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The Silly and the Serious: An Assessment of Edna O'Brien

Peggy O'Brien

AN INTRIGUING FACT about the past reception of Edna O'Brien's work is that American and Irish audiences have been largely at odds, her compatriots tending to be harsh while critics here have lavished praise. She is receiving a great deal of attention now in America, where two collections of her work have been published within the last three years. Her short stories came out in 1984 as *The Fanatic Heart* and last year the three early novels were gathered together under the title *The Country Girls Trilogy*, with an epilogue added to tell the fates of her continuous central characters, Kate and Baba. Even if these new editions hadn't prompted fresh attention, O'Brien would be due a retrospective assessment of her writing simply because it now amounts to so much: eight novels, four books of short stories, several plays and screenplays and a work of non-fiction. Much of the disapproval from home has been directed at O'Brien's persona, an outrageous concoction of what foreigners expect an Irish person to be—mellifluous, volatile, wanton, irrational. But more serious artistic reservations underlie this carping. The American criticism now emerging discloses many of the deep reasons why discerning readers of whatever nationality might find O'Brien flawed. Some American critics repeat the error of endorsing O'Brien's stage-Irishness, but many incisive observations about her art push the process of just evaluation further along. Using these readings as a starting point, I will explore the ways in which the inadequacies of her prose are bound to less visible strengths. My interest is double: to understand rather than judge an author's psychology that avoids certain opportunities and embraces others, and to broach those questions of literary evaluation which these choices raise.

Mary Gordon's review of *A Fanatic Heart* epitomizes the rapt response one has come to expect outside of Ireland.¹ Gordon is seduced by O'Brien's voice, enthralled by the Irish writer's use of language: "All the words are fitting; none of them shocks. . . . It is the emblem of her genius: the genuinely surprising word, not in itself exotic but conjuring in the reader a response inexorably physical." This leads Gordon to praise O'Brien's undoubted descriptive powers, the way she evokes the physical world through sensuous

¹ *The New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 18, 1984, pp. 1 and 38.

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language. Recalling O'Brien's description of a young woman, Gordon comments, "The physical detail burrows into the mind; how clearly one sees Eily." What limits Gordon's judgment is the way she elevates linguistic richness and vividness over other qualities of good prose, such as narrative control. Moreover, Gordon invites suspicion, if not derision, from Irish skeptics when she betrays that she views O'Brien through green-tinted glasses. She is beguiled quite simply by the author's Irishness. This, along with her gender, goes a long way toward establishing O'Brien's credentials with Gordon: "Edna O'Brien tells the Irish woman's inside story . . . she speaks with a voice identifiably and only hers. No voice could be less androgynous or more rooted in a land." It is worrying to the Irish, especially Irish women, that O'Brien is viewed as their representative and voice. But there is a contradiction in Gordon's statement that must be noted. Does O'Brien present herself as an individual, speaking "with a voice identifiably and only hers," or as a type of her sex and nationality? O'Brien herself is only too willing to exploit the potential for universal acceptance in such confusion.

Whereas sometimes she puts herself forward as the essential woman and other times as the voice of Ireland, in the short essay, "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to be Good Anymore," she conflates the two stereotypes to define Irish womanhood.² In a transparent effort at pandering to transatlantic taste, she assumes a susceptibility on the part of Americans for Celtic charm and trades blatantly on her origins. So open and roguish is she in weaving her obvious spell, however, that it is not so much this manipulation which seems reprehensible as her misappropriation of a native tradition. Hers are sins of presumption and reduction. Sprinkling tidbits of Yeats and Synge and snippits from legend and history throughout the essay, unabashed, she aligns her own persona with the great women of Ireland's past. Her egoism robs other characters and events of their individuality and usually their stature. She transforms the seering story of Deirdre into a maudlin, melodramatic tale of woman's woe. No self-ironic tone indicates an authorial awareness of how her penny-romance summary robs a great tragedy of passion. Characteristically, she touts intensity but presents risible soap opera: "When Deirdre of the Sorrows saw her husband slain, she tore her golden hair out, became distraught, uttered the most rending lament and then fell down beside him and died." The busy syntax, piling verb upon verb, creates a flurry of excitement rather than a solemn procession toward death. An austere heroine becomes an hysterical exhibitionist.

