead an 'illusion' was presented and literary realism was more an analyses of reality. The literary symbolism so strongly evident in the writings of Chekhov, Maupassant and O'Connor, for example, is also not taken into consideration. Nuanced layers to the surface language of a realist text inhabit a much more complicated

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105 Turgenev, Letters to P.V. Annenkov (25 January 1869; 4 March 1868); Quoted in Terras, 'Turgenev's Aesthetic and Western Realism', 29.
portrait of reality than simply a ‘see-through’ window. As already noted in Chapter One, O’Connor was conscious of the fact that he performed a careful selection of facts to make up his short-stories’ realities, and omissions and symbols were an essential part of the genre. The symbols and omissions stimulated a reader’s imagination and his or her moral judgement. O’Connor believed that this stimulation provoked social deliberation by the reader, and it could thus inspire social reform. O’Connor would later describe his own writing style as ‘old-fashioned’ and ‘humanist’. While he did subscribe to the notion that language in literature should be simple enough to not alienate the reader, he was primarily drawn toward literary realism for what he perceived was its reformist element. When asked in an interview if he thought the writer should be a reformer or an observer, he clearly stated: ‘I think the writer’s a reformer’.  

For O’Connor, romanticism similarly prevented a ‘completion and an explanation’. In the context of the post-independence disillusionment felt by so many of the younger generation of writers, who deemed that the romanticism of the Revival was now inimical to their literary needs, his accusation of irresponsibility towards Yeats in the *Irish Statesman*, that his art does not ‘come into touch with life’, is more clearly understood. O’Connor’s more favourable disposition towards Joyce in the 1920s could perhaps be best located in the Joycean declaration to forge ‘the uncreated conscience’ of the Irish race and write the ‘moral history’ of the country. Moreover, the ‘scrupulous realism’ in Joyce’s early writings, and Joyce’s stated admiration of some of the realist luminaries of the nineteenth century, such as Ibsen, were also what

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108 O’Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 159.
109 Ibid., 162.
initially attracted O’Connor to his work. The more experimental and extravagant Joyce’s work became, the more disengaged from it was O’Connor.\textsuperscript{110}

However, that he also positioned the lyric as an important component of writing shows that O’Connor was caught between a post-Revival romantic inheritance and a post-independence realist disillusionment. His greatest admiration for Irish-language poetry lay in the early medieval period, when the lyrical personal element was at its strongest and the language was at its simplest. As Robin Flower has observed, ‘It becomes personal, for the individual soul has now become the centre, the sensitive focus, of all interest. Language ceases to be decorative and ceremonial and grows simpler and more intense so that it almost comes to be the emotion it expresses.’\textsuperscript{111}

The romance of this poetry also appealed to O’Connor because it did not call for transcendence from life but instead looked to deepen the appreciation for the quotidian:

\begin{quote}
When I use the word romantic I am not thinking of what it might mean in English or in German literature. Irish verse of the period is not the literature of an escape from life, for it is mainly dramatic and objective. Its romanticism lies in its appeal to a fuller life within the life we live; like Hamlet, bounded by a nutshell, it counts itself a king of infinite space, and always it will sound this double note of imagination and precision.\textsuperscript{112}
\end{quote}

This double note of imagination and precision was located in romanticism bound up with a realist aesthetic; it was a form of poetic realism and it was this that O’Connor tried most to emulate in his creative writing. His own atmospheric, lyrical but ostensibly realist short stories reflected this in-between stance. Poetic realism — lyricism combined with a socio-political reality — is what O’Connor strove to attain in his artistic style.

\textsuperscript{110} See, for example, O’Connor on Joyce, \textit{The Backward Look}, 194-211.
\textsuperscript{112} O’Connor, Frank, Article, ‘Literature and Life. An Irish Anthology’, \textit{The Irish Statesman} (12 June 1926), 379.
This inclination toward lyric poetry also influenced his attitude toward middle-Irish and early-modern Irish bardic poetry, the poetry composed in Ireland from about the thirteenth century to the middle of the seventeenth century. O'Connor bemoaned the rise of bardic schools in Ireland and the resultant decline of monastic compositions of lyric poetry: ‘It is a religious loss, an intellectual loss, a narrowing of the horizons of poetry, and at the same time a gain in poetic texture, in language construction and style.’ O'Connor’s verdict on bardic poetry was in part an echoing of some of the claims by the respected Celtic Studies scholar, Osborn Bergin, whom O'Connor was already on friendly terms with, thanks to regular meetings at George Russell’s house. While Bergin had a love of this poetry, he was also aware of its limitations: ‘they are likely to leave the modern reader cold, for, while their technique is marvellous, there is naturally a want of freshness and variety about most of them.’ Bardic poets were systematically trained in the writing of verse – the schools were ‘the nearest thing in Ireland to University life.’ As such, composition was carefully monitored and there was an adherence to a set of guided rules which remained relatively unchanged for five hundred years. Dignified construction, complicated metres, and a prescribed poetic language were all part of bardic training. The dialect was firmly protected ‘against infiltrations of localisms in phonetic and idiom.’ A bardic poet was also master of the numerous branches of genealogical and historical allusions, with the majority of verse exclusively aimed at members of the upper classes. It was a poetic tradition that therefore upheld the aristocratic system

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116 Ibid., 9.

117 Flower, *The Irish Tradition*, 98.
in Irish society. Sean O'Faolain favoured this aristocratic tradition in Irish-language poetry and mocked Corkery's book on the eighteenth-century poets as it was 'an uneducated peasant tradition'. The earlier poetry was a 'tradition more historic, more cultured, and intellectual ... For these centuries were centuries of scholarship, and culture, supported and kept flourishing by the princes, and the nobles, and the State'. In contrast, O'Connor deplored the trained intellectualism involved in stylistic composition, the avoidance of living speech, and the lack of personal passion in these poems: 'Ireland is never a name, never a sentiment; it is harp-playing'. He rather bitingly reiterated his stance over a year later when he maintained that the most intelligent and universal Irish-language poetry was written before the breakdown of the monastic schools: 'bardic poets as a whole had not the intelligence of a hen ... [they were] slaves of superimposed forms and ideas ... [and] were unconscious of the tendency of living speech'. Once more, it was a critical approach that was informed by his post-independence cultural and artistic interests. It would seem that the desire to dispose of Revivalist and modernist forms and ideas, and the inclination toward a realist aesthetic, influenced his appreciation of Irish-language poetry. Like so many other critical opinions that he formed during the 1920s, it was a viewpoint that he sustained in his mature scholarship. Over forty years later, Daniel Binchy could

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120 O'Connor, Frank, Review, 'Irish Syllabic Poetry, 1200-1600. By Eleanor Knott.', *The Irish Statesman* (29 September 1928), 73. See, also, O'Connor's dismissal of bardic poetry that was written to assuage the insecurities of their aristocratic patrons, and his praise of Ó Brudáin for satirising the aristocracy as he 'flayed them with his tongue, like a true bard ... Irish democracy has been born.' – O'Connor, Frank, 'The Gaelic Tradition in Literature', 1:2 (July 1936), 32, 36.
write about O'Connor's 'unconcealed lack of sympathy with the bardic contribution to Irish literature.'

O'Connor's critical methodology in relation to Irish-language poetry stemmed in part from his penchant for poetic realism. In his review of Robin Flower's translations of sixteenth and seventeenth poetry, he initially admired the romantic element of the poems - 'it is full of gallant music and the delight in spars and ropes and the sea and all the other attributes of romance that Irish poetry had forgotten through centuries of schoolmen's verse.' But O'Connor ultimately scolded Flower for giving a too pleasant picture of Ireland which:

for that reason I think it is not altogether true. In literature we are at our best when verses leave a salt taste on the tongue, when the Old Woman of Beare cries out on her right eye that is gone and on her left that is going for better proportion's sake, when Caoilte comforts himself for the winter's cold, because the men he has slain are colder than he ...

He ends his review with the hope that the readers will be 'blown from their respective Dunboys' and transported into a greater imagining of the world around them. The realistic 'salt taste', the delight in romantic images, and the lasting impact on the reader - his review was a combination of the varying strands of his developing critical theory. O'Connor's publications in the *Irish Statesman* were in fact the arena whereby he worked out his literary instrumentalist mind-set, and his own creative writing style of poetic realism.

The instalment of the Censorship of Publications Act in 1929 was, of course, deeply inimical to O'Connor's reformist agenda. It is curious, therefore, why no letter...
or article by O'Connor on the subject appeared in the *Irish Statesman*, even though the ‘controversy surrounding this legislation dominated the pages of *The Irish Statesman* for almost a year.’ Perhaps he feared for his public sector job. However, he was deeply angry at the forced closing down of the *Irish Statesman* over the financial cost suffered during a libel case. At Yeats’s invitation in 1931, he agreed to join the Irish Academy of Letters, whose opening objective in 1932 was to protest against the Act and ‘discourage the Catholic Church from suppressing’ Irish writers. O'Connor would thereafter spend his life loudly and very publicly condemning censorship and its negative impact on artistic and intellectual expression:

> [T]o me the most awful thing about the censorship is the way it perpetuates the negative attitude we oppose to every manifestation of intellect and scholarship ... We have a Censorship Board and a Censorship Appeal Board, but we have no such thing as a Society for the Encouragement of Irish Literature ... We have a Censorship Board, but we have no publishers. We have a great literature, published by Englishmen and Americans, and, thanks to our censors, ninety-nine per cent of it is out of print and unobtainable, so that, as I have said before, we have brought up a generation which knows nothing of its own country, or its own literature.'

From 1931 onwards, O'Connor would continuously fight for the creation of a non-censorious and intellectual environment, in his creative as well as his critical work, as he argued that it was part of the post-independence artist's responsibility to the country: ‘there is no public opinion, and if the artists do not fight, who will?’ He

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127 O'Connor, ‘The Future of Irish Literature’, Connolly, Cyril (ed.), *Horizon*, v:25 (January 1942), 62. In his publicly staged plays in the Abbey Theatre and the Gate Theatre, particularly *The Invincibles* (1937) and *The Statue's Daughter* (1941), O’Connor’s references to a ‘fear of words’ and sarcastic comments about the bad influence of books are clearly rejoinders to the Censorship Act. Also see: O'Connor, Frank, ‘The Stone Dolls’, *The Bell*, 2:3 (June 1941), 66-67. O'Connor also engaged in sending a vast quantity of protesting letters to the Irish media: see, to list just a few for example, O'Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Times* (24 September 1936); [this letter was one of
did achieve a small victory when O’Connor and O’Faolain’s epistolary protest to the

Irish Times in 1942 over the banning of The Tailor and Ansty resulted in:

the first major Senate debate on censorship since the passage of the act in 1929. Together [O’Connor and O’Faolain], they were responsible for creating a climate of moral and civic awareness in Ireland that led to the formation of the Appeal Board in 1946.¹²⁸

O’Connor’s combative stance toward censorship was, of course, partially concerned with its negative effect on writers – in terms of reputation and remunerative anxieties – but this was not the primary reason for his deep disquiet. He saw the Censorship Act as the product of Church and State aspirations to control what the public read, in order to hierarchically impose their social and political ideological interests. O’Connor fought back to protect literature from contemporary utilitarian encroachments. It was literature’s role, he believed, to impart a ‘cargo of communications and information’ to the reader,¹²⁹ thus inspiring debate and reform. Unfortunately, the majority in Church and State institutions had not shared his views and thousands of books were banned in the intervening decades.¹³⁰ The direct relationship between a writer and a reader that was at the core of O’Connor’s literary instrumentalism would be thwarted by Church and State vested interests in a

many over the banning of O’Faolain’s Bird Alone]; O’Connor, Letter to the Editor, The Irish Times (9 October 1942); [a letter that was to ignite an infamous debate over the banning of Eric Cross’s The Tailor and Ansty, for more information, see footnote 128]; O’Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, ‘Justice – How Are You?’, The Irish Times (17 July 1946); O’Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, ‘The Midnight Court’, The Irish Times (10 August 1946); O’Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, ‘The Midnight Court’, The Irish Times (3 August 1946). O’Connor’s letters in 1946 to the Irish Times were primarily focused on the banning of his translation of Brian Merriman’s eighteenth-century poem, Cúirt an Mhéan Oiche. Four more books of O’Connor’s were banned by the Censorship Board: Dutch Interior (London: Macmillan, 1940); The Common Chord (London: Macmillan, 1947); Traveller’s Samples (New York: Knopf, 1951); and Kings, Lords and Commons (New York: Knopf, 1959).

¹²⁸ Carlson, Banned in Ireland, 14. For more on The Tailor and Ansty debate, see: Richardson, Caleb, ‘‘They Are Not Worthy of Themselves”: The Tailor and Ansty Debates of 1942’, Éire-Ireland, 42:3&4 (2007), 148-172.


censorious culture. O’Connor’s critical argument that literature could be instrumental in developing organic intellectuals who could debate the issues of the day and play a role in improving Irish society, would be profoundly undermined by the Censorship Act: ‘the most serious consequence of censorship for Irish writers has been to undermine their influence in the community … fostering the ignorance and provincialism of the Irish people.’ Any prevention of communication to the reader was abhorred by O’Connor and he saw its effect as detrimental to the cultural development of the country. He laid the blame squarely on Church and State oppressiveness: ‘“Blast them all”, he roared at O’Faolain, “where’s your Arts and the Free Man with the politicians and the priests? It’s Gormanstown all over again.”’

O’Connor was equally suspicious of State-sponsored schemes to encourage writers to write in the Irish language as he saw this as another form of official censorship. Writers availing of this funding would be beholden to de Valera’s moral and political vision for Ireland, so he warned any potential beneficiary that:

Before he claims it, it is as well that he should know the conditions. He must make a denial of the nature of fallen man … He must believe that the Irish language is more important than the evolving democracy that gave it back to us, and shut his eyes to all the problems that face his people – to disease, vice, ignorance and poverty. He must never mention infidelity or divorce, or birth control or communism … nor may he attack private property or native institutions, or suggest that Irishmen are anything but angels.

By 1942, O’Connor was declaring in an English literary journal that due to State and Church control of the arts, and the insular ideology that was being hierarchically imposed, Ireland had become ‘more than ever sectarian, utilitarian … vulgar and

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131 Carlson, Banned in Ireland, 2.
132 O’Connor, quoted in Matthews, James, Voices: A Life of Frank O’Connor (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 193. Gormanstown was an internment camp during the Irish Civil War and its immediate aftermath; O’Connor had been a prisoner there for most of 1923.
133 O’Donovan, Michael [O’Connor, Frank], ‘Two Languages’, The Bookman, v.86 (August 1934), 240.
When O’Connor wrote his 1942 article, his anger toward State and clerical control of Irish literature was very much in evidence. His 1920s reformist scheme was being denied by the official institutions of the country, and he continued to protest right up until his contribution on the matter at a debate held by Trinity College, Dublin’s Historical Society in 1962. It would not be until 1967 that Brian Lenihan, who had become Minister of Justice in 1964, administered the legal changes to initiate a new Censorship of Publications Act. One of the important amendments was that prohibitions on banned books would now lapse after twelve years. Moreover, dramatically fewer books were thereafter singled out for prohibition.

Throughout these decades O’Connor also maintained his instrumentalist stance in his criticism and continued to assert that literature could socially and politically inform the reader. His egalitarian view of literature, whereby all people could benefit from its message, was to the forefront of his cultural outlook. Anything which inhibited the ‘cargo of communication’ to the reader, whether it was a writer’s stylization, language or censorship, was inimical to O’Connor. Moreover, as he saw it, it was the critic’s role to provide further information to the reader on cultural matters and play a vanguard role in maintaining literary standards.

O’Connor as Literary Critic

Despite O’Connor’s avowed ideal for the critical maintenance of Irish literary standards, his 1920s literary criticism was a reflection of his own intellectual leanings.

134 O’Connor, ‘The Future of Irish Literature’, 56. O’Connor paid the price for his criticisms and for what was deemed his washing of Ireland’s ‘dirty linen’ in public. After the publication of this article, he began to encounter serious difficulties when trying to obtain travel permits to work in England. His work for Irish radio also began to mysteriously dry up and he endured severe financial hardship for the rest of the 1940s. By 1951, O’Connor had gone into exile.

135 O’Connor’s opponent was a member of the censorship Board at this time, the Hon. Mr. Justice Kevin Haugh. O’Connor’s motion was carried by forty votes to nine. See: Carlson, Ibid., 151.
at the time, rather than a more obvious effort to present a cogent interpretation of the texts. His success as a critic is marred by his personal bias. In *The Critic as Artist*, Oscar Wilde remarked that criticism is the only civilised form of autobiography. In a similar fashion, O’Connor would never manage to objectively assess literature on the grounds of merit; always in his criticism there is a sense that he used the opportunity to expound his own ideas on literature and society. As mentioned in Chapter One, a lengthy review of Séamus Ó hAogha’s book on poet Aodhagán Ó Rathaille, for example, engaged less with the scholastic achievement of Ó hAogha (or indeed Ó Rathaille’s actual poetry) than with the notion of literary reputations and what was retained in cultural memory. Not surprisingly, he came to the conclusion that it was Ó Rathaille’s lyric poetry that ‘has most successfully bridged the gap of time and thought that lies between his day and ours.’ Unlike Ó Bruadair’s intellectual craftsmanship, Ó Rathaille’s contemporary lyrical depiction of his changing socio-economic conditions was what remained in the mind: ‘There, I think, is O’Rahilly’s appeal to our own day; in this and in his other lyric poems he was the artist where all others were craftsmen, intellectuals sometimes, but never fashioners of content as they were of form.’ O’Connor’s conclusion on Ó Rathaille was couched in terms that aligned itself with his own critical agenda. Similarly, his admiration for Irish-language love poetry was more for its depiction of Irish life than for any formal achievement.

From the onset of the Censorship Act, O’Connor also became much more critical of government-sponsored Irish-language literature. He used the occasion of a review of An Comhar Drámaidheachta’s production of Seamus Wilmot’s *Casadh an*

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Rotha at the Peacock to launch the initial charge – ‘they gave me the impression not of being persuaded so much as of being bludgeoned’.

His personal intention was more clearly revealed after Wilmot protested at the review in a letter to the *Irish Statesman* and O’Connor duly responded:

> It was unfortunate from Mr. Wilmot’s point of view that I should have attacked his play when so much that was equally bad had gone unquestioned. This was not my fault. It was unfortunate that the Government Publications Committee should have been able to get away with the publication of enough nonsense to sink a battle cruiser ... and it must have been obvious that sometime or another[.] the attack on Gaelic infantilism had to begin.

O’Connor used the opportunity to criticise what he saw as State funding of inferior literature in order to pursue its social and political agenda of re-Gaelicisation. Wilmot honed in on O’Connor’s admission and spiritedly hit back with the rejoinder that: ‘not only does he crush my little effort in his giant stride, but Gaelic drama in general, Gaelic publications, audiences of Gaelic plays, and Gaelic actors – all come under the nasmyth [lunar crater] hammer-blows of this gentleman with a pile driver.’

O’Connor chose to ignore this remark and instead suggested that the problem of standard was due to a dearth of contemporary criticism on Irish-language productions, when he rather bluntly stated that ‘Mr. Wilmot is writing bad plays ... I am the only one who tells him so.’ In the same issue as this letter, O’Connor had a more positive response to the Gaelic Players performance of a translation of Goldsmith’s *She Stoops to Conquer* because it ‘had improved so much upon its last production’. However, his parting shot was that the Players should focus on lesser-known masterpieces so as to avoid comparison with professional companies; translations

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139 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Statesman* (16 November 1929), 212.
were also a good direction to go in ‘failing the arrival of native playwrights’. O’Connor’s reviews of Gaelic drama appear to be unnecessarily harsh and his aim seemed to be less about constructive criticism and more about his own artistic agenda. His advice on translations was more tongue-in-cheek than thoughtful as the lack of available original scripts in Irish had been an on-going issue for An Comhar Drámaidheachta (an Irish-language acting company founded in 1923 and which received an annual State grant of £600) and Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe (a Galway Gaelic theatre founded in 1928). It had resulted in ‘regular calls for the translation of plays for the new Gaelic stage’ and ‘both groups, as well as Gaelic League branches and local companies, turned with varying degrees of enthusiasm to translation to lure and hold an audience.’

The fact that O’Connor was very unwell at the time, which resulted in a doctor’s order to remain in bed until the New Year, perhaps had something to do with the small display of ill-temper. Nonetheless O’Connor had returned to the same mode of Gaelic drama criticism by the middle of January. In a review of Pádraic Ó Conaire’s Bairbre ‘Ruadh’[sic: Rua], Corkery’s Resurrection and Piaras Beaslai’s Cluiche Càrtai, O’Connor began by stating that

\[a\]n anthology of Worst Plays might confidently rely on rich pickings from amongst the plays written in Irish ... [and Ó Conaire’s] would be well up to standard ... [he] may have been able to construct a short story – though that too I am inclined to doubt – but on the stage the only impression one gets from his work is of a literary man, frigid, impersonal, non-native; devoid of even superficial brilliance.

Having dispensed with Ó Conaire, O’Connor praised Corkery’s effort – ‘[t]he play was at least warm with human feeling’ and whatever faults it had, he ‘suspected the

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143 O’Leary, Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 391.
144 See: O’Connor, Frank, Letters to Nancy McCarthy (10 December 1929; 19 December 1929), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
production’ was responsible. He reserved his greatest distaste for Béaslai’s ‘deluge’ and proclaimed that ‘[i]f we cannot educate dramatists by positives we can at least frighten them with negatives.’ O’Connor’s possible placation of Corkery, since their public tiff in the Irish Tribune, perhaps accounts for some of the obvious prejudice in this assessment. His flippant indifference to the short stories of one of the most important writers of the genre in the Irish language is indefensible. Béaslai (one of the founders, along with Gearóid Ó Lochlainn and others, of An Comhar Drámaíochta, and a general in the Irish Free State army during the Civil War), while not in the same league as Ó Conaire, was considered an important Munster writer and Philip O’Leary names him as one of the playwrights that deserves more critical attention. O’Connor’s review predictably drew an irate response from a reader about his attitude of ‘superiority’ and a rather nondescript correspondence ensued on the subject. There was a distinct silence about his review from the three writers concerned.

O’Connor’s stern criticism of Gaelic drama continued for the final few months of the Irish Statesman’s existence. A production of T.C. Murray’s Birthright was notable for its ‘general incompetence’ and a ‘hundred faults’. That actors ‘come on with only the haziest notions of their lines’ was to be expected. Gearóid Ó Lochlainn’s Cótai Móra was nothing more than a re-hashing of Boccaccio. Ô Lochlainn – ‘[t]he most influential figure in Gaelic theatre in the 1920s and 1930s’

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147 Ó Leary, Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 19.
150 Ó Leary, Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State, 392.
protested his innocence and remarked that it would be too much to expect to get ‘the benefit of the doubt’ from O’Connor.\textsuperscript{151} The playwright Paul Vincent Carroll, someone O’Connor would eventually champion whilst a member of the Abbey Board in the late 1930s, joined in to say that he had been ‘reading Mr. Frank O’Connor’s hair-raising criticisms’ and asked if there was any play in the country worthy ‘of the wicked little man’s commendation?’\textsuperscript{152} Unusually for him, O’Connor replied to neither letter. He might have been busy working on his short story, ‘Soldiers Are We’, when Ó Lochlainn’s letter appeared, as the story was published on March 8, or perhaps the response he was getting was beginning to hit home. The next and final Gaelic drama review was extremely positive. The production of American playwright Martin Flavin’s \textit{Children of the Moon} (which had first appeared on Broadway in 1923) was probably the ‘best thing the Gaelic Players have done during the season’, Gearóid Ó Lochlainn as the doctor was ‘excellent’, and choice of play, staging and lighting ‘have improved considerably’.\textsuperscript{153}

Overall, O’Connor’s criticisms of Irish-language drama of what were essentially amateur productions could be classed as biased, callous, and uncharitable. The more general critical perception was that Gaelic drama needed to be given time to develop, especially since runs of plays were quite short and provided little opportunity for perfecting skills. O’Connor seemed to be motivated from the beginning by a desire to attack literary endeavours that were State sponsored; his anger over the Censorship Act was a factor but perhaps there was also a touch of resentment. Irish artists who wrote in English were not receiving anything like the same level of financial

\textsuperscript{151} Ó Lochlainn, Gearóid, Letter to the Editor, \textit{The Irish Statesman} (1 March 1930), 515.
\textsuperscript{152} Carroll, Paul V., Letter to the Editor, ‘Gaelic Plays’, \textit{The Irish Statesman} (8 March 1930), 11.
O'Connor could have started writing Irish-language plays as he was interested in the genre and had already written three unstaged English-language plays; the fact that he resisted perhaps suggests that O'Connor did not want his writing to be beholden to State subsidy. However, O'Connor's drama criticism was not entirely unfounded or born solely from a personal agenda. Some of his points were strongly reiterated in fellow critics' reviews and complaints about actors not knowing their lines and awkward acting were common. O'Connor's literary criticism tended to be three-fold: he allowed his personal feelings or political agendas to sway his opinion at times, he could be insensitive, but he could also be brilliantly insightful (for example: in his study of the short-story genre, The Lonely Voice, and in his analysis of Early Irish poetry in The Backward Look). In his autobiography, Vive Moi!, Sean O'Faolain has painted one of the more memorable images of O'Connor's critical ability:

We were complementary in many ways; his imagination was a ball of fire, mine was less combustible but steadier; his memory was infallible, his interests more confined; his brain was first-class but completely untrained, and discipline was a word he had never heard; his intuitive processes was something to marvel at, to distrust and, if one was wise, to respect profoundly, because if you were patient enough to discard the old boots and bits of seaweed he would bring up from his deep diving he was certain, sooner or later, to surface with a piece of pure gold. I do not think he ever reasoned out anything. He was like a man who takes a machine gun to a shooting gallery. Everybody falls flat on his face, the proprietor at once takes to the hills, and when it is all over, and cautiously peeps up, you find that he has wrecked the place but got three perfect bull's-eyes.

In general the attitude toward O'Connor's literary criticism has been largely composed of analogous judgements – often original but lacking discipline, he has been considered erratic in his opinions. In a comparable fashion, for example,
Maurice Wohlgelelter argued that ‘[n]ot all of his words make critical sense’ but ‘he is, at times, illuminating’. In his rather uneven analysis of O’Connor as critic, Wohlgelelter chastised O’Connor for his inconsistent approach in his literary criticism. Likewise, Patrick Maume did not consider it worthwhile discussing O’Connor’s criticism of Irish Ireland ideology ‘because he was not as systematic a thinker’ as O’Faolain. His biographer, James Matthews, maintained that the majority of O’Connor’s criticism was imbued with his own principles; it was his moral code that defined his literary scholarship. O’Connor himself was not oblivious to his faults as a literary critic. In the 1920s he described himself in Arnoldian terms as a ‘belletristic trifler’, and he later bemoaned his lack of scholastic training as it resulted in a ‘lack of method, an opinionatedness, and the inability to do the simplest thing without first pulling down the house to get at it.’ O’Connor’s subjective critical style is perhaps an indication of the fact that he had little schooling and received no formal training in literary scholarship. Yet, his work did not lack recognised merit.

Daniel Binchy revealed that Osborn Bergin ‘used to lament that Michael had not been “caught young” and put through the mill of scholastic discipline’, but Binchy surmised that ‘this might only have blunted the edge of his genius. For his approach to scholarship was primarily intuitive, and his intuition was at times so overwhelming as to leave a professional scholar gasping with amazement.’ What one does receive from O’Connor is a passionate, forceful and entertaining engagement with literature.

159 Maume, Patrick, ‘Life that is Exile’: Daniel Corkery and the Search for Irish Ireland, 127.
160 Matthews, James, *Voices: A Life of Frank O’Connor*, 302.
162 O’Connor, Towards An Appreciation Of Literature, 7.
163 The critical reception of O’Connor’s mature criticism is presented in more detail in the Introduction.
Moreover, while it may be true to say that O'Connor often used the occasion of a critical publication to articulate his personal artistic interests, this research suggests that he was much more consistent in his critical opinion that heretofore has been acknowledged. Maume might have claimed that O'Connor was not a systematic thinker in his criticism of Irish Ireland ideology, but a closer analysis of O'Connor's criticism reveals instead that he had some sympathy for certain aspects of Irish Ireland arguments. This is particularly evident in relation to his acknowledgment of the importance of Irish-language literature in the creation of a post-independence cultural identity. Where he was most critical of Irish Ireland was in its attitude toward Irish literature written in English,\textsuperscript{165} and the standard of creative work currently being produced by Irish-language writers. Sean O'Faolain, in contrast, was more single-minded in his criticism of Irish Ireland. O'Connor's mixed attitude, which in reality was a more complicated view of Irish Ireland's line of reasoning, led perhaps to Maume's charge of inconsistency. Moreover, as this Chapter has shown, the theoretical formulations underpinning his early literary criticism – influenced by the re-Gaelicisation debate, Corkery and Russell's ideological positions, his critical attitude toward romanticism and modernism, and a preference for literary realism – were consistently sustained throughout his later scholarship.

