

Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 2

March 2021

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Annie. "“Say It with Flowers”: Exile, Ecology, and Edna O’Brien," *Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2021, <https://scholarship.shu.edu/ciis/vol3/iss1/2>.

"Say It with Flowers": Exile, Ecology, and Edna O'Brien

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What kind of language do plants speak? This question, rooted in the conceptualisation of language as an attribute of all living and nonliving phenomena, has become "a key concern in the endeavour to reconsider plant life" (Gagliano et al. 12). After all, "many of our notions about the vegetal world hinge on what kinds of language(s) we ascribe to it" (Gagliano et al. 11). This question is no stranger to Edna O'Brien. In the wake of the publication of *The Love Object*, a fifty-year retrospective of her short stories, critics have been carefully attuned to how O'Brien attends to rural Irish landscapes (Daniel). O'Brien's attentiveness to plant life is particularly evident in "Old Wounds," a short story about two cousins' attempts to bridge the years of hostile silence that have been maintained by the two warring sides of their family. This story, set amongst the "warm green" counties that border Ireland's River Shannon, begins with one simple line: "we didn't have a flower garden" (O'Brien 507). From this moment on, O'Brien pursues a literary method wherein flowers play a significant expository role. "Old Wounds" protagonist, the younger of the two cousins, is an avid anthophile, for whom flowers, rather than words, most effectively communicate care, comfort, or loss. Flowers come to represent the cousins' respective ties to their native Ireland, and raise questions about nationhood, belonging, and exile. Crucially, when the silence between the cousins proves too painful to bridge, flowers prove capable of saying the unsayable. In this sense, "Old Wounds" explores the ecocritical possibility that flowers have a language of their own in an Irish context.

This possibility has been spurred by the relatively recent shift towards ecocriticism in Irish studies. In *Ireland and Ecocriticism: Literature, History, and*

Environmental Justice, credited as “the first truly interdisciplinary intervention into the burgeoning field of Irish ecological criticism,” Eóin Flannery explores how “the ‘value’ of land, and of landscape, has always been in evidence in Irish culture” (2). Flannery’s argument is informed by John C. Ryan’s endeavours to “lay bare the symbolic prominence of botanical life” in literature (7), an endeavour that is central to *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature*. This collection, which suggests that plants in Western prose generally function as “correlatives of human emotions,” explores “what it means to talk about the language of plants” (Ryan et al. 4, 15). Most notably, in its tenth chapter, “The Language of Flowers in Popular Culture and Botany,” Isabel Kranz explores the history of flower-based ideographic sign systems, illustrating how flowers “encode secret messages” to “convey a surplus of meaning” (19). This is a useful lens through which to read O’Brien’s work. Her short stories are densely populated with secret or illicit affairs, many of which are conducted in forests, meadows, or kitchen gardens. There have been some ecocritical inquiries into O’Brien’s novels in recent years, such as Antonella Trombatore’s article on natural identities in *In the Forest* and Jane Dougherty’s article on feminist intertextualities in *Down by the River*. However, there is still a notable absence of ecocritical analysis of O’Brien’s short stories specifically. Of the thirty-one stories in *The Love Object*, only four do not mention a landscape, a fruit, or a flower on the very first page. In a 2016 interview for the *Smithsonian Magazine*, O’Brien joked that she loves “flowers more than [she] love[s] people” (Rosenbaum). Why, therefore, have flowers been afforded such limited critical attention in O’Brien’s short stories thus far? Crucially, how do flowers convey this “surplus of meaning” in “Old Wounds,” and what kind of language do they have?

The answer lies, partially, in "Old Wounds" nameless narrator, the slightly younger of the two aged cousins. She relates the details of the family feud, describing how "for several years there was no communication between us at all" (O'Brien 507). Before she recounts this "falling out," however, she describes the "ravishing garden" of her cousin's side of the family (507). In her own front garden, she laments, they had merely "a few clumps of devil's pokers," but in her cousin's garden there were "tall festoons of pinkish-white roses, a long low border of glorious golden tulips, and red dahlias that, even in hot sun, exuded the coolness of velvet" (507). Here, she illustrates the discord between the two sides of the family by depicting their two very different gardens, rather than by explicating their differences. These opening lines therefore establish this literary method wherein flowers, instead of words, convey difference or disagreement.