The essay, however, contains a clue to the serious shortcoming of O'Brien's imagination and, ironically, its interest. After she gives a cursory

² *The New York Times Book Review*, May 11, 1986, p. 12.

and specious account of two types of Irish heroine, robust and meek, she places her own Baba and Kate in this double line: "Realizing that the earlier heroines were bawdy and the later ones lyrical I decided to have two, one who would conform to both my own and my country's view of what an Irish woman should be and one who would undermine every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was." She places calculating Baba in line with heroines such as Deirdre and the Old Woman of Beare who have been justly celebrated for their passion and spontaneity. The telling and dangerous opinion divulged as the basis for her thinking is that being strong means having no emotion. Defending her decision to kill off vulnerable Kate in the epilogue and allow crass Baba to survive she explains, "lyricism had to go, just as emotion had to be purged." The equation of vigor and invulnerability is alarming, for this repudiation of emotion points to an evasion in O'Brien's work, which is nearly disguised by sexual and ethnic antics. It is the paradoxical birthplace of both the silly and the serious in her. More, it is the source from which her imagination springs and continues to be generated.

In an interview with her, Philip Roth asks some penetrating questions which, overall, demonstrate an enviable balance between indicating the impressive and hinting at the defective in her.³ Paying tribute to her prodigious memory and the part it plays in her descriptive ability—"the ability to reconstruct with passionate exactness an Irish world"—he also wonders if a tenacious clinging to the past, especially an obsession with her mother and father, hasn't blocked O'Brien emotionally. He asks, "I wonder if you haven't chosen the way you live—living by yourself—to prevent anything emotionally too powerful from separating you from that past?" O'Brien answers, "I'm sure I have. I rail against my loneliness but it is as dear to me as the thought of unity with a man." In this same interview O'Brien speaks of a continuing battle with her father that has only abated slightly with his death but that still would make it intolerable to be reincarnated as his daughter. The dream of unity, therefore, is in direct proportion to the reality of alienation. A stalemate exists because the emotion which creates this tension hasn't been released. In the same interview she also speaks of loving her mother overmuch and having "a sense of her over my shoulder judging." Then, in another section she talks of what seems at first an unrelated subject, her need to leave Ireland: "I do not think I would have written anything if I had stayed. I feel I would have been watched, would have been judged (even more) and would have lost that priceless commodity called freedom." It seems that the need to recover Ireland imaginatively and from a distance is more deeply a need for union with her mother. The great poignancy and

³ *The New York Times Book Review*, Nov. 18, 1984, pp. 38–40.

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artistic success of a story like "A Rose in the Heart" is that it meets this estrangement head-on and records with unflinching honesty an emotional ambivalence that doesn't take recourse in any of the diverting extremes of sex or country which are so common in O'Brien and are nothing but red herrings for the critic.

In his interview Roth also makes the important connection between O'Brien's descriptive acumen and these unresolved emotions, seeing description as a strategy to contain what are otherwise anarchic feelings: "You seem to remember the shape, texture, color and dimension of every object your eye may have landed upon while you were growing up—not to mention the human significance of all you saw, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. The result is prose like a fine piece of meshwork, a net of perfectly observed sensuous details that enables you to contain all the longing and pain and remorse that surge through the fiction." O'Brien's descriptive skill does, indeed, enable her to deal with emotional tumult, but it also encourages an avoidance of emotional honesty that places the value of her work in question. Her psychology as an author is revealed more by certain decisions she makes, especially with regard to how much she will indulge a narrator. There is a peril in using an interview, however, as evidence for this argument, since doing so can imply that my appeal is to certain biographical truths about Edna O'Brien, but, given her irrepressible, perverse humanity, the voice that we hear in her interviews is even more fictional than that of her fiction.

One could be forgiven for seeing O'Brien's work as autobiographical, for she is a writer who sounds most affected speaking in ordinary life and most candid narrating prose fiction. It is understandable why Anatole Broyard, in a quite contemptuous review of *The Country Girls Trilogy*, identifies the author with her chief character: "Like Kate, Miss O'Brien too sees the world through 'wronged eyes' and the success of her career suggests that, in literature at least, two wrongs may make a right."⁴ For most of the review Broyard's complaint is the futile one that O'Brien doesn't succeed at being someone else, the sort of woman he would like. His comments, however, lead in a more useful direction when he points to a collusion between author and character which his "two wrongs" implies. "Like Kate's, Baba's extra-marital choices are conspicuously odd, and if Miss O'Brien means these men to stand for women's fate, she has certainly stacked the deck. . . . The women in the later books are attractive, intelligent, witty—surely they could do better if the author let them." Stacking the deck and permitting characters particular destinies are authorial choices, matters for artistic control.