In spite of his inadequate scholastic training, from the 1920s onwards there was a determination by O'Connor to advance the state of cultural criticism in the country. O'Connor declared this intention from the outset when he contended that 'what we need first in Irish is a mature criticism'.\textsuperscript{166} That he linked literary criticism to possibly

\textsuperscript{165} See, for example, O'Connor, 'The Gaelic Tradition in Literature' (June 1936), 41-42. In his creative writing, O'Connor also gently satirised the attitude that assumed that everything in the Irish language was patriotic and idealistic. See: 'The Patriarch', \textit{Guests of the Nation} (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 201-235.

stimulating readers’ interest, and hence broadening their understanding of Irish life, was also initially propounded in the *Irish Statesman*:

In the articles I have contributed from time to time to this paper I have tried to interest the ordinary reader in Irish literature, not from the sentimental or the patriotic or the historical point of view, but from the point of view of contemporary criticism. We in Ireland are not so rich in ideas that we can afford to neglect our own literature of a thousand years; we have not so many Tolstoys and Dostoevskys [sic] amongst us that we can say on picking up an Irish novel, ‘Here is a book in which I shall find Ireland and all Ireland, and I can afford to neglect what came before it and made it possible.’

Ireland’s national literature, its role in guarding cultural memory and consequently supplying the country’s unique badge of identity, would be made accessible via a mature cultural criticism. The instrumental impact on the reader would thus inspire a greater engagement with Irish life and accordingly kindle the modernisation of Irish society. From his first forays into literary criticism, O’Connor was disparaging on several occasions of Irish universities’ contribution to the intellectual life of Ireland. However, he also acknowledged that inadequate funding and little governmental respect for intellectual scholarship facilitated a scant intellectual output: ‘Irish scholarship is at best a bad business, for scholars can secure no recognition for their work’. O’Connor refused to relinquish Irish literature to any essentialised version of Irishness. In particular, his critical targets were those members of Irish Ireland as well as the State whose utilitarian interest in the Irish language was for the purpose of re-Gaelicisation:

The true reasons why we all ought to learn and speak Irish is [sic] that it is bound up with our history, that it is a lovely, if difficult language, and that it contains enshrined in it a wealth of song and story, the loss of which to us and our children would be irreparable ... If today there is perhaps more Irish but less

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enthusiasm, may not the cause be that Irish has been divorced from liberty and poetry, music and song, and associated over much with compulsion and with mathematics?\(^{169}\)

Church and State authoritarian control of public accessibility to literature, and the resultant hegemonic power over the reading audience, was also a primary target. He would thereafter always remain distrustful of vested interest groups: ‘vested interests are the very devil for the artist.’\(^{170}\) In Arnoldian terms, O’Connor argued that it was the critic’s role:

> to prevent a generation growing up which will finally label Irish as synonymous with ignorance and English with culture. Another five years of this and Irish will be dead for ever. If we wish to revive Irish we must reverse the position, we must create an atmosphere that will permit of the fiercest criticism of everything second-rate, that will tolerate nothing but the best in literature and drama and art.\(^{171}\)

O’Connor’s philosophy was that literary critics were the custodians, in a sense, of Ireland’s culture, guarding its arts from any possible ‘hijacking’ by the Free State’s vested interests. His polemical soundings did not worry about upsetting the country’s official institutions. O’Connor’s philosophy of literary criticism was in its infancy stage when he was writing in the 1920s but it was an ethos that would remain with him for the rest of his writing life.

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\(^{169}\) Ben Mayo [O’Connor, Frank], ‘Dublin is as “English” Today as it was Thirty Years Ago!’, *Sunday Independent* (28 January 1945), 3.

\(^{170}\) O’Connor, Interview with Anthony Whittier, 154.

\(^{171}\) O’Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Statesman* (16 November 1929), 212.
Chapter Three

O’Connor and the Short Story

The Progression to the Short-Story Genre

Having spent the 1920s struggling to find his own artistic voice, whilst establishing himself as a polemical cultural critic, O’Connor was to emerge after the thirties as a writer of the form he is best remembered for: the short story. Like everything else he turned his attention to, this was not without its own difficulties. The events of this next decade, politically and socially, unfavourably impacted on his life and writing. Yet, the 1930s could be viewed as professionally successful for O’Connor. This was quite an accomplishment after nearly ten years of artistic struggle in a post-independence Ireland that has been critically summed up as follows:

The opportunities implicit in that independence so eagerly sought went begging in a fairly general acquiescence in comfortably provincial modes of social life and art ... Too many thought a respectable survival was enough ... in what must in general be reckoned a dispiriting decade from the social and cultural point of view.1

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In fact, it was this general public acquiescence to Church and State notions of 'respectability', and a still largely unarticulated societal response to the traumatic impact of the War of Independence and Civil War, that fuelled O'Connor's imagination. It was this material that would serve as the inspiration for his two 1930s short-story collections, *Guests of the Nation* (1931) and *Bones of Contention* (1936).

While his creative efforts during the 1920s were concentrated on poetry, O'Connor tended to find his greatest success and satisfaction in the short-story genre, even as early as 1926. In a letter to Geoffrey Phibbs, he admitted as much when he wrote that: 'It’s only in my stories I’m getting what I want though I slave more at poetry than at anything else.'\(^2\) This admission provides an important reason as to why O'Connor eventually transferred the majority of his creative attention to writing short stories. Moreover, from an examination of these short stories, it is also evident that O'Connor was already well aware of the genre's literary traditions before he embarked on his own experiments. His previous short-story reading history is therefore not without significance in terms of its influence on his writing style and thematic material.

O'Connor was working as a librarian when he commenced writing short stories and had ready access to books, so it is difficult to accurately trace his reading history throughout this period. As already mentioned in Chapter One, O'Connor claimed in his autobiography, *An Only Child*, that he had a marked attraction for poetry in his youth and that the majority of his reading revolved around this attraction. Despite this claim, the autobiography also reveals that his prose interests were no less significant. From a young age, O'Connor was reading short fiction in the weekly boys’ magazines: 'I had a strong preference for school stories and above all for the penny

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\(^2\) O'Connor, Frank, Letter to Geoffrey Phibbs (Cork: May 1926), Harriet O'Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
weeklies, the *Gem* and the *Magnet*. Discovering his former teacher's first collection of short stories also had a considerable impact on the twelve-year-old boy:

I had my greatest shock in that same year, 1916, when, passing by O'Keeffe's bookshop in Great George's Street one evening, I saw a book called *A Munster Twilight* of which the author was someone named Daniel Corkery. It seemed altogether too much of a coincidence to presume that the author could be my old teacher ... and when next I waylaid Corkery, he admitted he was the author ... I borrowed the book from the library ... and read steadily through it ... And that settled the hash of the English boys' weeklies. I did not know their authors as I knew Corkery, and henceforth their creations would be less real to me that his, little as I might understand them. And one day I woke to find the Invisible Presences of my childhood departing with a wave of the hand as they passed forever from sight.

Reading literature that the young O'Connor could culturally relate to was an influence that would remain with him, as he would always seek to depict the reality of Irish life in his own stories. His discovery also spurred him in the direction of reading on a much broader scale. O'Connor's autobiographical references to his teenage reading material are numerous and scattered in focus; Goethe and Canon Sheehan are mentioned during this phase, for example. He was also a regular visitor to the Carnegie Library in Cork where he immersed himself in any issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Spectator*, *The New Statesman*, or *The Studio*, that he could find in the library. O'Connor was simply reading whatever he could lay his hands on during his teenage years.

In relation to his short-story literary influences, more telling perhaps is his admittance that, whilst interned in Gormanstown during the Civil War, his second literary undertaking was an essay in Irish on Ivan Turgenev. In fact, throughout the early 1920s O'Connor was reading the nineteenth-century Russian masters of the

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4 Ibid., 160-161.
5 Ibid, 261. As detailed in Chapter One, this essay does not appear to have survived.
short-story genre, Turgenev and Chekhov. His *Irish Statesman* literary criticism also indicated his admiration for these writers, and it was an influence that would in part stimulate his penchant for literary realism. From 1923 onwards, O’Connor was reading the short stories that featured in the *Dublin Magazine.* One such writer was Liam O’Flaherty who contributed a number of short stories ‘based chiefly around the everyday life of his native Aran Islands.’ His assiduous craftsmanship and ‘bare, restrained prose ... captured a new trend in Irish realism.’ O’Flaherty’s stylistic and thematic focus would also be reflected in O’Connor’s early stories. Combined together, his letters, autobiography, literary criticism and, most importantly of all, his short stories indicate that O’Connor was well informed about trends in the short-story tradition before he ventured into the genre in the mid-1920s. His 1930s short-story collections also intimate that it was the already established realist short-story tradition that O’Connor was particularly influenced by. In a discussion of O’Connor’s short stories, a closer examination of this tradition and its impact on O’Connor’s writing is therefore worthy of critical attention.

**The Short-Story Tradition**

In relation to the Irish short-story tradition, the assertion of it being an older tradition than the twentieth century is an important point. The genre is generally considered to be a modern art form that began with the publication of George Moore’s collection of stories, *The Untilled Field* (1903). This critical attitude is evidenced by a lack of in-depth scholarly examination of the form in the nineteenth century. Instead, critical

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6 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Sean Hendrick (Sligo: 1924), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
7 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Sean Hendrick (Sligo: 22 September 1924), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
studies of the period tend to focus on nineteenth-century Irish drama and poetry. Irish fiction has received some scrutiny but invariably it is the novels that have received the most attention. By and large, the various publications available that deal with the subject of the Irish short story include just a few scattered references to short stories from the previous century, and often begin with George Moore as illustrated, for example, by the title of Deborah Averill’s study, *The Short Story from George Moore to Frank O'Connor.* And yet it is apparent from even a cursory examination that Irish short-fiction writing in the nineteenth century contributed to the development of the modern genre as well as to O'Connor’s short-story writing style.

However, before this Chapter focuses in more detail on the nineteenth-century tradition, it could also be argued that the Irish short-story tradition began centuries earlier with the cultural development of folktales and oral storytelling, as contended by the critic Vivian Mercier. Contemporary short-story writer William Trevor posits a similar claim on the lasting impact of the oral storytelling tradition:

> despite the passing of the seanachí, the native habit of storytelling has managed to survive pretty well in everyday life ... It is against this background of a pervasive, deeply rooted oral tradition that the modern short story in Ireland must inevitably be considered.

Moore’s *The Untilled Field* is a useful example of Mercier and Trevor’s assertion, with several stories bearing a folkloric hallmark. ‘Julie Cahill’s Curse’ is perhaps the best example of this, with the peasants in the story displaying a natural belief in superstition as they accept an implausible explanation for the demise of their community as opposed to the economic realities of their parish. The peasants’ mode

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9 Averill, Deborah, *The Irish Short Story from George Moore to Frank O’Connor* (Boston: University Press of America, 1982).
of dialogue is also heavily based on local idiom, as are all of the stories, as Moore tried to imitate the tone of oral speech in the collection. Likewise, one of the most lauded aspects of *Dubliners* is Joyce’s use of the narrated monologue, as stylistic inflection is present and the prose changes depending upon the disposition of the character. This emphasis on the language reflecting the character’s nature is rightly categorised as one of Joyce’s contributions to literary modernism, but a point could be made here that the narrated monologue bears a resemblance to narrative methodology in the oral tradition. Like *Dubliners*, characters would have ‘inflected’ the oral prose style of the *seanchaí* or the *sgeálai* in the oral storytelling tradition. In addition, these two writers, like several Irish short-story writers, rely on representational Irish communities that share the same set of values, and there is an attempt by all of them to convey an instrumental message to the readers, as was the case in the oral tradition. An oral storytelling influence is also visible in the work of not just O’Connor but also Daniel Corkery, Seamus O’Kelly, Mary Lavin, Benedict Kiely, Máirtín Ó Cadhain, William Trevor, Éilís Ni Dhuibhne and Claire Keegan, for example. Declan Kiberd has also made a case for the influence of the oral tradition on the modern genre:

[T]he short story has flourished in those countries where a vibrant oral culture is suddenly challenged by the onset of a sophisticated literary tradition. The short story is the natural result of a fusion between the ancient form of the folk tale and the preoccupations of modern literature.¹²

Kiberd pushes this theory further by claiming that the short story is a genre that succeeds in any culture caught between a more traditional way of life and a move towards modernity: ‘the short story flourishes on any cultural frontier, where solitary men daily confront the ambiguities of a changing society which is based on rival folk

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and cosmopolitan traditions. One could suggest that this is the most interesting aspect of Kiberd’s article – the identification of the short story as a form that operates best in transitional cultures – and this is a perspective that will be returned to at a later point.

However, despite these assertions, it would be wrong to suggest that the modern short story is directly descended from the oral storytelling practice. As James Kilroy argues, ‘the influence of the oral tradition is neither wide nor deep’ and there are major technical and thematic differences between the two conventions. Nonetheless, elements of the oral tradition are still traceable in the majority of modern Irish short-story writers. This is particularly pertinent to O’Connor’s work. From the 1920s onwards, he advocated the importance of capturing living speech in drama and prose and he would later declare that a story should always ‘ring with what seemed to him the essence of style, “the tone of a man’s voice, speaking”’. Despite the growing rift between O’Connor and his former mentor in the late 20s, for example, his review of Corkery’s *The Stormy Hills* was a positive one and he especially professed his admiration for Corkery’s literary rendering of living speech:

| the passionate love ... for the people of Ireland, their religion, their manners and their speech ... One grows so tired of Irish dramatists who seem to have been born defective in their five senses and cannot copy correctly for five minutes the speech of a countryman.

O’Connor was obviously arguing for an oral dimension to the written form to be maintained, and this attitude manifested itself most noticeably in his collection *Bones of Contention*. He saw the short story as indirectly descended from the oral

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13 Ibid., 48.
storytelling tradition, and O’Connor went so far as to claim in his study of the genre that the modern short story is a drastic adaptation ‘of a primitive art form to modern conditions – to printing, science, and individual religion.’

While Moore’s *The Untitled Field* has been largely accepted as marking the beginning of the modern Irish short story, a recent study of the genre has extensively broadened the field of research and has investigated the tradition in the nineteenth century. Heather Ingman has shown that new developments in Irish short fiction materialised in the nineteenth century and these paved the way for the modern form. Sweeping political and social changes experienced by Ireland at the time – the Act of Union came into operation in 1801 and the fight for Catholic Emancipation got underway – generated an awareness that Gaelic culture was on the point of extinction. In cultural nationalist circles, preservation of past folklore, beliefs and customs was considered crucial in terms of Ireland’s cultural history. The turbulent landscape also created a popular demand for material about Irish people by an English readership. Irish short fiction during this period was therefore written for export to an English audience, whilst also being engaged in cultural and political warfare. The motivation behind many of these literary endeavours was an anxiety to:

- record the beliefs and habits of Irish peasant life before they got lost for ever, to defend and explain the Irish to the English, to rectify the many and obvious faults in the Irish character. The nineteenth-century Irish short narrative, in its various different shapes, was involved as much in intervention in Irish life as in representation. Under pressure from the turbulent times, the realistic

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framework of the fiction frequently collapsed – into Gothic or melodrama, sentimentality or didactics.\textsuperscript{19}

The Gothic dimension mentioned by Ingman is one that most obviously owes a debt to the oral tradition. The supernatural, murders, mysterious disappearances, and use of local legends, were characteristic of the oral tradition and these thematic interests are preserved in the Gothic short story, particularly by writers such as Charles Robert Maturin and Sheridan Le Fanu. This darker edge to stories is also present in the work of most of the nineteenth-century writers as they dealt with such subjects as agrarian unrest, brutality and poverty. O’Connor’s own view of the short story – that it could act as a form of literary instrumentalism – perhaps owes a debt to the interventionist mind-set of the previous century’s short-story writers. While nineteenth-century short fiction was an unstable form which had no overall defining technical characteristics, it did produce two strands that contributed to the modern short story: an Anglo-Irish tradition that mainly concerned itself with exploring its own Ascendency class anxieties and a second tradition that was a native, rural Irish Catholic voice.\textsuperscript{20} This second tradition first surfaced in the 1820s with the appearance of tales and sketches by John and Michael Banim, Gerald Griffin and William Carleton. This was a short-lived tradition as the aftermath of the Famine impacted most fiercely on the regions from where these writers had emerged. Yet, in spite of the brevity of this tradition, it could be argued that the most significant nineteenth-century Irish influence on O’Connor’s short stories was made by Carleton.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 16-17. For a more detailed analysis of Irish short fiction in the nineteenth century, also see: Ingman, Ibid., 18-49.

\textsuperscript{20} Yeats first noted this observation in his introduction to a collection of nineteenth-century short stories and tales – ‘I note very distinctly in all Irish literature two different accents ... the accent of the gentry, and the less polished accent of the peasantry and those near them’, Yeats, W.B., ‘Introduction’, \textit{Representative Irish Tales} (1891; repr. Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979), 25; Quoted in Schirmer, Gregory A., ‘Tales from Big House and Cabin: The Nineteenth Century, Kilroy (ed.), \textit{The Irish Short Story}, 22. The Anglo-Irish tradition is best exemplified by writers such as Maria Edgeworth, Mrs. S.C. Hall, Maturin, Samuel Ferguson, Le Fanu, Emily Lawless, and Somerville & Ross.
Carleton’s best known collection of short stories is *Traits & Stories of the Irish Peasantry*; the first series was published in twenty-three parts in 1830, with a second series published in 1833. These stories inhabited the style of early nineteenth-century literary realism as they gave an almost scientific, didactic account of Irish peasant life. Carleton attempted to re-work the stage-Irish stereotype of the Irish peasant and instead the (English) reader was encouraged to see the real reasons for the behaviour of the Irish peasantry. He made an effort to accurately depict this ‘submerged population group’ (to use O’Connor’s term), a group that had previously found little realistic representation in English-language literature. Carleton’s stories result in ‘a graphic, serio-comic panorama of rascals and pedants, wakes and weddings in traditional rural society before the Famine.’ His incorporation of local dialect, his thematic emphasis on the local in rural districts, ‘serio-comic’ sensibility, alongside his focus on the more marginalized in Irish society: each of these elements correspond with O’Connor’s own style.

Gregory A. Schirmer was one of the first critics to attempt a nineteenth-century literary history of the Irish short story. He summed up his analyses by postulating that: ‘Certainly, the mirror of Irish short fiction in the nineteenth century was cracked – marred, at its worse, by annoying didacticism, purple prose, weak characterization, uncertain narrative line, and a general disregard for aesthetic form.’ However, in spite of this indictment, Schirmer’s work serves as a useful guide to the various writers and it recognised the artistic achievements of these men and women. In particular, he highlighted those innovative aspects of nineteenth-century short fiction


which anticipate the modern form: the manipulation of narrative voice, a grimy realism, an ear for dialect, careful and economic selection of detail, inner psychological despair, and a self-reflexive irony. Moreover, by the end of the nineteenth century experiments in the short-story form had laid the groundwork for the development of the modernist short story. As Ingman has observed, the characteristics of the modernist genre – 'impressionistic, concentrated, resisting narrative closure and using dreams to probe the inner psychology of their characters' – was already present in Irish *fin de siècle* short fiction. These Irish nineteenth-century short-story innovations, however, did not take place in a literary vacuum as they resonated with some of the advances made in continental Europe by those Russian and French masters who dominated the development of the short story, writers such as Turgenev, Chekhov and Maupassant.

It was American writer Edgar Allan Poe, of course, who first articulated a critical definition of the short story which European writers subsequently developed. Poe stated that the short story imparts a 'unity of effect or impression [that bestows] the deepest effects' on the reader. Therefore, 'there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.' Poe's emphasis on the economy of effects, whereby a story's action, character, imagery and language, is compressed and concentrated into a single episode, was a definition with uncanny accuracy. Slice-of-life episodes and intense compacted arrangement of form and content dominated the development of the Russian and French short story. Maupassant's technical craftsmanship, single revelatory moment,

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24 Ibid., 21-44.
25 Ingman, *A History of the Irish Short Story*, 79. She notes these characteristics in writers such as James Stephens, Yeats, and George Egerton.
and economy of narrative force; Chekhov’s fragmented, lyrical, impressionistic, suggestive and sparse episodic style; and Turgenev’s compacted, plotless, and evocative method: all in turn profoundly influenced the stylisation of the modern Irish short story. Chekhov’s lyrical realism is a style that would eventually become known as poetic realism, and poetic realism is often considered one of the defining characteristics of the modern Irish form.27 Moreover, Maupassant’s thematic focus on the marginalised in society, Turgenev’s exploration of social injustices imposed on Russian serfs, and Chekhov’s explicit sense of place, reverberated with Irish writers when they sought to convey the condition of life in twentieth-century Irish society.28 Nineteenth-century literary realism dispensed with romantic conceptions of society and was instead attentive to such issues as religious repression, repressed desires, and frustrations with urban and rural life. Plots were non-heroic and the emptiness of modern life was emphasised. An ‘unmasking’ of the uglier side of life was also stressed and it was the lower classes that were generally depicted. Literary realism stressed the power of the environment over the individual and its style therefore tended to attract socially-committed writers. Gogol, Turgenev, Ibsen, Maupassant and Chekhov all serve as aesthetic founders of short-story literary realism and it is notable that O’Connor was reading some of these writers during his early experiments in the short-story form.29

However, O’Connor was certainly not the first modern Irish writer to incorporate the style of nineteenth-century European short-story realism into his writing. As he later observed: ‘Moore was the only Irish writer of his time who was in

29 Literary realism has been examined in more detail in the previous Chapter.
touch with continental fiction. He was the first writer in these kingdoms who realised what it was all about and introduced to English fiction the principals of French naturalism.\footnote{O'Conor, Frank, \textit{The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature} (London: Macmillan, 1967), 196.} George Moore's \textit{The Untilled Field} acts as a useful transition point between an oral storytelling tradition and the fragmented 'single incident' type modern story. His collection encompasses both styles – from a folktale story like 'Julie Cahill’s Curse' to a single-incident story like 'The Clerk’s Quest'. Just twelve months after the publication of Moore’s collection, James Joyce began writing the first three of the stories that were eventually to become \textit{Dubliners}, ‘Araby’, Eveline’, and ‘The Sisters’. Joyce's \textit{Dubliners} pointed the way to a radically different vision of Ireland. His declared style of scrupulous meanness in each story, alongside a grimy realism, urban focus and epiphanic moment, initiated a pattern upon which his successors reflected. In addition, Joyce’s realistic thematic attention to the Church, history, politics, gender, social paralysis, the lower middle-class, the alienated individual, alcoholism, and cultural developments, resonated with post-independence writers, including O’Connor. His early short stories display these characteristics and reveal that, from the moment he began working in the form, O’Connor was consciously situating his writing within the realist short-story tradition.\footnote{For more information on traditions and theories of the short story, see: Rochette-Crawley, Susan, ‘Review: Recent Short Story Theory’, \textit{Contemporary Literature}, 32:1 (Spring 1991), 133-138; Lohafer, Susan and Jo Ellyn Clarey (eds), \textit{Short Story Theory at a Crossroads} (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Hanson, Clare (ed.), \textit{Re-reading the Short Story} (London: Macmillan, 1989); Shaw, Valerie, \textit{The Short Story: A Critical Introduction} (London: Longman, 1983); Reid, Ian, \textit{The Short Story} (London: Methuen, 1977); May, Charles E., \textit{The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice} (New York: Twayne, 1995).} O’Connor’s attraction to realism did not just stem from a reaction against the Literary Revival or the development of post-independence Irish society; his reading in the 1920s, and his admiration for writers such as Turgenev, Chekhov, Carleton, Moore and Joyce, also steered him in this direction.
Post-Independence Ireland

O’Connor, while desiring to become a poet in the 1920s, gradually became aware of his limitations in this field and began to turn his attention to short stories. In one original poem he did publish in the *Irish Statesman* in 1926, entitled ‘Two Impressions’, two lines of this poem read as follows: ‘Verse…? But, Lord, I’m sick of verse,/ And I wish I was driving alone in a hearse’. While they are not the most memorable of lines, they do suggest his frustration with writing poetry. In the same year O’Connor first began publishing short stories; ‘The Peddler’ and ‘Sion’ appeared in the *Irish Tribune* and ‘War’ was published in the *Irish Statesman*. In his mature criticism, O’Connor revealed the reason why he was drawn to the short story as an alternative to poetry; he saw the form as closely aligned and linked to the lyrical poem. In an interview with Anthony Whittier in 1957, O’Connor stated that: ‘God had not intended me to be a lyric poet, and the nearest thing to that is the short story. O’Connor moved easily as a writer from poetry to the short story, unlike the difficulties he encountered when he attempted to write novels. His 1920s progression towards the short story, and to a more realistic style of writing, was also in line with changes that were taking place in Ireland’s literary circles.

As already mentioned, Declan Kiberd has argued that the short story thrives in any culture where artists are faced with a society in transition. Romantic portrayals of Ireland, which the Revival had cultivated so well in the revolutionary period, would

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no longer serve as a mould for any representative literary depiction of the social and cultural friction that engulfed life in post-independence Irish society. Ireland was in a transitional condition as the Free State government sought to create a stable, conservative society in the aftermath of revolutionary upheaval, while it initiated the transition from a colonial state to a modern independent nation. Free State political ideology sparked off a number of initiatives, whereby the government, aided by various interest groups, tried to secure an essentialised image – at home as well as abroad – of a nation with economic, political and cultural autonomy: ‘post-revolutionary settlement in Independent Ireland championed a narrowly focused mono-culture which remained remarkably impervious to sources of pluralism.’

Rural, nationalist and Catholic were politically and spiritually imposed as the defining characteristics of ‘Irishness’. The absence of a complicated social composition, the disappearance of any spiritual vitality within the new system, and the deliberate emptying out of a multiplicity of identities provoked frustration and anxiety in O’Connor. The Irish Literary Revival had, he believed, been part of an awakening of the Irish spirit and as he later wrote:

In those days there were at least half a dozen movements to which any young man of spirit could belong; all of them part of a general attack by the younger generation on the enemies within: the imitator of English ways – the provincialist; the ‘gomeen man’ – a very expressive Irishism for the petit bourgeois; and the Tammany politician who had riddled every institution with corruption. Irish literature fitted admirably into that idealistic framework; it was another force making for national dignity.

O’Connor’s combative reaction to post-independence governmental policies originated from a keen intellectual as well as idealistic desire to develop a more
dynamic idea of Irish identity. He wanted to demystify notions that would exclude minority groups whilst also working toward preventing the progression of Ireland into an insular and isolated island on the verge of an increasingly turbulent Europe. While the new State’s hegemony found antagonists of various creative persuasions (Denis Johnston and Flann O’Brien, for example), it was the characteristics of realist short fiction that O’Connor believed would allow him to mount his personal campaign against dogmatic depictions of Irish people.

In his autobiography he expressed the fear that he had at the time, a fear of what he believed was a descent of post-revolutionary Ireland into social and cultural inertia, where ‘young men and women would emigrate to the ends of the earth, not because the country was poor but because it was mediocre.’ Society was becoming increasingly subjected to hegemonic Church and State endeavours and O’Connor worried that the social panorama would make it impossible for him to create rich and varied works of art. By the early 1940s, and clearly influenced in his thinking on the matter by American writer Henry James’s ideas, he went so far as to argue that without a complicated social composition, the writing of a novel was impossible:

Tchekhov [sic], the son of a slave, could write as easily of a princess or a merchant’s daughter. In Ireland, the moment a writer raises his eyes from the slums and cabins, he finds nothing but a vicious and ignorant middle-class, and for aristocracy the remnants of an English garrison, alien in religion and education. From such materials he finds it almost impossible to create a picture of life which, to quote Dumas’ definition of the theatre, will embody ‘a portrait, a judgment and an ideal’.

37 O’Connor, _An Only Child_, 210.
38 For more on James’s ideas on social composition and the writing of novels, see: McCall, Dan, ‘Henry James’s Hawthorne’, _New England Review_, 18:4 (Fall 1997), 111-118.
39 O’Connor, _The Future of Irish Literature_, 61. This claim might also explain why O’Connor attempted an abstract impressionistic style in his novel, _Dutch Interior_, as he seemed to believe in his 1940s’ literary criticism that a realistic Irish novel was not possible in the current political and social climate.
O’Connor wrote those words in 1942 and his strong sense of alienation from the social establishment is clear; he believed that venial self-interest had betrayed the romantic ideals of the revolution. In the mid-1920s, when the post-independence State was still in the process of being built, writing became his method for rebelling against what he saw as an unimaginative, staid and blinkered reality. He believed that the modern short story could provoke interest in those aspects of Irish society that were being steadily written out of official ideology. Literary realism could extend the potential of common life into art whilst simultaneously forging a sustained social critique on the petit-bourgeois centre. For O’Connor, the characteristics of the short story could portray the basic dichotomy between official ideology and individual experience; it was an eminently suitable form for a juxtaposition of the individual’s interior reality and the contrasting external world.