This method is deliberate, particularly in O'Brien's short stories. As Heather Ingman asserts, although a novel may "contain incidental events," "everything in the short story has to be selected and controlled in preparation for the conclusion" (7). This certainly rings true of "Old Wounds." The two cousins do not rekindle their relationship deliberately; rather, after years of silence, they meet by chance "at a garden center" where flowers, before words, again communicate the tension between the two cousins (O'Brien 509). The two meet because O'Brien's protagonist, who now lives in London, has returned briefly to Ireland. Home on holiday, she visits the garden center to buy some broom shrubs for her nephew, where she encounters her cousin Edward "on a pathway between a line of funereal yew trees" (509). "My cousin," O'Brien's protagonist narrates, "saw me, then pretended not to and feigned interest in a huge tropical plant, behind which, he slid" (509). This is a crucial moment in the text. Edward, too "awkward" to address his estranged cousin, hides

behind a plant (509). This incident, set amongst these foreboding “funereal” trees, foreshadows an unlikely friendship in which so much between the cousins, from the pain of the initial separation to their failing health, their financial issues, and their funeral arrangements, will be left unsaid (509).

Much of O’Brien’s story is consumed by her protagonist’s attempts to interpret her cousin’s stoic silences. Edward, in his own words, is “not an emotional man” (516). As their friendship develops, it therefore falls to his cousin to “feel” the pitch of excitement in his voice when she telephones him; to “imagine” that he is brooding over his mother or his marriage; to “realise” when he is vexed with her; to “know” when he wants her to leave (517, 518, 520, 522). The cousins, in this sense, are alike. O’Brien’s protagonist also fails to bridge all of these embarrassed silences: “why don’t I throw my arms around him and say something? But I couldn’t. I simply couldn’t” (522). Instead, she substitutes language with flowers. Notably, early in her newfound friendship with Edward, she sends him flowers before an eye operation. In this instance, she uses flowers to communicate the care that she has not expressed in words. In this context, as Edward’s nurse notes, flowers demonstrate that “someone loves you” (509). This moment is echoed later in the story, when the two cousins sit together in the car during the third summer of their reunion. They sit silently, but the surrounding shrubs and hills slope towards them, “enfolding [them] in their friendliness” (517). Here, again, flowers serve as a substitute for the feelings that are too painful to communicate after so long a separation. This substitution is rooted in both cousins’ profound attachment to the surrounding landscape. As she establishes in the very first lines of the story, flowers are central to “Old Wounds”’ protagonist’s sense of home. However, she is only “home on holiday” (509). The cousins’ accidental meeting among those foreboding “funereal yew trees” foreshadows that,

for Edward, flowers will not always prove to be an adequate substitute for care. This is because the two cousins have very different relationships to their native Ireland.

Edward is intensely tied to his homestead. He knows every inch of its "mountain terrain" and has "a map of the entire lake inside his head" (509, 517). In this sense, Edward can be aligned with Kent Ryden's definition of an "essayist of place," who is both a cartographer and a conscientious chronicler of landscapes (Flannery 90). Such an "essayist," for Flannery, challenges anthropocentric representations of landscapes in Irish literature by emphasizing the "life of the place, exploring in depth its symbiotic relationship with his or her own life or with the lives of the residents of the place" (90). Edward's symbiotic relationship with his rural home is evident to his cousin. "He loved the place," O'Brien's protagonist narrates, and "said that people who did not know the country—did not know nature and did not stay close to it—could never understand the loss that they were feeling" (510). However, this is not a relationship that "Old Wounds" protagonist is privy to. Edward's description of those who "did not know nature and did not stay close to it," she feels, refers obliquely to her (510).