The abiding problem for critics of O'Brien's work is to explain the

⁴ *The New York Times Book Review*, May 11, 1986, p. 12.

constant blend of powerful and weak writing in her. So often she creates chilling evocations of confused and chaotic existence by means of an art which fails to distance itself from this cogent material. More often than not it enacts the same confusions. Her practice as a fiction writer raises proverbial questions about the craft, such as whether authorial detachment and objectivity are necessary virtues or whether to demand them is to be outmoded and unfair. A perfect example of this dilemma is raised by the story "Paradise," a terrifying representation of a needy woman's insecurity and self-loathing in a loveless relationship. The prose itself is brittle with the anxiety and panic felt by the protagonist; however, she is also a relentlessly whining, self-pitying person who is never thrown into ironic relief by authorial interpositions. The author seems complicitous in the self-destructive behavior, and this can prompt reader disapproval as much as intense reader identification. If we disapprove, the problem arises of whether we reject the personality of the author, that of the character or some elusive entity that we call the art itself. The fact remains, however, that the story leaves an indelible impression as the recreation of an extreme mental state.

Mary Jo Salter reviews *The Country Girls* in a more probing, engaged manner than Broyard.⁵ Her response, puzzled rather than disdainful, seems more appropriate, given the genuinely mixed quality of O'Brien's work. Salter's position also may reflect how the women's movement has played a role in prompting American critics to question O'Brien's representation of women just as the Irish question her portrayal of them. Salter, in relation to Kate, refers to "all that dreaming of men, and no thinking about her own plans regardless of them." She speaks too in a concerned tone of the catastrophic consequences of such an attitude: "In time the alternatives for such a woman reduce to death—either her own, as in Kate's probably suicidal drowning, or her lover's, as occurs in O'Brien's 1977 novel, *I Hardly Knew You*." But Salter makes a statement which suggests her own suspicions of a complicity between author and material, thereby calling O'Brien's detachment into question. Commenting on the dramatic transformation of a husband-figure from one book to the next, Salter observes, "It seems at least as much O'Brien's failure as Eugene's that he has changed from a complex man—charming, but with some serious faults—into a villain." This is a problem of accuracy and restraint, of lapsing from proportionate representation into stereotyping. Salter sees this degeneration occurring over time, with later books and stories more prone to generalized, blurred portraits than the lucid, extremely life-like *Country Girls*. Salter puts this difference down to the artist's special skill in portraying adolescence, which,

⁵ *The New Republic*, June 30, 1986, pp. 36–38.

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she says, is the same for most people, as opposed to middle-age where more telling, individual distinctions surface. It could just as easily be, however, that the authorial identity is arrested in its development and has difficulty imagining mature adults with clarity. O'Brien's characters, projections of a turbulent authorial psyche, participate in a dialectical relationship with that center, and the dynamic created promotes personal development. Aiding the discovery of authorial identity, these fictions serve a serious purpose.

If a characteristic of the late authorial persona and characters is that they chronically seek affirmation from others, the refreshing and reassuring attribute of Kate, as she first appears, is a radiant self-containment. We trust her precisely because she doesn't ask us to. Perhaps the adolescent tendency toward self-absorption makes her refer to no other tribunal than herself; but, because she has no interest in manipulation, she is utterly reliable as a narrator. As a result, the author disappears as a mediating presence. Salter rightly isolates the opening to *Country Girls* as an example of this transparency, but also, ironically, as an announcement of a major authorial obsession, her father: "I wakened quickly and sat up in bed abruptly. It is only when I am anxious that I waken easily and for a minute I did not know why my heart was beating faster than usual. Then I remembered. The old reason. He had not come home." As the passage unfolds, what distinguishes it from later, similar moments is the narrator's refusal to disguise or displace feeling. For instance, Kate laments, "There was a smell of frying bacon in the kitchen, but it didn't cheer me." The temptation for indulging her senses doesn't divert her from the main feeling; she doesn't pretend that vapors from the kitchen fill the hole of dread in her stomach.

