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**Tough Luck:**

*The Unfortunate Birth of Edna O'Brien*

by JAMES M. HAULE

EDNA O'BRIEN'S *Mother Ireland* is a book filled with memories that move starkly between terror and pity as it explains, with the help of the haunting photographs of Fergus Bourke, why Ireland must be left and why Ireland can never be escaped. Her last statement is a remarkable admission of an entrapment at once willing and unwilling, a confession of both victory and defeat:

I live out of Ireland because something in me warns me that I might stop there, that I might cease to feel what it has meant to have such a heritage, might grow placid when in fact I want yet again and for indefinable reasons to trace the same route, the trenchant childhood route, in the hope of finding some clue that will, or would, or could, make the leap that would restore one to one's original place and state of consciousness, to the radical innocence of the moment just before birth. (89)

The entire book, short as it is, clearly demonstrates the extent to which O'Brien's own life has been transformed into the early novels (especially *The Country Girls Trilogy*) and a number of her short stories (many collected recently in *A Fanatic Heart*). What makes this autobiographical statement so unusual is that it is an admission that the only escape from the oppressive heritage of moral obligation and social responsibility lies not in death or in unconsciousness, but in pre-consciousness: a state prior to knowledge that can only be lost at birth, befuddled by life, and fixed forever in death. Her work is an attempt to return to this condition of stasis, of innumerable possibilities unencumbered by the mothering that is their ruin.

This, of course, does not make O'Brien wholly unique. The stories of Elizabeth Bowen often center on children of profound moral and intellectual power who come to learn that life narrows rather than expands possibilities. "The Tommy Crans" and "Maria" are especially good examples of this. In a unique exploration of this same idea, Muriel Spark reveals in her story "The First Year of My Life" that all babies possess at birth a cosmic awareness that life is designed to destroy. At birth the child knows everything:

Babies, in their waking hours, know everything that is going on everywhere in the world; they can tune in to any conversation they choose, switch on to any scene. We have all experienced this power. It is only after that it is brainwashed out of us. . . . (263)

Because the narrator is as yet "unable . . . to raise my head from the
pillow and as yet only twenty inches long,” she must observe the activities of the adults without comment. The First World War is raging and even the most brilliant authors, she discovers with disgust, miss the mark: “‘I only wish I were a fox or a bird,’ D. H. Lawrence was writing to somebody. Dreary old creeping Jesus. I fell asleep” (265).

It soon becomes clear, however, that Spark’s narrator does not lapse into unconsciousness just to gain the strength necessary to participate in the world. Her human inheritance, intact at birth, makes the world seem dull and vicious. Sleep is escape. Life will be long, and there is much to unlearn. She begins life in a condition of intellectual superiority and physical dependance. This is an encumbrance that cannot be maintained, since it would make life with humanity impossible.

It is an analogous condition that O’Brien describes in nearly all her published work. While the child for her is not the awfully empowered infant of Bowen or Spark, it is a morally and intellectually superior being nonetheless who begins, as it encounters the world, to construct fictions in an effort to ward off the terrible depravity of adults. While Spark’s narrator describes a ridiculous nursery routine in an arid and satiric way, O’Brien’s child finds in the dependancy of infancy and childhood a betrayal that is too dark to afford more than a slender moment of relief. The child instinctively desires what the adult, in Ireland or in exile, more fully understands to be a useless longing: the desire to be her own mother, at once to embrace and to betray the single compelling figure that represents the beginning and the end of life. It is mothering that will require Spark’s infant to relinquish its intelligence, and it is mothering throughout O’Brien’s work that condemns the women of Ireland to the support of a social and moral order that is hopelessly destructive.

