

“With a Knife at One’s
Throat”: Irish Terrorism
in *The O’Briens and
the O’Flahertys*

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Say, what shall counteract the selfish plottings
Of wretches, cold of heart, nor awed by fears
Of him, whose power directs th’ eternal justice?
Terror? or secret-sapping gold? The first
Heavy, but transient as the ills that cause it;
And to the virtuous patriot rendered light
By the necessities that gave it birth.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794)

ON Christmas Eve 1800, a drunken coachman whipped his horses through the streets of Paris. As the carriage proceeded rapidly down the rue Saint-Nicaise, a roadside bomb exploded. At least twelve people died, but the explosion of the “machine infernale,” the most serious of several assassination plots against Napoleon Bonaparte, left the Consul shaken but unharmed. Ten days after the explosion, two royalists involved with the plot were

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hanged. Meanwhile, a British satirist, referring to the one hundred and thirty people who were deemed guilty without any proof and exiled without trial, noted:

The Jacobins (for, as related,
This party the brave Consul hated),
Were mark'd for this assassination,
And many suffer'd transportation.¹

Long planned and well financed (partly by the British government), the plot of the rue Saint-Nicaise was ultimately foiled by music. Napoleon had been hurrying to the Paris premiere of Franz Joseph Haydn's oratorio *Die Schöpfung* (*The Creation*), and the carriage's speed unnerved the conspirators, delaying the bomb's detonation. *Die Schöpfung*, Haydn's Miltonic interpretation of the biblical cosmogony, begins with a musical representation of unresolved tumult but moves quickly to celebrate God's creation of matter out of chaos. The oratorio ends with a triumphant choral fugue—a form of contrapuntal interweaving—that extols God's handiwork and musically underscores the idea of the universe as harmonious, rational, and beautiful: a dismissal of or deliberate rebuke to the chaos of its historical moment and to the violence spreading throughout Europe from which, apparently, no one was immune.²

In *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827), Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, uses the plot of the rue Saint-Nicaise as the backdrop for the novel's final chapter, which takes place during *Die Schöpfung*'s premiere. As the orchestra plays the overture, "The Representation of Chaos," news of the bombing spreads among the gallery, followed by the arrival of the Consul himself. Shortly thereafter the novel's protagonist, Murrough O'Brien, last seen escaping from an Irish prison six years ago, appears in a box nearby. Murrough is first introduced in the novel as

¹ [William Combe], *The Life of Napoleon, a Hudibrastic Poem in Fifteen Cantos, by Doctor Syntax* (London: T. Tegg, 1815), p. 117.

² Nicholas Temperley observes that "*The Creation* presents a comfortably optimistic picture of the world and of humanity's place in it" (Temperley, *Haydn: "The Creation"* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991], p. 12), while Bruce C. MacIntyre notes that the oratorio was a "musical escape" from the social and political upheavals of the 1790s (MacIntyre, *Haydn: "The Creation"* [New York: Schirmer Books, 1998], p. 32).

a revenant to Ireland after years of exile. Equipped only with rusty Gaelic and impractical idealism, he continually propels himself into situations, both political and amorous, from which he requires constant rescue. By the novel's end he is a radical pamphleteer accused of both murder and treason, fleeing Ireland only to be imprisoned in France near the end of the Reign of Terror. The gossiping audience at the theater informs the reader that Murrough escaped the guillotine following the Thermidorian Reaction in July 1794 and embraced constitutional liberalism until politics forced him to turn to soldiering instead, where his prowess on the battlefield caught Napoleon's eye. Accompanying O'Brien to the premiere is his cousin and wife, Beavoin O'Flaherty, a former nun who had spent the majority of the novel flitting around incognito, repeatedly rescuing the hapless O'Brien from danger. The couple has acquired fame and influence as émigrés, but the reader is informed that their opposition to Napoleon's increasing authoritarianism means that their future in France will likely be as precarious as their past in Ireland.

This abrupt shift to Paris, Haydn, and Napoleon seems a peculiar ending for a novel that, when it was first published, was largely critiqued for its depictions of Anglo-Irish aristocratic hijinks.³ *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* does spend considerable time depicting the profligate, pseudo-cosmopolitan world of Ascendancy Ireland, but, as the final scene at the opera demonstrates, gossip is equally useful as a gauge of

³ Many reviewers mentioned the politics of *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* but devoted more time to its depictions of a dissolute aristocracy. A review in *The London Literary Gazette* pays little attention to the novel's politics and instead lambasts its depiction of high society, remarking that the novel "may be so [a national tale], inasmuch as it may be a true picture of the profligate part of a profligate coterie in high life" ([Anon.], rev. of *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, *Literary Gazette*, 563 [1827], 707). Conversely, even when the politically ambitious nature of Morgan's writing is touched upon, it is considered tainted by her interest in "feminine" things: "And we should have quite as high a notion of the political information and talent of our authoress, if we were not quite so frequently treated with a lecture on liberty apropos of lace-flounces" ([Anon.], "National Tales of Ireland," *Westminster Review*, 9 [1828], 424). Bolstering the novel's identification with the silver-fork genre, Julia M. Wright notes that Morgan's Henry Colburn was a "leading developer and publisher of the genre" (Wright, "Introduction," in Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, ed. Wright [Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2013], p. 21).

political atmosphere. This juxtaposition of violence and high society, of terror in the streets and social machinations in the hall, is crucial to Morgan's characterization of 1790s Ireland as "an epoch of transition between the ancient despotism of brute force, and the dawning reign of public opinion."⁴ Given her stated interest in capturing the spirit of what Morgan felt was a neglected era, it is surprising that its natural *telos*, the 1798 Irish Rebellion, warrants only a passing mention toward the novel's end. The present absence of the Rebellion reveals the author's interest not necessarily in violence itself, but in its pathology.⁵ *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* is one of the earliest literary texts to identify the specifically colonial contours of modern terrorism, prefiguring Frantz Fanon's arguments about the "extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity" of colonial violence and counterviolence in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).⁶ Extrapolating from the legacy of the French Revolution, Morgan's novel offers an anamnesis of colonial history in Ireland and, in turn, a grim prognosis for the British imperial body politic.