At the same time, immediate sensations save her from being sucked under by another whirlpool of feeling, associated with her mother:

Getting out, I rested for a moment on the edge of the bed, smoothing the green satin bedspread with my hand. We had forgotten to fold it the previous night, Mama and me. Slowly I slid on to the floor and the linoleum was cold on the soles of my feet. My toes curled up instinctively. I owned slippers but Mama made me save them for when I was visiting my aunts and cousins; and we had rugs but they were rolled up and kept in drawers until visitors came in the summer-time from Dublin.

The prose lets us know that the mother has been internalized as a repressive force dictating every movement within her domain, where the gratification of simple pleasures is delayed and there are rules for the smallest operations. The reader senses clearly the mother's controlling personality and its toll on the child but is not enlisted to be on the daughter's side or to blame the mother, for there is nothing wheedling in the tone. Kate's healthy sensuality naturally and without defiance asserts itself against the rectitude of the

mother. Smoothing the “green satin bedspread,” she soaks in color and texture as psychic sustenance. It is as though the instinctive curling of her toes from the cold of the linoleum is a metaphor for the recoiling of her sturdy young nature from the pathology of her parents. Kate’s autonomy guarantees our own, so we don’t require an implied author to save us from fusion with a narrator’s subjectivity.

This opening passage, O’Brien’s first published words, is prophetic in many respects, not just for the considerations about narration which it raises, but for the place description occupies within it. It contains one of the best illustrations of O’Brien’s capacity to observe nature minutely, with a painter’s eye, and reproduce what she sees in language. She provides Kate with an exquisite evocation of early morning, as much a projection of a fanciful, feminine spirit as a description of mist and verdure:

The sun was not yet up, and the lawn was speckled with daisies that were fast asleep. There was dew everywhere. The grass below my window, the hedge around it, the rust and paling wire beyond that, and the big outer field were each touched with a delicate, wandering mist. And the leaves and the trees were bathed in the mist, and the trees looked unreal, like trees in a dream. Around the forget-me-nots that sprouted out of the side of the hedge were haloes of water. Water that glistened like silver. It was quiet, it was perfectly still. There was smoke rising from the blue mountain in the distance. It would be a hot day.

This is an ingenuous deflection of feeling onto the outside world. There is honesty too in not confusing the subjective descriptive process with objective reality: the romantic passage comes to the empirical conclusion, “It would be a hot day.” The child feels free to project onto nature innate and valid longings for peace and perfection, the utter stasis of the scene showing her need to escape family turmoil. Through the personification of the “daisies that were fast asleep” she expresses a desire for an undisturbed innocence belied in real life by her waking abruptly in an anxious state. The dew as it touches and bathes the landscape becomes an ethereal medium which transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. “Haloes” alerts us to the transcendent aim of this imagination. All this evanescence, however, is in balance with concrete fact: “The sun was not yet up.” We don’t feel that the narrator mistakes her hopes and needs for their actual fulfillment. The act of projecting feeling onto nature and describing the composite scene which results serves a healthier purpose than escape. It affirms a human vitality manifested by this creative power.

The exact place where the narrator is launched into this fantasy is important. It doesn’t follow a further stab of anxiety about the father, but rather another subliminal reminder of the mother’s censorious ubiquity. The

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window blind has shot up and the cord tangled itself when the girl reflects, "It was lucky that Mama had gone downstairs, as she was always lecturing me on how to let up the blinds properly, gently." These last two words succinctly communicate the ambiguous impression the mother makes, as forbidding and attractive. By describing a beautiful world which is entirely her own, the daughter creates both a defense against maternal control and a means of imitating the mother's winning romanticism, which insists that even mundane tasks be imbued with grace. Both of these functions for the descriptive act, self-affirmation and emulation of another, come out in a key passage from *Johnny, I Hardly Knew You*.⁶ At this late stage, however, there is an enormous split between unbearable feeling and the solace of the physical world. During a session with a psychiatrist the narrator experiences a gothic, fantasized reentry of the womb followed by an escape into apparent ordinariness.

I was hurtled down, down down into the denizens of horror, with the devils to direct and make mock of my flight. The walls purred with blood and the spheres through which I had to pass were lit by flame. There were no doors or no way out. Yet I had to get out, or die, or choke, and out I did get only to be dragged back again, back into the swirling sphere, and again and again, with no respite. . . . As helpless as spermatazoa . . . the world that I came back to was indeed unswerving, almost exquisite. I was glad to feel the tableness of a table, to trot down a little path towards a garden seat and know that I wouldn't be swept away.