This emphasis on the individual was also part of a larger trend in post-World War I modern society. The works of international short-fiction writers of the time manifested ‘the way they grapple[d] with the loss of confidence in the adequacy of the social system and the new reliance on the individual self’. Moreover, the short story’s ‘fragmented action and characterization reflected the disillusionment of the post-war generation.’ It was an art form that could best represent this cultural fragmentation, with its embodiment of literary vignettes that portrayed the isolated individual or, alternatively, evoked ‘slice-of-life’ images that were detached from the social totality. Brief encounters, fleeting moments, snippets of emotional contact and splintered connections became the bedrock of modern human relationships. The form of the short story thrives best in its depictions of a fragmented society, or in

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41 Kilroy, ‘Setting The Standards: Writers of the 1920s and 1930s’, *The Irish Short Story*, 95.
representing the individual perspective. In this sense, it would seem to be fitting for the delineation of the ‘outsider’ in any social setting. It was O’Connor who advanced this theory in his literary criticism when he proclaimed that the short story develops as a strong substitute tradition in fragmented cultures that lack the values of community. What the genre represents instead is a ‘submerged population group’, which O’Connor sees at the heart of the great short stories:

In fact, the short story has never had a hero. What it has instead is a submerged population group ... That submerged population changes its character from writer to writer, from generation to generation. It may be Gogol’s officials, Turgenev’s serfs, Maupassant’s prostitutes, Chekhov’s doctors and teachers, Sherwood Anderson’s provincials, always dreaming of escape ... Here it does not mean mere material squalor, though this is often characteristic of the submerged populations groups. Ultimately it seems to mean defeat inflicted by a society that has no signposts, a society that offers no goals and no answers. That submerged population is not submerged entirely by material considerations, it can also be submerged by the absence of spiritual ones ... Always in the short story there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society ... As a result there is in the short story at its most characteristic something we do not often find in the novel – an intense awareness of human loneliness.43

The words in The Lonely Voice, regarding an incoherent society, first written in 1962, could easily be passed off as O’Connor’s defeatist opinion of Irish society in the post-independence period. While O’Connor’s theory has critical merit, he could be criticised for presenting a theory of short fiction that generally describes his own stories. He could also be censured for postulating a theory that depicted his own personal feelings toward Irish society. Deborah Averill has argued that in relation to O’Connor’s literary criticism, ‘he has stated his views polemically, as part of his

43 O’Connor, The Lonely Voice, 18-19. According to Patrick Maume, it was Corkery who sowed the seeds for O’Connor’s ‘submerged population group’ theory. In an article by Corkery in 1915, ‘The Peasant in Irish Literature’, he stated that: ‘The majority of the Irish nation are peasants, yet they have not found a voice; any attempt to express Irish life must come to terms with the peasant.’ See: Corkery, Daniel, ‘The Peasant in Irish Literature’, New Ireland (4 December 1915), 57; Quoted in Maume, Patrick, Life that is Exile: Daniel Corkery and the Search for Irish Ireland (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1993), 51.
ongoing quarrel with Irish society."⁴⁴ O’Connor’s theory does transmit a description of his own personal opinion on Irish society and his opinion is embedded in his stories. This in itself is not unusual for the short-story form and other Irish short-story writers have asserted that a natural component of the genre is the expression of the personal. As his contemporary Mary Lavin put it:

I believe that it is in the short story that a writer distils the essence of his thought. I believe this because in the short story shape as well as matter is determined by the author’s own character. Both are one. Short story writing for me is only looking closer than normal into the human heart.⁵⁵

Sean O’Faolain also espoused a similar theory when he claimed that the genre:

is a special distillation of personality, a unique sensibility which has recognized and selected at once a subject that, above all other subjects, is of value to the writer’s temperament and to his alone – his counterpart, his perfect opportunity to project himself.⁶⁶

O’Connor overcame his own feelings of frustration with Irish society by turning towards the personal in his stories. Moreover, all of O’Connor’s short stories, except for the few stories set in England and which were mostly based on the Irish diaspora experience, were deliberately placed in a local Irish setting. His creativity seemed to need this constant contact with the country – ‘his imagination was tied to his homeland’, as Roger Chatalic has observed⁷⁷ – but the interior world he illuminated

⁴⁴ Averill, The Irish Short Story from George Moore to Frank O’Connor, 236.
⁷⁷ Chatalic, Roger, ‘Frank O’Connor and the Desolation of Reality’, Rafroidi, Patrick & Terence Brown (eds), The Irish Short Story (Lille: Université de Lille, 1979), 193.
was, as he said himself, 'part of the human condition.' His realistic stories were so much of their time and place that they might stimulate a reader's self-recognition, as opposed to the reader unquestioningly accepting the Church and State's authoritarian imposition of identity. O'Connor hoped that this self-recognition would consequently lead the reader to a more critical engagement with life in Ireland. A triumph of the interior world of the reader over his or her exterior reality was the embodiment of O'Connor's post-independence literary protest.

The Early Short Stories and *Guests of the Nation*

One of the prevailing motifs in *Guests of the Nation* stems from O'Connor's personal vision of the lonely individual soul in an Irish community. O'Connor had already moved to Dublin to take up a new position as librarian in Pembroke District Library when he began writing the stories that would eventually become his first collection. The new job could be considered a demotion, a step-down from his previous position as librarian of Cork County Library, but O'Connor jumped at the chance to return to the bigger city. However, he initially found Dublin disappointing and suffered from bouts of loneliness, calling his letters home 'songs of homesickness'.

Dublin was already infected with post-Treaty frenzy. Ex-gunmen from the country migrated there in search of newly created civil service jobs. Partition dominated conversation; domestic issues, such as housing, education, social welfare, and economic recovery, was drowned out by the endless debates on such issues as the Irish language ... [O'Connor] and the other young artists of his

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generation, many of whom had been rebels and prisoners, could not have helped feeling the emotional vibrations of division, suspicion, and instability that engulfed the city.\textsuperscript{50}

By this stage, O'Connor was regularly contributing to the \textit{Irish Statesman} and frequenting the homes of George Russell and Yeats whilst meeting their circles of friends and acquaintances. O'Connor may have felt lonely in his personal life at various stages but he was also moving in the heart of Dublin's cultural scene. As revealed in his writings of this time (which are explored in the previous chapters), O'Connor was already drifting away from his pre-Treaty republicanism. By the time he wrote the stories for \textit{Guests of the Nation}, O'Connor had managed to achieve an objective stance on the War of Independence and the Civil War, and this artistic distancing is clear from the political underpinning of the collection. The dedication at the front of the collection, a poem by O'Connor, discloses his mindset at the time. In the poem, the speaker is on the Irish Sea on a ship bound for England: 'I leaped up to see the wonder:/ Dawn had broken over England./ Europe’s sleeping-beauty sister,/ Ireland, still lay locked in darkness.' However, the speaker is haunted by his memories: 'Then your face shone out before me./ I crept back and hushed my breathing/ [...] All experience draws about me:/ Boughs to trap the dream that haunts me./ [...] I was yours for one wild moment./ I was yours and yours for ever.' By the end of the poem, the speaker leaves behind old attachments as the ship he is on 'crushes her way through calm russet seas at dawn.'\textsuperscript{51} O'Connor seems to be declaring in the dedication that while his memories would always be with him, he has escaped his past loyalties and repositioned himself in a calmer, more objective

\textsuperscript{50} Matthews, James, \textit{Voices: A Life of Frank O'Connor} (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 57.

perspective. He has located himself outside Ireland and can now look dispassionately at the country.

*Guests of the Nation* was conceptualised in O'Connor's mind as a unified volume, as the book's structure was to some extent modelled on *The Untilled Field* and *Dubliners*. Of the fifteen stories in the volume, they are divided almost equally into first and third-person narratives and all but the last four deal with the Troubles; the majority of the stories focus on the Civil War. It was not the first time O'Connor had attempted to articulate his war memories in fiction. His earlier creative prose effort, the short story 'War', also attempted this and was published in the *Irish Statesman* in 1926.

Although George Russell primarily provided O'Connor with the opportunity to publish his literary criticism and translations in the *Irish Statesman*, he also encouraged O'Connor's initial efforts in the short-story genre. Sean O'Faolain was working as a schoolteacher at the time and admits to his envy of O'Connor during this period. He also reveals that it was thanks to O'Connor that he was given the opportunity to publish his first short story in the *Irish Statesman*:

Michael O'Donovan was plucked from penury and provincialism by the generous hand of Lennox Robinson and sent off as assistant to the poet Geoffrey Taylor ... he was at once thrown into contact with the literary set in Dublin ... I was left alone in Cork, envying the lot of them ... Michael had meantime met AE, talked to him generously and enthusiastically about me, and urged me to send something to the *Statesman* ... I did send AE something, and he did publish it, in the *Statesman* of February 6, 1926, beside a translation of a Gaelic poem by O'Connor. It was a short story called "Lilliput".  

Set in a suffocating caravan, 'Lilliput' relates a night in the harsh life of a tinker woman and her children. The story is gloomy in tone and demonstrates O'Faolain's feeling of stiflement and disappointment with life in post-independence Cork. A few

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months later O'Faolain left for Harvard. In fact, the *Irish Statesman* played a role in the rise of the post-war generation of Irish short-story writers. Alongside O'Connor, Liam O'Flaherty's short stories regularly appeared in the periodical. Critical attention was also given to new anthologies of short stories as well to other writers' collections. Russell had the foresight to see the winds of change in Irish literature while generously providing much needed publishing space for the younger generation. On saying that, Russell was not simply pandering to genre fashions when he encouraged emerging Irish short-story writers. From the outset, before he began as editor, he had stated his intention to publish short fiction whilst noting there was this genre gap in contemporary Irish literature: 'if I could get stories I would insert them occasionally', he commented to Yeats in a letter in 1923.

'War' reflects O'Connor's inability at that stage to have fully absorbed his own experiences. It is a 'short short' piece and is barely fiction as it depicts his own capture by pro-Treaty soldiers during the Civil War (as detailed in *An Only Child*). In the story, the protagonist, a republican commandant of a small group of soldiers, is gradually realising his sense of alienation from his soldiering:

It occurred to him then that he was absolutely apart from these men ... but for the life of him he did not know what it was. Things were happening outside him, that was all ... he suddenly thought of home, and felt a great longing to be there and away from all this thing. It revolted him; it was drab and stupid and unreal – unreal, that was the word.

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53 See, for example, O'Connor, Review, *The Stormy Hills* by Daniel Corkery and *The Best Short Stories of 1929*, ed. E.J. O'Brien', 158. Interestingly, *British* was left out of the anthology's title, its correct title is *The Best British Short Stories, 1929*. As O'Connor was also published in this anthology and states this in his review, this was perhaps editorial expediency considering the political climate of the 1920s.


55 O'Connor, Frank, 'War', *The Irish Statesman* (7 August 1926), 605.
The story has little to it in terms of action but it does reveal traits which would become identifying markers of O’Connor’s war stories: a tragi-comic tone, a lonely individual at the centre who evolves from idealism to disillusionment, and an ear for dialect. The story also discloses that O’Connor was already grasping the technique of short-story literary realism from his 1920s reading material, as ‘War’ is written in a slice-of-life episodic, plotless style with the action unfolding in the space of a single day. The commandant’s reaction to being shot is non-heroic while the ugliness of war is unmasked. O’Connor also skilfully captured sparse, pared-down language in the story: ‘He was not used to it yet, that was it. He felt exasperated but in a quite impotent way. He did not interfere, and even had he wanted to he did not know how. Things happened, that was all.’\(^5\)\(^6\) Before he began his series of stories for his ‘war book’, O’Connor would publish five more short stories: ‘Sion’ and ‘The Peddler’ in the *Irish Tribune* in 1926, ‘The Awakening’ (1928) in the *Dublin Magazine*, and ‘The Ring’ (1928) and ‘The Picture’ (1929) in the *Irish Statesman*. In these early stories, O’Connor honed the technical skill which manifested itself so skilfully in *Guests of the Nation*.

Ostensibly, ‘Sion’ is set in a picture theatre in London where the narrator bumps into a woman he knew from his childhood in Cork. Themes of belonging, identity and loneliness encapsulate the pared-down but compact opening sentences:

> It was in London that I met her, a slender beauty; Irish too, they told me, only she had lived practically all her life in England. Her name, Sylvia Beaumont, did not strike me as being very Irish, nor did her manner, so in complacent self-deception I made no enquiry. I was rather lonely, in fact, an exile, and she became my friend.\(^5\)\(^7\)

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\(^5\)\(^6\) Ibid., 604.
\(^5\)\(^7\) O’Connor, Frank, ‘Sion’, *The Irish Tribune* (6 August 1926), 9.
From the narrator’s recall of their youth, an image of colonial Cork is portrayed. Poverty and religion are part of daily life but the broader world of the British Empire is also opened up through the narrator’s father and Sylvia’s English mother. His father had proudly ‘served for a while’ and he ‘would tell us all sorts of things about the places he had been in, about England and the colonies’. Sylvia’s mother had an imperial stereotypical attitude toward the local people, whom she considered dirty, violent drinkers; between the narrator’s father and Sylvia’s mother, ‘they used to praise all England and all Englishmen.’ Sylvia’s father had worked all his life on the coalboats between Ireland and England and ‘he was inordinately proud of his English wife and American parrot.’ Sylvia’s mother appears to almost wish for his death so she could escape her marriage-imposed exile.

Cork is represented in the story not as a place of anti-colonial rebellion, and its cultural identity is instead bound up with its occupier. Even still, Sylvia and the narrator negate this sense of identity as both experience an emigrant’s sense of displacement in London. O’Connor undermines any notion of mono-cultural autonomy and individuals’ lives are shown to comprise of complicated social disruptions. Sion, the story’s title, is a well-known variation of Zion, the biblical land of Israel or the ‘Promised Land’. At the time O’Connor was writing the story, Zionism was a movement for the re-establishment of a Jewish nation, Zion also symbolised the longing of a wandering people for their spiritual homeland; in other words, Zion advocated the idea that Jewish people were in exile from a particular place that they considered their nation, their homeland. In the story, O’Connor

58 Ibid.
disturbs this ‘Sionist’ conception of a spiritual homeland; instead he is intimating that there is no such thing as a sense of belonging to just one place. Similar to the international trends that short fiction was taking in post-World War I society, O’Connor’s short story embodies cultural fragmentation and an increased reliance on the individual self in modern society. It is only in the darkness of the picture theatre that the narrator and Sylvia can reach out, albeit tentatively, to each other. But the narrator is left inarticulate at the end of the story, unable to confirm Sylvia’s claim that she could never be happy outside Ireland. Their relationship with its setting of the cinema denotes the modern development of human connections and notions of belonging – a brief encounter, snippets of emotional contact and, by the end, a splintered attachment.

An interesting aspect to the publication of the story was that Corkery was the literary editor of the *Irish Tribune*, and O’Connor and Corkery’s public spat was taking place in the pages of the journal at the same time as the publication of ‘Sion’. O’Connor’s story aligned itself with the very point that he was making in the dispute – that identity was not a unified, permanent idea and national tradition was a continuously evolving process. The birth of cinema, the experiences of the Irish diaspora, and foreign migration to Ireland: these could all play a role in conceptualising the country’s national tradition. Sylvia’s refusal to be ‘anglicised’ perhaps accounts for the story’s acceptance as it fitted with the Irish Ireland ideals that the *Irish Tribune* editors had declared for the newspaper. Yet, Corkery’s publishing of the story also indicates that he was not immune to O’Connor’s argument. His refusal to directly engage with the point O’Connor was making was perhaps due more to circumspection than disagreement.
O’Connor’s second story in the *Irish Tribune*, ‘The Peddler’, marks another appearance of a ‘submerged population’ character. This time it is a tramp that is the outsider figure, and it is his outsider status that allows him to develop a dispassionate enjoyment in the idiosyncrasies of the local people: ‘Human beings existed for him only in their foibles, and already he had got to know Cork so well that it seemed to him like a large toyshop, with passions for toys.’ In this story, O’Connor makes a more obvious effort at lyrical depictions of the setting; he also employs a Joycean repetition of words to capture the city’s atmosphere:

Beneath him in the valley the mists had mounted from street to sky and hung discoloured with smoke and sunset-stain, beneath the chilly glow of a white winter’s night. The lamps were lit and tracked street and lane beneath him, up and down the hillside.

Closer attention is paid by O’Connor as well to idiomatic phrasing and there is an attempt to capture the ‘living speech’ of the Cork people: “‘And mind you me,” said the woman, warming to her visions, “that’s how ’twill end ... She know it, my dear, she know just how ’twill be, and so it will be, for ’twas all fated beforehand.’”

Again, it is a slice-of-life episodic story, providing a snapshot image of urban Cork life. It is a comic piece with the tramp selling religious books, the priest discovering he has been selling ‘Protestant books’ and bribing him to buy back all the books he sold that day. The question of who exactly is ‘the peddler’ in this story is therefore ambiguous. It is the tramp who seems to have the greater gifts of insight and understanding. He has no interest in the religious affairs of the city and his interest lies only in his observation of human nature, akin to what O’Connor saw as the artistic position in society. The ‘artist’, of course, would be another named figure in

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O’Connor’s ‘submerged population’ list, a list of lonely, wandering outsiders. He was starting to reproduce this as a regular motif in his own work when he published his next story, ‘The Awakening’.

Seamus O’Sullivan, editor of the *Dublin Magazine*, had actually asked O’Connor for a play for the journal, which is not surprising since O’Connor was heavily involved in the Cork Drama League at the time. O’Connor did offer O’Sullivan a three-act comedy about the Civil War which he had ‘just finished’ but no such publication materialised. Instead, O’Sullivan published ‘The Awakening’ in July 1928. Strains of Joyce’s ‘Eveline’ are discernible as the young woman in this story is also about to embark on a new life in another country. Like Eveline, Eileen scrutinises her life at home and concludes that she has not lived a life that has been true to her emotional and intellectual desires. Instead, she had allowed herself to become bound up with ‘the petty mortifications to which she had subjected herself and which she had thought of as realities.’ Unlike Eveline, Eileen undergoes an ‘awakening’ of sorts as she realises how fragile life is – ‘Like chinaware’ – and that her denial of a more profound exploration of life had resulted in an empty, shallow existence. By the end of the story, the implication is that Eileen, unlike Eveline, will leave Ireland. O’Connor’s story is a departure from the Joycean theme of paralysis; this time, the young woman will not permit the emotional nets of family and home to trap her. In his 1942 essay ‘The Future of Irish Literature’, O’Connor might have dismissed Ireland as a staid and blinkered society, but he was clearly advocating to the reader in this story the possibility of living a life of purpose and self-fulfilment. It is not Cork that is blamed for Eileen’s former apathy, as the descriptions of the city are

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61 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Seamus O’Sullivan (2 March 1928), Seamus O’Sullivan Papers, Trinity College, Dublin, Ms. 4630-49/3940. For whatever reason that the play was not published, it was unfortunate in the context that the manuscript for this play does not appear to have survived.
beautiful and sunshine and light abound in the urban dwelling; instead, the message is that it is up to each individual to create and build their own significant realities.

O'Connor's craftsmanship showed further signs of improvement when he published 'The Ring' in the *Irish Statesman* in 1928. 'The Ring' displays his ability to vividly describe a scene in just one or two sentences: 'the match faded out in his fingers. He had caught a glimpse of its nakedness, the walls peeled, the rifts in the flooring, the two chairs that were its only furniture – "not even a lamp!" he thought.'

All of the action of the story is set in darkness, and evokes an atmosphere of bleakness and hopelessness. In 'The Ring', O'Connor makes use of his own personal memories to portray a woman's life. The unnamed character has been locked out of her house in her nightclothes by her drunken husband, which was something that had also happened to his mother. A stranger comes to her rescue and smashes the window to gain access. The rest of the story shows the young woman recounting her courtship days and explains why she married the man she did. It was because he gave her an expensive ring when the real love of her life prevaricated on the matter of a proposal. The girl's greed was her downfall and she is condemned to live a life of hardship and suffering.

O'Connor seems to be suggesting that the choices one makes in life should be based on emotional truth and not avariciousness. Material goods could only provide fleeting happiness. The story was perhaps a pointed critique of the *arriviste petit bourgeois* in post-independence society, the newly-risen middle-class who were beginning to dominate the power structures in Ireland, and a group that O'Connor would continue to condemn in his later stories. In *The Lonely Voice* O'Connor stated that short stories should provoke a reader's moral judgement and his literary

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instrumentalism is apparent in these early stories. Moral considerations on such issues as greed, violence, compassion and indolence are all exemplified in these stories, and it is for the reader’s imagination to expand the stories’ premises into personal and social considerations.

The only other story that O’Connor appears to have published in the late 1920s and which was not included in his first collection was ‘The Picture’. The narrator is an old man in an urban community who tells a ‘true’ story to an anonymous listener about a patriotic bookshop owner, Julie Casey. An English officer tries to buy an old cheap picture from her one day and, thinking he was really searching for her lodger whom Julie mistakenly thought was an Irish rebel, she refuses to sell him the picture. Over the next two days, the officer continues to return and increase the amount he’ll pay for the picture. When Julie finally realises that it is just the picture he wants, she sells it for the exorbitant sum of two hundred and fifty pounds. She gave up the shop after that and was ‘never the same afterwards’, but she could be regularly heard saying, ‘Look at what me patriotism done for me!’

‘The Picture’ is little more than a funny tale about mistaken allegiances and inducements, but it also hints at the type of tales told in local nationalist communities about any incident that might have signalled even an inadvertent minor victory over the colonial occupier. The story, more than any of the other early stories, exemplifies O’Connor’s effort at incorporating an oral storytelling dimension to the narrative and dialogue. The old man’s idiomatic speech, familiarity with the customs of the area, and knowledge of the local people, conjures up a portrayal of a close-knit community where all events, no matter how trivial, are stored in cultural memory. O’Connor’s succinct descriptive ability is the most noticeable aspect to the story, as he was able to capture the

personality and appearance of Julie in one or two sentences: ‘she had a crop of red hair that she neither washed nor combed, and a pair of big spectacles on the end of her nose, and a great big mouth that used to go up and down and in and out when she was in the humour of talking’. O’Connor’s craftsmanship in the late 1920s was best displayed when he came to write the title story of *Guests of the Nation*.

In ‘Guests of the Nation’, O’Connor backs away from the violence of the Troubles to expose the futility of war. Bonaparte, an Irish soldier during the War of Independence, recounts the unusual friendship that developed between himself and his comrade, Noble, on the one hand, and between them and their two English soldier prisoners, Belcher and Hawkins, on the other. All are housed in the remote cottage of an old Irish woman and are often visited by Jeremiah Donovan, a rigid and distant Irish officer. The four friends spend their evenings playing cards and engage in spirited arguments about politics and religion. When Jeremiah Donovan announces that the Englishmen have to be killed in retaliation for the executions of four Irish prisoners held by the British army, Bonaparte and Noble face an excruciating moral dilemma. At the end of the story, after the executions have taken place in a lonely bog, Bonaparte feels forever changed by what duty has caused him to do, and feels emotionally desolate.

From the opening lines an intimate atmosphere of camaraderie between soldiers fighting on opposite sides of the war is introduced by O’Connor:

> At dusk the big Englishman Belcher would shift his long legs out of the ashes and ask, ‘Well, chums, what about it?’ and Noble or me would say, ‘As you please, chum’ (for we had picked up some of their curious expressions), and the little Englishman ’Awkins would light the lamp and produce the cards.’

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65 Ibid., 87.
66 O’Connor, ‘Guests of the Nation’, *Guests of the Nation*, 1.
An undermining of any possible animosity by Irish readers towards the British soldiers is immediately established in the story. The first-person narrative and the use of local dialect manipulates the reader into aligning their moral judgement of the action with Bonaparte's perspective, as he is presented as a non-judgemental and honest man: it 'is my fixed belief you could have planted that pair in any untended spot from this to Claregalway and they'd have stayed put and flourished like a native weed. I never seen in my short experience two men that took to the country as they did.' These 'decent fellows' learned Irish dancing, made Irish friends, made no attempt to escape and 'were quite contented with their lot.' O'Connor's constant repetition of the word 'chum' in the story continually emphasises to the reader that these English soldiers were not the 'enemy' but just two ordinary men. While the story is told in retrospect, Bonaparte is not portrayed as an omniscient narrator. He recounts the events as he experienced them at the time and is therefore rendered as unaware of the upcoming tragic developments as the reader is; this serves in part to absolve him from blame for the executions. It is only one-third of the way through the story that the reader is reminded by the character Jeremiah Donovan that a war is going on and Belcher and Hawkins are hostages. The slow building of the narrator's reaction to the realisation that they might have to shoot their two new friends adds to the impact of what was to come in the story; Bonaparte's cold sweat, sadness, loss of speech and quiet movements initiate a darker thread to the action. His world as an Irish soldier is starting to deteriorate: 'everything if I can so express myself was tottering before my eyes'. Darkness pervades as they make their way to the 'fatal bog'. The ensuing tragic scene is heightened by the bleak and evocative language - 'cold and open grave', 'unsteady glint of a lantern', 'cold-blooded', 'shiver',

67 Ibid., 11.
nervous’, ‘pitch-blackness’, ‘birds hooting and screeching’, and ‘desolate edge of the treacherous bog’. O’Connor’s repetition of these words to recount the Irish soldiers’ reaction to the killings emphasises that it was a vicious act they had carried out in the name of ‘duty’. The bog, so much a part of the natural landscape of Ireland, becomes a site of buried memory, a place containing the country’s darker secrets as the shocking brutality of war is etched into the landscape. The soldiers’ feelings of loss, loneliness and heartbreak are magnificently captured at the end of the story. Like Joyce’s epiphany, O’Connor had stated in *The Lonely Voice* that the axis of a short story centered on a single revelatory moment and he quoted nineteenth-century Russian writer Gogol’s ‘The Overcoat’ to illustrate this: ‘If one wanted an alternative description of what the short story means, one could hardly find better than that single half-sentence, “and from that day forth, everything was as it were changed and appeared in a different light to him”’. The final line of ‘Guests of the Nation’ emulates Gogol’s sentence and the reader is left aware that the memory of the action taken would ensure life has irrevocably altered for these two Irish men:

[I] stood at the door, watching and listening to the damned shrieking of the birds ... Noble says he felt he seen everything ten times as big, perceiving nothing around him but the little patch of black bog with the two Englishmen stiffening into it; but with me it was the other way, as though the patch of bog where the two Englishmen were was a thousand miles away from me, and even Noble mumbling just behind me and the old woman and the birds and the bloody stars were all far away, and I was somehow very small and very lonely. And anything that ever happened me after I never felt the same about again."

In ‘Guests of the Nation’ politics negates personal feelings, abstract ideals destroy real friendship. O’Connor does not indict the Volunteers or their *raisons d’être* for war; neither does he justify violence in the story; instead an explanatory reason for the War of Independence is subtly implied. The narrator’s name, Bonaparte, suggests the

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69 O’Connor, ‘Guests of the Nation’, *Guests of the Nation*, 19.
Napoleonic Wars and the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, where the Duke of Wellington defeated the French army. It was after this that the British Empire became the foremost imperial power in the world. In turn, the Irish fight for independence is yet another event in the imperial wars. There is no indictment of either side in ‘Guests’; rather, in this story, O’Connor isolates the atrocious encroachment of war on everyone involved. This lies in comfortable conformity with the characteristics of literary realism which depicts the powerlessness of the individual in the social system. In other words, the general sense of helplessness an individual feels when faced with the effects of a dominating set of beliefs. This external domination could be a government’s decision to go to war or, in the Irish case, a dominating abstract notion of nationalism. Bonaparte and Noble are as much victims of political ideology as Belcher and Hawkins. The devastating effect of war on individual lives is the motif of this story, while difficult questions of loyalty and morality regarding the recent revolutionary past are directed at the reader.

This thematic context continues throughout the collection, and finds particular expression in ‘September Dawn’. The historical context of this story is the Civil War. A strong sense of place is present in this story as various locations around County Cork are specifically mentioned. The fiercest fighting of the actual war took place in rural Cork and O’Connor tries to creatively depict the reality of it, based on his own autobiographical experiences. The story details the disbanding of a small column of Irregulars because there was nowhere to take cover in the flat countryside. A comical chase ensues with Hickey and Keown, the two characters, on the run from the pro-Treaty soldiers. Their reaction to bullets being shot at them is almost farcical. Stopping the night in Hickey’s aunt’s house, an ‘old-fashioned’ home with pictures of

70 O’Connor first published the story in the *Dublin Magazine* (July-September 1929) and the dedication there is to Sean Hendrick, whom O’Connor would have spent most time with during his Civil War activities.
Robert Emmet and Parnell on the wall, the wind disturbs their sleep and rising early in the morning, Hickey kisses a beautiful young girl who works in the house.

The primacy of individual experience is emphasised in this story as Hickey undergoes a Joycean epiphany of sorts in relation to his soldiering. From the outset, the absurdity and vulnerability of boys playing at being soldiers is suggested – ‘their flushed young faces … their bare brown throats’ – and the main characters, Hickey and Keown, have no illusions of heroism – ‘We want to live for Ireland, not die for it’.\(^{71}\) The futility of their anti-Treaty stance is subtly suggested throughout the story: the old weapons dump containing nothing but oil cloths, greasy rags and a single can of oil; the landscape affording them no protection; having nothing but cupped hands for dispensing drinks of water; the Free State soldiers eating their butter; their movements covert in comparison to the regular army, and their coming to blows in the bed they share together. Similar to the commandant in ‘War’, the gloomy note that appears in the story arises from Hickey’s realisation of his own lack of military effectiveness: ‘and suddenly it became clear to him that his life was a melancholy, aimless life … he had felt something explode within him at the inhumanity, the coldness of it all’. He comprehends ‘his own loneliness, his own unimportance, his own folly.’\(^{72}\) The flicker of sexuality and romance in the form of the young woman reminds both men of the attractions of home, of what they have sacrificed for their republican beliefs. The swirling wind is symbolic of the chaotic political environment and the damage it performs on the domestic sphere is indicative of the effects of war itself – the broken slates, withered leaves, scattered straw, the bare trees, and the broken branches. Yet, there is an affirmation of love by the story’s ending and the erotic note is lyrically played:

\(^{71}\) O’Connor, ‘September Dawn’, *Guests of the Nation*, 75.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 92-93.
She asked if he had been disturbed by the wind and he nodded, smiling. Then she knelt beside the fireplace and turned the little wheel of the bellows. The seed of the fire upon the hearth took light and scattered red sparks about his stockinged feet where he stood, leaning against the mantelpiece. He watched her bent above it, the long golden plait hanging across her left shoulder, the young pointed face taking light from the new-born flame, and as she rose he took her in his arms and kissed her. She leaned against his shoulder in her queer silent way, with no shyness. And for him in that melancholy kiss an ache of longing was kindled, and he buried his face in the warm flesh of her throat, while the blue smoke drifting through the narrow doorway was caught and whirled headlong through grey fields and dark masses of trees upon which an autumn sun was rising.73

The poetic realism of the passage is symptomatic of the developing style of the young writer, a style that would become a hallmark of his technique. Poetic realism’s blending of romance and realism is symptomatic of the content of the passage itself; the protagonist’s self-revelation is combined with an awakening sexuality, and his desire takes precedence over the war. The reader is left to make his or her own judgement on what should happen next, but the implication is that it is only love and self-fulfilment that can provide personal happiness and not some abstract nationalist notion.