Morgan's deliberate invocation of seemingly incongruous contrasts are vital to her establishment of Ireland as in a state of siege, which is expressed topically through the novel's Gothicism.⁷ From the publication of her first successful novel, *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), it was clear that a Gothic lexicon allowed Morgan to safely probe dark corners of the British imperial psyche, but in *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*—the last of the author's self-described "national tales"—the direction of

⁴ Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, ed. Wright, p. 41. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

⁵ As a Whig, Morgan embraced the early, reformist United Irishmen rather than its later, more radical incarnation. Tom Dunne notes that Morgan's romanticized view of the United Irishmen prevented her from detailing the horrors of the 1798 Rebellion (see Dunne, "Fiction as 'the best history of nations': Lady Morgan's Irish Novels," in *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence*, ed. Dunne [Cork: Cork Univ. Press, 1987], p. 153).

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 46.

⁷ I refer specifically to Giorgio Agamben's definition of a "fictitious" or political state of siege, which, as he notes, is a creation of the "democratic-revolutionary tradition" (Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005], p. 5).

signification is inverted: rather than the Gothic serving as a vehicle to safely explore the problems of colonial dispossession, colonial dispossession is deliberately cited as the source of the novel's Gothic register.⁸ The cultural psychosis enmeshed in Gothic tropology is unraveled and historically contextualized in the novel's assemblage of ruins, antiquarianisms, and (what I principally address in this essay) flawed or arrested subjectivities. In explaining how trauma is imprinted on land, community, body, and narrative, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* serves as an indirect riposte to critics who complained that the unnatural artifice of Gothic tropes perverted the novel's generic purpose to the "representation of human life and manners."⁹ What the author of an essay bemoaning "Terrorist Novel Writing" sees as a transposition of revolutionary edict into sensationalist trappings, Morgan reveals as colonial diktat: terror *is* the order of the day.¹⁰

Despite the novel's aforementioned preoccupation with the revolutionary 1790s, Morgan's prefatorial musings on epochal history reveal her true investment in probing the relationship between past and present. Describing the political landscape of the 1790s as one "characterized by the supremacy of an oligarchy . . . [with a] sense of irresponsible power. . . . curious from its evanescence, and consolatory by comparison with the present times,—times the most fatal to faction, and favourable to the establishment of equal rights, which Ireland has yet witnessed," Morgan proceeds to warn "a large and influential portion of the public, which has yet to learn, that to advocate arbitrary government, is to nourish moral disorder" (*The*

⁸ See Bridget Matthews-Kane's argument that "Gothic components" in *The Wild Irish Girl* "allow Morgan to articulate the troubled colonial status in Ireland in a style that masks the subversive nature of speaking such political truths" (Matthews-Kane, "Gothic Excess and Political Anxiety: Lady Morgan's *The Wild Irish Girl*," *Gothic Studies*, 5, no. 2 [2003], 8).

⁹ [Anon.], "Terrorist Novel Writing," in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797* (London: E. Phillips, 1798), 224.

¹⁰ The author of "Terrorist Novel Writing" complains of "the great quantity of novels . . . in which it has been the fashion to make *terror* the *order of the day*" ("Terrorist Novel Writing," p. 223). The realism of the Irish Gothic has been noted by Niall Gillespie (see Gillespie, "Irish Jacobin Gothic, c. 1796–1825," in *Irish Gothics: Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions, 1760–1890*, ed. Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie [London: Palgrave, 2014], p. 63).

O'Briens and the O'Flahertys, p. 41). Morgan's approbation of the present—the 1820s—is clearly influenced by her anticipation of Catholic Emancipation (which was finally granted two years after the novel's publication), a cause for which she had long labored. The past, however, does not always remain in the past—as, with her “yet,” she links the irresponsible oligarchy of the past to the supporters of arbitrary government in the present. The implications are clear: the violence of that last, bloody decade of the eighteenth century may not be comfortably consigned to the dustbin of history.

This warning is symptomatic of the author's extended interest, in her late fiction, in “modalities of temporality.”¹¹ In *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, the colonial condition is manifested as a multimodal experience of temporal disjunction. Visiting his deserted and decaying family home, Murrough stumbles across a contemporary copy of an ancient family manuscript, *The Annals of St. Grellan*, the sole remnant of his father's ruinous obsession with “antiquarian nationalism.”¹² Morgan here plays on the repetitive nature of annalistic history. While such repetition traditionally (as in the mode of Livy) denoted stability and continuity, the O'Brien *Annals*, contrastingly, catalogs an endless series of religious, clan, and territorial conflicts, impelling Murrough's disgusted realization that his family history telescopes a greater, circular historical process, and that the Irish people as a whole are “a barbarous people, checked in their natural progress towards civilization by a foreign government, to the full as barbarous as themselves . . . the same system still re-producing the same effects” (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, pp. 247–48). This sense of oppressive time, of an inverse imminence, is heightened when Murrough discovers that he is depicted in several of the *Annals'* interpolated illustrations acting out the deeds of his ancestors. The illustrations neither reflect nor aestheticize history; instead, they enact prophecy through historical

¹¹ See Ina Ferris, *The Romantic National Tale and the Question of Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 75–76.

¹² For an analysis of Morgan's critique of antiquarian nationalism, see Julia M. Wright, “‘The Nation Begins to Form’: Competing Nationalisms in Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*,” *ELH*, 66 (1999), 939–63.