In O’Brien’s Ireland, this order is the product of a mediaeval repression that focuses on reproduction in general and motherhood in particular. Divorce, contraception and abortion are all proscribed, leaving women with no choice but to be “good.” Thus Irish women fear men who will not care for them and whose dominance is supported by Church and State; they conceive new life long before they have even an elementary understanding of their own; they deliver children into a world that denies natural emotion and desire. The result is successive generations of women who associate the misery of life, not with the oppressor, but with the oppressed who support with resignation this obliteration of intelligence and identity. Mothers are, therefore, more feared and hated than loved by their daughters. The prospect of motherhood itself is so horrible to O’Brien’s young women that it leads to emotional and physical deformity. Clearly, a woman’s own birth and its replication in the birth of her daughter is, in Ireland, a tragedy of impossible proportions. This is the thematic center of O’Brien’s stories and her novels.

“A Scandalous Woman” is a good example. The narrator claims that she participates in the events of the story only slightly. It is not her own,
but “another’s destiny that is . . . exciting” (239). This other is Eily who had the “face of a madonna,” but the energy and desires of “a colt.” Much is made throughout the story of her similarity to an animal, and once her downfall is confirmed, she is treated like a wild and dangerous beast much in need of “breaking.” The success of the conspiracy of church and family to reduce Eily to compliance with moral and social orthodoxy results, at the end of the story, in the narrator’s realization that “ours indeed was a land of shame, a land of murder, and a land of strange, throttled, sacrificial women” (265).

Innocence is reserved for childhood. Even then, however, the games most often played mimic adult situations. The most telling of these was “hospital.” Eily’s sister “Nuala was happiest when someone was upset” and it was then that she liked to play at being a surgeon:

Nuala liked to operate with a big black carving knife, and long before she commenced, she gloated over the method and over what tumors she was going to remove. She used to say that there would be nothing but a shell by the time she had finished, and that one wouldn’t be able to have babies, or women’s complaints ever. She had names for: the female parts of one, Susies for the breasts, Florries for the stomach, and Matilda for the lower down. (241)

Eily was the nurse. The narrator, invariably the patient, was disconcerted with the necessary preparations for surgery, since “Nuala would be sharpening the knife and humming ‘Waltzing Matilda’ . . .” (241).

This “woeful event” is more than comic relief, since it prepares us for the reduction of Eily, and finally of the narrator herself, to a mere shell. Eily is betrayed by her own physical desires. This results in an unwanted pregnancy and a loveless marriage with a forbidden Protestant boy who wishes for nothing more than escape. Ironically his first name is “Romeo,” but his middle name, “Jack,” is also the name of Eily’s father from whom, as a small child, she used to hide under the table in order to “escape . . . thrashings” (239). Eily meets the boy at a dance organized for the “aid of the new mosaic altar” for the local church. It is her “debut,” and it leads to a series of surreptitious meetings “Sunday after Sunday, with one holy day, Ascension Thursday, thrown in” (244).

The narrator agrees to help, but is beset with guilt “over the number of commandments we were both breaking” and so gargles with salt water and refuses proper food as “forms of atonement to God” (245). Eily was asking her to do “the two hardest things on earth—to disobey God and my own mother” (245). When this Romeo seems to lose interest in Eily after she sacrifices moral conviction and family responsibility for his company, both girls consult a “witch” who reluctantly tells the truth: Eily will see a “J” return twice. The girls assume that this means that her lover will always be hers. The truth of the matter is, however, that her lover will become another “Jack” like her father, and that he has sired within her a child who, after the shotgun wedding that morality and decency require, will in turn be called “Jack.” It is a bitter fate that reproduces the tragedy of domestic Ireland, making endless repetition unavoidable.
Once her condition is known, the narrator laments that Eily's "most precious thing was gone, her jewel. The inside of one was like a little watch, and once that jewel or jewels were gone, the outside was nothing but a sham" (252). Ironically, Eily has been reduced by pregnancy to the hollow shell of the childhood operation. Her punishment is to be kept like an untrustworthy animal, "hemmed in by her mother and some other old women" (253) at church, and locked up all day with the animal feed. The parents discussed her like "a beast that had had some ailment" (257). When she is let out, she is seen trying "to dart into the back of the car, tried it more than once, just like an animal trying to get back to its lair" (260). At one point Eily's father "wanted to put a halter around her, but my mother said it wasn't the Middle Ages" (255).