Not all of the stories of war are treated with such melancholic lyricism. ‘Alec’, ‘Laughter’, ‘Jo’, ‘Ambush’ and ‘Machine Gun Corps in Action’ in their own ways convey a comic hysteria to the Troubles.74 O’Connor’s memory of the time is tinged with romanticism, the sense of danger and guns adding to the adventure of it all in these stories. He was only sixteen when he became involved in the War of Independence and the teenage boy’s impressions are captured in these various escapades. On saying that, there is also a more thoughtful note underpinning each story, detailing the actual brutality of war, which reflects the mature writer’s handling of the compositions. Similarly, ‘Nightpiece With Figures’ is a compressed,

73 Ibid., 98.
74 The story of ‘Ambush’ was first incorporated into a poem and this is dealt with in more detail in Chapter One.
atmospheric episodic piece, that illustrates the loneliness and isolation of the men caught up in the fighting. The title indicates an association with the art of painting and it is perhaps O'Conor’s way of suggesting that the story is a portrait of war. ‘Jumbo’s Wife’ reveals the breakdown of relationships during the Civil War and the devastating impact of this on society. Suspicion, betrayal, greed, and violence invade Irish homes and cold-blooded murder of former acquaintances and friends is just one of the terrible outcomes to a civil war. That Ireland was already a dark place of secrets is also represented by O’Connor, and past misdeeds are examined within the context of the wartime situation in ‘Attack’. The reality of war and the fact that society is confronted with death in a traumatizing manner is portrayed in ‘Soirée Chez Une Belle Jeune Fille’, as adventure gives way to tragedy. The protagonists in these war stories all aspire to heroic deeds in some shape or form but those aspirations are invariably crushed by a moral apprehension of the actuality of war. Any sense of the grandeur of revolution is undermined while the notion of the heroic tale is challenged, which of course underpins O’Connor’s claim that ‘the short story has never had a hero’75. The reality of war is also ironically achieved in the ‘The Patriarch’, O’Connor’s final and longest war story in the collection.

That patriotism and heroism are incompatible terms is declared at the beginning of the story: ‘Patriarch was a laney malapropism for the name one would expect the old hero to be called’.76 A former Fenian, his long grey hair is symbolic of a more heroic time now past; his uninformed commitment to the Irish language is subjected to crass materialism by the young boys in the locality, who speak ‘a few words of Irish’ to him in payment for sweets. Ireland’s Gaelic language heritage is a relic to be bartered over in the minds of the younger generation, the ‘extraordinary combination

75 O’Connor, The Lonely Voice, 18.
76 O’Connor, ‘The Patriarch’, Guests of the Nation, 201.
of sounds’ a cause of merriment. The Patriarch’s own ignorance of the language is a further ironic reflection on his commitment to patriotism while he speaks about:

Holy Ireland, and about the beautiful tongue in which our fathers had sent down their message of undying hatred to children forgetful of their fame ... I’d give five years of me life to know it ... The Kings and priests and prophets of our race are speaking to us out of the mouths of children.  

The communication by ‘the kings and priests and prophets of our race’ is the young narrator’s recital of a song in Irish. When he translates it for the old man’s benefit, it turns out to be a bawdy song about a lazy wife. The Patriarch refuses to accept this and declares that ‘there’s a message in that you and I don’t see. They wrapped up their meaning in dark words to deceive their enemies.’ The Patriarch appears foolish to the reader in his deliberate patriotic misinterpretation of the bawdy song. It is conveyed in the story as a sign that an unquestioning faith in ‘heroic’ historiography is just cause for subjected mockery. Yet, the Patriarch’s nationalism has its effect on the young boy who eventually becomes embroiled in the turbulent atmosphere of 1916 and sees active involvement in the War of Independence. The guilt the Patriarch feels for his influence over young boys, and his responsibility for some of their deaths during the Civil War, confronts him but to the end his loyalty to Irish political heroes remains intact. The Patriarch becomes an anachronism in the post-independence period, his loyalty to an idea of old heroic Ireland is deemed ‘false sentiment’, and he dies to the sound of a sniper’s rifle in action outside his home.

‘The Patriarch’ is a coming-of-age story in one sense, as the narrator’s developing political consciousness is tracked from childhood to adulthood while the story is set against the background of the first two unstable decades of twentieth-century Ireland. O’Connor’s own autobiographical reminiscences of his maturation in

77 Ibid., 204.
78 Ibid., 206.
the same period are incorporated in the figure of the boy, and it could perhaps be Daniel Corkery that serves in part as a figure for the Patriarch. It was his former teacher who first awoke O'Connor's interest in Irish cultural and political history, who encouraged him to join the Gaelic League, and who inspired him to become a Volunteer. After the wars, O'Connor and Corkery grew apart. In the story, the narrator reveals that:

We were innocent in those days, and yet strangely, when the armistice came and there was no longer anything for us to do, we woke up and found ourselves hardened, almost grown up, a little sly, a little given to bragging, a little contemptuous of people like the Patriarch who indulged in what we thought false sentiment. 79

The impact of environment on impressionable children is suggested here, as adult political and cultural discourse is shown to be invariably transmitted into the minds of the younger generation. In other words, O'Connor is suggesting a child is profoundly influenced by her or his surroundings, and adults play a fundamental role in the formation of a child's belief system. It is this belief system that will dictate a teenager/young adult's actions, including signing up to fight in a war. The story serves as a warning perhaps to the possible detrimental consequences of mismanaged childrearing. It is the least successful story in the collection, as a shambling disjointed structure is combined with little narrative force. In 'The Patriarch', the narrative of heroism is ironically examined and the heroes of Irish history occupy no more than a place of faded photographs on the walls of contemporary homes. O'Connor is attempting to creatively articulate the reasons for his own induction into the Irish revolution and the story operates as little more than recollection performing as fiction.

O'Connor may have conceived of Guests of the Nation as his unified 'war book' volume but the last four stories work outside this parameter. James Matthews posits

79 Ibid., 216.
the reason that it could be O’Connor ‘suggesting perhaps that personal growth happens with or without the pressure of war or catastrophe.’ This is doubtful as only ‘The Procession of Life’ makes any attempt at detailing personal growth. It is possible that the last four thematically disconnected stories are included because O’Connor was eager to publish a book at this time and he needed additional stories to fulfil the publisher’s criteria. His eagerness probably partially stemmed from his contemporaries’ progression. By 1930 O’Flaherty had published an autobiographical volume, several novels, and two short-story collections; also, the respected Jonathan Cape reader Edward Garnett had already expressed interest in what would eventually become O’Faolain’s first collection of short stories, *Midsummer Night Madness and Other Stories* (1932). Of the three other additional stories in *Guests of the Nation*, ‘The Late Henry Conran’ is a comic piece of writing that pokes fun at the newly-risen small-town *petit bourgeois* in Irish society. Those who had fought for Home Rule have been lost to exile and emigration and Ireland has been taken over by materialistic concerns. The writing of the story is heavily indebted to the oral tradition and local idiom is strongly evident throughout the tale. ‘The Sisters’ also imparts an intimate narrative voice telling a tale about ‘queer’ goings-on in the community. Mental illness, misunderstandings, gossip and death feature in the story to illustrate a typical small Irish community and provide a snapshot of life in rural Ireland where people are judged by surface appearances. It is a rather unusual story for O’Connor, in that the presence of the supernatural in Irish society is alluded to; when the ‘sane’ sister dies, the ‘mad’ sister suddenly appears in the community in a ghostly fashion, ‘the queerest little creature you ever seen, in a while nightdress with white hair sticking out all over

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80 Matthews, *Voices*, 70.
81 This story is examined in Chapter Four as O’Connor bases his play, *A Night Out*, on it.
her head.' Notions of a fractured consciousness and a divided self are hinted at but
the story is left to trail off into a happy-ever-after ending.

‘After Fourteen Years’ had already been published in the *Dublin Magazine* in
1929 and O’Connor’s inclusion of it in this collection signals perhaps that he
considered it a good story. His technical ability to encapsulate an image in just a few
sentences is again evidenced in this ‘short short’ story. The bustle of a market scene is
vividly portrayed in the opening passage:

> The narrow streets were crowded with cattle that lurched and lounged
dangerously as the drovers goaded them out of the way of passing cars. The air
was charged with smells and dust and noise. Jobbers swung their sticks and
shouted at one another across the street; shopkeepers displayed their wares and
haggled with customers on the high pavements; shrill-voiced women sold apples,
cigarettes and lemonade about the statue of the Maid of Erin in the market-place,
and jovial burly farmers with shrewd ascetic faces under their Spanish hats
jostled him as they passed.  

It is a more thoughtful, sparse and lyrical story in comparison to the other two tales.
Modernity has reached Ireland as mention of cars, factories and trains signify social
progression. Yet, the continued presence of the past in memory is delicately explored
through the figure of Nicholas Coleman. Moreover, it is this thematic motif that
perhaps best explains the inclusion of the final four stories in *Guests of the Nation*.
Memory is a common denominator to all four stories. Nicholas Coleman actively
explores his memory of a woman he once knew; Henry Conran only travels back to
Ireland when he thinks his memory is no longer being kept alive by his family; the
‘sane’ sister’s memory of her former self is reborn after her contemporary identity
dies; in ‘The Procession of Life’, the adolescence’s memories of his abusive
childhood affects his path to adulthood. O’Connor’s exploration of memory at the end
of his ‘war’ volume suggests that he was perhaps asking what form the two wars

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83 O’Connor, ‘After Fourteen Years’, *Guests of the Nation*, 236.
would eventually occupy in Irish political and cultural memory. In ‘After Fourteen Years’, Coleman travels back to his past by visiting a nun in a convent, a woman he used to know in his youth. Their stilted, shy and circumspect conversation illustrates the passage of time and the realisation that the past is now incommunicable:

he grieved that God had created men without the innocence of natural things, had created them subtle and capricious, with memories in which the past existed like a statue, perfect and unapproachable.

Both characters have settled into middle age, and the man reassures himself that ‘it is good to have one’s life settled, to fear nothing and hope for nothing.’ It is the train that admonishes him with ‘its petulant metallic voice – ‘Ruthutta ruthutta ruthatta!’’

The past as a perfect, unapproachable statue is undermined in the story, old dreams, desires and memories persist in contemporary times with the train symbolically reminding the reader of the doggedness of history. O’Connor’s engagement with this theme is writ large throughout Guests of the Nation as questions concerning Ireland’s recent past are held up for literary inspection.

His initial efforts to find a publisher for the collection met with some difficulty. This is surprising considering the positive reaction to the already published titular story. The closing down of the Irish Statesman in 1930 forced O’Connor to look elsewhere for publication outlets for his stories, including America, and resulted in ‘Guests of the Nation’ first appearing in the Atlantic Monthly in January 1931. As noted by Robert Evans, ‘‘Guests’ is still, perhaps, the story by which O’Connor is best known for and for which he is most respected; he thus had the good fortune of beginning his career with a genuine masterpiece.’

However, Edward Garnett returned the collection of stories ‘with the acrid comment that Frank O’Connor had no

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84 Ibid., 243.
power of observation. It was only following the intervention of George Russell, who wrote to Macmillan recommending the young writer, that O'Connor secured a contract for *Guests of the Nation*. It was a critical success in America and ‘O’Connor began to attract the serious attention of American reviewers. For a first book of short fiction, the volume received wide attention’, drawing positive reviews in some of the most influential journals of the time. Assessments such as ‘a book of poignant beauty’, ‘excellent’, ‘commendable restraint and economy’ and a ‘rich promise’ of things to come, abounded in the critical reception of *Guests of the Nation*. Closer to home, it received good reviews overall with Gerald Bullett, for example, in *The New Statesman and Nation* asserting that

O’Connor has all the gifts of the storyteller: sympathy, humour, detachment, and a style so unobtrusively the servant of his purpose that one hardly pauses to admire it. He writes of what he knows, of what he has seen and heard, and if his work is in some degree personal reminiscence it is perhaps none the worse for that … the best [stories] have a quality that suggests permanence.

The poet Austin Clarke wrote a similarly positive review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, stating that the:

individual quality of Mr. Frank O’Connor’s first books is discernible at once, and the quiet, subdued art of his short stories shows him to be a writer of experience … Most of these stories are sombre in theme, but their sincerity is compelling, and they are resolved in a mood of poetic sensibility.

‘P.C.T.’ in *The Irish Book Lover* asserted that there was ‘no mistaking the quality of the work in *Guests of the Nation*. It puts its author unhesitatingly into the front rank … it is extraordinary that an Irish writer should in his first book display so masterly a

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87 Evans, ‘Frank O’Connor’s American Reception’, 72-74.
88 Bullett, Gerald, Review of *Guests of the Nation, The New Statesman and Nation* (17 October 1931), 481.
89 Clarke, Austin, Review of *Guests of the Nation, The Times Literary Supplement* (15 October 1931), 708.
control over the medium of the short story." O'Connor's star as a writer continued to rise throughout the early 1930s and expectations were high for his next collection of short stories, *Bones of Contention and Other Stories* (1936).

**Bones of Contention**

In *Bones of Contention* O'Connor enacted a move away from his exploration of revolutionary politics and instead focused his attention on the more mundane struggles of 1930s Irish society. His 'submerged population' framework had regrouped into a variety of local communities. The conceptual bridge between *Guests of the Nation* and *Bones of Contention* was O'Connor's veering from national public events to local private moments. The stories were now less about individualism and more about problematic relationships and characters; characters who symbolised Irish communities. His characters in this collection often serve as mediums to entire communities for the reader. There are twelve stories in this collection but in contrast to *Guests of the Nation*, nine of the stories are written as a third-person narrative. Except for one story, 'A Romantic', autobiographical elements are not as embedded in the stories as they were in his first collection. O'Connor might have been writing about local communities but the narrator in the majority of these stories employs an objective tone. Just like the author, the narrators know the communities intimately; s/he is invariably a member of the community in question but still retains a detached distance in the telling of the tales. A contemporary personal issue in O'Connor's life, the loss of the woman he loves, does find its way into one of the themes explored in the collection but he handles it in a temperate and impartial manner. *Bones of*  

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90 P.C.T, Review of *Guests of the Nation*, *The Irish Book Lover* (November-December 1931), 179.
Contention indicates that O’Connor had reached a more objective position in his creative portrayal of not just Ireland but of his own personal emotions as well.

O’Connor continued to work as a librarian in Dublin in the time period between the two collections. He eventually resigned in 1938 in order to devote his attention to his writing. Apart from the role of writer, his work as a librarian was the only full-time job that O’Connor ever held throughout his life. By 1936, he was starting to gain the reputation of being something of an antagonist in the public eye but his role as a Free State librarian could be deemed a success. In this work, he was responsible for the setting up and stocking of Cork County Library and Pembroke District Library in Dublin. He had also been the assistant librarian involved in the setting up of Wicklow County Library. Censorship, clerical interference, inadequate funding and local pieties had not made his job an easy one but ‘he met with not a single call for his resignation, either for incompetence or for literary impropriety, during his three years in Cork and ten years in Dublin.’ "O’Connor encountered a rich variety of people who frequented the libraries and it not only fuelled his interest in ‘the reader’, it also provided him with a fascinating insight into the more common needs of Irish people. The humanist element is more strongly developed in O’Connor’s second collection and this could in part be attributed to his prolonged exposure to community concerns during his librarianship years. Moreover, the increased interest in matters of the heart in Bones of Contention perhaps stemmed from O’Connor’s failed relationship with Nancy McCarthy. Between 1928 and 1934, O’Connor proposed to McCarthy on numerous

91 Matthews, Voices, 60. Interestingly, O’Connor’s death mask hangs on the wall of Pembroke Library. According to Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy, his friend and assistant librarian in Pembroke, Dermot Foley, had organised the making of O’Connor’s death mask and he offered it to Pembroke in honour of O’Connor’s time as Head Librarian there. Whilst in charge of this library, O’Connor had been determined to engage the interests of local children in reading and had organised for the entire second floor to be devoted to children’s books. This set-up was still in place at the time of writing. Moreover, as his biographer also observed in the 1980s, the stamp of O’Connor’s taste in Russian and French literature was still evident in the library in 2008. For more on O’Connor as a librarian, see, Matthews, Ibid., 59-66.
occasions but she always refused. Their courtship was a chaste and cautious one and, after McCarthy finished the relationship in April 1934, O’Connor suffered a mental breakdown.  

‘Michael’s Wife’, the first story in the collection, explores the theme of lost love whilst the setting is located in a rural Irish community.

The character herself, Michael’s wife, remains nameless in the story as her role is mainly as a literary medium, and she is utilised to provide an insight into this community for the reader. She arrives from America to the similarly anonymous village to stay with her parents-in-law, Tom and Maire, to recover after a miscarriage. Their son Michael has stayed in America to work. Unusually for O’Connor, the story is set in the late nineteenth century and it is perhaps for the reason of telecommunications. Michael’s parents cannot contact him except by letter or telegraph and the importance of this only becomes clear at the end of the story (this point will be returned to later in the chapter).

Various critics have suggested that O’Connor ignores place in his work. William Tomory has argued that there is not a strong visual quality to his work and O’Connor seldom provides descriptions of place; instead there is a concentration on how characters sound. James F. Kilroy has also stated that ‘descriptions of place are

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92 Various reasons have been offered as to why McCarthy refused O’Connor’s marriage proposals. Though they were to remain life-long friends and McCarthy carefully preserved all of O’Connor’s letters to her (which she bequeathed to his widow, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy), no explanation is forthcoming from these letters. Unfortunately, none of McCarthy’s own letters to O’Connor appear to have survived. O’Connor’s biographer rather dismissively suggests that she ‘was only a highly strung small-town girl afraid of what she might do to the two of them’, Matthews, Voices, 107; Similarly, Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy has suggested that Nancy thought she would hold O’Connor back from reaching his full potential – O’Donovan Sheehy, Interview with Hilary Lennon (Dublin: 25 August 2006); Carol Quinn, the archivist of the Nancy McCarthy Papers in University College Cork, has tendered the possibility that McCarthy never wanted to have children and therefore waited until she was past her childbearing years before she married – Quinn, Interview with Hilary Lennon (Cork: 16 February 2008).

93 The first telephone arrived in Ireland in 1878 but it would be well over a century later before the majority of homes in Ireland had a private telephone. For more on the history of the telephone in Ireland, see: ‘Sound Exchange’, Programme I, RTE 1 radio broadcast (12 April 2007), http://www.rte.ie/radio1/soundexchange/1133361.html. Accessed 14 June 2010.

94 Tomory, William, Frank O’Connor (Boston: Twayne, 1980), 86.
sparse’ in O’Connor’s stories. While this may be true for some of O’Connor’s stories, in ‘Michael’s Wife’ one of the more notable aspects of the story is O’Connor’s depictions of the landscape in several different passages:

Beyond the village the road climbed a steep hill. Through a hedge of trees the bay grew upon the sight with a wonderful brightness because of the dark canopy of leaves. On and up, now to right, now to left, till the trees ceased, the bay disappeared over the brow of a hill, and they drove along a sunlit upland road with sunken fences. Hills like mattresses rose to their right, a brilliant green except where they were broken by cultivated patches or clumps of golden furze; a bog, all brown with bright pools and tall grey reeds, flanked the road ... The land suddenly dropped away from beneath their feet, and the open sea, speckled white with waves and seagulls’ wings, stretched out before them. The hills, their smooth flanks patterned with the varying colours of the fields, flowed down to it in great unbroken curves, and the rocks looked very dark between their wind-flawed brightness and the brightness of the water. In little hollows nestled houses and cottages, diminutive and quaint and mostly of a cold, startling whiteness that was keyed up here and there by the spring-like colour of fresh thatch. In the clear air the sea was spread out like a great hall with all its folding doors thrown wide; a dancing floor, room beyond room, each narrower and paler than the last, till on the farthest reaches steamers that were scarcely more than dots jerked to and fro as on a wire.

The beauty of this rural place is captured in O’Connor’s descriptions of the setting. The community’s poverty, remoteness from the world and under-population is also lyrically rendered in these pastoral sketches. It is because of this isolation that the arrival of Michael’s wife causes something of a disturbance in the community, especially for Maire. Her arrival provokes Maire to view her community with more objective eyes, as the familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar:

It wasn’t only that the girl was a stranger and a sick one at that, but – and this Maire had never allowed for – she was the child of a strange world, the atmosphere of which had come with her, disturbing judgment ... In the bright starlight a cluster of white-washed cottages stood out against the hillside like a frame of snow about its orange window-squares. For the first time Maire looked at it, and with a strange feeling of alienation wondered what it was like to one unused to it.

95 Kilroy, James F., The Irish Short Story, 105.
97 Ibid., 9-10.
The impact of emigration on rural Irish families is delicately suggested in this story as Maire probes the girl for odd little details about their life in America (how the milk was delivered, their home central heating, the streetcars); all with a view to grasping some kind of image and understanding of the world their only child now lives in. The old couple would never travel to America and there seemed to have been no possibility of Michael returning with his wife for a visit. In nineteenth-century Ireland, emigration often meant emigration for life and the emotional pain of missing a loved one is illustrated by the couple’s longing for any trivial piece of news that they could obtain about their son. Through Michael’s wife’s wanderings about the village, the reader is supplied with snapshots of the community and the realities of day-to-day life in this remote region. Religion, fishing and local gossip are the mainstays of this world and there are no references to national political events – such as the Land War or the fight for Home Rule that was taking place across the country at this time – or even to events in the next parish. Local pettiness or any instance of provincial bitterness is also not depicted in this story. Instead, O’Connor portrays an enclosed, tightly-knit and warm community where survival and family dominate the concerns of the people.

Michael’s wife arrives in a tearful, exhausted and fragile state. While she gradually recovers her physical health, her mental health appears under duress as she continually talks in her sleep and often screams out the name of her husband. In a reversal of the old couple’s desire for American news, Michael’s wife also has an avid curiosity for stories about Michael’s life in Ireland. She is as keen to listen to the fishermen and the women in the village as to his parents while they all recall their memories of Michael as a child and young man. O’Connor deliberately stimulates the reader’s imagination with various hints as to why Michael’s wife is acting in such a
way. While the reasons are never fully disclosed in the story, a few events imply that Michael has died in America. It is for this reason that his parents’ inability to verbally communicate with their son in America was an important part of the story’s plot.

The weather becomes progressively worse as the story unfolds, going from bright sunshine to heavy rains and dark clouds, and several passages evoke an atmosphere of impending trouble. One stormy night Tom, hearing her scream out Michael’s name, returns to his bed and suddenly:

He felt another hand coldly touching his forehead and his heart. For one wild, bewildering moment it was as though Michael had really entered the room above his head, had passed in his living body across all those hundreds of miles of waves and storm and blackness; as though all the inexpressible longing of his young wife had incarnated him beside her. He made a sign of the cross as if against some evil power. And after that there was silence but for the thunder of the rising storm.  

The theme of death enters the story with this ghostly encounter and when Tom is saying goodbye in the pouring rain to his daughter-in-law, his fears have crystallized: ‘he looked at her appealingly. He could not frame the question he looked ... so he asked it only with his eyes and with her eyes she answered him – a look of ecstatic fulfilment ... He raised his hands to his eyes and swayed to and fro, moaning softly to himself’. Tom and the young wife communicate the devastating news through silence, instinct and sensitivity. Michael’s wife had come to her husband’s place of birth to grieve for her lost love but also to keep him alive for a little while longer, in his parents’ world and in memory. The emotional trauma of losing someone informs the entire story, and O’Connor gently explores the human reaction to this common life event. ‘Michael’s Wife’ is not the best story in the collection but, as James Matthews

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98 Ibid., 25.
99 Ibid., 26-27.
has observed, it is the 'most evocative'. It has its own literary value in terms of its subtle and lyrical study of lost love.

‘In the Train’ and ‘A Romantic’ also explore the theme of love but in distinctly different ways; the former story delineates the individual cost of forbidden love in a local community while the later relates a coming-of-age love story. ‘A Romantic’ is partly autobiographical as the life of the protagonist is heavily based on O’Connor’s experiences as a teenager, when he worked as a messenger boy as well as a draper’s assistant while attending Gaelic League meetings. The story traces the boy’s progression, in an almost cinematic style, from the idealism and timidity of his first forays into love-making, to his more casual and inconsiderate interactions with other women, and finally to his predicament of being engaged at twenty years of age to three different women at the same time. Noel does not know what or who he wants in his romantic imagination and, by the end of the story, in his despair he ends up in bed with yet another woman and the implication is that she is a prostitute. His youthful naivety has transformed into a hardened realism and he realises that he has forever lost the exquisiteness of innocent first love, due to his desire for romantic experience. He is now ‘Adam’ forced to leave his innocent Garden of Eden:

He had the sense of the most appalling desolation. Even the melancholy moonlight on the river, the three-master and the sailor of the evening before, seemed to exist in an ideal world, far far above him; a world that contained the magical lost beauty of Anne. First love and last, there was no one like her ... The world would be magical again, but not for him. Never again would he see it as in the days when he tramped the quays whistling with his basket of bottles. And the experience - it was nothing! He had fallen, and wasn’t a ha-porth the wiser for his fall.

Matthews, Voices, 113.

101 ‘In the Train’ is dealt with in Chapter 4 as O’Connor’s play, ‘In the Train’, was an adaptation of the story.

Romantic imagination and the realities of life are intertwined in this story, and O’Connor seems to suggest that the two are incompatible in life. Nancy McCarthy had been O’Connor’s first real love and that he wrote a story such as this, so soon after the desolating experience of losing her, suggests that O’Connor’s experience had also hardened him emotionally. O’Connor was dating again by 1935 but the story intimates O’Connor’s awareness that he had lost something unique when he lost Nancy. ‘A Romantic’ is positioned as the final story in the collection so the opening and closing stories in Bones of Contention render the emotional cost of lost love and lost innocence.

In the rest of the collection, the focus is more clearly on action and adventure in local communities. O’Connor presents comic stories about the foibles and vanities of Irish people. This is most evident in the good-humoured portrayal of the hard-drinking local brass band in ‘Orpheus and His Lute’, the funny battle over a corpse and who had the rights to bury it in ‘Bones of Contention’, and the affable pub debates over Ireland’s problems in ‘What’s Wrong With The Country’. These stories impart to the reader an entertaining image of the ordinary and proverbial in 1930s Ireland. Poverty, unemployment and social ills such as alcoholism are alluded to throughout these stories but they are framed within a droll tenor. They highlight O’Connor’s ability to gently poke fun at human behaviour whilst inserting more serious matters into the stories in an indirect and detached manner. ‘The English Soldier’ is set during World War I but O’Connor’s adopts a comparable style in the handling of this material. Instead of the war, the story concentrates on detailing how an Irish family ‘adopted’ a soldier while he was stationed in Cork. Cajoled into posing as Cissie Dorgan’s family, out of circumspection over her drunken father at home, the family are introduced to Cissie’s new boyfriend, the English soldier. The interaction
between the local Irish family and the English soldier develops into an affectionate relationship. It is only at the end of the story that the War imposes itself on the story when word reaches the family that the soldier has been killed at the front. The bequest of his savings to them in their real surname forces their realisation that he knew of their deceit but thought little of it. Overall, it is a weakly executed story but the community O’Connor evokes in the portrayal is warm, considerate and welcoming to strangers. That the soldier was English also suggests that O’Connor was perhaps advocating to the reader abandonment of old anti-English prejudice. Like Belcher and Hawkins in ‘Guests of the Nation’, the likability of this soldier and his disinterest in discussing the war implies that he too is a victim of official political ideology, regardless of his nationality.

In a similar manner to ‘A Romantic’, O’Connor also positions romanticism and realism as incompatible in ‘Lofty’. Lofty might ‘ache for romance and glory’ but his practical, material side dictates his marriage proposal to the daughter of a prosperous man. The power of the imagination and its influence on the individual is creatively explored in the story and Lofty’s romantic imagination is transformed into delusional acts of vanity. His pragmatism would not allow him to delve into his romantic inclinations in any meaningful way. Part of the action is set during the Civil War and O’Connor’s representation is humorous, uneventful and borders on farce:

Every day he went out on the hill, his sombrero cocked on one side of his head, and with a powerful pair of field-glasses surveyed the country round. ‘Movement of some sort to the West,’ he would announce with bloodless calm whenever a herd of cattle raised a dust on the distant highways.103

National politics has retreated to an almost irrelevant off-stage position in the story and instead the concentration is on Lofty’s absurd fantasies of himself. His bragging,

vanity and ‘lofty’ delusions are his eventual downfall. It is only at the end of the story, when he finally looks directly at himself in a mirror, that Lofty experiences the self-realisation of what he has become, a lost and lonely man. As in his 1920s short stories, ‘The Awakening’ and ‘The Ring’, O’Connor appears to be suggesting in ‘Lofty’ that one should live a life of emotional self-truth, as thwarted natures can result in psychological conflict and are ultimately self-defeating for the individual. In the censorious and puritanical world of 1930s Ireland, it was perhaps an attempt to sagaciously warn the reader of the possible moral impact of repressing one’s natural instincts. Like ‘The Patriarch’ in *Guests of the Nation*, ‘Lofty’ is also the longest story in this collection and it is also the least successful. Similar to O’Faolain, ‘who was always more assured in handling particular scenes and tense moments than in shaping an extended narrative’, O’Connor is unable in ‘Lofty’ or ‘The Patriarch’ to sustain a tightly-controlled structure and both stories suffer from an excess of unnecessary detail and an over-developed narrative.