O'Brien's protagonist returns to Ireland only once a year. In the words of one of Edward's nurses, she has been "citified" (521). She is thus perceived, to a certain extent, as an exile, a recurring theme in O'Brien's work. Indeed, O'Brien herself, "having broken ties with her County Clare origins, her own family, and ultimately her Irish homeland" after the banning of her first novel, "looks with an exile's measuring eye" upon her short stories (Wigfall; Banville xiii). In "Shovel Kings," for example, Irishmen are exiled to England to find work installing electricity cables, due to the depletion of the Irish economy by the British. These men, a barman surmises, no longer "belong in England and ditto Ireland": "exile is in the mind and there's no cure

for that” (O’Brien 418). In “The Connor Girls,” comparatively, a young woman incurs the wrath of her family for marrying a man “who was not of our religion” (39). She concludes that by “choosing his world” she had departed from her own, and that by such choices “we gradually become exiles, until at last we are quite alone” (42). For Mary Shine Thompson, the ultimate “tragedy” in O’Brien’s work is “belonging nowhere—neither in unendurable exile nor in an increasingly alien Ireland.” This certainly rings true of “Old Wounds”’ protagonist, for whom Ireland has become almost unrecognizable. In one poignant scene, Edward takes her to visit the ruin of a cottage where a workman of her family had lived. As a child, she remembers she “had been dotingly in love with the man,” but now his house is in ruins, and all that remains is a “tumbledown porch with some overgrown stalks of geranium, their scarlet blooms prodigal in that godforsaken place” (515). Here again, she does not express her sense of loss in words, but in her observations about the local plants. Like the geraniums, she too has “overgrown”: she no longer recognizes the Ireland of her childhood.

It is Edward’s proximity to the land that O’Brien’s protagonist envies most. Indeed, ever since she first coveted her cousin’s “ravishing gardens,” she recalls that she admired her relatives “as being more stoic than us and truer to the hardships of the land” (507, 519). Her preoccupation with flowers, therefore, reflects her desire to share Edward’s symbiotic relationship with the landscape. Furthermore, her determination to demonstrate an affinity with her cousin’s “branch” of the family indicates that she desires to reverse some of the effects of her self-imposed exile and recapture the sense that she belongs in Ireland (519). Ironically, flowers come to represent the root of the irreversible division between the two cousins.

The climactic of "Old Wounds" is the death of Edward's wife, Grania. Edward's cousin, who is abroad when Grania passes, is unable to attend the funeral. Instead, she sends "roses by Interflora" (519). From this moment on, although O'Brien's protagonist claims she cannot tell what has caused it, a "chasm" has sprung up between the two cousins (520). "The friendliness," she narrates, "had gone from his voice when I rang, and his letters were formal now" (O'Brien 520). The root of the problem lies in the flowers. O'Brien's protagonist soon realizes that Edward is vexed with her for having missed his wife's funeral, and that flowers did not serve as an adequate substitute for her attendance (520). Furthermore, her decision to "send roses by Interflora" gestures toward a deeper rift in the cousins' relationship. Sending flowers from abroad merely serves as a reminder of her self-imposed exile. Moreover, O'Brien's allusion to Interflora subtly gestures toward her emigration as Interflora was sold to a U.S. wholesaler only three years before "Old Wounds" original publication, indicating the enduring link in O'Brien's short stories, as in much Irish fiction, between exile and America. In "The Rug," a mother dreams of being "remembered by relatives who had gone to America," and in "My Two Mothers," a mother grieves for a lost sweetheart in Brooklyn (92, 444). In Interflora's one-hundred-year history, its most famous slogan remains "say it with flowers," but this is exactly what "Old Wounds" protagonist has tried, and failed, to do. To "say it with flowers" has only reminded Edward of her own displacement and, from the moment of Grania's death, he treats the idea of being bought a flower "with disdain" (521).

Edward, with "the native's mistrust of the outsider," does not appear to have ever left Ireland (515). The farthest afield that he travels in "Old Wounds" is Dublin. Even in the garden center, he merely "feigns" interest in tropical plants (509). He is not interested in anything that appears foreign to him, instead prizing his own land.