“infolding,” Ina Ferris’s word for “a certain fluidity of time and consciousness that threatens the clarity of the line of modern history and the coherence of modern subjectivity” (*The Romantic National Tale*, p. 90). Identified as the subject of ancient prophecy in a supposedly antiquarian manuscript, Murrough’s past crosses uneasily into the present, a condition that is further amplified by the manuscript’s contrastive condition: although the history in the *Annals* is old, the illustrations are so new that the paint on the palette is still wet. Prophecy is as much threat as it is prediction.¹³

Murrough is both reader of and unwilling actor in a renewed ancient manuscript discovered while sitting in the ruins of his patrimony (immediately following this scene, the O’Brien home, having served its purpose, literally crumbles to dust), and this predicament allows Morgan to critique both the stultifying cultural nationalism and the material extirpation that are the dual result of colonial dispossession. The novel’s engagement with this dyad is immediately established in its first chapter, a bewildering, near unreadable epistolary rehashing of Irish history told as a web of property losses and genealogical tangles that seems tangential to the actual narrative. Indeed, Morgan’s literary executor, W. Hepworth Dixon, helpfully suggested that the entire first volume, which “damps the reader’s interest,” be skipped entirely.¹⁴ But these seemingly disposable, reader-resistant opening chapters enmesh the reader in the history of dispossessions (religious, territorial, familial) while simultaneously establishing the smothering familial/cultural history from which its two heirs, Beavoin and Murrough, will endeavor—vainly, if the *Annals* are any indication—to escape. And, as we will see, Morgan explicitly uses these inaugural chapters to tie this dispossessive dyad to the rhetoric of terrorism.

¹³ Ian Balfour writes: “Claus Westermann has shown how the lament, the prayer, and the threat are as characteristic of prophetic discourse as are the prediction and the oracle” (Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2002], p. 5).

¹⁴ W. Hepworth Dixon, in *Lady Morgan’s Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries, and Correspondence*, ed. Dixon, 2 vols. (London: William H. Allan and Co., 1862), II, 234.

After reading the *Annals*, Murrough participates in a tavern brawl, is arrested, and then is taken as prisoner to Dublin Castle, the architectural embodiment of British colonial power. Improbably enough, he is then guided to a party hosted by his captors in another wing of the castle. This bizarre shift from imprisonment to pleasure is not lost on Murrough, for whom it creates

a confusion of all the senses, which extended minutes to months, and gave to something less than half a quarter of an hour the importance of a century. . . .

. . . That he was then occupying a spot, in what he deemed the den of political corruption; that he was surrounded by those who drew their very existence from the misery of his country . . . were fancies or convictions, rendered insupportable by the morbid state of his feelings. . . . They left him without the power, almost without the will to act. (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, pp. 181–82)

As the novel advances, it becomes clear that Murrough's psychosomatic reaction to this scene is merely an extreme iteration of a phenomenon common in a colonized society: that all aspects of life become politicized. The most significant example of this phenomenon is the aforementioned tavern brawl that erupts between a group of drunken English soldiers and local tradesmen. Initially, the Irish are described as regarding the soldiers with "less wrath than merriment" (p. 146). The authorities, however, decide that this is no mere brawl but an insurrectionary uprising, and the military guard subsequently dispatched to the scene fires indiscriminately into the crowd, essentially creating an insurrection after the fact. As the narrator observes, this is part of a larger pattern whereby "the government secretly fomented the very intemperance it affected, by unconstitutional means, to restrain. . . . it gave a sanguinary character to disturbances, which of themselves would have been bloodless and unimportant" (p. 146). Crucially, such politicization is not the exclusive purview of the ruling powers: when the English begin to harass the pub's landlady, the narrator likens her to Lucretia, a bold allusion to imperial collapse.

As the Lucretia metaphor indicates, the novel's interest in the politicization of life extends beyond the travails of the disinherited upper classes (Murrough) to consider the effect of colonial terror across the various strata of Irish society. Some of these characters are incorporated into the plot, but others exist as deliberately constructed, narratively extraneous miniatures that thicken the novel's sociopolitical texture. For example, Morgan spends several paragraphs describing the O'Briens' housekeeper, an old woman whom the locals are convinced is the notorious fourteenth-century witch Alice Ketyll. Why the narrator should detail the townspeople's persecution of the housekeeper (who, in an example of historical slippage, is perversely and persistently referred to by the narrator as "Alice" even after acknowledging that her true name is Molly) is a mystery, until it is finally revealed that Alice-Molly's torment is an ironic allusion to the oppression of Catholics. The only reason "Alice" is merely egged and not burned alive, the narrator observes, is "because the current of prejudice" has turned away from witchcraft and been applied "with equal wisdom and policy . . . against papists and popery" (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 143). This extended analysis of a minor character who, like Murrough, is unable to escape history's modern manifestations enfleshes the social consequences of the "policy" that Morgan references: the Irish Penal Code, whose baleful influence haunts every plot detail. Laws against Catholicism were first instituted by Elizabeth I and then alternately relaxed and strengthened in response to periods of conflict, reaching a critical peak in 1691 after the Jacobite War. Even as adherence to the Code's various provisions alternately tightened and relaxed over time, its scope rendered Irish Catholics "not just as subservients but as outcasts."¹⁵ Edmund Burke, who likened the laws to a "general oppression," noted despairingly the corrosive social effect of inheritance and property laws, which he argued led to "a total extinction of principle and of natural benevolence . . . whilst we are obliged to consider our own offspring and the brothers of our own blood, as our most

¹⁵ T. O. McLoughlin, *Contesting Ireland: Irish Voices against England in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999), p. 28.

dangerous enemies; the blessing of providence on our families, in a numerous issue, is converted into the most certain means of their ruin and depravation," warping not just the family unit but, by extension, the nation-state for which it served as a proxy.¹⁶