The next story in the collection, ‘The Man That Stopped’, has an analogous message to ‘Lofty’. The protagonist, John Cronin, unconsciously stops still for hours at a time in public places. Previously, Cronin had been a quiet, upstanding member of the community, attending mass and going to work. His life had been untouched by passion or yearnings and he had offered little in the way of contribution to improving society or himself. His ‘stopping’ unnerves the community and provokes strong reactions. John’s previous life is symbolic of his community in general as the people’s violent reaction to his ‘stopping’ indicates that individual difference is not acceptable and must be banished from their world. Rumours also begin to circulate that people in

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other parts of the country ‘took with the stopping’ too.\textsuperscript{105} It was only when Julia Cantillon agrees to take him home that John’s periods of immobility ends. Julia is a forceful, independent spirit and cares little for what others think. They fall in love, their marriage is a success and they prosper in life. O’Connor’s moral message is easily unravelled in this story: if an individual’s potential is not fully realised they lead a wasted life. John was living the type of life that would have met with social approval in 1930s Ireland – cautious, chaste and religious. His ‘stopping’ is simply symptomatic of the existence that O’Connor believed the majority of people were now enduring in the country. In this story, O’Connor is suggesting to the reader that, regardless of what society thinks, the only existence worth having is one that passionately embraces life.

‘In the Train’, ‘Peasants’ and ‘The Majesty of the Law’ are three of the best stories in \textit{Bones of Contention} and they, along with ‘Tears, Idle Tears’, explore an identical theme – the clash between traditional and modern Ireland. It was an issue that concerned O’Connor as he feared that traditional ways of life were being disrespected and discarded in the years following the foundation of the Free State. In his 1920s literary criticism, O’Connor had argued for the importance of tradition in the creation of post-independence Ireland’s cultural identity. In \textit{Bones of Contention}, O’Connor was intimating that disregarding traditional practices would result in social conflict; it would also instigate a marginalisation of those rural communities that were more impervious to the decline of traditional customs. Rather than present such communities as an anomaly in modern Ireland, O’Connor’s work creates a concise exposition of the traditional roots of the communities’ \textit{modi operandi}, in an instrumental endeavour to inform the more metropolitan reader. The individual

\textsuperscript{105} O’Connor, Frank, ‘The Man That Stopped’, \textit{Bones of Contention}, 166.
protagonists in each of these stories creatively serve as mediums into the communities. In particular, the thematic thread of the short stories considers the villages’ enclosed rules in the area of justice.

‘Tears, Idle Tears’ is set in the nineteenth century and stands as an example of the illegal practices that were utilised in a local community in order to uphold justice. The story illustrates the hoodwinking of the official law during the local Tenants’ League angry dispute with a land agent, named Forester. The land agent’s name appears on the first line of the story and suggests ruthlessness as it alludes to ‘Buckshot’ Forster who was Chief Secretary of Ireland at the time and who was loathed in the country: ‘The uncompromising force he brought to the job, implementing a policy of coercion against an impoverished peasantry, was seen to have curdled into simple cruelty.’ Because of the land agent’s name as well as the title of the story, an Irish reader’s sympathy would have been quickly directed toward the tenant farmers in the story. Organised land agitation had begun in Ireland in 1879 and led to the establishment of the Irish National Land League in the same year. The impact of this was that:

Rural disturbances began to increase exponentially in the Irish countryside … On average there were seventeen murders of landlords and their associates per year during the land war, as well as acts of violence such as cattle maiming redolent of the agrarian agitation of the early nineteenth century.

Land agents invariably worked for the local landlord and the angry dispute in ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ signals an upcoming eviction. The locals kill Forester and collectively work to dispose of the body whilst the area is under police investigation. The rest of the story involves a dramatic, comic but foolhardy chase by the police to apprehend

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the suspects. Internal disagreement and feuds might abound in the community but external threats were cooperatively dealt with as a united group. Official law at this time was imperial law and little assistance was therefore supplied to the police. The story serves as a reminder to the reader that outlawed practices in rural 1930s Irish communities might have their derivation in nineteenth-century physical-force nationalism. ‘Tears, Idle Tears’ is also a direct reference by O’Connor to Tennyson’s 1847 poem of the same title. Tennyson wrote the poem in response to his visit to Tintern Abbey. For Tennyson, the Abbey represented ‘bygone memories’ and ‘the passion of the past’; the tears are idle because there is no immediate cause for grief but the speaker is shocked that the past can rise up with such clarity in the present: ‘they return as ghosts to haunt this world as embodied memories.’

O’Connor is suggesting in the story that cultural memory is the explanatory factor for anachronistic deeds in contemporary Irish communities.

Similarly, ‘In the Train’ displays that there is only a surface respect for the official laws of the nation in this contemporary community, as the peasants lie in court to avoid the accusation of ‘informing’. The accused will instead stand charge and receive her punishment within the confines of her locale. The country people in ‘Peasants’ refuse to defer to Church and State authority and relinquish a local boy who is standing trial for thief. In defiance of the local priest, who ‘adheres to English/Roman law that was introduced into the country by invasion and conquest’, the boy is safely smuggled to America as the community’s traditional values dictate that a trial would stain his family’s name and banishment should therefore be his

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justified punishment. O’Connor’s work posits the argument that long-established methods concerning social order were maintained even when the political authority of the land had changed. De Valera’s 1930s Ireland might have imposed an authoritarian, censorious and law-abiding social system, but O’Connor negated this in the stories. Historic insurgency practices continued to exist in local communities and O’Connor was perhaps suggesting that rebellion against official ideology was still a plausible option.

‘The Majesty of the Law’ is the best story in the collection and brilliantly captures this clash between the modern developments of Ireland and a more outmoded way of dealing with local disturbances. In the story, an old bachelor called Dan Bride warmly receives his visitor, the local sergeant, and the two men spend an enjoyable evening talking, drinking tea and illegal whiskey, and comfortably smoking their pipes. Old-fashioned politeness and hospitality frames their behaviour as they consider the changes in society and lament the passing of traditional knowledge. The two men discuss how people have lost the art of making good liquor and the modern legal system is blamed, but sensitivity to his guest forbids Dan from any candid condemnation: “‘Ever since things became what they are,” said Dan, carefully guarding himself from a too direct reference to the peculiarities of the law administered by his guest, “liquor is not what it used to be.”’

Proceeding cautiously, Dan regrets the impact of change on the community’s cultural heritage:

‘Every art has its secrets, and the secrets of distilling are being lost the way the old songs were lost. When I was a boy there wasn’t a man in the barony but had a hundred songs in his head, but with people running here, there and everywhere, the songs were lost ... Ever since things became what they are,’ he repeated on the same guarded note, ‘there’s so much running about the secrets are lost.’

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111 Ibid.
In this poor, remote old bachelor’s cottage, the men relax into affable chat and contented long silences. The progression of the companionable evening is lyrically rendered as the light ‘grew thick and coloured, and wheeling about the kitchen before it disappeared became tinged with gold … From the ash tree a thrush began to sing. The open hearth gathered brightness till its light was a warm, even splash of crimson in the twilight.\textsuperscript{112} The sergeant finally bids his goodbye and leaves but soon returns to gently enquire if Dan planned to pay the fine for violently assaulting another old man in the vicinity. Dan’s actions had been provoked by ‘the victim’s own unmannerly method of argument’ and he utters a polite refusal over the payment of the fine.\textsuperscript{113} It results in Dan and the sergeant organising Friday as the most suitable day for Dan to begin his prison sentence. The assaulted neighbour also receives a punishment as he is shamed by Dan and the community for reporting the incident.

O’Connor’s disillusionment with post-independence Ireland and his anxiety concerning the new bourgeois order are imperceptibly rendered in this story. Moreover, his fear that Ireland was becoming a philistine-minded country that was divorced from its own past manifests itself, as the notion that the Irish are alienated from their rich cultural heritage is an issue that is raised in this story. While O’Connor had mocked the idea of a passive deference to tradition in his 1920s literary criticism, the story also explores his apprehension over the cultural disappearance of traditional Gaelic poetry and songs, pagan health remedies and, most noticeably, what were fast becoming antiquated good manners. The story celebrates traditional values that preserve personal dignity. The sergeant’s understated subversion of contemporary policing methods also pays homage to traditional rituals and undercuts modern conceptions of justice in the Free State. More subtle methods of upholding social

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 93.  
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 96.
order in the community are explored instead. In one sense, the content of the story illustrates the form of the short story itself. By withholding the important facts of the plot until the end, O'Connor deepens this story's impact. The gaps and omissions inherent in the short story, where only so much information can be directly imparted, also calls for a more perceptive attention on the part of the short-story reader. 'The Majesty of the Law' is a story that highlights the effectiveness of an implicit rather than an explicit form of communication. It was also a style that was particularly useful at a time when nearly all writers of note in Ireland were being banned.

It was far easier for O'Connor to publish this book as Macmillan had made provision for a second collection in his contract for Guests of the Nation. Bones of Contention is not as technically cohesive as Guests of the Nation and some stories suffer as a result. Idiomatic phrasing and attempted portrayals of regional dialect are strongly present throughout the entire collection, but the effort at imitating an oral storytelling dimension, particularly in relation to the narrative methodology, results in some of the stories becoming more like 'tall tales'. This is most evident in stories such as 'Bones of Contention' and 'Orpheus and His Lute'. That said, some of O'Connor's finest stories are included in this collection – 'The Majesty of the Law', 'In the Train' and 'Michael's Wife'. O'Connor was by now a skillful poetic realist and his descriptions of place in the collection are beautiful. Bones of Contention also delivered imaginative and sensitive portrayals of 1930s Irish communities. National problems were not ignored but slotted into a secondary position as the focus instead was on local, ordinary life. The image that emerged was of a country that had suffered in its history; that was poor and offered little opportunity for young people; where alcoholism and emigration were some of the regular difficulties faced, and petty squabbles and idle talk informed part of daily life; where unnatural repression of
emotions was common and traditional values and customs were in danger of being irrevocably lost. However, this was not to the fore in the collection and is instead embedded in many of the stories. What O’Connor more directly portrayed was a country with people who had the ability for gracious hospitality, compassion, family loyalty, good-natured humour, profound love, musical talent, kindness and tolerance. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Bones of Contention was not banned. The area that was a particular target of the censor, sex and anything to do with it, is largely absent from the collection. The closest O’Connor ventures to the subject is the reference to the woman’s exposed breasts at the end of ‘A Romantic’. It would not be until his later short stories, particularly in The Common Chord in 1947, that O’Connor explored the taboo topic of sex in Ireland.

Bones of Contention received mixed reviews. Writing in the Dublin Magazine Padraic Fallon dismissed ‘Lofty’, ‘A Romantic’ and ‘What’s Wrong with the Country’ as ‘stories with hollow centres.’ However, he did reserve particular praise for ‘Michael’s Wife’:

where there is a rare delicacy of atmosphere and a reality of life that is as variable in its moods as wind and sky, and still as solid as the solid, earthy people that inhabit it ... and, so, touches for a moment a dark imagination of truth that is, artistically at any rate, its own assurance.  

The American reception of Bones of Contention was also mixed, with one review considering ‘The Majesty of the Law’ ‘a trite little number’ while also describing ‘Michael’s Wife’ as ‘a recognizable little fragment of fine goods.’ However, some American reviewers were lavish in their praise: ‘He is likely to be a superb writer of

the realistic-fantastic style'; \textsuperscript{116} 't]he language is a realization of the improbable flights of Irish speech of a sort to make the more famous passages of Synge seem like the insincerities of a tired littérateur. It grows on the page, sprouting into lush foliage out of the materials of the situation.'\textsuperscript{117} The Irish Times declared that there is a lot to remind the reader of Maupassant' but O'Connor 'is much more of the Irish shanachie ... [a]t least half of the stories in the volume ... would be most effective if told orally.' The same reviewer identified this characteristic in 'Tears, Idle Tears', 'The English Soldier', 'Orpheus and His Lute', 'Peasants', 'Bones of Contention' and 'What's Wrong with the Country', and concluded with the assertion that 'Michael's Wife' and 'In the Train':

will certainly be acclaimed as masterpieces, equal to the best short stories ever written by Russian or Frenchman or Englishman or American. In both stories art and craft are so exquisitely blended that neither could be separated ... he is a master among masters himself.'\textsuperscript{118}

O'Connor's reputation by the end of the 1930s had been firmly established as a master of the short-story form. It was a significant development after the frustration of the 1920s and the stage was set for further acclaim when his next collection, Crab Apple Jelly, was published in 1944. Reviewing the later collection, for example, Kate O'Brien would claim that:

Mr. O'Connor has long been an expert in the short story form, for which he has a marked and seductive talent; and he is by now so much at home in it that he is entering the dangerous phase of actually being too easy to read, so smooth and suave of accomplishment as almost at times to make no greater impression on us than a passing ripple of pleasure. He has always had a great eye for the makings

\textsuperscript{117} Troy, William, Review of Bones of Contention, 'The Comic View', The Nation (29 April 1936), 567; quoted in Evans, 'Frank O'Connor's American Reception', 79.
\textsuperscript{118} Anon, Review of Bones of Contention, The Irish Times (7 March 1936), 7.
of a story, and he can move into his theme and carry it along with a virile naturalness which, when he is in his best form, can truly be called magnificent.\textsuperscript{119}

\textbf{O’Connor as a Short-Story Writer}

O’Connor’s early 1920s short stories, along with \textit{Guests of the Nation} and \textit{Bones of Contention}, amounted to more than just a personal process. They were also not simply poetic realist delineations of submerged populations groups. Daniel Corkery argued in \textit{The Hidden Ireland} that Gaelic poetry allowed the modern reader a more truthful insight into traditional Ireland since it gave a more accurate picture of that culture, in comparison to the image that the official history offered: ‘Not only are they a surer guide to the history of the place and period than the official statements, but they are a swifter guide … they bring us deeper into the heart of things.’\textsuperscript{120} O’Connor advocated a broadly similar thesis when he wrote \textit{Guests of the Nation} and \textit{Bones of Contention}, as he believed that the 1930s reading public would gain a superior understanding of Ireland through its literature as opposed to relying on Church and State ideologies. As already detailed in previous chapters, underpinning O’Connor’s work was the belief that an artist’s vision could act as an impetus to the development and growth of society, and he had an acute awareness of the author-reader relationship. O’Connor was a writer who wrote for ‘the lonely reader down the country’ but also aimed at reaching a community of readers. This is important when one considers that intrinsic to the structure of short-story reading are the adjustments and compressions required, as only so much can be told or suggested. This excludes the possibility of a detailed portrayal of a specific society, and does not set up clear guidelines for moral judgement. The actual form of the genre, O’Connor believed, could inspire social

\textsuperscript{119} O’Brien, Kate, Review of \textit{Crab Apple Jelly}, \textit{Spectator} (26 May 1944), 484.
change as the reader had to more actively engage with the text. V.S. Pritchett describes this process as one of 'seeing through', whereby presentation of character and incident in the short story allows the reader to see other planes of meaning beyond them. The reader completes what lies behind the surface of the story. This is perhaps why O'Connor placed such emphasis on form and content. It is in this sense, through the very characteristics of the form of the short story, that O'Connor attempted to become a voice of opposition to post-independence hegemonic forces.

After the publication of *Guests of the Nation* and *Bones of Contention*, O'Connor maintained this detached but familiar observational position in his later collections. He wrote from the perspective of an insider, one who based his fiction on an intimate knowledge of the people, yet O'Connor was also a writer who depicted his characters with an outsider's detachment. Throughout his career as a short-story writer, he focused on ordinary Irish life, and his stories have domesticated heroes and 'adventures' drawn from the everyday. In this is reflected gentleness, amiable humour and compassion for people, especially for the young, but the writings also reflected anger, sadness, flippancy or comic mockery towards those aspects of Irish life he considered hypocritical, authoritarian, élitist, falsely pious, or mediocre. While O'Connor mocked a passive deference to tradition, his stories also delicately explored people's loyalty to the past ('The Majesty of the Law' and 'The Long Road to

121 Quoted in Kilroy, *The Irish Short Story*, 5.
Ummera’, for example). O’Connor’s work revealed little interest in the Ascendancy classes, a sympathy for the Irish poor and a pointed critique of the *arriviste petit bourgeois*, yet he reserved condemnation for those forces that hampered individual desires (‘The Procession of Life’ and ‘The Custom of the Country’, for example). O’Connor wanted freedom of choice for the individual yet also desired a traditional sense of community. His stories represented ‘submerged population’ groups, his oft-cited phrase for those he considered marginalised, outlawed, lonely or alienated in society and who, he believed, formed the kernel of short-story material. He once said that writers drawn to the short-story form had ‘an attitude of mind that is attracted by submerged population groups ... the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic’.

Yet his stories were at times less about individualism than about characters who seemed to symbolise Irish communities (‘In the Train’ and ‘The Luceys’, for example). His created individual characters often served as mediums to entire ‘communities’ for the reader. O’Connor’s short-story writing style and theories were established by the time he had published his first two collections, and he maintained this stylistic and theoretical stance in all of his subsequent collections. After *Bones of Contention*, it would be another eight years before O’Connor published his next collection, *Crab Apple Jelly*. Instead, he devoted this time to playwriting and to his recently appointed position as a director on the board of the Abbey National Theatre.

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Chapter 4

Frank O’Connor and the Abbey Theatre

Joining the Abbey Theatre

From a very young age Frank O’Connor displayed a keen interest in the theatre.¹ His active involvement did not begin until 1927 when, as a result of encouragement from Micheál MacLiannmóir, O’Connor, Seán Neeson (head of RTÉ broadcasting in Cork) and J.J. Hogan (a director with Cork Opera House) founded the Cork Drama League. Despite proclaiming an intention at the debut performance on 20 February 1928 to stage ‘the best of Southern thought and emotion’², O’Connor focused most of his attention on productions of works by writers such as Ibsen and Chekhov. The League instead attended to the second intention expressed at the same performance, to give a platform to those international playwrights whose work was ‘unknown’ in Cork. The only Irish playwright who was staged during O’Connor’s time with the League was Lennox Robinson. O’Connor greatly admired Robinson as a dramatist. His other production choices – it was O’Connor who primarily selected – were undoubtedly influenced by his own interest in European literature at the time as well as the Dublin Drama League’s more internationalist programme.³

However, O’Connor’s general eschewal of Irish plays also stemmed from his own literary-political opinions. He asserted soon afterwards that he had ‘no use for a

¹ In his autobiography he tells of a time when, as a small boy, he built a model theatre out of an old boot-box and used ‘an elaborate lighting system of Christmas-tree candles with coloured slides of greased paper that could be made to produced the effect of moonlight, dawn, storm, and every other romantic aspect of nature.’ See O’Connor, Frank, An Only Child (London: Macmillan, 1961), 122.
² Matthews, James, Voices: A Life of Frank O’Connor (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1983), 50.
theatre that leaves out literature … the Abbey should do Tchehov [sic] and Ibsen and Hauptman instead of Brinsley McNamara'. Irish writers, in his opinion, were too involved in the politics of the country:

he [Daniel Corkery] who was the finest artist of us all goes and writes blithering articles for the Irish statesman [sic] … The business of the artist is with his art and not with the problems that will be decided far more finally and successfully by the illiterate mussolinis [sic] of the world.  

Rather than genuinely espousing an ‘art for art’s sake’ ideological framework, and notwithstanding his own contribution of nine articles by this stage to the same periodical, O’Connor was in reality reacting more to Corkery’s cultural protectionist arguments and, most likely, the introduction of the Censorship of Publications Act in July 1929. He feared this would lead to a disregard for literary merit. O’Connor advocated similar sentiments just a few months later, to what he perceived as a hijacking of Irish-language drama by government-sponsored cultural nationalism, and in Arnoldian terms called for ‘the fiercest criticism of everything second-rate, that will tolerate nothing but the best in literature and drama and art’. O’Connor’s selection of plays during his stint with the Cork Drama League appears to be an oppositional act to State-imposed literary standards. His time with the League was brief, however, as he moved to Dublin on 1 December 1928 and took up the position of librarian in Pembroke District Library, a post he was to hold until 1938. By the early thirties O’Connor’s attitude towards the staging of Irish drama had completely changed and

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5 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, The Irish Statesman (16 November 1929), 212.
6 Matthews, O’Connor’s biographer, gives the impression that O’Connor turned his back on the Drama League when he left Cork, as well as linking this to his convenient leaving when it was heavily in debt. This impression is somewhat misleading as in a letter to Nancy McCarthy, an amateur actress with the company as well as being the woman that O’Connor was to propose to on numerous occasions over the next six years, he refers to ‘misunderstandings happening’ over his continual advice-giving to the Cork Drama League. He decides to ‘step out, and let you people carry on’ because of this. See: O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Nancy McCarthy (Dublin: January 1929), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
he became instead a champion of Irish playwrights; this change in attitude was something that he was to bring into full force by the time he became a director of the Abbey Theatre in 1935.

The closing down of the Irish Statesman in 1930, the poor condition of Irish libraries, the increasing social conservatism that was becoming prevalent in post-independence Ireland – these were just some of the issues that served to increase his frustration with the new establishment and ignited a burning desire to do something about it. In a loving letter to Nance McCarthy, he expressed the fear that he was afraid of her getting ‘injured by my writing ... This thing is going to get worse and not better’. He tellingly revealed in the same letter that he ‘feels like a soldier on leave from the front’.7 O’Connor’s vanguard reaction to what he saw as a stultifying affiliation between an anti-modernist Church and a conservative State and culture was beginning to set in. Through his friendship with George Russell (AE), O’Connor was introduced to W.B. Yeats. Becoming acquainted with Yeats was a significant encounter for the young writer from Cork as the famous poet involved O’Connor in such projects as the campaign against the Censorship of Publications Act and the setting up of the Irish Academy of Letters in 1932. More importantly, it was Yeats who invited O’Connor to become a director of the national theatre.8

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7 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Nance McCarthy (Dublin: 7 September 1933), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
8 O’Connor was already well-informed about the Abbey’s internal machinations through Richard Hayes, who was a Board member as well as being O’Connor’s physician and close personal friend. In fact, it was because of O’Connor’s intervention that Hayes agreed to become a Board member in the first place. See O’Connor, My Father’s Son (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1968), 152; Hunt, Hugh, The Abbey: Ireland’s National Theatre, 1904-1979 (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), 145-46. Born in Bruree, County Limerick in 1878, Richard Hayes was a boyhood friend of Eamon de Valera and qualified in medicine in 1906. He had fought with the Irish Volunteers during the 1916 Rising and was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment but was released in 1917. Re-arrested in 1918, he was elected TD for East Limerick while in Reading Jail. He had supported the Treaty but resigned from the Dail in 1924. He wrote several books about the Irish in France and received the Cross of the French Legion of Honor in 1951. He was a member of the Irish Academy of Letters and the Royal Academy of Surgeons and received an honorary doctorate (D.Litt) from the National University of Ireland. He died on June 16, 1958.
The general history of the Abbey has by now been well delineated and its state of decline, by the time O’Connor joined, will be familiar to most. Previously, the 1920s had witnessed the development of an alliance between the theatre and the Cumann na nGaedheal government. The campaign by Yeats and Lady Gregory for State financial support for the Abbey was a crucial factor in the transpired affiliation. On the government’s side, the newly formed State sought to create a stable society in the aftermath of revolutionary upheaval. The theatre’s valuable ideological role in Irish culture, alongside its perceived association with the Anglo-Irish minority, served to develop the government’s consideration of the theatre as a significant legitimising ally. Moreover, the Abbey’s institutional support for the new Irish Free State was believed important for the government as it sought to rein in republican anti-Treaty opposition. In August 1925, an annual subsidy of £850 was granted to the Abbey. The mid-to-late 1920s saw the strengthening of this alliance and several of the most notable plays … work either to sentimentalize the relationship between Cumann na nGaedheal and southern unionism or to advocate support for the ‘national’ government of the Irish Free State as opposed to the recalcitrant and anti-modern forces of republican opposition. Despite the accession of Fianna Fáil to power in the 1932 elections and its winning of an overall majority in the 1933 elections, there was a continued, pronounced avoidance of major conflict between the Abbey Theatre and the government. The theatre was in financial difficulties due to the economic depression of the thirties (it was £2,500 in debt), plus its annual subsidy from the government had been

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10 Pilkington, Theatre and State, 107.
11 O’Connor was unusually reticent when reflecting on the relationship years later: ‘it would not be unfair to say that the Establishment had a more than adequate voice in the running of the theatre’, O’Connor, Frank, ‘Quarreling with Yeats: A Friendly Recollection’, Esquire (December 1964), 157; a copy of this article is held in the Denis Johnston Papers, Trinity College, Dublin, MS 10066/54/48.
temporarily cut to £750 a year. In order to address these financial pressures the period from 1932-35 saw resumption of the theatre’s American tours, but the overall standard of its Dublin repertoire remained poor. Instead of becoming an important cultural arena which could engage critically with Irish social and political issues, the Abbey was being reduced to playing to an audience that wanted to eschew uncomfortable conceptions of what constituted ‘Irishness’ and whose expectations converged on perfunctory images of the country. It ran the risk of becoming a substandard theatre that catered to an audience who perceived a visit to the national theatre as mere entertainment. This decline was mirrored at an internal level in the Abbey Theatre by Lady Gregory’s death in 1932 and the subsequent inefficient management by Lennox Robinson.

Yeats attempted to do something about it and, in the *Daily Express* in December 1934, announced that there would be a change of policy within the Abbey due to the ‘slackening of activity among Irish dramatists’. What he was planning was the ‘revival of lesser-known Irish plays’ as well as an inclusion of regular productions of modern continental plays, to compete with the thriving Gate Theatre. In *The Irish Times* article, Yeats also outlined the idea of setting up an advisory committee to introduce new blood to the Abbey (which would also effectively strip Robinson of his control). On the recommendation of Richard Hayes, this proposal changed to the enlargement of the board membership; it resulted in F.R. Higgins (poet and friend of Yeats), Brinsley MacNamara (Abbey playwright and novelist), and Ernest Blythe (former Minister for Finance) being appointed as new board directors on 9 August 1935.

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12 Hunt, *The Abbey*, 149; the interview was expanded and republished in the *Irish Times* (23 February 1935), 5.
1935 (but they had been working in the Abbey since March of that year). Just a few months later O'Connor would also find himself becoming a director of the Abbey, when he replaced Brinsley MacNamara on the board.

**Theatrical Theories**

After Yeats’s announcement of a ‘fresh start’ for the Abbey, Frank O’Connor and Sean O’Faolain wrote to *The Irish Times* complaining about the production proposals. They believed that this exemplified the Abbey’s shabby treatment of aspiring Irish dramatists and both writers strongly objected to these new intentions:

In the first place, we doubt that there has been any real slackening of activity among Irish dramatists, and we cannot, therefore, agree that the theatre was compelled to fall back on the revival of old plays ... To fall back on the revival of old plays is merely a confession of incapacity to encourage. In the second place, we consider it bad policy on the part of a National Theatre to set out on a scheme for the production of Continental plays. This is, surely, a pitiable confession of defeat.