The inanimate object world is identified as an anchor for a psyche otherwise driven mad by vertiginous feelings. The author wants us to believe that the salvation found is objective reality, but the narrator's oasis, in its quiddity, is even less material than the wonderland Kate conjured from her window. A platonic table is less than material, and "to trot down a little garden path towards a garden seat" is to romanticize the landscape. There is a definite push from within to idealize. It is as though the acceptable face of the mother, her gentle, romantic side, is projected outward, leaving the controlling, punitive part inside, repressed.

The balanced creature in *Country Girls*, who preserves a paradoxical response to her mother and knows the difference between raw nature and her transmutation of it, is replaced by someone who splits and polarizes emotion. Moreover, her emotional life is encased in fantasy and the physical world is rendered abstract, an insidious inversion which is caused by sustained stress. *Country Girls*, with its unembellished frankness, contains this

⁶ All the titles used here are the original ones under British copyright. After the first mention of a title, subsequent references will use an abbreviation.

important disclosure by Kate: "Always on the brink of trouble I look at something, like a tree or a flower or an old shoe, to keep me from palpitating." Much of O'Brien's descriptive writing is not the product of deliberate looking at something but distracted movement away from one thing, usually an acute feeling, toward another, an object, a transition essentially from emotion to sensation. A moment in the story "Paradise" demonstrates this involuntary response. When a conversation among people she fears comes to a subject that provokes anxiety in the protagonist, the dialogue abruptly stops and the next words are, "The sun, filtered by the green needles, fell and made play on the dense clusters of brown nuts. They never ridicule nature, she thought, they never dare." This is more than description and a more radical outcome is intended than finding self-affirmation through recreating nature imaginatively. Here we witness an empathic flow into the object itself. Invulnerability from excruciating pain comes from a Keatsian entry into an object which the senses have intensely perceived. This particular imaginative act blurs the boundaries of genre and we enter the territory of lyric poetry. We also come to the crux where strength and weakness combine in O'Brien, for at such moments she fails to distance herself from the narrator to enable us to see the gesture of escape for what it is. We fail to receive an emotional profile of the character, achieved through irony, gaining instead, through our own unaided extrapolations, a profile of the author, who participates in both the romanticism and escapism.

O'Brien's penchant and capacity for descriptive writing does more for her prose than lend it texture and warmth. Even Roth's image of containment, the fine meshwork through which feeling surges, doesn't do justice to the subtle interaction of emotion and description that takes place. A passage from *Johnny* illustrates the psychological complexity such instances involve when the descriptive strategy is a paradoxical effort to control and avoid reality. When rape is imminent the speaker tells us, "I knew for certain there would be a scuffle within minutes. It was nearly dark. Strange to say I was able to notice the countryside." She then constructs a stylized view of the scene which is more like a description of a Sienese painting than an actual landscape. Our suspicions are confirmed when she casually remarks, "I thought down there [Sienal] were the paintings I had seen." This literary moment is similar to the famous scene in *The Ambassadors* when Strether is on the brink of discovering the truth about a sexual liaison he has regarded as innocent, as much a crisis for James' fastidious hero as rape is for O'Brien's worldly heroine. In his crisis Strether frames the French countryside where the truth will be imminently revealed in the terms of a painting he previously saw in Boston. Both figures project an ideal, static image from memory onto an inanimate object world in order to control a dynamic,

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threatening human situation. They manage by the tactic to place themselves at least two removes from the source of their anxiety. James' particular genius is that he interjects just enough irony for us to perceive Strether's evasion, to know that his picturesque projections differ wildly from the facts. O'Brien's prose does not generate irony because the narrator's tactic for survival is shared by the author. A benefit for the reader, however, is that the absence of mediating cerebration brings the unsettling mixture of fear and rationalization immediately before us.

The preeminent attraction of descriptive writing for O'Brien is that its overt focus is the non-human world, one safely outside the emotional melee of human relationships. The descriptive act becomes anodyne when it mingles the unbearable feelings produced by intimacy with the innocence and inertness of objects. If one reads O'Brien for the extreme effect those first intimates, mother and father, have had on her authorial psyche, then various aspects of her fictional practice become comprehensible, indeed seem necessary in the light of these psychological exigencies. The collusion between author and character is essentially a blurring of the boundaries between individual and parental identities; and the unresolved nature of these primary relationships accounts for O'Brien's overall obsessiveness. It is this quality of her imagination which provides the energy both to explore unfamiliar psychological recesses and to repeat the same hackneyed experiences over and over again, without apparent control. The former makes reading her works exciting, the latter makes it wearying. The reader is torn between interest and impatience.