By the 1790s many reformers felt that the ongoing depredations of the Penal Laws were augmented by a new atmosphere of paranoia and mistrust. William Sampson's *Memoirs* (1807), which begins abruptly with his arrest for treason in 1793, describes that spring in Dublin as a period when "the terror became so atrocious that humanity could no longer endure it. In every quarter of the metropolis, the shrieks and groans of the tortured were to be heard, and that, through all hours of the day and night."¹⁷ Niall Gillespie has argued that Irish Jacobinical writing post-1795 (that is, following the dissolution of the Irish Parliament) became dominated by a Gothic register, but, as Sampson's *Memoirs* demonstrates, even earlier radical writing displays not only a tendency to the horrific and sensational but, as importantly, a keen awareness of the psychological effect of rhetorical stratagems deployed by the colonial state.¹⁸ Writing to his brother-in-law and fellow United Irishman Sam McTier in 1792, the author William Drennan mentions a fire in the Parliament House (caused by plumbers) and wryly remarks that the blaze "will be called a Catholic plot, and terrify the public mind."¹⁹ Earlier that year Drennan, using language that recalls Morgan's descriptions of the tavern brawl, tells Sam about a "riot" between the military and Irish militants that the "Government will probably make . . . out a rebellion."²⁰

¹⁶ Edmund Burke, "Address and Petition of the Irish Catholics" (1764), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford, et al., 9 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981–2015), IX, 431.

¹⁷ William Sampson, *Memoirs of William Sampson* (New York: William Sampson, 1807), p. 4.

¹⁸ See Gillespie, "Irish Jacobin Gothic," p. 60.

¹⁹ William Drennan, letter to Sam McTier, [February] 1792, in *The Drennan-McTier Letters, 1776–1793*, ed. Jean Agnew ([Dublin]: The Women's History Project in Association with the Irish Manuscripts Commission, 1998), p. 397.

²⁰ William Drennan, letter to Sam McTier, 3 February 1792, in *The Drennan-McTier Letters*, p. 389.

In its depictions of constant, low-level unrest, colonial architectonics (Dublin Caste, the moldering O'Brien house), and, as we have seen, governmental rhetoric, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* establishes the psycho-political ramifications of "spectral violence"—that is, "a violence that is never fully materialized, that is always in excess of its apparent material effects and that is neither containable, specifiable, nor localizable."²¹

Such violence never fully materializes, perhaps, but it is definable. Those inaugural epistolary chapters culminate in a court ruling that turns Protestant-held land back over its original, Catholic owner, sending the ruling oligarchy into a furor, predicting "poverty and persecution . . . the massacre of St. Bartholomew . . . the inquisition, the popish plot, Guy Faux, and Bloody Queen Mary," all of which the narrator dismisses as "the bugbears of terrorism . . . conjured up in Ireland with unfailing effect" (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 88). Later on, the narrator notes that the tavern brawl was "bruted about . . . [as] a *guerre à la mort* . . . the preliminary explosion of a long-concerted plot, which was to be followed up by the rising of the White Boys . . . with every other 'wild variety' of 'Boys,' which in Ireland, at all times . . . served as terms of terrorism" (p. 157).

The word "terrorism" is rare in early-nineteenth-century fiction, so its appearances in *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* act as lexical blasts on the page. Joseph Crawford notes that the identification of terrorism as specifically "undisciplined" power (and distinct from the terror regularly wielded by the state) was part of the Thermidorian abjuration of the excesses of the French Revolution.²² It is notable, however, that in his *Fourth Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1795) Burke, one of the early English adopters of the word, uses it to refer to actions taken by the Directory ("those Hell-hounds called Terrorists"), the governing committee that, while revolutionary, opposed

²¹ Samira Kawash, "Terrorists and Vampires: Fanon's Spectral Violence of Decolonization," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Alessandrini (London: Routledge, 1999, 2003), p. 240.

²² See Joseph Crawford, *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism: The Politics and Aesthetics of Fear in the Age of the Reign of Terror* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 52.

Jacobinical excesses.²³ Thus “terrorism,” although coined to refer to Jacobinical terror, was quickly unmoored from its lexical origins. By 1798, shortly before the rebellion broke out, opponents of a motion to appease Irish discontent referred indignantly to “threats of terrorism” employed by the United Irishmen.²⁴ This accusation was made in the context of describing their alliances with the French, so the connection to Jacobinism is present but distinct. On the opposing side, supporters of reform asserted that “Terrorism cannot, or ought not to give permanent security to any Government,” effectively demonstrating that terror was increasingly considered an unacceptable weapon in the state’s avowed arsenal of power.²⁵ In *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, both instances of “terrorism” refer to acts of insurgency, not to state-sponsored terror. But the narrator sarcastically refers to these instances of terrorism as “bugbears” being “bruted about,” mocking and debunking the voice of state power that is ventriloquized. Thus, Morgan plays with the limits of performative utterance by rejecting the reality created by the invocation of “terrorism” and offering an alternate reality in its place.

Crawford argues that in Britain terrorism, particularly revolutionary terror, was generally seen as a breach in the normal flow of history: an incomprehensible, unprecedented, catastrophic visitation of violence upon the innocent.²⁶ Morgan, in contrast, uses “terrorism” to describe a rhizomatic tangle of state and anti-state extremist violence that is the inevitable, if regrettable, outcome to centuries of oppression. Colonial terror is an enduring and not, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Robespierre insists, “transient” condition.²⁷ *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* diagnoses colonialism in Ireland as the cause for

²³ Edmund Burke, *Fourth Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1795), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, IX, 89.

²⁴ *Report of the Debate on the Earl of Moira’s Motion* (London: J. Debrett, 1798), p. 20.

²⁵ *Vindex to the Thane, To Which is Prefixed for the Purpose of Reference, Sir John Freke’s Address to the Electors of the County of Cork* (Cork: Freke Family, 1798), p. 4.