O'Connor had already written at least two plays that are still in existence, *A Night Out* and *Rodney's Glory*. One of them had been rejected by the Abbey in 1934 (it is not known for certain which play was rejected but the evidence from his letters seems to point to *Rodney's Glory*). The rejection appears to have had a deep effect on O'Connor and fuelled his conviction that the Abbey should do more to encourage and

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15 O’Connor, Frank & Sean O’Faolain, Letter to the Editor, *The Irish Times* (26 February 1935), 7. Sean O’Faolain later elaborated on the letter and explained that they blamed the new policy on a lack of enthusiasm on the part of the directors. What they were arguing for at the time was a return to that intimacy, where common things were presented to the public with ‘a fidelity and affection, that, translated into realism and lyricism, produced a drama then almost unique in Europe.’ However, his memory of their reasons for objecting is somewhat confused. He also stated that even productions of old Irish plays at the time would have shown ‘embryo dramatists what was expected of them by the traditions of the theatre.’ This statement, of course, forgets their protestation against the revival of old Irish plays. See: O’Faolain, Sean, ‘Preface’, *She Had to Do Something: A Comedy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), 17-19. Reprinted in Mikhail, E.H. (ed.), *The Abbey Theatre: Interviews & Recollections* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 147-148.
advise budding dramatists (it sparked his five-year-long battle with the Abbey board for improved treatment of young Irish playwrights). However, O’Connor’s objection to Yeats’s new policy of staging continental drama did not arise from purely personal playwriting ambitions. It also stemmed from his growing conviction that a national theatre should challenge and confront the dominant orthodoxies, as opposed to the Abbey’s strategic avoidance of so doing. He therefore began supporting the staging of contemporary Irish plays as, he argued, it could help extirpate the doctrinaire from Irish cultural representations. O’Connor would later admit that he had been attracted to the theatre in the 1930s because he felt that it was the ‘quickest and surest way of stinging the country alive’.\(^\text{16}\) He viewed modern Irish drama as the art form that would best encompass a subversive agenda; the theatre, he was to claim in Yeatsian tones, was ‘a challenge to the mob’.\(^\text{17}\) Writing at a time when the threat of theatre censorship was rumoured, O’Connor asserted that it was the arena that could best stage a combative stance against the government’s control of public opinion: ‘the theatre is the only art form than can directly influence opinion, particularly now that the censorship of books is acting, more or less effectively, as a gag on the novelist’.\(^\text{18}\)

O’Connor contention was that by staging plays that the audience could socially and linguistically relate to, fresh realistic portrayals of Irish society might possibly unsettle the predominately Catholic middle-class audience out of their comfortable notions of what constituted ‘Irishness’. The influence of Daniel Corkery on his opinions is pronounced. Corkery’s evaluation of the audience’s reaction to a play – that they always relate it their own contemporary situation, hence the inherent

\(^{16}\) O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Denis Johnston (Wicklow: 1939), Denis Johnston Papers, Trinity College, Dublin, Ms. 10066/287/2287.


instrumental nature of dramatic art, alongside his emphasis on the educational importance of protecting and producing a native literary tradition – is echoed in O’Connor’s theatrical theories. O’Connor also argued that the staging of classical drama (unadapted for a contemporary audience) was akin to staging ‘museum theatre’, as a playwright wrote with her/his audience in mind and this in turn influenced a playwright’s writing. An Irish audience could more easily access deeper meanings in contemporary Irish drama, where ‘a line must explode like a fragmentation bomb and hit a thousand people simultaneously’. O’Connor’s combative language, on the subversive potential of language itself, held the premise that contemporary Irish drama would succour a manumitting effect whereas classical or continental plays would forestall a liberating agenda. In a Hamletian sense, O’Connor saw plays as confrontational devices that could provoke reaction, reveal truths and inspire action. While O’Connor’s ‘museum theatre’ premise is critically interesting, in terms of the importance he attached to the material conditions of reception, it would appear that his vanguard agenda in mid-century Irish cultural debates also underpinned his theatrical theories. This idealism further stimulated his support for realism as opposed to abstraction. His desire to initiate social change in

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20 O’Connor, *The Art of the Theatre*, 25–28. This publication was a collection of four articles that had been previously printed in *The Bell* (March – June 1945) and contained his main argument that a play was a complex collaboration between the audience, the author, and the actor. This theory, of course, neglects the role of the director and the stage designer in any dramatic production. For further reading of O’Connor’s drama criticism, see: O’Connor, Frank, ‘A Lyric Voice in the Irish Theatre’, Barnet, Sylvan, Morton Berman and William Burto (eds), *The Genius of Irish Theatre* (New York: Mentor, 1960), 354-358, which was a short piece that praised Yeats for being Ireland’s greatest theatrical poet. His last piece of critical writing on drama was: O’Connor, Frank, *Shakespeare’s Progress* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1960), which involved a close textual reading of the works of Shakespeare, situated within the context of a detailed social history. Overall, O’Connor’s drama criticism reveals the enormous importance that he placed on the social and political setting within which a playwright operates, as it in turn influenced a playwright’s writing. One could not access the underlying meaning in a play, O’Connor believed, unless one had cultivated a comprehension of the broader historical background.

Ireland via the stage augmented his stance against experimental drama and cemented his support for theatrical realism, and he wanted it staged without compromise. The national theatre, O'Connor argued, should be disencumbered from acceptable social mores and ethics and this would lead to disturbing the audience into engaging with contentious issues. As he later said (with perhaps Synge and O'Casey in mind):

The theatre has two great charms for me: one is the sense of freedom from considerations of circumstances; the other is its contemporaneity ... A storm in the theatre may very well mean the author's ahead of his time. The audience may not like the picture he gives of them because it's truer than the convention they want to have in their minds.22

O'Connor was ultimately objecting to what he saw as conservative, conventional attitudes in 1930s Ireland and the State's hegemonic mediation of art to the Irish public. When O'Connor joined the Abbey board, he did so with an oppositional agenda in mind.

**O'Connor and the Abbey Theatre Board**

O'Connor's actual joining was due to tension and divisions within the board itself. In the summer of 1935 Yeats and Sean O'Casey settled their quarrel over the Abbey's earlier rejection of *The Silver Tassie* and the play opened in the theatre on 12 August.23 *The Silver Tassie*'s political underpinning represented an inanity in undertaking violence for an idealistic end, while it condemned the collaboration of society, Church and State in the sacrificing of young men to protect the status quo. A storm of protest based on religious grounds erupted and angry protests against the

23 Interestingly, O'Casey included O'Connor in the dedication for a satirical lyric that he composed in 1928 concerning the treatment that Irish writers were receiving from the Abbey. Already, O'Connor was starting to become associated with the politics of Irish drama. See Krause, David (ed.), *The Letters of Sean O'Casey, 1910-41* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 320.
Abbey, O’Casey and Yeats ensued. Opposition also came from within the Abbey as Brinsley MacNamara joined the attack. Aroused by the charges of blasphemy that were directed at the play, he issued a statement to the press whereby he deprecated the ‘vulgar and worthless’ plays of O’Casey and proclaimed his powerlessness, as the only Catholic board member, to prevent the play’s production. Despite his refusal to resign MacNamara was eventually forced out. Yeats offered his place to O’Connor and he was subsequently elected on to the board on 9 October 1935.

Various reasons have been offered as to why Yeats wanted the inexperienced O’Connor on the board of the Abbey. According to Peter Kavanagh, Yeats would have asked O’Connor a lot sooner but for the fact that he was a ‘discovery’ of George Russell’s. If this was true, Russell’s death on 17 July would have removed Yeats’s reason for hesitating. Some critics have argued that it stemmed from Yeats’s belief that ex-gunmen were running all successful businesses at that time and O’Connor’s history in the Civil War fitted the bill. O’Connor’s biographer has claimed that Yeats ‘knew from disputes with Michael on the Academy Council that he could be depended upon to keep things stirred up and fight for the best interests of Irish artistic expression’. There is an element of truth to both assertions. O’Connor’s anti-Treaty credentials from the time of the Civil War, as well as his Catholic background, would have helped dissuade criticism leveled at the Abbey board that it had become a coterie.


25 MacNamara, Brinsley, Letter to the Editor, The Irish Independent (29 August 1935). 5. MacNamara was mistaken in his assertion that he was the only Catholic board member as Walter Starkie was also Catholic. Starkie was a Spanish and Italian literature professor at Trinity College, Dublin since 1926, as well as the former music and drama reviewer for the Irish Statesman.


28 Matthews, Voices, 127.
of Ascendancy-related Protestants. Yeats also knew that O’Connor would fight for a more combative repertoire in the theatre, not just from his experience of O’Connor on the Academy Council but also from O’Connor’s regular public skirmishes as a literary and cultural critic throughout the previous ten years. Moreover, O’Connor had already developed a reputation as a noted translator of Old Irish poetry and this interested Yeats in him. During O’Connor’s time with the Abbey they worked together on numerous translations; Cuala Press had also published O’Connor’s first collection of translations, *Wild Bird’s Nest*, in 1932. Yeats’s strong approval of O’Connor’s oration at George Russell’s funeral would have also increased the old poet’s liking for the younger man.

As it transpired, this period within the history of the Abbey was to have important long-term consequences for the theatre. Even though the scholar, D.E.S Maxwell, has dismissed the Abbey board manoeuvrings during this time as being ‘of small interest’, the fact that Ernest Blythe went on to outlast all the other boardroom members, and serve as managing director of the Abbey from 28 January 1941 until 31 August 1967 (when he retired but he remained on as an influential member of the board until 1972) stemmed from this very period of the Abbey’s managerial history.

The result of the ‘greenroom’ power manoeuvrings in the late 1930s was that Blythe’s commercial emphasis and Irish-language interests would dominate the Abbey Theatre’s boardroom decisions for the ensuing thirty years. In 1935 O’Connor’s only real theatrical experience was from his brief time with the Cork Drama League. It was a giant and intimidating step for him to become one of the directors of Ireland’s national theatre and he keenly felt the responsibility of the legacy that had been passed on by its founders:

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29 For examples, see: Matthews, *Voices*, 98-9.
I entered the Boardroom for the first time, seeing nothing but the figures of John Synge and Augusta Gregory, and trusting they would inspire me, but their inspiration was similar to that of the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin in earlier days when I couldn’t do my lessons or my work.”31

From the beginning, his innocence and inexperience served to put him at odds with the rest of the board members – Ernest Blythe, Richard Hayes, F.R. Higgins, Lennox Robinson and Walter Starkie. Their sagacious methods of conducting business were in direct contrast to O’Connor’s youthful impatience and enthusiastic idealism. In his autobiography O’Connor remembers Blythe as looking like a Buddha in grey plaster that spent most of his time doodling on his pad during the meetings. He also recalls that Walter Starkie took little part in the meetings or discussions, while Richard Hayes mostly concentrated on financial matters. F.R. Higgins was the most treacherous opponent to the naïve O’Connor on the board, as he carried ‘greenroom gossip’ to every corner of Dublin and generally blamed O’Connor for every wrong decision that had been made. Years later, O’Connor would recall how they all had laughed at a board meeting when Higgins described how he accepted plays from his ‘drinking’ friends, only to return them months later with the excuse that ‘O’Connor was being impossible as usual.’32 Lennox Robinson was the last board member. He had an immense capacity for silent, despondent resistance and it was with Robinson that O’Connor battled the most.33

31 O’Connor, *My Father’s Son*, 154. That O’Connor also viewed Yeats with enormous awe and respect, as well as a father-figure, is reflected in the fact that he probably took the title for his autobiography from Yeats’s *Purgatory*:

I ran away, worked here and there
Till I became a pedlar on the roads,
No good trade, but good enough
Because I am my father’s son,
Because of what I did or may do.


By this stage Yeats, in his attempt to implement the new Abbey policy, had also engaged a young English producer, Hugh Hunt, as play director and Tanya Moiseiwitsch as stage designer. Hunt’s understanding of the Abbey’s situation was very close to O’Connor’s own beliefs at the time. Hunt would later write that this policy of staging continental plays proved to be unsuccessful, and it became obvious that challenging the Gate’s repertoire was not the way forward in the regeneration of the theatre in the late 1930s. What was needed instead was a more dynamic and active approach to the drama that its international reputation had been founded upon; for Hunt, this meant treating the already established playwrights with greater respect whilst also developing more strategic methods for motivating and encouraging new Irish writers. It set the stage for successful dramatic collaborations between O’Connor and Hunt, numerous disputes with Robinson, as well as O’Connor’s antagonisation of the already fractious board.

One of O’Connor’s first discoveries on joining the board was the realisation that it was Robinson who was mainly responsible for the rejection of new plays by Irish writers, as he had managed to persuade the board that no works of any real substance or value were being submitted. His unremitting alcoholism, his demoralised state, and insecurity in the face of new talent played a dominant part in his directorial decisions. Whenever a new play appeared in the boardroom, Robinson ‘reduced it to rubble with ingratiating smoothness’. A few years later this treatment of Irish playwrights

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34 Hunt was a young English producer, who had been a protégé of Nugent Monck’s at Norwich’s Maddermarket Theatre. It was John Masefield, the poet laureate, who advised Yeats to appoint Hunt. At Hunt’s request, Moiseiwitsch was also engaged.


36 These disputes obviously left Robinson with a lasting dislike of O’Connor. His only mention of O’Connor in his history of the theatre was to briefly record the dates for his appointment to the board, the staging of O’Connor’s plays and his resignation – Robinson, Lennox, Ireland’s Abbey Theatre: A History 1899-1951 (New York: Kennikat Press, 1951), 149-50.

37 Matthews, Voices, 127. Also see Murray, Twentieth-Century Irish Drama, 118.
obviously still rankled with O’Connor when he wrote to Sean O’Faolain about the setting up of a new Irish dramatic society:

I propose what I proposed to the Abbey long ago, that we offer to people submitting plays a detailed criticism ... I did that at the time not in the interests of the Abbey at all but for those unfortunate creatures in the country who send in hundreds of plays and never have seen a play and don’t know what to read, and my proposal to the Board was that you should be appointed a sort of permanent reader at a fixed salary. Now, we should have to do that between us voluntarily, but it would still be a blessing to be able on occasion to get away from that murderous inhuman rejection slip business which haunted me all the time I was in the Abbey.\(^{38}\)

O’Connor’s theatrical aspirations were threatened by Robinson’s attitude. His discovery would augment his increasing frustration with the directorial decisions that were being taken as he wanted to represent the ‘true Ireland’ on stage.

O’Connor’s desire to represent the ‘true Ireland’ on stage was not unique. Nicholas Grene has identified the importance of representations of Ireland within Irish drama since the Abbey was first founded, whereby it:

has remained self-consciously aware of its relation to the life of the nation and the state ... Every dramatist, every dramatic movement, claims that they can deliver the true Ireland, which has previously been misrepresented, travestied, rendered in sentimental cliché or political caricature.\(^{39}\)

O’Connor’s theatrical idealism was no different. At a farewell luncheon that Eamon de Valera gave for the Abbey players in 1937, before they embarked on their American tour, O’Connor made a speech on behalf of the board where he aligned the chronicle of the Abbey with the chronicle of the country. This chronicle had passed from a proclivity to sentimentality to what O’Connor hoped would be a healing phase of realistic self-laughter. His speech concluded with his envisioning of a time where Ireland would take itself (as well as being taken by an outside audience) seriously.

\(^{38}\) O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Sean O’Faolain (Wicklow: December 1939), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.

O'Connor believed that one could utilise the national theatre as a ‘fighting weapon’, whereby the problems of the country could be thrashed out on stage.\(^{40}\) O'Connor did not want Irish drama to merely reflect the surface of social life but to push instead for a deeper probing into Irish people’s disparate beliefs and actions, and he therefore began to turn the Abbey away from Yeats’s new policy. One of the final productions as part of this policy was Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* (13 January 1936). As Europe was in the grip of the rise of Fascism, the production of *Coriolanus* in Paris had caused a riot over the use of coloured shirts. Yeats wanted a similar reaction in Dublin and demanded a similar staging. His attraction towards the Irish Blueshirt movement in the previous few years was partly behind this desire, but his overt and rather outrageous reasoning was that a riot would help regenerate interest in the theatre. O'Connor refused to support the idea. His conciliatory gesture towards Yeats was a production of *Coriolanus* in Renaissance costume but it cost the theatre a lot of money. The new trend of staging classical and continental drama similarly failed in its attempt to capture the attention of Dublin’s theatre-goers and the policy was thereafter dropped.

The aging Yeats was very aware of the direction in which O’Connor was pushing the theatre, but he also wanted a living theatre and knew that the Abbey needed re-energising. He therefore accepted O’Connor’s moves.\(^{41}\) O’Connor began a process of actively promoting dramatists such as Teresa Deevy, Paul Vincent Carroll and Denis Johnston at board meetings and his methods began to be slowly felt. The board had rejected Carroll’s *Shadow and Substance* and Deevy’s *Katie Roche* in 1935, but Deevy’s play went on to be staged in the Abbey to critical acclaim on 16

\(^{40}\) O’Connor, ‘Curtain up! Classical & Contemporary Theatre’, 269.

March 1936 and Carroll’s was staged on 25 January 1937. He had also ‘gone the round begging for plays and had a few promises, one from Sean O’Faolain and another from Brinsley MacNamara’. O’Faolain’s play, the only one he ever wrote, was *She Had to Do Something* (27 December 1937). MacNamara’s play was possibly *The Grand House in the City* (3 February 1936). The staging of O’Faolain’s piece produced more personal consequences for O’Connor in that the players objected to Evelyn Bowen getting the leading part. O’Connor’s relationship with the married Bowen (who went on to become O’Connor’s first wife) was very unpopular with the rest of the board. He offered his resignation but Yeats refused to accept it, so O’Connor continued to assiduously attempt to create his ‘fighting weapon’. He ‘began screening the manuscripts submitted, approving and sending into production plays that turned the Abbey away from the fantasies which Yeats favoured. The Abbey thus began to emphasise dramatic fare ... which dealt with either current social problems or with historical events’.

Hugh Hunt has described this period as something of a rebirth of Irish drama and D.E.S Maxwell has written that ‘the truly remarkable fact is that noteworthy dramatists did emerge’. Lionel Pilkington has also noted that in the mid-late 1930s ‘the Abbey Theatre appeared to resume a more combative role in relation to nationalist majority views’. This would seem to be directly attributable to Frank O’Connor’s efforts. Robert Welch has highlighted that O’Connor was ‘proving to be a dynamic force on the Abbey board’, and Peter Kavanagh has credited O’Connor with being solely responsible for the attempts at revitalising the Abbey: he ‘was the only man whose genius might hold out against the ever-present deteriorating

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43 Tomory, *Frank O’Connor*, 52.
influences on the Abbey’s integrity’.

While Kavanagh’s account is somewhat laudatory, it is true that O’Connor played a leading role in encouraging new voices in Irish drama in the mid-late 1930s, helped succeed in getting the theatre out of debt, and dominated an undertaking to shift the Abbey away from its theatre-state alliance during this period.

**Dramatic Works: The Early Efforts**

O’Connor of course was also involved in playwriting and several of his dramatic works, which included collaborations with Hugh Hunt, were staged by the theatre in the same period. In fact, O’Connor saw his joining the Abbey as an opportunity to become more involved in playwriting. ‘The Abbey job is a help because it compels me to write something for the theatre’, he wrote to his friend and fellow librarian, Dermot Foley, ‘and as you know I’ve always had a shy and timorous passion for that’.

His initial efforts had already begun in the late 1920s. Ruth Sherry has pinpointed *A Night Out* and *Rodney’s Glory* as being two of his earliest plays; these plays were completely unknown until they were donated to the National Library of Ireland in March 1989. In 1928 O’Connor also referred to having written a three-act comedy about the Civil War with a view to staging it with the Cork Drama League.

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47 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Dermot Foley (Dublin: January 1936), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin. Foley first worked with O’Connor as his deputy in Pembroke library in 1929 but transferred to Clare Public library in 1931; for the rest of his working life Foley remained a librarian and from 1960-73 he was Head of The Irish Libraries Association. He and O’Connor remained lifelong friends.

48 The plays were donated by the Director of the National Film Archive, Liam O’Leary. The original manuscripts of *A Night Out* and *Rodney’s Glory* had been found in the possessions of a former neighbour of O’Connor’s in Cork by her son, Noel Ryan, who worked in the Film Division of RTÉ, and who passed them on to O’Leary. See: Sherry, Ruth, ‘The Manuscript of “Rodney’s Glory”’ by Frank O’Connor’, *Irish University Review*, 22 (Autumn/Winter 1992), 219; O’Connor, Frank, *Rodney’s Glory*, Sherry, Ibid., 226-241; O’Connor, Frank, *A Night Out* [1929], Frank O’Connor Papers, National Library of Ireland, 5, Pos. 35247/2.
but, to date, a manuscript of this play has not been found. His other unstaged play was the *The Lost Legion*. Not counting his radio plays, he wrote eight plays in total that are available – four were staged by the Abbey (three were collaborations) and the final one, *The Statue’s Daughter*, by the Gate Theatre in 1941.

*A Night Out* is a short one-act play and it will probably be best remembered as O’Connor’s attempt to articulate the ideas that he was to reproduce in ‘The Procession of Life’, which was published as the concluding piece in the collection of short-stories, *Guests of the Nation*, in 1931. In the play as in the short-story, we encounter Larry, a young boy of 17/18 years of age, who has been locked out of the house by his father and left to wander the streets of the city for the rest of the night. In his frightened state, he encounters three other creatures of the night on the Cork quays – a night watchman, a prostitute and a policeman on duty – and the four characters together present an image of loneliness that pervades the entire play. The night watchman chastises Larry for not standing up for himself against his domineering father, and reminiscences in Synge-like fashion about his own youthful rebellion:

I up with the poker and hit him such a clout over the poll they had to put six stitches in him at the infirmary after ... Oh, I quietened him – the heavens be his bed – I quietened him, sure enough. I had him so quiet at the end that he’d mull the porter for me drink at night ... and there’s a strapping lad like you now, and you’d let your father bate you, and never rise a hand in your own self-defence?

Larry is afraid of his father, a prefect of the Holy Warfare Confraternity, and the thought of rebelling has never occurred to him. He listens in awe to the tale and is further confused when the prostitute arrives on the scene and begins to shower him

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50 O’Connor, Frank, *The Lost Legion* [1936, my date], Trinity College, Dublin, Ms 10899a.
51 The idea is partly autobiographical as O’Connor’s own father had previously locked his son out of the house when he had failed to return home before 10pm, which generally happened after attending Gaelic League meetings with Daniel Corkery. This left a lasting mark on the writer as he returns to the theme of a father locking the door on his son yet again in his novel, *The Dutch Interior*, in 1940.
52 O’Connor, *A Night Out*, 5.
with affection and offers of a bed for the night. The offer by this 'magical' creature, which would have been Larry's first real opportunity to explore his sexual desires, is thwarted by the appearance of the fourth and final character — a constable on night duty. Prostitutes had often befriended rebels that were 'on the run' in Irish society at that time but even these women, who live outside of conservative society, were caught within the net of State law. The policeman wants the prostitute for himself and orders her off to their 'usual spot'. After sharing a drink and cigarettes with the other two, by way of an apology for 'taking' the woman, he orders Larry to stay with the night watchman and follows the prostitute. The action of the play finishes up with Larry deciding to return home instead, but this time with a spirit of defiance towards the policeman and his father.

O'Connor was writing into this play his own concerns at this time, and is clearly advocating the benefits of overthrowing the traps of a provincial perspective and an acquiescence to social and state authoritarianism. A Night Out focuses on a young boy's coming of age and his initiation into adult life. It delineates the beginning of his passage from a romantic adolescent to a more independent young man who can deal with the real world. Larry obtains a glimpse of what might be possible if he fights back against the oppressive forces that hamper his development, and leaves at the end striding confidently through the darkened city. The law, in the guise of the policeman, attempts to pacify Larry with drink but the thirst for defying authoritarian rule wins out. Overall, while this one-act play is quite weak in its construction, it remains interesting for the fact that it highlights some of the cultural concerns of the young writer in the late 1920s, concerns that were to dominate his writing in the following decade.
Another anxiety of O’Connor’s was that Ireland was descending into a petite bourgeoisie, philistine-minded country that was divorced from its own past. This worry was broached in his next play, *Rodney’s Glory*, as O’Connor attempts to dramatise the relationship between traditional Ireland and modern Ireland, a concern that he would broach again in his 1936 collection of short stories, *Bones of Contention*. The role of the poet in society, and the notion that the Irish were becoming alienated from their heritage, are the issues that are raised throughout the dramatic piece. Like ‘The Majesty of the Law’, the play also explores O’Connor’s fears over the possible cultural loss of traditional Gaelic poetry and songs. Set in a country cottage at the end of the eighteenth century, the action of the play centres round the figure of Eoghan Ruadh O’Sullivan, based on the eighteenth-century Gaelic poet, Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin. O’Connor got the name of the play from the title of Ó Súilleabháin’s ballad, ‘Rodney’s Glory’. Ó Súilleabháin wrote the song after the English beat the French in a battle in the West Indies on 12 April, 1782, where he had been serving in the English navy. Rodney was a vice-admiral in Britain’s navy and captain of the ship the poet sailed on. While some scholarly accounts of this event claim that the poet had been press ganged into the navy, O’Connor dramatizes it as Ó Súilleabháin joining the navy to escape the gun of a young woman’s angry father.

Daniel Corkery had published his book, *The Hidden Ireland*, in 1924, where he gives an account of Ó Súilleabháin and quotes the ballad in full. O’Connor largely bases his own depiction of the poet on this account. Corkery had also described the poet as one who wrote for ordinary people and, except for the Aisling (vision) poems, his songs are closely linked to the real things of his day, as essentially a type of poetic realism. As O’Connor later championed staging a form of poetic realism in the

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Abbey, this perhaps explains his attraction for the figure of Ó Súilleabháin. Moreover, as previously detailed in Chapter Three, Corkery had argued in *The Hidden Ireland* that Gaelic poetry allowed the modern reader a more truthful insight into traditional Ireland in comparison to official history. O’Connor’s pushed his similar thesis further in his dramatic attempt at incorporating ‘real fact’ into his play, and *Rodney’s Glory* is a blending of historicity with the literary enterprise.

The opening scene of the play begins with an animated discussion between Sheila and her father, Padraig. O’Sullivan is about to pay them a visit and Padraig wants Sheila to hide in the bedroom. Padraig is worried about the poet’s womanizing ways – a reputation that was often afforded Gaelic poets and especially Ó Súilleabháin. Padraig is more interested in O’Sullivan (“The Glory of Munster, the pulse of poetry”) paying a visit than with his daughter’s objections. Padraig’s own apparent reverence for poetry is expressed in his worried admission that: “‘You don’t understand us at all, a chree. The learning is dying with us; the craft is dying with us and soon enough ’twill be gone and we with it. There’s a good child now!’”54 Sheila agrees to be locked in her bedroom for the duration of the visit and O’Sullivan arrives.

What follows is a comedy of sorts, with a fawning attitude displayed by Padraig and some old neighbours who have dropped in to listen to the great poet recite. They make botched attempts to dismiss the noise Sheila makes as first a dog, then the wind and finally as an old, deaf woman. The old men then proceed to make amusing comparisons between O’Sullivan and another eighteenth-century poet, Egan O’Rahilly.55 Eoghan Ruadh is on his way to the harvest to work as a farmhand. This is

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54 Sherry, ‘The manuscript of “Rodney’s Glory”’, 227.
55 Aodhagán Ó Rathaille. Rivalry between these eighteenth-century poets was a common practice as they fought for their work to be included in ‘Bolg an tSoláthair’ (The Wallet of the Provider), a Munster book of poetry and song that contained only the poems and songs that were deemed the best by the rural audience. O’Connor was attempting to re-create this traditional practice in the play by
a telling point since O'Connor would have been aware from his 1920s translations and literary criticism that a sense of loss and regret is expressed in eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry for the decline of the poet's status in society; as a result, poets were generally obliged to work as farm labourers in the summer and teachers in the winter in order to make a living.\(^{56}\)

PADRAIG: (as if imparting a precious secret) Harvesting he's going to the fine country about Mallow, friends.

CON: (still under the spell) Harvesting!

EOGHAN: Harvesting to the mellow lands.

MICHAEL PAT: Mellow lands! Oh, oh, oh!

PADRAIG: A poor trade for the great poet of Munster though.

EOGHAN: A poor trade as you say, but not a dull trade, and where there's a poet the time passes quickly. 'Tis good this warm weather to sit a while by the bank of a river and sing and tell stories.

(murmuring to himself)
And when I'm sick and sore and the steward shall say
That my strength on a spade isn't worth either food or pay
I'll whisper a song about Death and his lofty way
And the wars in Troy and the great ones vanished away.

PADRAIG: (acting as leader in a chorus of approval) And the wars in Troy and the great ones vanished away.\(^{57}\)

Bardic schools in the eighteenth century, such as the academy at Faha in Kerry, encouraged an appreciation of Greek and Latin literature, and the tales told by writers


\(^{56}\) For example, in Ó Súilleabáin's poem 'Spealadóir', he longs for a Stuart restoration so that he would not have to spend time working in the fields and could instead concentrate on the writing of poetry.

\(^{57}\) Sherry, "The manuscript of ‘Rodney’s Glory’", 230-231. O’Connor is citing from a stanza in Ó Súilleabáin’s ballad, ‘Rodney’s Glory’, which O’Connor translated as 'To The Blacksmith With A Spade'; it was first published in *The Bell*: O’Connor, Frank, ‘To The Blacksmith With A Spade: From the Irish of Eoghan Rua O’Sullivan’, *The Bell*, 3:2 (November 1941), 104-105. This stanza mourns the fact that the spade is the only thing that is sponsoring the poet now. The version published in *The Bell* is very different to the play's:

And whenever I’m feeling low at the end of day
And the ganger comes round and tells me I’m dodging it well,
I’ll give him a bar about Death’s adventurous way
And the wars of the Greeks in Troy and the Kings that fell.

Another version of the poem has also been published under the title of ‘Séamas, Light-Hearted and Loving Friend of my Breast’; see: Ó Tuama, Seán & Thomas Kinsella (eds), *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1994), 185.
such as Homer, Virgil and Ovid were read and enjoyed by these eighteenth-century poets. The passing on of these great writers and Padraig’s ingratiating ignorance of what O’Sullivan is actually referring to is implied here. O’Connor evokes a subtle comparison and questioning of twentieth-century audiences’ comprehension of traditional Gaelic poetry and the broader European literary heritage. The audience is subsequently treated to colourful tales of O’Sullivan’s adventures with the navy and the far-flung places he visited. O’Sullivan subsequently informs the older men that it is because of his poetical gifts, that he was refused release from the British military forces. The military, he implies, was cognisant of the scarcity and value of poets and would therefore not discharge O’Sullivan from service. O’Connor is gently rebuking the audience for the fact that even the British forces were more appreciative of poets than post-independence Irish society. The climax of the dramatic action arrives when Eoghan recites a poem through the keyhole to Sheila, whom he has been led to believe is an old hag protesting at his titillating tales. Sheila demands to be set free and enters the room in a state of fury, whereupon the poet and the daughter discover that they have been deceived by the old men. Eoghan, embarrassed at his shyness being unmasked in front of a beautiful woman (after all the boastful stories of his exploits), denounces the old man’s house and leaves, vowing to keep his poetical secrets to himself. Sheila and Eoghan, in their misunderstanding and confusion, miss the opportunity of starting a relationship together, and the play finishes with Sheila venting her anger on the three old men and wondering at what Eoghan meant by poetical secrets.