Most telling of all is the fear that all this engenders in the young narrator. As she washes dishes, she finds that she is "unable to move because of a dreadful pain that gripped the lower part of my back and stomach. I was convinced that I, too, was having a baby and that if I were to move or part my legs, some freakish thing would come tumbling out" (255). These fearful pains are not sympathetic but symptomatic. Mindless mothering offers only loneliness and rejection and is the cause of her grief. Her mother responds to the scandal, not with openness and love, but with the enjoinder "to go home in pairs, to speak Irish, and not to walk with any sense of provocation" (260). The narrator is praised for her goodness, though she knows how much she has shared in Eily's sin. She is warned to cut her hair and look as unattractive as possible, since "'Fine feathers make fine birds'" (261). Like Eily, she too is treated like an animal worth watching with alarm. Internally, the narrator is consumed not just with her "pains" but with parasites. After the grim wedding, she reports, I "passed a big tapeworm, and that was a talking point for a week or so . . ." (261). Both physically and emotionally, she is slowly being reduced to the lifeless shell demanded by conformity to moral and social requirements.

Eily gradually loses her hair and her sanity and cannot remember her best friend without effort. Her "recovery" is effected only when she accedes to the demands of parents and church, ignoring her wayward husband and the dreams of her youth. The "restored" Eily is a mother herself many times over when she is finally confronted by the narrator, who is herself pregnant for the second time. Neither of them can talk convincingly about themselves and center their attentions instead on a child. The narrator's "first thought" when she sees her old friend is that the enemy, "they," must have changed Eily by drugging "the feelings out of her, they must have given her strange brews, and along with quelling her madness, they had taken her spark away" (264). As a final gesture, Eily anoints the narrator with "a little holy water on my forehead" (265), a telling reminder of the curse that they both must bear for a lifetime.

The reduction of Eily and the narrator to moral and social stereotypes
is clearly linked throughout the story to their mothers and their own mothering. They both become increasingly concerned with forgetfulness and order, yearning for a state of stasis associated mysteriously with womb and womankind. The powerful imagination of youth is lost as they desire to conform to a social conscience that allows them no individual moral or mental life. As O'Brien says in *Mother Ireland*, they gradually awaken to "a world where help and pity did not forthcome" (47). It is their own birth that they desire, this second time without the mothering that was their ruin. O'Brien herself understands, but allows few of her characters to realize, that "to be on an island makes you realize that it is going to be harder to escape and that it will involve another birth, a further breach of waters" (32). More awful still is the realization that to be born again, even at your own prompting, will ultimately make little difference. The "radical innocence of the moment just before birth" cannot ever be recovered.

This yearning for another birth outside the womb is even more powerfully dramatized in O'Brien's novels, most especially in *The Country Girls Trilogy*. The recent publication of a one-volume edition of these novels provided an opportunity to conclude the sad story of Kate and Baba. Twenty years after the events that concluded *Girls in Their Married Bliss*, Baba relates in her own voice the terrible fate that opened beneath them both.

O'Brien herself described the purpose of this unusual conclusion in a brief article published in *The New York Times Book Review*. Entitled "Why Irish Heroines Don't Have to Be Good Anymore," it approaches directly the center of Edna O'Brien's quarrel with the world—her warfare with the destructive role that Ireland demands of her women. She describes "the glorious tradition of fanatic Irish writing which flourished before sanctity and propriety took over" and admits that

it was with this jumble of association and dream and hope that I first sat down to write. 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 understand every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was. As well as that, their rather meager lives would be made bearable by the company of each other. Kate was looking for love. Baba was looking for money. Kate was timid, yearning and elegiac. Baba took up the cudgel against life and married an Irish builder who was as likely to clout her as to do anything else. That was 20 years ago. The characters remained with me as ghosts, but without the catharsis of death. I had never finished their story, I had left them suspended, thinking perhaps that they could stay young indefinitely or that their mistakes might be canceled out or they would achieve that much touted fallacy—a rebirth.