²⁶ See Crawford, *Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism*, p. 81.

²⁷ See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794), in his *Poetical Works, III: Plays, Part 1*, ed. J.C.C. Mays, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), p. 19.

what I am calling symbiotic terrorism: that is, terrorism as a culture of reciprocal violence and not merely a series of singular, catastrophic events. In this, the novel echoes the work of writers in the 1790s who, witnessing the revolution unfold in France, theorized a responsive modality of violence.²⁸ Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791), for example, includes a section on the mob violence of the French Revolution that places the blame on the "base idea of governing men by terror, instead of reason," which results in the oppressed "inflict[ing] in their turn the examples of terror they have been instructed to practice."²⁹

But Morgan is closer to Mary Wollstonecraft, who, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), identifies the psychological ramifications of oppression by drawing parallels between women and seemingly disparate groups: "Slaves and mobs have always indulged themselves in the same excesses, when once they broke loose from authority.—The bent bow recoils with violence, when the hand is suddenly relaxed that forcibly held it. . . . The being who patiently endures injustice . . . will soon become unjust, or unable to discern right from wrong."³⁰ Wollstonecraft's ambiguity toward collective rebellion is evident in her characterization of revolution as indulgent excess and her arguments that the subaltern psyche is fundamentally warped: arguments that, as I discuss below, find a strikingly similar echo in Morgan's novel in the character of the rapparee, Shane.

Wollstonecraft's metaphor of the tensed bow, whose immobility belies the force of its release, describes an arrested, imminent violence reminiscent of Morgan's observation that writing for Ireland is to exist "*poignard sur gorge*" (with a knife at one's throat) (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 41). This strained immobility also characterizes Morgan's description of Ireland in the 1790s as a country unable to fully participate in the

²⁸ See the analysis of British responses to Jacobin violence in Robert M. Maniquis, "Holy Savagery and Wild Justice: English Romanticism and the Terror," *Studies in Romanticism*, 28 (1989), 365–95.

²⁹ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1791), pp. 33, 34.

³⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), pp. 183–84.

epochal transition from feudalism to civil society. When Murrough is invited to the association of the United Irishmen, he initially objects to the group's secrecy, noting that, "It was in no secret association . . . that the great principle of American Independence originated. It was the free and bold explosion of public opinion, which . . . [gave] birth to the French Revolution," to which a friend replies that "wretched Ireland has no public opinion, no public to express an opinion" (p. 304). Murrough quickly changes his mind and joins the United Irishmen, but he maintains that "the revolution which is not based on public opinion, is at best but insurrection" (p. 304). It is clear, however, that his optimistic insistence that "the whole world is in movement," and that "the people and the press are irresistible," do not apply in Ireland, and his ideals are challenged by the more practical Beavoin (p. 363). Murrough will not thrive in this country, Beavoin says, because "Those . . . whose endowments are of the highest caste, and who have not their age along with them, will find their knowledge not power, but impediments; and they will soon be taught that the light thrown upon a society which is not prepared to reflect it serves but to consume the spirit that kindles it. 'Tis the bursting of a rocket, before it is launched" (p. 480). Cannily aware of the dangers of temporal infolding on the colonized psyche, Beavoin advises Murrough that his only hope of avoiding self-immolation is flight, with the other, implied, option of violence.

And yet Morgan deliberately avoids descriptions of the spectacular violence that characterized representations of Irish-British conflict during the period. Even when recording incidents of bloodshed, her language keeps the violence at a distance by resorting to classical analogy, as in the description of the tavern brawl, or by deputizing the record of tragedies to a recording voice, as in *The Annals of St. Grellan*. Indeed, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* is strikingly unsentimental, especially for an author whose novels were frequently criticized for excessive emotion and "outrageous passion."³¹ Murrough

³¹ [Anon.], rev. of *Woman: or, Ida of Athens*, by Lady Morgan, *Dublin Satirist*, 1 (1809), 53; rpt. in *Critical Receptions: Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan*, ed. Jacqueline Belleranger (Bethesda, Md.: Academica Press, 2007), p. 117.

is passionate and unrestrained, but his frequent allusions to paragons of Greek civic virtue (he is also described as having a “Roman head” [*The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys*, p. 197]) and his repeated disavowals of secrecy and personal ambition in favor of public self-abnegation and transparency indicate his aspiration to be a man of virtue, the political persona adopted by a number of French revolutionaries but embodied by Robespierre, whose personal virtue allowed for the espousal of the synonymity between terror and justice. This ideology of virtue was at least partly responsible for the series of events that precipitated the Reign of Terror: “Because the Jacobins were genuinely virtuous they could be entrusted with power as they would use it not for themselves . . . but for the *patrie*. So long as terror was wielded by men of authentic virtue then it would be morally right, no longer terror but a form of justice.”³² Rejecting the thesis that the Terror was the predetermined *telos* of the Revolution, Marisa Linton tracks its origins to a series of contingencies precipitated by a slavish devotion to the performance of virtue.

Murrough, likewise, does not choose terror, but *The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys* critiques the idealistic embrace of virtue—coded in the novel as a specifically male prerogative—as a position of privilege with seriously disastrous consequences for himself and for others. After being abducted from a Dublin graveyard by his ailing father and spirited away to an illegal abbey, Murrough writes a pamphlet, “On the State of Ireland,” that “evince[es] that its author had felt more than he had thought on his subject. . . . It was honest and injudicious, and eminently perilous to the fearless writer; who in the uncompromising probity of youth, saw only the end, and was careless of the means” (*The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys*, p. 358). The pamphlet leads to the imprisonment of its publisher and the exile of one of the revolution’s leaders. Soon after, Murrough’s seemingly heroic rejection of Beavion’s injunction that he flee Ireland leads to the burning of her convent and the end of her

³² Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), p. 190.

practical efforts to effect local empowerment through the education of rural women.