58 O’Connor was perhaps trying to introduce a ‘bigger’ picture of the world to the audience. Just a few years previously O’Connor had been working in Sligo, training as a librarian, which he described as having to deal with ‘the barbarous mediocrity of the small town life’. He found relief from listening to ‘the larger air’ which my landlady’s husband introduces into the home circle when he begins to recount his experiences as Musketry Instructor in the White Army.’ O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Sean Hendrick (Sligo: 21 April 1925); repr. The Journal of Irish Literature, IV:1 (January 1975), 45.
The climax of the one-act play is a contrived effort and the ending is rather loose and abrupt. Readers more familiar with O’Connor’s short stories, such as ‘The Majesty of the Law’, would realise that the writer was trying to express the belief that the contemporary public’s growing lack of respect for the arts would result in a loss of the secrets that are attached to the creative process itself. This effort to represent a perceived widening of the chasm between traditional Ireland and modern Ireland in dramatic form is a weak one, and the main area of weakness is in the looseness of the dialogue. There were, however, signs that the young writer had the potential to improve as a playwright. His ability to delineate representative Irish characters on stage, alongside his flair for dramatic action, was an indication that O’Connor had playwriting potential. He was not to make an attempt at playwriting for another seven years, until he wrote The Lost Legion in January 1936.

The manuscript of The Lost Legion was bought by Trinity College, Dublin on 11 June, 1996. In the correspondence between Giollamuire O’Murchú and John de Vere White, of de Vere’s Art Auctions in Dublin, over the auction of The Lost Legion, O’Murchú wrote that:

it looks as though The Lost Legion is O’Connor’s first attempt at a play, inspired by his appointment to the Abbey board in late 1935, and by his vivid memories of re-adjusting to life in post-1922 Ireland after his release from prison at the end of the civil war.59

As detailed in Chapter One, in February 1923 O’Connor had been captured by Free State soldiers and was held in the Women’s Gaol in Sunday’s Well in Cork. He was transferred in April to Gormanstown Internment Camp just outside Dublin, where he was held until his release in December of that year. The experience had left a lasting impression: ‘In the years to come, travelling through the country, I would meet with

59 O’Murchú, Giollamuire, Letter to John de Vere White (15 April 1996), Frank O’Connor Papers, Trinity College, Dublin, Ms. 10899a.
the survivors of the period ... “The Lost Legion” I called them. There they were in small cities and towns, shopkeepers or civil servants, bewildered by the immensity of the disaster that had overwhelmed them, the death-in-life of the Nationalist Catholic establishment’.  

O’Connor wrote these words in 1961, but he first tried to articulate these sentiments in his play, The Lost Legion.

Set in the mid-1930s, the play functions as a literary organ for O’Connor to vent his own frustration with post-independence Ireland. Paul Dwyer, the main character, had fought in the war and thirteen years on, his life has progressed from a time of revolutionary excitement at the possibility of social change, to one of resentment and bitterness at the fact that nothing has changed. He is angry with himself for ending up trapped in the narrow, provincialism of his local town to the point where, on getting a new job with the local council, he finds himself boasting about it in the local pub and is disgusted at his reaction the next day. Dan Healy, a fellow-republican, arrives back from America where he had emigrated just after the War. For a few brief moments they reminisce about the exhilaration of that time when they were involved in the fighting: ‘the patrol we dodged, the stars, the drunks and the smell of the frost in the air’. On hearing that Healy is determined to take up the ‘cause’ again, Paul soon reverts to cynicism and laughs at Healy’s idealism. He invites Healy to join his Lost Legion who were:

The fellows who set out to do something and didn’t succeed. We drink and talk of old times and all the things we might have done – if only we’d got the chance ... Our organization extends everywhere. Once a week at least I get a visit from some poor devil ... Usually he has some fantastic notion for saving the country ... He boasts about it and the more he boasts, the more I know the fetters have sunk in. When he boasts too much we put him in an asylum and get up a subscription for his family.

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60 O’Connor, An Only Child, 214.
61 O’Connor, The Lost Legion, 12.
62 Ibid., 14.
Bitter disappointment has set in and Paul now believes that anyone who listens to the empty promises of republican hyperbole is suffering from serious delusions. Paul has become part of the *petit bourgeois* and he blames it on the early corruption of his innocence by republicanism:

> whenever there was youth and honesty enough to smash the sham, you turned it against a mock enemy and went down fighting for a mock principle … You’ve had everything from me, my youth, my honesty, my hopes, you’ve left me at thirty seven with nothing to live for.

Paul ends up fighting Healy to prevent Brendan, his younger brother, from joining the republican movement. The action continues with Paul breaking up with his girlfriend Eileen (a solid, repressed, conservative type who blames books for Paul’s restlessness) and deciding to ask Joan to marry him (Brendan’s girlfriend who sides with Paul during the fight). From the beginning of the play Joan longs to be free from the dull life she leads. The play finishes with Paul’s mother, Mrs. Dwyer, threatening to tell the local priest on all of them.

Similar to Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says ‘No’!*, O’Connor delineates the present as a depressing picture in contrast to the heroic vision that the Irish revolutionary leaders had espoused. The romantic hero has become redundant. In *The Lost Legion*, O’Connor was attempting a dramatic articulation of the disillusionment felt by many in post-independence Ireland. O’Connor was also provoking the audience into questioning the present state of 1930s Irish republicanism. On taking office in 1932, de Valera had suspended the Public Safety Act, lifted the ban on the IRA and released all ‘political’ prisoners. Large republican demonstrations were held throughout the week of Easter in that year. By 1935, de Valera was admitting to

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63 Ibid., 30-31.
64 This was a common theme in mid-1930s Abbey plays. Annie, in Teresa Deevy’s *The King of Spain’s Daughter*, for example, is also frustrated with small-town life in rural Ireland.
‘disappointment at the failure of the IRA to accept peaceful government by majority rule [as] political murders continued.’ On the 18 June 1936, the same year O’Connor wrote The Lost Legion, the IRA was ‘declared an illegal organization.’ Of the members who remained in the illegal organization, many were drawn to fascism and by the time of World War II, they were attempting to form alliances with Nazi Germany. As described in the Introduction to the thesis, despite some calls for a united Ireland in his literary criticism, O’Connor’s writings, overall, indicate that he had accepted the twenty-six-county State. In addition, he most clearly distanced himself from his former republicanism when he published a biography of Michael Collins in 1937. The sympathetic portrait that emerges of Collins in the biography is of a forceful, emotional, dynamic, clever man, whose ruthless behaviour during the wars was dictated by circumstance. It is likely that O’Connor was writing the biography at around the same time as the play, as he had carried out the majority of his research for the book in the spring and summer of 1935. O’Connor’s message in The Lost Legion is that 1930s Irish republicanism is an empty and corrupting political ideology, which no longer served any useful purpose in the Free State.

Staged Abbey Plays

In the Train was O’Connor’s first staged play in 1937 and it turned out to be a successful venture, helped perhaps by the fact that it was a collaboration with Hugh Hunt. It was based on his similarly titled short story, previously published in Bones of Contention (1936). While it is difficult to ascertain the exact extent of O’Connor’s involvement in the dramatisation of In the Train, Hunt has written that during their

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67 Matthews, Voices, 119.
collaborations, while there was no set pattern, O’Connor provided the characters and plot and Hunt shaped it into scenes and wrote some rough drafts of dialogue, which O’Connor then completely polished.68

The play opens with a voice-over by the judge informing the audience that Helena Maguire is alleged to have poisoned her much older husband. The action on stage is set in various compartments of a train where the people involved in the case (Helena, the local guards and Helena’s neighbours) are on their way home to Farranchreesht, a small village in the west of Ireland. A wandering drunk carries information between the compartments. The audience learns from the guards’ compartment scene that contradictory accounts have been given by the witnesses — the local guards and neighbours — and the implication is that the neighbours have committed perjury and will perform their own local punishment: ‘standing for her in court and standing for her in Farranchreesht are two very different things’.69 In the compartment filled with the country people, the gulf between rural and urban life is stressed. They are joined by the guards and joke about their brazen lies in court. The audience is given more details of the case by the voice-over and the drama moves to the compartment that Helena occupies. Quickly joined by most of the locals, they openly bait her about committing the murder so she could be with her younger lover, Driscoll; one guard ridicules her innocence: ‘You wanted him, Helena. Your people wouldn’t let you have him, but you have him at last in spite of them all’.70 Helena angrily responds that Cady Driscoll means no more to her now than sea salt, and the play finishes with the judge’s voice-over giving a ‘not guilty’ verdict.

69 O’Connor, Frank, In the Train: A Play in One Act from the Short Story [1937], Barnet, Berman and Burto (eds), The Genius of Irish Theatre, 254. The version of the play used here is O’Connor’s own; Hunt published his own version in 1973.
70 Ibid, 260.
*In the Train* is a powerful and dramatically intense one-act play. Characters are adeptly honed, through dress and dialogue, and a compelling picture of life in rural Ireland emerges. The narrative illustrates the divisions between rural and urban life, between community law and official law. As the train travels westwards it symbolises the departure of the people from a more modern way of life in Dublin, and traditional ways of maintaining authority are re-established on the journey back to Farranchreesht. The train’s compartments symbolise the social order of the village community but do not privilege any one perspective. It is a self-contained culture with its own customs and values and appears immune to the modernising forces of the State; this ‘submerged population’ will not sacrifice one of their own people to an ‘outside’ law but will decide on their own rural disciplining of Helena. The possibility of being branded an informer (a theme that materialises even more strongly in O’Connor’s 1937 play, *The Invincibles*) was something that would not be entertained and the villagers steadfastly respond to the unwritten laws within their own community. Because of this, O’Connor does not allow Helena to control and satisfy her sexual desires. Helena enacts her own self-punishment at the end of the play with the hardening of her heart toward the man she loves and this lonely individual now returns to social alienation. *In the Train* was based on a true murder case being tried in the Four Courts in April 1935, of a woman from West Clare accused of poisoning her husband (in order to be with her lover). Her neighbours commit perjury to avoid ‘informing’. O’Connor obtained the idea for the story by attending the Central Criminal Court one day and listening to the case.\(^{71}\) The ending of the play is

\(^{71}\) It was not usual for O’Connor to attend the Four Courts. Dermot Foley had come to Dublin for a visit and heard from Irene Haugh (whom they both knew from the days of the *Irish Statesman*) that her brother was working as deputy prosecutor in a highly publicised trial. Foley brought O’Connor along in the hope of lifting him out of a fit of depression. During recess, Kevin Haugh told O’Connor and Foley that the woman was guilty but that her neighbours would commit perjury before they would testify against her. O’Connor was fascinated by this overt display of an entrenched tribal attitude towards
O'Connor's own and while powerful in itself, it is not unsettling for a 1930s Abbey audience as it reinstates the woman back into conventional social laws concerning female behaviour. Instead, there is a dramatic containment of female autonomy, which counters emerging social 'problems' such as women's emancipation that threatened the official ideology of the nation. O'Connor's first staged effort at 'disturbing' acceptable social mores achieves little in this context.

First staged in the Abbey on 31 May 1937, as a one-act preceding O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman*, it received a positive response from the critics. The *Irish Press* praised the acting and production and hoped that 'it will be the forerunner of many such efforts'. David Sears applauded the production, the stage design and the 'greatness' of the adaptation: a 'first-class' short story was transformed into a 'first-class one-act play'. Hunt's dramatic technique of using a chorus to chant the rhythm of the train did not sit favourably with Joseph Holloway but he praised the acting and found it 'an interesting experiment'. *In the Train* was subsequently part of the Abbey's repertoire during the American tour in 1937 and was performed as part of the Abbey festival in 1938. It also enjoyed a revival when it was performed in the Abbey in August 1970 as part of a programme that included Yeats's *Purgatory*, Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon* and Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Due to its success, O'Connor and Hunt went on to collaborate on two more plays, *The Invincibles* and *Moses' Rock*. These were to become part of a dramatic trilogy by O'Connor that dealt with important events in Irish history (the third was

_informers and immediately set about writing a play based on it. It also led to O'Connor sending a newspaper clipping about another murder case to George Shiels with the suggestion that it might be an idea for a play. This idea was to turn into Shiels' successful *The Rugged Path* – Shiels, George, *The Rugged Path and The Summit: Plays in Three Acts* (London: Macmillan, 1942). See Matthews, *Voices*, 111-112, 134._

_72 Anon., Review of In the Train, The Irish Press (1 June 1937), 2._
_73 Sears, David, Review of In the Train, Irish Independent (1 June 1937), 10._
_74 Hogan & O'Neill (eds), *Joseph Holloway's Irish Theatre*, 70._
*Time's Pocket* but Hunt did not collaborate). In the case of *The Invincibles*, O'Connor claimed (in a preface written for a planned publishing of the play that never materialised) that the idea came to him while researching for his biography of Michael Collins. In his autobiography he said he wrote the play because ‘for years [he] had been haunted by the subject of the Invincibles’. It is also possible that his idea for the play was impacted by his reading of *Ulysses*, which mentions the event in detail. This Joycean influence seems more likely when the title, *Moses' Rock*, and background subject, the fall of Parnell, of his next play is taken into consideration (as discussed later in the essay). The Phoenix Park murders occurred on 6 May 1882 when Lord Frederick Cavendish, the newly appointed chief secretary for Ireland, and his under-secretary, Thomas H. Burke, were assassinated by a group calling themselves the Invincibles, a splinter Fenian group. The result was a condemnation of the murders by Parnell as he wanted to avoid any suggestion of involvement (the *Times* forgeries in 1887 would famously try to implicate Parnell in the event), and a betrayal by one of their own men who ‘informed’. Five of the Invincibles were hanged in Kilmainham Jail and popular national sentiment in the country had held the view that the men were brave patriots betrayed by a hated informer. It was a politically delicate subject to tackle and it was perhaps for this reason that O'Connor decided to attempt a dramatisation of it. He drafted a play and Hunt joined him as collaborator in order to put ‘real theatrical bones into my dramatised history’. The result of their efforts was a seven-scene play that was first performed in the Abbey on 18 October 1937.

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75 Matthews, *Voices*, 403-4, fn. 46.
76 O’Connor, *My Father’s Son*, 172.
78 O’Connor, *My Father’s Son*, 173.
The play opens to a pub scene of squabbling and raillery between various Fenian factions, language that the Abbey audience would have been familiar with and comfortable listening to. The Invincibles, after their secret meeting in the pub, eventually receive their orders from their headquarters to kill Forster, the then Chief Secretary. In Scene Two, amid complaints of Parnell’s negotiations with the British Liberal government, they express fears that the possibility of an Irish republic will dissipate. They had failed in the previous six months to assassinate Forster and Carey wants to forget it in light of Cavendish (who was better liked) taking over as Chief Secretary. When they hear the news that a twelve-year-old child has been killed by a soldier’s bayonet as they dispersed a street-crowd celebrating Parnell’s release from Kilmainham Jail, they angrily decide to carry out the assassination and the scene finishes with the words that ‘Steel they gave us, and steel we’ll give them back’. In the opening lines of the next scene, set in a pub near the park, the Abbey audience listens to posturing by an English fisherman that the Irish as a race ‘deserve nothing but drowning’. Cavendish and Burke have been killed and the scene focuses on revealing the men’s uncertainty before committing the deed and their explanations for committing the assassinations; their remorse and panic is made clear. In Scene Four, the audience learns that the Church, the Fenians, and Parnell have strongly condemned the murders. Brady and Tim Kelly are very disillusioned in Scene Five in Brady’s sitting room. Carey drops in and all three men are subsequently arrested. In Scene Six, through the clever trickery of Inspector Mallon, Carey dramatically transforms himself into an informer. A year passes and the final scene of the play is set in Brady and Carey’s lonely jail cells. The condemned men await their execution in the morning while outside silent crowds have gathered. Brady is bitter and defiant

and dismisses the Irish for their hypocrisy. After talking to a nun (the sister of one of the assassinated men, Burke), Brady repents and begs for forgiveness. Tim Kelly’s voice in a nearby cell begins singing the hymn ‘Hail, Queen of Heaven’ and the whole prison chorus joins in. Carey shouts to be hanged with the others (in real life, Carey was shot dead while ship-bound for Australia). While listening to the hymn, Brady changes his mind again and reasserts that his actions were right; he sadly comments that it is Ireland’s shame, ‘Poor Ireland with slavery in her blood’; he forgives Ireland, Tim continues singing and the play ends.

The staging of this episode in Irish history generated quite a bit of interest in Dublin circles and rumours on the opening night of a protest demonstration circulated. The appearance of Maud Gonne in the foyer only added to the rumour. Peter Kavanagh noted a ‘tense and eager’ atmosphere and Joseph Holloway recorded ‘an air of eagerness and excitement’. No such protest materialised. The reaction of the critics was mixed. In his positive review, Kavanagh praised the acting, stage-settings, the historiography and the portrayal of Carey; one could now understand why he turned himself into an informer: ‘his weakness is vanity and a foolish pride’. Kavanagh also admired the ‘extraordinary emotional appeal of the play’, illustrated by the fact that ‘the audience joined ... in singing [the hymn].

David Sears’ review, appearing a day after Kavanagh’s, had an almost complete opposite reaction. Sears took issue with the historiography: ‘When one indicts a nation it is hardly fair to leave the case for the defence to be presented mainly through the clowning of two fools in a public-house bar’ (a reference to two local Fenians whose reactions are idiotic and who serve as a comedic element in the fourth scene). While praising the acting and

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80 Ibid., 74.
81 Kavanagh, Peter, Review of The Invincibles, The Irish Press (19 October 1937), 6; Hogan & O’Neill, Joseph Holloway’s Irish Theatre, 75.
82 Kavanagh, Ibid., 6.
stage-setting, Sears admired the final scene where ‘not even the rather irrelevant community singing which retards the action towards the end could spoil it’. The very brief *Irish Times* review noticeably commended only the acting and production. Holloway dismissed it as the ‘crudest of melodramas ... cheers rang out from the audience. It was evidently more impressed than I was by the crude picture they had just seen limned of a very painful episode in our country’s history’. General public interest in the dramatic piece and its subject matter was further reflected in the various references to it in the ‘Irishman’s Diary’ and letters page in the *Irish Times* during the staging of the play. In addition, Robinson’s public support of criticism of O’Connor and Hunt by the Actors’ Guild (for dramatising a subject painful to the Invincibles’ relatives) nearly resulted in his being removed from the board. A revival was planned for the Abbey festival in 1938 but Robinson succeeded in getting it dropped; it was subsequently reproduced in the Gaiety Theatre in February 1943 by Louis D’Alton.

O’Connor and Hunt’s attempt to open up national memory of the historical event is an interesting effort, but it does result in the play being more dramatised history than theatrical creativity. It suffers from a lack of economy in its melodramatic language, and O’Connor’s aim to provide background social and political context produces wearisome dialogue in places. It would seem that part of O’Connor’s intention was to use the events of history to illustrate the pattern of repetition in Irish social conditions. This is particularly evident when the piece refers to the role of the Church in Irish politics and a perceived passive acquiescence of Irish people to

83 Sears, David, Review of *The Invincibles*, *Irish Independent* (20 October 1937), 5.
84 Anon, Review of *The Invincibles*, *The Irish Times* (26 October 1937), 5.
86 *The Irish Times* (21, 22, 26 October 1937).
87 See O’Connor, *My Father’s Son*, 174; O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Evelyn Bowen (Dublin: August 1938), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
dominant social forces. The frequent references in the play to Irish people’s fear of words could also be a rebuke at the prevailing strict censorial conditions that writers had to operate within during the thirties. However, the narrative of the play is carefully aligned with popular nationalist sentiment and it would seem that O’Connor and Hunt were directing the play at a particular audience, the dominant Catholic nationalist establishment. Scene one posits local political bickering and ineffectual republicanism against patriotic action. The second scene paints a picture of confusion and division within The Invincibles and a rather sympathetic and credible portrait of the men is drawn. This splinter Fenian group is not displayed as simply a bloodthirsty violent faction and their final incentive for committing the murders is represented as a protective reaction to English force. Nationalist sentiment within the Abbey’s audience would have fully approved of this portrayal, and this fortifies the impression that O’Connor and Hunt were consciously attempting to provide the political context of the murders and delineate the rationale behind them. O’Connor and Hunt switched the focus of the drama in the final two scenes, from the assassinations to the attitude within Irish society towards an informer.

This concern with words is a constant one in Irish writing during the censored thirties and forties. Sean O’Faolain, for example, also criticized the constrictions placed on writers by the state: ‘The trouble is that writers deal in words, and words convey ideas, and only a really imaginative and courageous Government will encourage ideas’, O’Faolain, Sean, ‘Sense and Nonsense in Poetry’, The Bell, 7:2 (November 1943), 96.

The pointed references to ‘steel’ at the end of the scene suggests O’Connor’s own sympathy for the men if one considers a Joycean influence. In the ‘Eumaeus’ chapter in Ulysses, while Stephen and Bloom sit in the cabmans’ shelter (owned by Skin-the-Goat, James Fitzharris, who allegedly drove the decoy car for the Invincibles), Bloom admits to, as he muses over Fitzharris’ involvement in the episode, having ‘a certain kind of admiration for a man who had actually brandished a knife, cold steel, with the courage of his political convictions’, Joyce, James, Ulysses (1922; repr. London: Penguin, 2000), 744.

where Carey is cast as the duped informer are the most powerful in the play. They bring the action to an emotional climax and conservative social order is reassuringly restored. Carey as the villain would have been comfortably received by most of the Abbey audience in the 1930s. But the play also displays a criticism of nationalism and the Irish nation. O’Connor and Hunt attempted to portray a basic dichotomy between outside and inside the jail cell, between nationalist ideology and individual experience. National memory might well have blamed the informer for the Invincibles’ executions but the play, while not condoning, explicates Carey’s actions and interjects the point that these simple men had already been abandoned by the nationalist movement and the public at large. O’Connor and Hunt’s play does not indict the Invincibles. Instead, questions as to what constitutes ‘heroism’ in nationalist rhetoric and in Irish society are confrontationally posed throughout the drama.

Just a few months after the Abbey production, O’Connor and Hunt’s next and final collaboration was Moses’ Rock, which was staged on 28 February 1938. The focus again was on Irish history and this time the political downfall and death of Charles Stewart Parnell serves as a structuring device for the plot. It is a three-act play and each act is connected to important events during this time – the splitting of the Irish Parliamentary Party, Parnell’s by-election defeats, and his funeral. Act 1 takes place in December 1890 and is set in Cady O’Leary’s house, a wealthy Catholic butter merchant. Ned Hegarty has just been released from prison and Cady, Jer Coughlan (his lawyer) and Dr. Jackson, the local intellectual, are celebrating off-stage. Their toasts to Parnell and the Irish Republic are listened to by three old women – Shuvaun (Cady’s mother), Biddy and Sorry – and the maid, Nellie. Ned makes a speech proclaiming their steadfast faith in Parnell and the future liberation of their country.
Kate, Cady’s sister, shuts the door on them at this point and, reminiscent of Joyce’s Dante, virulently denounces Parnell as the ‘damned adulterer’. Kate’s betrothed died in the 1867 Fenian rebellion and she is still bitter. Joan, Cady’s daughter, appears and the audience learns that both Ned and an English officer, Lieutenant Fortescue, are her suitors. When Ned discovers that Jer also wants to marry Joan he loyally decides to postpone his proposal for six months, as both Ned and Jer are convinced that Home Rule is within their grasp and this takes priority. In contrast to Ned and Jer, Fortescue is actively pursuing Joan. Her father is only interested in making a prosperous ‘match’ and pays scant attention to her. They learn the party has split, ‘split like Moses’ Rock’, and the Act finishes with Kate crying over the split.

Act 2 is set in the summer of 1891; Ned is still supporting Parnell and believing that the people will too. Jer and his brother, Father Henry, are supporting the Church’s anti-Parnellite stance, Cady is playing both sides and Joan is becoming disillusioned and starting to have real doubts about the country. Cork, to her mind, is changing from a lovely, beautiful place into something ‘mean, ugly, sordid’; she wants to go to Parnell’s campaign meetings but both Cady and Ned refuse to take her. Ned and Jer disagree bitterly about the political situation and both then propose to Joan: she refuses them. When Jer reveals that Fortescue was also named as a co-respondent in a divorce case, she agrees to marry Jer. Cady then declares his loyalty to the anti-Parnellites and the Act finishes with Kate crying again. Act 3 is set in October 1891, the day after Parnell’s funeral and the day before Joan’s wedding to Jer. Cady is once more only concerned with backing ‘the right horse’, he provides patriarchal advice to Joan about her wifely duties and considers running in the elections for ‘the sake of Ireland’. Ned is deeply regretful of losing Joan, his ‘one great chance’, and Joan has become bitter and angry with the Irish men in her life:
JER: I didn’t ask for the split.

JOAN: Of course you asked for it. You and Ned and all the others. All the pretence is broken down at last, and you can indulge all the meanness of your mean little souls, spitting in your neighbour’s fence, stealing his trade, plotting and intriguing against him, and all in the name of Ireland and religion.\(^1\)

By the end of the final act, the split produces a more positive effect on characters such as Kate and Jackson. The continual crying is cathartic for Kate and releases deep-seated negative emotions. She softens in her attitude towards everything. As Joan is so unhappy about marrying Jer, Kate urges Joan to meet with Fortescue who has called to see her one last time before his regiment leaves for India; Joan elopes with the English officer. Jackson, the emotionally reserved intellectual type, whose keen insight is capable of predicting future political developments, also begins to open up and reveals a long-hidden love for Joan (he chases after Joan but he has left it too late).\(^2\) Cady, upon learning of Joan’s flight, is only concerned about the effect on himself; Jer is furious and the play ends with Kate emotionally declaring that ‘this town is no place for the young. All that is young and beautiful is leaving Ireland now, like seagulls flying into the dark. It’s a poor divided country we’ll be from this night on’.\(^3\)

O’Connor’s second attempt at dramatising Irish history produces a better play. Rather than depicting the historical event, he focuses less on the actual facts and imagines instead how it might have affected an Irish middle-class Catholic family. This results in the second play having more creative dialogue, better characterisation, tighter scene arrangement and a more imaginative plot. The main instances of the

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\(^1\) O’Connor, Frank & Hugh Hunt [1938], in Ruth Sherry (ed. and intro.), *Moses’ Rock* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1983), 100-1.

\(^2\) The only manuscript of the play that has survived stops at this point. Hugh Hunt reconstructed the ending of the play for Sherry’s edition.

\(^3\) Sherry, *Moses’ Rock*, 110.
historical crisis – the Catholic Church’s reaction, the party splitting, the by-election campaign meetings and Parnell’s funeral – take place off-stage and the on-stage action is more of a reaction to these events. Like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Ireland is once more personified as a woman, this time through the figure of Joan. Allegorical readings of her three suitors suggest themselves. Ned is the idealistic pro-Parnellite faction, Jer adopts the Church’s anti-Parnellite stance and Fortescue represents the British Empire. The minor female characters, apart from Shuvaun, also serve as little more than stock figurations of these divisions. (While she is a minor character, Shuvaun signifies O’Connor’s recurrent attempt in the 1930s-40s to symbolically represent the surviving fragmented remains of a traumatised past, the Great Famine in this instance, and the dying out of traditional Gaelic culture.) In the play, the destruction of Ned and Jer’s friendship, their fighting and ensuing rivalry for Joan results in neither side winning her hand; instead Joan leaves with the English officer for colonised India. Ireland has been firmly re-attached to its colonial status.