Despite the fact that he is a “frugal man,” he recognizes that “too often in the Irish context both place and landscape have been abstracted into... relative financial value” (O’Brien 510; Flannery 91). His cousin recalls that “he had been offered princely sums for fields of his that bordered the lake; people were pestering him, developers and engaged couples, to sell them sites”, yet he had “refused resolutely” (O’Brien 518). His land cannot be abstracted into relative financial value because it is bound up with his sense of self. In this sense, despite his “disdain,” he can be characterized rather aptly by a local plant. Edward prizes his family graveyard above all else, which, tucked away on an “island in the broad stretch of the Shannon River,” is for him “hallowed ground” (507, 519). He cannot understand why his wife had ever “expressed a wish to be buried in a grave near the town” and laments that his cousin’s mother, too, “had chosen not to be buried there” (518). This graveyard is dominated by imposing limestone tombs “blotched with white lichen” (507-508). The earliest known Western glossary of flowers and their signification—a blueprint for flower-based ideographic systems—claims that “flowers speak a clear and intelligible language”. In this glossary, lichen represents solitude, just as Edward is an isolated man (6). In his later years, caring for his wife and estranged from his son, his cousin recognizes the “loneliness that he must have felt” (O’Brien 522). Ironically, therefore, despite Edward’s disdain, he shares one remaining similarity with his cousin: both identify with flowers.

Edward never admits, however, to feeling this loneliness. As established already, he is “not an emotional man,” and it often falls to his cousin to interpret their mutual silences (516). The cousins’ relationship can be characterized by the “few seconds of wordless confrontation” that follow one of their many disagreements (521). As signs, flowers fill the absence of words and even signify people, so that

when O'Brien's protagonist visits Edward in hospital, she laments that she "should have brought flowers," to which a nurse responds that she is "flower enough!" (521). Recent ecocritical theory has sought to attune itself to the language of flowers in order to "reflect upon the polyvocality of the world" (Gagliano et al. 2, 13), recognizing that "many of our notions about the vegetal world hinge on what kinds of language(s) we ascribe to it" (11). One such language, as defined in *The Language of Plants*, is "intrinsic language": the modes of articulation used by vegetal species to negotiate ecologically with their environments (11). Such modes of nonverbal signalling or sensation require the listener to cultivate "speaking without words" (Gagliano et al. 14) and resemble the signals that Edward's cousin must interpret in order to "feel" the pitch of excitement in his voice when she telephones him, or to "know" when he wants her to leave (O'Brien 517, 522). The tragic irony of "Old Wounds," therefore, is that the cousins' failure to bridge the gulf between them is a result of their mutual affinity with flowers. Edward dies with an unwritten letter in his pocket, and his cousin is plagued with regret about the words they left unsaid. He joins the ranks of husbands, wives and children buried in the family graveyard, all conclusively "silenced" (O'Brien 523). Even at his funeral, O'Brien's protagonist cannot find the words to express the loss that she feels, describing instead the surrounding wildflowers and the red roses that three young girls throw into Edward's grave (523). In the concluding lines of the story, she reflects that "there is no name" for her lingering regrets, nor for how she feels about the family graveyard. She cannot find the words. She can only describe the flowers.

"In our deepest moments we say the most inadequate things" (135). This line from O'Brien's "Sister Imelda" captures the heart of "Old Wounds." This story, whilst negotiating complex questions of belonging, isolation, and exile, ultimately

concerns what two cousins leave unsaid. Within this, “there is an endless reel of vivid imagery, rampant and uninhibited, like red rhododendrons, a fire that smoulders on” (Daniel). In “Old Wounds,” O’Brien makes a clear case for the communicative capacities of flowers. Indeed, O’Brien’s characters have much to learn from plants’ intrinsic language. Despite the fact that Edward dies with a blank “sheet of paper in the top pocket of his pajamas,” an “unwritten letter” that his cousin can only hope was going to be “an attempt at reconciliation,” one token of hope remains (525). Although the wildflowers had already expired on Edward’s newly dug grave, the undertaker promises that they will grow again, “as the birds scattered seeds all over and flowers of every description sprouted up” (524). This, ultimately, is the redemptive image that O’Brien leaves us with in “Old Wounds”: the promise of fresh flowers.

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