Murrough's performative virtue is ultimately neutering, as "he cannot act because he is so utterly visible in the public sphere."³³ This helplessness is already evident early in the novel, when his conflicting emotions at the party in Dublin Castle leave Murrough "without the will to act." Indeed, as *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* progresses it becomes clear that Murrough's extreme visibility robs him of his personal sovereignty. He exists in a synopticon of one, watched over by competing networks and continuously guided by others. Late in the novel, Beavion informs him that various attributes marking him as the subject of ancient Irish prophecy made him "the object of the incessant vigilance and interference of our visionary relations," who hope he will become a powerful tool in the Jesuit cause (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 500). And when Murrough expresses his astonishment that his United Irishman sponsor, Lord Walter Fitzwalter (an obvious stand-in for Lord Edward FitzGerald, the most famous martyr of the '98 Rebellion) has a "long felt" interest in him, Lord Walter replies, "do not suppose that the papist and protestant Jesuits exclusively possess the secret of turning the talents of highly-gifted youths to their own purposes. . . . Why should not truth and freedom adopt an agency, which slavery and superstition have found so available? In a word, we . . . have, for some time, marked out you, and such as you, as our destined agents" (p. 308). But when referring to the government's scrutiny of university students, Morgan deliberately uses the word "*surveillance*" (p. 293)—which, like "terrorism," is a loanword of the Revolution—to draw a parallel between the feared revolutionary *Comités de Surveillance* and the colonial administration. Murrough's final appearance in the Irish part of the novel reveals the consequences of a surveillance society: no longer the classical ideal, Murrough is a fugitive of "forlorn figure and distorted countenance" whose "whole exterior bespoke one hunted to the death," his physical deterioration mirroring Ireland's landscape of ruins (p. 521).

³³ Julia M. Wright, "National Erotics and Political Theory in Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*," *European Romantic Review*, 15 (2004), 238.

Even the novel's conclusion in Paris depicts Murrough as the object of social surveillance in the theater being pushed once again to the borders of the state, this time because of his resistance to Napoleon's authoritarianism.



In tracing the perhaps inevitable decline from virtuous transparency to paranoid victimization, Morgan depicts the slippery descent from revolution into terror even while drawing sharp distinctions between 1789 and 1798. *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* mines the obvious connections between Irish unrest and Jacobin terror, but the novel sees the Revolution-Rebellion connection as correlative and inspirational, rather than causal: the true locus of terror in the novel is Britain's brutal colonial presence in Ireland. The pathos of Murrough's character is his insistence on bringing the ideals of the emergent French republic into a colonial situation that cannot possibly accommodate them. Terrorism is not merely the brutality of conquest: it is, in this context, the violence generated by the glaring discrepancy between the ideal of a civil polity and the present reality of the colonial police state.

Tracing the consequences of Jacobin ideology, Linton observes that the French Revolution's ideology of virtue demanded proof through action: "Ultimately . . . the only way to prove beyond doubt the authenticity of one's identity was to be ready to die for the cause" (*Choosing Terror*, p. 21). One problem with the sustaining fiction of authenticity is that it serves all too easily as a proximate cause for violence. Murrough, the inadvertent catalyst for much of the novel's violence, describes himself as an Irishman "soul and body," in contrast to the shape-shifting Beavoin, whose effectiveness lies in her ability to change her identity at will (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 175). (Beavoin is, at various points, an Italian penitent, a rural Irish lady, a musician for hire, and the ghost of her tenth-century ancestor.) Late in the novel, Beavoin muses that to be an Irishman "is sometimes almost a ridicule; and it is always a misfortune. With some it is a farce; with others a tragedy" (p. 494). The crucial distinction between

Murrough's and Beavion's "Irishman" is that Beavion's identification of Irishness is as an automatically colonial condition that warps noble characteristics, as when she grimly notes (in another echo of Wollstonecraft) that "all that bends not—falls" (p. 495).³⁴

Despite Beavoin's recommendation that he quit Ireland, Murrough rejects exile, mostly because of his political zeal but also because he cannot resist the blandishments of the novel's temptress, Albina Knocklofty, a woman high up in the Protestant oligarchy whose family has benefited from its "policy of elevating some to the peerage, and others to the gallows" (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 159). This zeugma rhetorically underscores the casually, causally violent intertwining of power and pleasure that characterizes the Ascendency class. The rioting urban poor at the tavern and the preening aristocracy at the castle—the prison and the parlor—are not merely juxtaposed: one benefits directly at the expense of the other. The brawl had resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency, but, as the narrator dryly observes, "Power and pleasure, despotism and dissipation, were then inseparable images in Irish society. . . . More troops were ordered out, and more wine was ordered up" (pp. 158–59). Grim parallelisms effectively convey the parasitism of the Ascendency class, as the party culminates amid toasts and proposals to "exterminat[e] all the Catholics" (p. 159).

The O'Brien-Knocklofty romance begins in earnest at the party in Dublin Castle and is resumed at the Knocklofty estate, where Lady Knocklofty teasingly informs Murrough that he has entered the "enemy's camp," a play on both his politics and his potential adultery. She then reassures him that he is "at least protected by the law of war," to which Murrough jokingly replies that because he is "here without the knowledge of the

³⁴ This critique of Irishness extends metatextually to Morgan's critique of the authenticity of her fictional project. Ferris observes that in much of Morgan's later fiction there is "a troubled sense that the distinction between role and being or between pragmatic demands and authentic action may entirely erode in such a [colonial] context, become illusory, or serve only as a sustaining fiction" (*The Romantic National Tale*, p. 72). Once again, the similarity between the condition of the Irish novelist and her Irish characters—*poignard sur gorge*—is underlined.