O'Brien admits baldly to Roth, "I am obsessive, also I am industrious. Besides, the time when you are most alive and most aware is in childhood and one is trying to recapture that heightened awareness." A telescopic look down the length of her works reveals this quality of obsessiveness in a simple, direct way: the repetition of the same characters in only slightly different guises. Kate and Baba appear in the three early novels, then become Willa and Patsy in *Casualties of Peace*, Stella and Zee in *Zee & Co.*, Emma and Caitheleen in *A Pagan Place*. The procession of pairs within the stories is too long to relate. The passive-aggressive husband figure enjoys minor mutations in the different fictional embodiments of Eugene in the trilogy, Robert in *Zee*, a malevolent presence in *August is a Wicked Month*, Dr. Flagglar in *Night*, Herod in *Casualties*. The recurrence of stock characters and incidents articulates the psychological law that early crises dictate the content, in the form of psychological projection, of later experience. No wonder adult life seems tepid compared to childhood, when the only immediate experiences, if they are not subsequently relinquished, take place. It is intriguing to ask why evidence of obsessiveness mounts in the works directly after *Country Girls*.

The answer may be that sex comes into her fiction after this point and physical intimacy unleashes primitive feelings that induce a regression back into the triangle of the parent-child relationship. Kate in *Country Girls* gains steadily in autonomy because she is constantly affirming parts of herself that lie beyond parental control. Sex and the atavistic emotions it uncovers disturbs this progress and leaves identity in fragments. In the preface to the Collins selection O'Brien describes herself as a "searching, somewhat fractured adult." The creation of fictions is part of an effort to redeem herself, become whole.

The Kate/Baba division is fundamentally one between the sides of the author's character dictated by mother and by father. All the morbid Kates yearn for romantic fulfillment and transcendent, sublime experience; the Babas are hard realists—sensual, opportunistic but decent. The father's roistering fecklessness affects the author's psychology and artistic development by informing all the Baba characters who prod the introspective, meek Kates into adventure and fun. It is crucial that the personality traits of Baba's fictional parents reverse those of Kate's: Mr. Brennan is the sober, nurturing parent, while Martha is the alcoholic extrovert. It is important to see this reversal as meeting an authorial need.

The reversal expresses the fantasy, with its own inner logic, that if her father were more feminine, then she and her mother might be less so, might enjoy more crude Baba-buoyancy. As matters stand, the father with his patent, relentless flaws forces a realism on the author so extreme that it can mean the extinction of finer feelings in the face of brute physical force. The result can be a self-conscious toughness which seeks to eliminate feeling rather than express it with exuberance. This defensive imitation of the father's indifference to feeling results in a personal loss of the resilience which emotional fluency provides. The positive face of the anti-romantic author is that endearing rogue who endorses in her characters a rude capacity for survival. Its darker face is the adolescent who persistently generates in her plots an acting-out rather than a considered judgment, superficial busyness rather than purposeful activity, endless stimulation rather than emotional satisfaction. The glacial nihilism of these middle novels, heavy with casual sex and philistinism, in contrast to the ebullient *Country Girls*, is caused largely by suppression of a sensitive Kate (modelled on her martyred mother but with a generous leavening of the father) in favor of a more radical split between Kate and Baba types, with a preference for the latter. The sensualist manqué of *August* thinks she can expunge painful feeling through merely desperate acts, chiefly sexual. The appropriation of first-person narrating space to Baba in *Married Bliss* (where Kate anomalously receives third-

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person handling) heralds this phase of emulating paternal callousness rather than exquisite maternal suffering.

O'Brien also told Roth, "I am a creature of conflicts. . . . I am often rather at odds with myself and others." While the dialectic set up between narrators and author stimulates growth, one shouldn't underestimate the value in the creative conflict of Kate and Baba as opposing but interacting projections. The father, perceived as sexually rapacious and perpetually absent, is also the model who urges a breaking away from the mother's stranglehold into the autonomy of sex and the outside world. If the mother's influence on the author's descriptive ability is to promote romantic projections onto landscape, the father bends those powers toward realism, sometimes with a very hard edge.