Without youth or hope of rebirth, Kate and Baba face death and bewilderment. We learn in the "Epilogue" that Kate has "gashed her wrists, thinking daftly that someone might come to her rescue, a male Florence Nightingale might kneel and bandage and swoop her off to a life of certainty and bliss" (511). Baba sees that Kate's desire for mothering
has blinded her to life and led inevitably to death, for she could not realize that
we're lonely buggers, we need a bit of a romp so as not to feel that we're walking, talking skeletons. Kids don't do really; at least not when they grow up, and that was Kate's mistake, the old umbilical love. She wanted to twine fingers with her son, Cash, throughout eternity. (515)

It was to avoid "the rupture" that Kate experienced that Baba isolates herself from tenderness and love. Sex is purely physical; it carries no spiritual significance or danger. She refuses to accept the responsibility of mothering most especially, perhaps, because her illegitimate child is female. Baba does not abort it, but instead severs all emotional connections. Thus, her daughter rejects her from birth, for the girl had

a will of her own and a mind of her own from the day she was born. Vomited the milk I gave her, rejected me, from day one, preferred cow's milk, solids, anything. She left home before she was thirteen, couldn't stand us. . . . I'm not a mother like Kate, drooling and holding out the old metaphorical breast, like a warm scone or griddle bread. She stood up to me, my little daughter, Tracy. At five years of age she walked into my bedroom and said, "You better love me or I'll be a mess." (515)

Ironically, when her brutal husband Durack suffers a stroke, Baba must forego recreational sex on "one of those tropical islands" and come home to play nurse. His illness has turned him into an enormous child who insists on seeing A Thousand and One Dalmations and who writes pathetic little notes, like "I love you, do you hear. Answer me now.' " Baba is not moved; she would not mother a child, and she will not mother an afflicted husband. She is repelled by his desire to

to be with me all the time, nestling. He'd think that I had gone and he'd tell me that Baba had gone when I was there in the kitchen making fucking potato cakes and barley soup to remind him of his martyred mother and all that mavourneen mush. I was full up to the gills with guilt and pity and frustration. (519)

Hardened to the demands of life, Baba is able to survive, however unhappily, because she recognizes no claims upon her. She sees no purpose, only survival. Because Kate cannot relinquish claims, she is doomed to as much unhappiness and, finally, to death by suffocation. Her drowning is ruled accidental, but Baba knows better: "Death is death, whether it's by accident or design." She knows Kate swam after dark on purpose. It was all a "blind really, so that no one would know, so that her son wouldn't know, self-emulation to the fucking end" (524).

What most irritates Baba is that Kate's normal condition was, after all, much like Durack's final predicament. What's more, Kate chose to live in darkness and unreason. Baba is infuriated that her friend has died in a fit of irrational devotion to all that betrayed her, to motherhood and duty:

Why couldn't she see reason, why couldn't she see that people are brigands, what made her think that there was such a thing as twin-star perpetuity, when all around her people were scraping for bits of happiness and not getting anywhere? (528)
During her last days, Kate writes and talks in a kind of code that not even Baba attempts to interpret, for “you'd need a brain transfusion to understand them.” Everything she writes or speaks has, in one way or another, to do with the betrayal of desire and mother love. Kate's notebook records an almost Blakean aphorism worthy of “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”: “The flushes of youth are nothing to the flushes of age, the one is rose leaf, the other the hemorrhage of death” (528). More telling still is Kate's inability to pray, a condition that leads to her “mumbled petitions to St. Anthony” (Patron of the Lost) and her questions about “infinity, if there was something more to life.” What she dreads most is the fearful condition of the narrator of “A Scandalous Woman” who, by story's end, has become a shell. Kate fears “the emptiness... the void.” She experiences strange physical pains and hallucinations, as does the teller of Eily's story. She sees herself, by turns, “stitched to the sky with daggers or pins,” or feels that her teeth were too large for her head and “were crushing her” (529).