commander of the forces, and being neither hostage nor prisoner, [he] cannot claim the protection of those laws," inadvertently gesturing to his real status outside juridical order (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 451). This moment of banter underscores one of the novel's greater truths: that to be Irish Catholic is to be perpetually criminalized and legally exterminated. After all, as one Ascendancy aristocrat merrily reflects, "An Irish catholic! who ventures to acknowledge that such a thing exists?—not the laws of the land" (p. 89). The cruelty of statutorily consigning a (majority) population to nonexistence was the centerpiece of a petition presented to the House of Commons in January 1792 that passionately described the state of Irish Catholics: "We stand a strange anomaly in the law; not acknowledged, not disavowed; not slaves, not freemen: an exception to the principles of jurisprudence; a prodigy in the system of civil institution. We incur no small part of the penalties of a general outlawry, and a general excommunication."³⁵ By the novel's conclusion, the role of Albina (her name a near Albion) is to acknowledge this excommunication when she attempts to help Murrough evade the authorities who have trumped up murder charges against him. It is tempting to read her character as a cynical echo of the allegorical females/readers in Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh* (1817), whose national prejudices are to be transformed by love/poetry.³⁶ After Murrough leaves her ("not unsullied," as the novel coyly observes [*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 521]), he is next seen as a fugitive in the mountains, his now-bestial appearance paralleling the devolution of Morgan's ideal of Whiggish, aristocratic reform into the violence of the '98 Rebellion.

Murrough's pendular transitions from hero to *homo sacer* are a result of irresistible destiny (a lack of historical contingency) coupled with choices (to publish a political pamphlet, to join the ranks of the expatriate Irish officer-class) afforded him by his class and education. Contrast this with the character

³⁵ Quoted in Henry Parnell, *A History of the Penal Laws Against the Irish Catholics, from the Treaty of Limerick to the Union* (Dublin: H. Fitzpatrick, 1808), p. 136.

³⁶ It is cynical because Lady Knocklofty appears to have no further interest in mitigating Irish misery beyond aiding Murrough, after which they consummate their affair.

in the novel whom some of Morgan's contemporaries found the most appealing: Shane, the mysterious, murderous, but loyal rapparee who acts as Murrough's protector.³⁷ As an Irish Catholic, Shane is legally nonexistent (as has already been noted), a concept that Morgan reinforces by having him literally come back from the dead. (He had been hung as a freebooter and murderer of a British soldier, but his mother cut him down from the gallows.) Shane is thus the apotheosis of colonialism's phenomenological violence, and evidence of a colonized existence as a "permanent battle against atmospheric death."³⁸ Murrough, who is repulsed by Shane's willingness to kill, acknowledges:

this man [Shane] . . . [is] a murderer, an outlaw, ready for every violence,—his hand armed against civilization, as civilization is armed against him,—and the whole tenor of his life at variance with the best interests of society! The world may make its conventional virtues and vices, and civil associations may dictate forms; but the source of good is in the feelings and affections of the animal. Even when bad government . . . turns [feelings and affections] the most irresistibly aside from their natural career, and enforces a disordered reaction, their principle itself remains unchanged; and the man thus situated, *makes for himself a code of compensating morality*, which fits him for the peculiar circumstances of his untoward and difficult position. (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, pp. 398–99; emphasis added)

If Murrough tracks the thwarted hopes of Ireland's stalled modernity, then Shane personifies the future consequences of its past injury. By the novel's end, Murrough's arrested potential and essential passivity make him the novel's most apt representation of Agambenian bare life, whereas Shane's violent rejection of abjection is emblematic of what we might call bare life's bandit potential. Through the Murrough-Shane dyad, Morgan partly reifies Frantz Fanon's argument that revolutionary violence is both the means by which the

³⁷ As the Countess of Charleville wrote to Morgan, "Now, what I like best in the whole was Shane; he beats Eddie Ocheltree off the ground. . . . In short, I love him so that I think he is the hero of the tale" (Lady Charleville, letter to Lady Morgan, 30 December 1827, in *Lady Morgan's Memoirs*, II, 250).

³⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Oeuvres* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), p. 361.

colonized subject restores the self as well the source of psychic trauma.³⁹ But by choosing the literally unintelligible Shane (he jabbars a mishmash of Latin, Gaelic, and English) as the representative of anti-state terror, Morgan ultimately defines terrorism as something beyond comprehension: not a strategic act of selfhood but an extension of subaltern madness, or an involuntary response to a lack of contingency. This hesitation reflects Morgan's uneasiness toward the conclusions of her canny diagnoses and, as we will see, her qualified support of revolutionary action.

After benevolently haunting Murrough's footsteps for most of the novel, Shane's influence grows once Murrough leaves Dublin behind and plunges into the Connemara mountains, historically a region of internal exile, and one that is most resistant to the physical, if not economic, effects of colonial incursion. As Murrough's journey becomes a sublime experience of heath and crag that dangerously stimulates his patriotic and nationalist "sensations" (rather than, the narrator carefully notes, "his sentiments"), the aesthetic and political valences of landscape interpenetrate (*The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, p. 383). Emerging from the mountains—the topographic representation of national and historical potential—into his ancestral home of St. Grellan, Murrough is afforded a panorama of historical time: the ruined, militarized Irish town occupies the foreground, shadowed by his own impoverished estate and then the lush, rackrented Knocklofty plantation. Morgan employs picturesque techniques of framing and perspective only to trouble them by making people and histories that often serve as mere ornamental flourish into active participants (sufferers) in their environment. Immediately before he reaches St. Grellan, Murrough is guided across a river by a starving, Charonesque peasant, "the very genius of famine," who exemplifies the inseparability of legal and embodied death (p. 392). But in the same way that the town of St. Grellan is enframed with the estate of its absentee

³⁹ On the complications of the Shane-Murrough dyad, see Susan B. Egenolf, *The Art of Political Fiction in Hamilton, Edgeworth, and Owenson* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 167–74.

landlords, the narrator on multiple occasions refers to the ruling oligarchy class as “political vampires” and “harpies who devoured the vitals of the land” (pp. 209, 210). Exposing both the intimacies and vast chasms of colonial rule, Morgan depicts “the entire scene of colonial non-existence” as corrosive to both exploiter and exploited (Kawash, “Terrorists and Vampires,” p. 249).