Like one of O’Connor’s prominent short-story themes, the play also questions the personal cost of political involvement. Ned neglected everything, including his domestic happiness, in the pursuit of his political idealism and is left at the end with only regrets; Kate allowed the personal consequences of political action to ensnare her in bitterness and, despite her redemption over twenty years later, is left at the end as a rather lonely woman; Parnell lost his life. Yet O’Connor is careful in the play to avoid condemning Parnell’s actions or Irish nationalism. The rather sympathetic portrait of Ned, Kate’s late praise of the Fenian movement, Joan’s desire to attend Parnell’s monster meetings, her disinterest in marrying Jer and ultimate disregard for Fortescue being named as co-respondent in a divorce case, would seem to indicate O’Connor’s own conclusions on the historical event. Shuvaun’s recitation of part of a ‘Lament for
Art O’Leary’ as Kate cries indicates O’Connor situating the downfall of Parnell as an unjustifiable tragic episode in Irish history. Jer and Cady’s depiction as self-interested middle-class opportunists, and their expedient obedience to the Church’s position, reveals instead O’Connor’s indictment of those who rejected Parnell. The play stages his retrospective regret at the political repercussions and also highlights his thoughts on similarly recurring trends in the 1930s. Passive obedience towards Catholic Church dictates, a spectator-ship role among Irish intellectuals in politics and society, and those who use political events as a pawn in their own personal power battles, are similarly indicted. Interestingly, the play was revived in the Abbey in 1994 and it was positively reviewed in terms of its apt resonances to the issues of the 1990s.94

Critical reaction to the staging of the play in 1938 was generally favourable. The *Irish Press* review praised the acting and character portrayal, and declared that ‘the ground around Parnell’s feet is scraped inquiringly, as in “The Invincibles,” less they be of clay … there is bitterness in the play. But there is also entertainment’.95 David Sears pronounced it ‘sound and wise … searching in its analysis of national and personal emotions … comprehensive in its imaginative span’.96 In contrast to these opinions, a review of the 1983 publication described it as a ‘middle-class Cork City soap opera’. The reviewer also queried the relevance of the Irish party split to ‘Moses cleaving of the rock whence water and salvation flow’ and dismissed it as a ‘hazy symbol’.97 A possible explication of O’Connor’s title is, as mentioned earlier, connected to a Joycean influence at work. Literary Parnellism was well established by the time O’Connor wrote the play. The literary connection between Moses and Parnell was also established, and a paralleling between the Jews and the Irish in *Ulysses* is

97 Griffin, Christopher, ‘The Betrayal of Parnell’, *Irish Literary Supplement*, 3 (Fall 1984), 40.
well known. In the bible, in the Old Testament’s ‘Book of Numbers’, as Moses was about to strike the rock, he said, ‘Listen, you rebels, shall we bring water for you out of this rock?’ (20.10). ‘The Lord’, angered by Moses’ words as he did not give due recognition to his Holy work, does not allow Moses to lead the people into the Promised Land (20.12). It was in this context that Joyce paralleled Moses with Parnell in *Ulysses*. In ‘Aeolus’, J.J. Molloy points out that Moses died before getting to the land of promise, similar to Parnell’s failure to lead the Irish to Home Rule and his subsequent death, and also similar to Bloom’s status as a wanderer and failure to be socially accepted in Dublin, or as an Irish citizen in the ‘Cyclops’ chapter. Parnell is reincarnated in Bloom even more concretely in ‘Eumaeus’. In the ‘Cyclops’ chapter, the Citizen calls Bloom a new apostle to the gentiles as well as the new Messiah for Ireland, thus linking Bloom to both Moses and Parnell. O’Connor wanted to explore nationalist sensitivities in his trilogy and it would appear that Joyce’s Citizen imparted the material: the Citizen, while linking Moses with Parnell, also mentions the Invincibles and makes reference to ‘the men of sixtyseven’ – O’Connor’s subject matter for his next play, *Time’s Pocket*. Other minor details in these *Ulysses* chapters – the incorrect historical year of the Phoenix Park murders (O’Connor also takes creative liberties with historical dates⁹⁸), a brass and reed band playing, the singing of ‘A Nation Once Again’, Professor MacHugh’s reference to the death of the imagination, Bloom’s brand of Parnellism, the vulgar name-calling of Kitty O’Shea, and Bloom’s depiction of political quarrels as largely a question of money, greed and jealously – all reappear in different ways in *Moses’ Rock*. Despite the mature condemnations of Joyce in O’Connor’s literary criticism, the analogous crossover of

ideas would seem to reinforce the impression that *Ulysses* was a fruitful source of inspiration for the inexperienced dramatist in the 1930s.

O’Connor’s last play for the planned historical trilogy, as well as his final Abbey play, was *Time’s Pocket*. Hunt had left the theatre by this stage so O’Connor went ahead with it by himself. Staged on 26 December 1938, it turned out to be the play that attracted the most public attention for him. While O’Connor had described *Moses’ Rock* in his letters as a ‘sequel’ to *The Invincibles*, chronologically his trilogy does not follow any linear historical narrative as *Time’s Pocket* returns to 1867, to the time of the failed ‘physical-force’ Fenian uprising. Apart from the Citizen’s referral to it in ‘Cyclops’, another possible reason for O’Connor’s return to the 1867 rebellion might be because the Fenian movement contributed in the 1870s to a social and political shift away from deference to the state and its institutions and towards a more assertive and confident nationalism ... it was this that enabled the political assertion of the home rule and land war years of the 1880s\(^99\).

Moreover, as Seamus Deane has pointed out, the debates of the post-independence period had their origins in the 1870s, due to the long-standing effects of the late nineteenth-century ‘Devotional Revolution’ among the Catholic beneficiaries of the Land War [precipitated by the First Vatican Council’s identification of ‘modernism’ as the enemy], whose descendants also became the chief beneficiaries of the Irish revolution ... By the 1920s, nationalism had begun to yield [almost] entirely to this anti-modernist Catholicism.\(^100\)

O’Connor’s understanding of this would seem to be evident from the prominence given to the Church’s position in the play. The Catholic Church’s hostility towards the Fenian movement, and its influence in social and political affairs, is a theme that

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O’Connor focuses on in the play; this also allowed him to use the historical event as a comparative vehicle for his thoughts on the Church in the 1930s. The play’s title itself indicates a place where nothing has changed, life has continued in the same patterned, timeless way in this ‘pocket’ of the world. Another possible reason for O’Connor’s thematic focus might have been because of the deliberate efforts by the Fianna Fáil government in the mid-late 30s to shift the party away from more extreme republican positions, as it strongly and legally distanced itself from the IRA. This might well have inspired O’Connor to try and provocatively stage what was considered a tragic physical-force republican episode in Irish history.

Two copies of the unpublished play have survived but both copies are missing most of the eighteen-page first act.101 The National Library of Ireland’s (NLI) copy claims an Act 6 but the four pages available appear to belong to the first act, and this is confirmed by the Mugar Memorial Library’s (MML) copy. What one can deduce from the surviving pages of Act 1 is that the action seems to be set in Abbey’s house (an old Irish-speaking woman similar to Shuvaun in Moses’ Rock) in an urban city setting. The Fenians are organising an armed rebellion; Sullivan (who is planning to marry Nance, Abbey’s daughter) is against the rebellion because the priests are, the local priest is more concerned with building an even bigger chapel than the one already in the town. Nance is a Fenian sympathiser and her brother, Patrick, is more interested in making money than in politics. Conlon, a wandering old poet, has been searching for forty years for a missing but very important Irish-language book, and some Irish soldiers in a British regiment are also in the house, including Daly, Fahy and Dargan. The available text for Act 1 is enough to indicate leading character development and some of the direction of the plot in the rest of the play.

101 O’Connor, Frank, Time’s Pocket [1938], Abbey Theatre Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS. 21426. The second copy is O’Connor, Frank, Time’s Pocket [1938], Boston University, The Frank O’Connor Collection, 990, Box 5, Folder 5.
In Act 2, frustration with the delays for the Fenian uprising are voiced, the Church’s criticisms are strongly revealed, and Dargan, as one of the leaders of the Fenians, is arrested. Set in Victoria Barracks, Abbey, Nance and Conlon have come to plead for Dargan’s life in Act 3. Sullivan is viciously smug towards them and obsequious towards the general and his wife. As she pleads for Dargan’s life, Nance confesses to being pregnant and Dargan is the father. Sullivan is furious but the general wife’s suggests he still marries her and she will ‘put in a word’ for Dargan so Nance agrees to the marriage for Dargan’s sake. Disillusionment is strongly expressed by Conlon and he is outraged at what has happened to the young couple. Transportation for life is Dargan’s sentence and Conlon vows to watch over Nance (mainly because of his guilty feelings for unwittingly revealing Dargan’s whereabouts before his arrest).

In Act 4, ten years later, old and haggard Nance is working in her kitchen and Conlon returns after wandering for two months, disappointed at the standard of spoken Irish he encountered on his travels and having learnt that the prisoners have gained early release. An old, sickly-looking man appears – Dargan has returned for Nance and meets his son– and the suffering both Nance and Dargan endured for the ten years is revealed. Sullivan enters and his name-calling convinces Nance to leave with Dargan as both her and Conlon’s ‘purgatory’ is over. Conlon returns to his poor hungry people in the hills, ‘with great tongues of Irish to understand my books’ (NLI, 62), where he will live out his dying days. A year later, in Act 5, the family is living in a bright, cheerful house, and mother and child are much happier in appearance and behaviour. Dargan’s nightly nightmares are started to recede but his mental health has deteriorated. Some of the harrowing treatment he received as a prisoner is relayed to his son. After having ignored Nance’s existence for the previous ten years, Patrick
arrives and wants the unmarried couple to break up because it is affecting his social standing. The climax of the play is Nance and Father Costello’s fiercely bitter argument over Nance and Dargan’s co-habitation. Costello uses very threatening, forceful language but Nance is not cowed and valiantly defends the man she loves. When Costello realises the condition of Dargan’s mental health, the NLI copy ends with his giving an apology to the couple. The MML copy is a half-page longer. In this ending, Nance refuses to be affected by the priest’s warnings of what will now happen to her – spiritually, socially and economically. She can deal with life because of Dargan’s love, she states, and asks the priest to leave so she can return to her true husband.

*Time’s Pocket* is a tragic romance set against the background of politics. Hunt’s absence from the transferal of O’Connor’s plot and characters into a useable script is evident. The play contains such an over-abundance of characters that their depictions are attenuated and they simply serve as representatives of various political and social clichéd machinations. While it is difficult to judge a play that has over half of the first act missing, Nance and Dargan’s love story is not fully believable and yet their story is compelling. It is for Nance and Dargan that the audience is asked to feel the most approbation, the young couple that is torn apart by forces outside their control, a tragic love story that has no satisfyingly happy ending. The materialistic Patrick, the Catholic Church, British imperialism, its prison system and its informers, are portrayed in an extremely unflattering light. A more sensitive treatment is given to Abbey and Conlon. Similar to his unstaged *Rodney’s Glory*, O’Connor is once more using this type of character to represent the collision between ancient Gaelic tradition and modern commercialism, as well as rebuke society’s growing disrespect for the artist.
O’Connor is also careful to insert details that align with the actual facts of the 1867 rebellion. This includes the Irish Republican Brotherhood’s emphasis on physical force nationalism as opposed to constitutional methods; the Church’s antagonism towards the secret oath-bound society; the poor socio-economic background of a majority of the Fenians; the influence of French socialist thought on the Fenians’ ideological thinking; the infiltration of the Fenians into British regiments, the betrayal of this and the authorities’ arrest of some of the men before the rising ever took place; the delays on setting a date for it; the harsh conditions of the prisons, and the early release of many prominent Fenians from prison.\textsuperscript{102} The historical details are casually interspersed throughout the drama but, like Moses’ Rock, O’Connor imaginatively dramatises the effect of this on the young Fenian couple. Again, O’Connor is exploring the personal consequences of physical-force political involvement and the price that one could pay – a loss of one’s personal happiness, deep emotional suffering, a loss of one’s sanity or life – as well as the price the families have to pay too. Yet, it is not the Fenian movement that is impeached by O’Connor. The ongoing threat to indigenous traditional culture, the economic hardship that is endured by the Irish poor, mistreatment of Irish women by the ‘swaddies’, arrogant displays of imperial might, and the pain of forced emigration are also interpolated throughout the play as reasons for the planned uprising. Imperialism, the Catholic Church and the propertied classes are judged on their treatment of ‘ordinary’ people and are found guilty of maltreatment and a narrow-minded sexual morality (the ‘showdown’ over adultery was perhaps no coincidence considering O’Connor was by now opening living with Bowen). It is the latter two groups that are portrayed as unappreciative and hence unworthy of any heroic sacrifice made on their

behalf, and O'Connor provocatively stages the priest apologising near the end of the play to the co-habiting couple.

The play was not well-received. Andrew Malone denounced the first act, thought the play focused too much on the 'bold Fenian men' and the real drama of the play, Nance and Dargan's suffering, was completely lost. The critic put the play's failure down to O'Connor's 'amateurish' efforts. David Sears found it 'a rather dull, ambling play', reserved the majority of his criticism for the construction, plot and character development but was more positive about the final two acts: 'his theme is unusual, tragic, cruel, and inevitable, and he handles it in masterly fashion'. The most interesting reactions appeared in the New Year. O'Connor rather arrogantly defended the play and issued a statement to the *Irish Independent*, declaring that:

> the critics think only of 'construction' and 'action' and 'development' and 'psychology' – all of which have about as much to do with the theatre as the man in the moon … we had had two civil wars, and a whole generation of embittered men and women … and the Abbey had never even become aware of their existence. Now the Abbey is aware of them … there is something about a critic's job which makes him blind to the things that are happening in the world about him."

Sears rose to the bait and responded the next day in the same newspaper to O'Connor's 'pernicious nonsense … it is very disheartening to find crass ignorance enthroned in the very citadel of Irish drama'. To which O'Faolain weighted in with a lengthy letter in O'Connor's defense: 'Mr. O'Connor's play was reviewed with unusual acidity. The clichés with which the main reviews … were packed exasperated many of us. Mr. O'Connor assailed these clichés [*sic*] – the usual armoury of the textbook critic … Mr. O'Connor is right … I recommend Mr. Sears to take his little text-

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105 O'Connor, Frank, Letter to the Editor, *Irish Independent* (6 January 1939), 5. The reference to the second civil war perhaps could be explained by O'Connor describing the Parnell split as a civil war (*Moses' Rock*, 80).
book ... and gently deposit it in the Home for the Blind'.

A letter from an ‘onlooker’ on 12 January mocked the O’Connor and O’Faolain ‘scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours brigade’. Further readers’ letters appeared during the following days (14, 16, 18 January). The argument also moved to the Irish Times with many readers expressing their opinions on the squabble. Of these letters, the most humorous exchange took place between O’Connor, O’Faolain and Flann Ó’Brien. The unknown Ó’Brien satirised the other two writers’ depiction of themselves as artistic superiors to the critics, and they replied to this ‘personal abuse’ by questioning the identity of Ó’Brien. Ó’Brien responded by writing in letters from ‘Frank O’Connor’, which O’Connor himself had to bring to the editor’s attention on 16 January. The letters that followed were mostly readers’ reactions of delight and Ó’Brien writing in under other pseudonyms. Little was achieved by O’Connor in this episode, apart from sparking a very minor debate on the role of the critic versus the artist in Irish society; but importantly for Ó’Brien, who would soon become the Irish Times ‘Myles na gCopaleen’ columnist, it brought him attention from the Irish Times’ editor. After this reaction to his play, O’Connor submitted one more play, The Statue’s Daughter, to the Abbey board in 1940 for their consideration but it was bizarrely rejected on the grounds that it would offend Terence MacSwiney’s family (the play concerns a small-town committee that want to erect a statue in memory of a local War of Independence hero. A rumour spreads that he had a daughter born outside wedlock and the townspeople are throw into turmoil). The Abbey’s rejection of the play was simply symptomatic of O’Connor’s relationship with the theatre’s directors at this stage.

107 See The Irish Times (11, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 21, 30 January, 1 February 1939).
108 Matthews, Voices, 412, fn. 12.
Departure from the Abbey

Throughout the 1930s the boardroom was continually entangled in a fractious state of dealing with ongoing resignations, hirings and firings. The financial situation only added to the managerial problems. Further financial strain was placed on the depleted coffers by the employment of two secretaries – Eric Gorman for correspondence and Tom Robinson (Lennox’s brother) for accounts. Hayes and O’Connor were mainly responsible for the termination of Tom Robinson’s contract. Lennox’s casual indifference to the Abbey’s financial matters had also helped bring the theatre close to bankruptcy. Matters came to a head over Robinson’s blunder in relation to the hardware store next door. As O’Connor described it:

In a bad week we could lose a couple of hundred pounds, but in a good one we could rarely make more than twenty-five. All that could be changed if only we had a hundred extra seats, and the only hope of fitting these in was to buy the hardware store next door. I explained to the Board that if the proprietors of the hardware store knew that instead of their going into bankruptcy, the theatre was proposing to buy them out, they would raise the price beyond anything we could afford to borrow from the bank. Then one evening I went to a Board meeting and saw Higgins with a long face. Robinson had sent the stage carpenter round to the hardware store to enquire the price.¹⁰⁹

Furious, O’Connor pushed through a motion in December 1935 which appointed Hunt as the new manager for the next two years, but his actions deprived Robinson of his only source of income as well as his only real source of influence. The man who had given O’Connor his first real job as public librarian had now been sacked by O’Connor and the guilt was too much to handle. It resulted in O’Connor obtaining for Robinson the job of Director of the Abbey School of Acting (even though he had pressed for the appointment of Shelah Richards a few days before). Robinson’s continual drinking was the reason behind his failure to succeed in this new position, and the School of Acting declined. In 1936 the board had redistributed the company

¹⁰⁹ O’Connor, My Father’s Son, 167.
shares and had effectively stripped Robinson of the controlling interest that he would have had after Yeats’s death. The long-term consequences of this minor skirmish was a hardening of Robinson’s dislike for the young writer, which left O’Connor in a more precarious position within the boardroom power struggles.

However, during this period the Abbey began to have new plays to produce and money in the bank. Shortly before the opening of O’Connor’s *In the Train* in 1937, Yeats told O’Connor that, while he had opposed many of his decisions, he knew they were necessary and offered him the position of managing director which O’Connor accepted (F.R. Higgins’ departure for America with the Abbey tour had made this offer possible). The following two years would find O’Connor embroiled in numerous disputes with the other directors over issues such as the style of acting that the Abbey should represent, Hunt’s production and directing of Yeats’s dramatic works, and the Abbey Festival in 1938. Alongside all of these disputes was an ongoing power battle within the greenroom. By 2 May 1939, O’Connor had resigned, pushed out by the rest of the directors. It was not the first time he had offered his resignation but this time it was unanimously accepted. His relationship with the Abbey board had deteriorated to the point where he had fallen out with every other member and his relationship with the Abbey ended on a bitter note. O’Connor had started to gradually withdraw from the boardroom meetings and intrigues since 1938 as his health was quite poor and he wanted more writing time. However, the dominant factor in his decision to resign was his complete frustration and annoyance with the other board members. Robinson and O’Connor had never succeeded in patching up their differences and unbeknownst to O’Connor, his position with the other board members had always been unstable. Their disgruntlement stemmed from O’Connor having such a free hand in the theatre, and he appeared to them to be a
bumptious Corkman who, finding himself by accident on the Abbey board of
directors, was attempting to dominate it. He was receiving all the publicity, and it
would seem to an outsider as if no one else mattered in the Abbey Theatre.\(^{110}\)

The board simply tolerated O'Connor up to the time of Yeats's death. Personal
differences aside, O'Connor's desire for a more critical and open approach to
contemporary social and political issues was in direct conflict with the rest of the
board members more prudent response and predisposition to comply with the nation's
increasing conservatism.

His ongoing love affair had also increased the board's animosity towards him.
As previously mentioned, O'Connor had offered his resignation over it. On June 3
1938, O'Connor sent a letter of resignation to Yeats but the response was as
O'Connor had secretly hoped. Yeats commented on the recent edition of *Lords and
Commons* and added that he had nothing to say about your resignation because I have
much to say on the subject in the Board meeting on Friday. Your book is beautiful
and moving.\(^{111}\) Yeats obviously dissuaded the board from accepting O'Connor's
resignation and the young writer received an 'official' letter in response to his	ended resignation:

The Board exceedingly regret the receipt of your letter ... The Directors are
sorry that you have taken this action in view of your invaluable service to the
Theatre during the years when you have been a member of the Board ... The
Directors, therefore, unanimously ask that you would reconsider your decision ...
If, however, you are unable to reconsider [sic] your position, the Board will
leave your seat vacant and as you are still a Member of the Society, the Directors
wish to be in a position to co-opt you as a Member of the Board at any time you
think fit.\(^{112}\)


\(^{111}\) Letter from Yeats to O'Connor, Matthews, *Voices*, 142.

\(^{112}\) Yeats, William Butler, Letter to Frank O'Connor (13 June 1938), National Theatre Society, Harriet
O'Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
Considering the resentment already felt by various members toward O’Connor, it is
doubtful that this letter expressed the true sentiments of the directors. It is more likely
that Yeats dictated the letter after the Friday board meeting. O’Connor reconsidered
and turned his attention to the upcoming Abbey Festival.

Managerial skirmishes continued to break out over the following few months
and ‘somewhat disillusioned by the bickering and intransigence of the board now that
Yeats – a sick man – had left for the South of France and O’Connor had largely
withdrawn, Hunt resigned in November 1938. O’Connor proposed Denis Johnston
to take Hunt’s place as play director but it was not to be. Louis D’Alton was preferred
and after his resignation in May 1939, Frank Dermody was appointed to the position.
It would appear that a token offer was made to Johnston but it was refused. In a letter
to Johnston, O’Connor wrote about how furious he was to discover the salary that the
Abbey had proposed to pay Johnston. At a later date, after O’Connor’s resignation,
he referred to the situation again:

The fact of the matter is, I’m afraid the original offer was only a blind, to satisfy
me – as you know, it was only by accident that I discovered about the salary and
lit out on them ... I proposed you, Yeats proposed Higgins. Yeats of course got
his way, being an old bully and intriguer, and succeeded in keeping me away
from the meeting at which the appointment was discussed.

Yeats’s reason for refusing to accept Johnston would appear to be on the grounds that
his ideas would have posed a strong opposition to Yeats’s vision of what the Abbey

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114 O’Donovan, Michael, Letter to Denis Johnston (Wicklow: 1938), Denis Johnston Papers, Trinity
College, Dublin, Ms 10066/287/2285. The original idea to propose Johnston seems to have come from
O’Faolain. See: O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Sean O’Faolain (Dublin: 22/23 August 1938), Harriet
O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
115 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Denis Johnston (Wicklow: 1939), Denis Johnston Papers, Trinity
College, Dublin, Ms. 10066/287/2287.
should stand for.\textsuperscript{116} Yeats returning the position of managing director to Higgins when he returned from America also irretrievably weakened O’Connor’s position of influence (Yeats’s close friendship with Higgins and O’Connor’s gradual withdrawal from board meetings might have been behind this decision).\textsuperscript{117} While it is difficult to fathom the exact reasoning behind Yeats’s various manoeuvres, his close friendship with Higgins, apprehensions over Robinson’s inefficiency, and O’Connor’s gradual withdrawal would have certainly been behind his thoughts on the matter. Subsequent actions by the other directors were a culmination of attempts to push O’Connor out of the Abbey, which included a failure to invite O’Connor to the farewell dinner given for Tanya Moiseiwitsch, the stage designer.\textsuperscript{118} Yeats’s death on 28 January 1939 was a time of deep grief for O’Connor as, despite his quarrels with Yeats over Abbey policies, he had had the greatest of literary respect for Yeats and had looked upon him as a father-figure. It also meant that O’Connor no longer had the support of a formidable ally on the board. It set the stage for their imminent removal of O’Connor from the board, by removing his responsibilities, gradually declining to invite him to important theatre social functions, and setting in motion a change in the Articles of Association which would empower them to dismiss a director.

\textsuperscript{116} Hunt, \textit{The Abbey: Ireland’s National Theatre}, 161. O’Connor would later recall in his autobiography that Yeats once said to him that, ‘You and George have exactly the same admiration for Denis Johnston. George made me listen to a radio programme of his on the Siege of Derry, and it was a masterpiece. But I can’t help thinking he is a young man who would want his own way.’ O’Connor, \textit{My Father’s Son}, 188.

\textsuperscript{117} In a letter to Ernest Blythe, Yeats suggests the future appointment of Higgins as Manager as ‘Before the company went to America Higgins was constantly in the office directing Gorman in his work and supervising the accounts; he was, in fact, doing the work of a manager. Lennox is now constantly in the office directing Gorman. I think he should be put back in the school of acting and direct that. I suggest that for a period of six months beginning with Hunt’s departure Higgins be made Manager with a salary.’ Earnest de Blaghbd Papers, National Library of Ireland, Ms. 20,715. O’Connor’s later amusement on the matter is reflected in his comment that he did not believe that the six months would mean just that, ‘for I knew that an Irishman approaches a job in the spirit of the marriage service – “till death do us part”. But even I never guessed that not only had Higgins dug himself in for life, but that his successor would do the same, and that twenty years later the non-existent job would still be flourishing’, O’Connor, \textit{My Father’s Son}, 194.

\textsuperscript{118} This did bother O’Connor as he felt it had been a deliberate snub on the part of the Board. See O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Sean O’Faolain (Wicklow: 1 May 1939), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.
When the only responsibility left to O’Connor was removed (editing the Arrow’s commemorative issue to Yeats), he knew it was time to go and he sent in his letter of resignation on 2 May 1939. His numerous letters to Sean O’Faolain and Denis Johnston in the subsequent months reveal O’Connor’s hurt and anger over his departure from the Abbey. He was also bitter as he felt betrayed by his old friend, Richard Hayes, who led the move to oust O’Connor. What did ensue was a brief battle by O’Connor over such issues as Abbey shares, access to Company Articles, a threat of legal proceedings and indirect accusations of embezzlement at some of the other directors. O’Connor engaged Denis Johnston in a detailed account of this fight in his letters, who dissuaded him from proceeding with the legal battle. He left the Abbey with a sense of loss and failure, he had not achieved his dream for Ireland’s national theatre and none of his theatrical theories had been realised. O’Connor’s memories of that departure have a ring of defeat about them:

What I did regret in 1939 was leaving the theatre of Yeats, and Synge and Lady Gregory ... The alternative for me was to remain on and fight the Board, not on the terms of the founders, but on the terms of the current members ... this kind of in-fighting and intrigue was something I could not carry on alone. Their terms were those of the Nationalist-Catholic establishment – Christmas pantomimes in Gaelic guying the ancient sagas that Yeats had restored, and enlivened with Blythe’s Gaelic versions of popular songs and vulgar farces. One by one they lost their great actors and replaced them with Irish speakers; one by one, as members of the Board died or resigned, they replaced these with civil servants and lesser party politicians.

O’Connor’s great affection for the Abbey and his sorrow at having to leave it are behind these words. In a letter to Sean O’Faolain shortly after his resignation, he

119 Sean O’Faolain, at one stage, remonstrated with Hayes over the shabby treatment of his friend. See Harmon, Maurice, Sean O’Faolain: A Life (London: Constable, 1994), 120. O’Connor’s biographer, James Matthews, intimates that it was a homosexual jealousy on Hayes’s part that provoked the disloyalty, Voices, 180, but this assertion is not mentioned in any of O’Connor’s own writings about that time.
120 O’Connor, Frank, Letters to Denis Johnston (Wicklow: 1930-1940), Trinity College, Dublin, Mss. 10066/287/2285-90.
121 O’Connor, My Father’s Son, 199.
wrote, 'you couldn’t work four years in a theatre unless you either fell in love with it or ignored it. I am in love with it, thats [sic] it'.

O’Connor might have resigned from the board on a bitter and angry note but he did not harbour a vengeful attitude for long. Less than two years later, he would walk out in protest at the unflattering caricature of Robinson in Louis D’Alton’s play, The Money Doesn’t Matter (10 March 1941). When F.R. Higgins died on 8 January of that year, O’Connor was genuinely upset when he heard the news: ‘Higgins [sic] death came as a bit of a shock after the news of Joyce’s death: he was an enemy but an enemy whose steps I knew so well that he might as well have been a friend, and it’s a little bit of oneself that died’. On a more positive note, his departure from the Abbey ignited his desire to develop an alternative Irish dramatic society. While this did not come into being, his letters and meeting with Sean O’Faolain and Denis Johnston on the matter helped spark the resurrection of the Dublin Drama League in the Gate Theatre (O’Connor’s last play, The Statue’s Daughter, was the opening play on 8 December 1941). The play was not well-received and thereafter O’Connor dropped his playwriting ambitions. While O’Connor’s plays had their faults, his dramatic imagination and skill with characterisation reveal that had he persisted with the genre, he had the ability to become a good dramatist. His main problem lay with structuring the plays into usable scripts. The letters and meeting with O’Faolain and Johnston also culminated in the growth of an idea for the beginning of a new periodical to challenge social and political notions of Ireland. This became known as the literary periodical, The Bell, which would become one of the most important journals in mid-twentieth-century Irish cultural debate.

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122 O’Connor, Frank, Letter to Sean O’Faolain (Wicklow: Late May 1939), Harriet O’Donovan Sheehy Collection, Dublin.

Afterword

Frank O'Connor played an important role in the cultural debates of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. Along with fellow writers such as Sean O'Faolain, he self-consciously adopted the stance of one of Ireland's most public intellectuals. O'Connor consistently engaged with the varying tensions that engulfed Irish life in the post-independence period. In addition, his creative writings provided a valuable record of political and social debate in the post-Civil War years. Censorship; the Irish language; the discourse of re-Gaelicisation; the role of the Catholic Church; Free State government policy; Ireland's national literature; republican politics; the importance of the reader; various social issues including poverty, illegitimacy and loveless marriage; and the development of Ireland's national theatre: O'Connor fearlessly attempted to play an active part in each of these areas over the course of his career. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that his name habitually features in critical studies of the post-independence period. However, O'Connor's reputation, and critical examinations of his work, has fallen into decline in recent decades. This decline is one of the aspects considered in this thesis.

This thesis returns O'Connor to the beginning of his career and provides a critical exploration of his endeavours in the first two decades of independence. O'Connor's involvement in the conflicts of the time is reassessed; the more neglected aspects of his oeuvre, across a variety of genres, are reappraised; his relationships with other members of the Irish intelligentsia are inspected; and new readings of some of his better-known work are proffered. The thesis also engages in extensive archival work and explores some manuscript collections which have previously received little
or no attention. The result is an exhaustive and original investigation into the early work of one of Ireland’s most distinguished and underrated men of letters.
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Frank O’Connor was the pseudonym that Michael O’Donovan mainly used when writing. He also wrote under his own name, under the Irish version of his name – Micheál Ó Dónabháin (usually without the fadas or acute accents), as Ben Mayo and occasionally, M.O D. All items listed in the Primary Sources sections were written solely under the name of Frank O’Connor unless otherwise stated.

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