The story "Forgetting," a chronicle of the bland, recuperative days after the end of an affair, contains instances of an extreme, in fact bogus, realism prevalent in the later works, where Baba's cynicism eclipses Kate's naïveté. The truth is more that the two converge but with the hard, protective armor of Baba on the surface. The realism is only apparent. A soft center lies within the stark perimeters a jaded eye perceives. It is apt, therefore, that the scene is a Mediterranean resort where a glaring sun gives objects their clinical outline and the heavy scent of holiday sex provides the required, lurid aura. The opening words contain an unsettling blend of apparent naturalism and obvious metaphor. It begins with a studied neutrality—"Then the foliage is wet, the sun shining on it, while all the umbrellas and parasols are already dry and people hurrying down on their pop-pop bicycles or on foot, down to the sea"—but quickly abandons this antiseptic vision to observe, "By evening the yellow flower of the marrow tops will have wilted to an unrecognizable shred, holiday couples will have quarrelled, will have made love and half-built castles will be like forlorn forts on the vistas of dark sands." Once the metaphorical intention has been made explicit, we endow retrospectively what has come before with an implicit content. The initial coldness is seen with hindsight as a pitiable denial of feelings that seem crushed by circumstance. The flat surface of images is a barrier to keep down a pain derived through sexual involvement with men. O'Brien gives us no pointers by which to perceive this irony.

The feelings associated with the father are so engulfing they make distancing impossible. It is his introjected image which makes O'Brien ceaselessly portray sexually insatiable women, like the father, in disastrous relationships with hurtful men, also like the father. When one of her protagonists complains that "one man is the same as another," we read a profound truth beneath the cliché: when each man is a projection of an original father figure

and each romance a replaying of an original trauma, sameness is the result. The promiscuity which has become a hall-mark of O'Brien's writing is the result of a serious authorial need to realize the full content of the intense feelings associated with a father figure. As though still relying on an unreliable father to validate their relationship as an intimate one, she seeks one male spectre after another in futile quest of this elusive conclusion to years of waiting. The sexual partners become more apparitional and allegorical as her fiction evolves because they become mere representatives of an inherently remote figure from the past. However painful and inaccessible the father has been, however, he is idealized in direct proportion to the degree he has removed himself and caused hurt.

Mother Ireland, which may with justification be read as a series of psychological projections onto Irish history and landscape, contains a tendentious account of patriarchal culture which reveals a relishing of the violence associated with her father. Referring to ancient warriors she exclaims, "Their chess pieces could pierce a man's brain and often did. Warriors sat down with their opponents' slain heads under their belts and guts falling about their feet." Mary Hooligan in *Night* luxuriates in such gore and the author offers not a single caveat to the blood-lust. This is the author who propels the Kate of *Lonely Girls* to derive more sexual excitement from a brawl between country rowdies than from sex with her civilized partner. This same Kate endures an inordinately protracted term of imprisonment with a drunken, distracted father, from whom escape would be easy. It appears that if Kate's sights were not obscured by idealization she would see her father's limits and bolt, but it is her author's bondage to a paternal image that determines Kate's paralysis.

This powerlessness, which expresses itself most in a fixation with rape, could only be reduced by an objective distancing from the explosive emotions associated with the father. The obstacle to achieving this self-control, however, is the introjected image of an excessively controlling mother. The quandary is that assuming responsibility for one's own feeling seems like acceding to her tyranny. If relationships with men for O'Brien's characters commonly culminate in the eruption of psychotic violence (the ending to *Johnny*, for example, where a young man is actually murdered), confrontation with the mother's influence leads to a much more insidious effect, an ineffable implosion of the psyche. Much of the tedium that comes with reading O'Brien is the result of the melodramas constructed around men, while the struggle with female identity produces a hidden content which is more subtle—so too the artistic rendering of it. If the lack of objectivity about the father results in a lack of ironic distance from her female characters; masochism in relation to men, the basic collusion between the author

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and these characters, the continuous nature of their composite identity, is the consequence of a failure in differentiation from the mother. An unhealthy fusion is responsible for that blurring of boundaries between author and protagonists which creates so many evaluative doubts. But the search for identity involved also creates an interaction between author and characters which is the essential but covert story O'Brien is telling. A dimension beyond conventionally defined content, this struggle for self-objectification gained through the process of narrating gives a psychological immediacy and urgency to the prose that compels our attention and respect.