The anguish of birth trauma haunts Kate's final weeks. The departure of her son is the “last breach” that proves too much for her. Kate knows that her heart is her great affliction and, along with the female organs that have betrayed her, she wants to “tear it out, stamp on it, squash it to death, her heart being her undoing” (530). She has become a shell as surely as the conspirators of “A Scandalous Woman.” Baba will not forgive her, because she cannot tolerate “people like her” who are “always looking for meaning” (530). Baba knows there is no meaning, not at least where Kate would find it. She knows that Kate's first problem was with “father—the crux of her dilemma.” Her second was an acceptance of the role she had learned from her mother—to suffer and to die. In Baba's view, this makes her worthy, finally, of compassion:

I don't blame her. I realize she was in the fucking wilderness. Born there. Hadn't the reins to haul herself out. Should have gone to night school, learned a few things, a few mottos such as “Put thy trust in no man.” (531)

Baba’s monologue ends, unexpectedly, not in anger but in longing. She too, it seems, cannot completely deny that “much touted fallacy.” She wants to be the true mother, the progenitor that Kate could not be for herself. She wants rebirth, this time without mother or father to bring it to a bad end:

Jesus, is there no end to what people expect? Even now I expect a courier to whiz in on a scooter; to say it's been a mistake; I'm crazy, I'm even thinking of the Resurrection and the stone pushed away, I want to lift her up and see the life and the blood coming back into her cheeks. I want time to be put back, I want it to be yesterday, to undo the unwanted crime that has been done. Useless. Nothing for it but fucking hymns. (531)

Baba's graphic language here is all the more poignant because she realizes its futility. She has demonstrated that she “understands every piece of protocol and religion and hypocrisy that there was.” Yet, though
she has taken "up the cudgel against life," she is still unable to dismiss entirely the hope of salvation from "a world where help and pity did not forthcoming." Kate is no different. She knows all too well that it is mothering and motherhood that have betrayed her. Twenty years ago she sought a physical remedy to the problem, choosing to be sterilized rather than face mothering again. At the end of Girls in Their Married Bliss, an alarmed and confused Baba visits the hospital after the surgery. It is a grim tableau:

“Well,” Baba said after some time, meaning, "What does it feel like?"
“Well,” Kate said, “at least I've eliminated the risk of making the same mistake again,” and for some reason the words sent a chill through Baba's heart.
“You've eliminated something,” Baba said. Kate did not stir, not flinch; she was motionless as the white bedpost. What was she thinking? What words were going on in her head? For what had she prepared herself? Evidently she did not know, for at that moment she was quite content, without a qualm in the world. It was odd for Baba to see Kate like that, all the expected responses were missing, the guilt and doubt and sadnesses, she was looking at someone of whom too much had been cut away, some important region that they both knew nothing about. (508)

In a violent act close to self-mutilation, Kate has attempted to cut away all resemblance to the great betrayer. Sadly, however, the "Epilogue" dramatically demonstrates that Kate has not “eliminated” any of the “risk.” After twenty years more of life and after the most extraordinary efforts to release or deny the effects and obligations of mothering, neither she nor Baba are able to reject entirely the claims of Irish maternity. Kate's operation is a real-life version of the playful surgeries of “A Scandalous Woman,” but the results are the same: “there would be nothing left but a shell . . . and one wouldn’t be able to have babies or women’s complaints ever.”

O'Brien's complaint, then, is that Irish women cannot hope for life from their mothers, and they cannot hope to give life, in turn, to their daughters. Perhaps the solution to the problem of birth, to follow the author's own example, is exile—to seek "that further breach of waters" she discusses in Mother Ireland. But even this "rebirth" is not free from the ruinous effects of fathering and mothering. As Edna O'Brien admits, freedom is partial because the "leaving is conditional. The person you are, is anathema to the person you would like to be." Perhaps the truth, then, is that there is no safe place for women born to a country that offers no chance for health or happiness. If so, to be born in Ireland at all is the worst of luck.

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