Such is Morgan’s bleak portrayal of 1790s Ireland, in which “the sphere of creatures and the juridical order are caught up in a single catastrophe,” the inevitable result of which is violence (Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 57). But, as we have seen, the author’s prefatorial comments suggest that the novel was concerned with matters beyond its immediate temporal scope. *The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys* extends Morgan’s assertion in the preface to *O’Donnel* (1814) that fiction should exhibit “a mirror of the times in which it is composed; reflecting morals, customs, manners, peculiarity of character, and prevalence of opinion.”⁴⁰ As much as *The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys* is an exegesis of colonial Ireland in the 1790s, it is suffused with the author’s fears, even on the cusp of political victory (Catholic Emancipation), about the direction of late-Romantic Irish nationalism. Four years after the novel’s publication, Morgan tried to dissuade her friend Thomas Moore from publishing his biography of Edward FitzGerald. Publishing the book would be dangerous, she wrote, because “To judge by the outline and aspect of things, a *connoisseur* in *revolution* . . . would say we were on the eve of the worst and most perilous political commotions[,] *one* coming from *below* . . . *terrorism* [is] the order of the day.”⁴¹ Although her warning was possibly influenced by ongoing governmental attempts to suppress Irish discontent (specifically the Irish Coercion Act), this identification of the locus of terror as “coming from below” refers to an emergent Irish polity—that elusive public whose nonexistence *The O’Briens and the O’Flahertys* laments—that was galvanized by the rise of Daniel

⁴⁰ Lady Morgan, preface to *O’Donnel. A National Tale*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1814), I, vii.

⁴¹ Lady Morgan, letter to Thomas Moore, 2 January 1831, in *Lady Morgan’s Memoirs*, II, 319.

O'Connell and the Catholic Association in the 1820s. Morgan's Protestant, Whiggish tendencies favored an Ireland run under the auspices of an enlightened Anglo-Irish leadership, rejecting O'Connell's mass-mobilization strategies.⁴² Her letter to Moore is a warning not about governmental reprisals, but about the potentially galvanizing effect the history of an Irish martyr will have on the peasantry. Although O'Connell embraced nonviolence, the *Times*' decision to label his mass gatherings "monster meetings" attests to an enduring Gothic lexicon. This new terrorism "from below" was a sharp contrast to what Morgan idealized: the moderate politics and aristocratic backgrounds of the United Irishmen in the early 1790s. Having depicted the total debasement of the aspirational man of virtue, Morgan is afraid that reform will ultimately lie in the hands of the monstrous peasantry: a host of Shanes.

The Ireland that *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* leaves at its near-close is one populated by a dissipated, vampiric oligarchy and a dehumanized populace occupying a landscape haunted by generations of political violence and the failed good intentions of exiled reformers. Although Morgan's fears about the recurrent specter of terrorism seem like an ironic echo of British panic over the spread of Jacobinism twenty years before, her identification of a symbiotic terrorism rewrites the vector of violence from a unidirectional ascription of blame into a complex network of reciprocal, mutually constitutive exchanges. We can begin to see the extraordinary discursive potency of terrorism; even at this early moment, terror came to define the actions of the police state and the terroristic responses to it as well as to adumbrate the oppression of colonialism and the violent resistance to it. The novel's pivoting, in the last chapter, to a scene of creation and terror, of biblical genesis and nascent despotism, offers little hope for the cause of liberal nationalism.

Murrough's appearance in the theater—restored to life and honor—suggests that such rebirth is at best precarious, and can happen only outside colonial space, echoing her choice to depict only Haydn's representation of ontological

⁴² See Dunne, "Fiction as 'the best history of nations,'" p. 151.

morass. Morgan denies her readers the resolution that *Die Schöpfung* offered its listeners, when the ominous C minor of the Representation of Chaos modulates to a valiant C major at its conclusion, when a chorus of singers announce God's creation of light, and Uriel establishes the divine Manicheanism of light and darkness. In contrast to Haydn's oratorio, *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* traces the Enlightenment's colonial paradox, wherein institutionalized terror was both dependent on and a departure from its constitutive principles. Writing on the cusp of emancipation, Morgan turns to history to consider the future of British colonialism in Ireland and warns that violence without limits may be the inevitable outcome of the wreckage of the past.

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ABSTRACT

Padma Rangarajan, "‘With a Knife at One’s Throat’: Irish Terrorism in *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*" (pp. 294–317)

Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan's *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys* (1827) is a silver-fork novel edged in steel: a portrait of aristocratic 1790s Dublin society that doubles as anti-imperialist jeremiad. It is also one of the earliest pieces of fiction to explicitly identify terrorism as an inevitable consequence of colonial conquest. In this essay, I demonstrate how Morgan's novel upends the standard definition of terrorism as a singular historical rift and rewrites it as a condition of life. Modernity has no chance in Ireland, Morgan argues, if the colonial parasitism of the past continues unabated. In *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*, Morgan prefigures Frantz Fanon's diagnoses of the colonized psyche by carefully detailing the psychological and material effects of symbiotic terrorism—that is, terrorism as a complex network of reciprocal, mutually constitutive violent exchanges. Intertwining the thwarted legacy of the 1798 Irish Rebellion, the ongoing depredations of the Irish Ascendancy class, and her fears of an imminent revolution of the peasantry, Morgan mines Ireland's near and distant past to forecast violence's inevitable futurity.

Keywords: Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan; *The O'Briens and the O'Flahertys*; Irish Rebellion; terrorism; national tale