Much of her best writing occurs when O'Brien confronts directly the implications of fusion with the mother. The sustained honesty of "A Rose in the Heart" stems from her finding the courage to admit and articulate a paradoxical truth, one half of which is alienation from the mother, the other half an intense fusion:

The food was what united them, eating off the same plate, using the same spoon, watching one another's chews, feeling the food as it went down the other's gullet . . . when it ate blancmange or junket it was eating part of the lovely substance of its mother. . . . Her mother's veins were her veins, her mother's lap was a second heaven . . . her mother's body was a recess that she would wander inside forever and ever . . . a sepulchre growing deeper and deeper. . . . She would not budge, would not be lured out.

O'Brien as an author remains embedded in the flesh of her female protagonists in order to avoid depicting, and perhaps experiencing, the terrors of separation, emergence and action on the surface of a world stripped of the mythological projections rampant in *Mother Ireland*.

In "Rose," the speaker refers to her mother as a "gigantic sponge, a habitation in which she longed to sink and disappear forever and ever." As O'Brien's fiction advances it becomes apparent how strong the impulse is to "sink," how increasingly reluctant she is to be "lured out." This spectacle of fusion may frighten and repel the reader, and it does hinder artistic qualities of detachment and control, but it also makes reading what might be considered the worst of O'Brien a powerful encounter with the messy and unresolved in human experience. More lifelike than any art of lapidary perfection, its impact on the reader is visceral and personal. This sort of art fails to mitigate pain and confusion just as the mind often fails to dispel the anxieties of actual living. Many of O'Brien's narrators become haunting figures for the reader precisely because no implied author has pinpointed and filed away their misconceptions. Their neuroses aren't magically corrected by an ulterior voice of psychological normality. For example, in "A Scandalous Woman" an unreliable narrator, disappointed in marriage and deeply repressed, follows with pathological doggedness the career of a

sexually precocious childhood friend, who eventually suffers and recovers from a mental breakdown. The parasitic motives of the frustrated narrator are not exposed through irony, but, if they were, it might lessen the uncomfortable effect the prose has on us. This self-deluded narration possesses a resonance not unlike that created by Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway, whose homo-erotic obsession with Jay Gatsby is also left throbbing under the surface of the text as an unconscious sexual drive.

O'Brien's most revealing disclosure in the Roth interview concerns a female compulsion to merge with the mother: "If you want to know what I regard as the principal crux of female despair, it is this: in the Greek myth of Oedipus and in Freud's exploration of it, the son's desire for his mother is admitted; the infant daughter also desires its mother but it is unthinkable either in myth, in fantasy or in fact, that the desire be consummated." O'Brien's most authentic writing centers around this secret wish, either demonstrating the catastrophic consequences of trying to realize the fusion, as in "A House of my Dreams," or in presenting the growth that separation from a fantasized fusion promotes, the subject of "Sister Imelda." It is no coincidence that this story of a schoolgirl's moving beyond a reciprocated crush on a repressed and febrile nun is one of O'Brien's most finely crafted works, artistic control working hand-in-hand with autonomy. So much is the primal unity a fugitive ideal, the more it's sought the more it disperses, and the ego that chases the phantom is fragmented in the process. The speaker of "House of my Dreams," who ends in mental breakdown, begins to caress another woman and says, "It was a strange sensation, as if touching gauze or some substance that was about to vanish into thin air." So too, those works in which the author fails to differentiate herself from her material, "Night" being the outstanding instance, tend to fragment for the reader and "vanish into thin air."

When the center of a work doesn't hold, we are presented with a troublesome problem of response. The rapidly disintegrating story seems to beg us for help to erect boundaries, and bestow integration. Or perhaps to be complicitous in the breakdown and suffer it too. Even the hint of such an invitation can leave some readers disgusted and cold, dismissing the work as an artistic failure. A detached but secure reader may regard even the manipulation as part of an appalling but convincing enactment of a real psychological condition. The prose unquestionably makes this powerful gesture of appeal to us, demanding reaction, either to affirm or reject the author. O'Brien's search for the innocence of recovered unity ends with this bid to merge with the reader which appears to replay some very old drama. We become the idealized other, pursued by a seductive rhetoric that intends to ensnare but may fly past us on the scent of more willing prey.