



the PARIS REVIEW

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 82 EDNA O'BRIEN

Edna O'Brien resembles one of her own heroines: beautiful in a subtle, wistful way, with reddish-blond hair, green eyes, and a savage sense of humor. She lives alone in an airy, spacious apartment in Little Venice, London, near the Canal. From her balcony, wrought-iron steps lead down to a vast tree-filled park, where O'Brien often can be found strolling during breaks from her work. The following interview took place in her writing room—a large, comfortable study cluttered with books, notebooks, records, and periodicals. The day I was there, the room was warmed by a log fire burning in the fireplace, and even more so by O'Brien's rich, softly accented Irish voice.

—*Shusha Guppy, 1984*

INTERVIEWER

You once said that as far back as you can remember you have been a writer. At what point did you actually start writing literature?

EDNA O'BRIEN

When I say I have written from the beginning, I mean that all real writers write from the beginning, that the vocation, the obsession, is already there, and that the obsession derives from an intensity of feeling which normal life cannot accommodate. I started writing snippets when I was eight or nine, but I wrote my first novel when I left Ireland and came to live in London. I had never been outside Ireland and it was November when I arrived in England. I found everything so different, so *alien*. Waterloo Station was full of people who were nameless, faceless. There were wreaths on the Cenotaph for Remembrance Sunday, and I felt bewildered and lost—an outsider. So in a sense *The Country Girls*, which I wrote in those first few weeks after my arrival, was my experience of Ireland and my farewell to it. But something happened to my style which I will tell you about. I had been trying to write short bits, and these were always flowery and overlyrical. Shortly after I arrived in London I saw an advertisement for a lecture given by Arthur Mizener [author of a book on F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Far Side of Paradise*] on Hemingway and Fitzgerald. You must remember that I had no literary education, but a fervid religious one. So I went to the lecture and it was like a thunderbolt—Saul of Tarsus on his horse! Mizener read out the first paragraph of *A Farewell to Arms* and I couldn't believe it—this totally uncluttered, precise, true prose, which was *also* very moving and lyrical. I can say that the two things came together then: my being ready for the revelation and my urgency to write. The novel *wrote itself*, so to speak, in a few weeks. All the time I was writing it I couldn't stop crying, although it is a fairly buoyant, funny book. But it was the separation from Ireland which brought me to the point where I *had* to write, though I had always been in love with literature.

INTERVIEWER

If you had always loved literature, why did you study chemistry at university rather than English?

O'BRIEN

The usual reason, family. My family was radically opposed to anything to do with literature. Although Ireland has produced so many great writers, there is a deep suspicion about writing there. Somehow they know that writing is dangerous, seditious, as if “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word *was* God.” I was an obedient little girl—though I hate to admit it now!—and went along with my family’s wishes. I worked in a chemist’s shop and then studied at the Pharmaceutical College at night.

INTERVIEWER

The protagonist of *The Country Girls* also works in a shop. Is the novel autobiographical?

O'BRIEN

The novel is autobiographical insofar as I was born and bred in the west of Ireland, educated at a convent, and was full of romantic yearnings, coupled with a sense of outrage. But any book that is any good must be, to some extent, autobiographical, because one cannot and should not fabricate emotions; and although style and narrative are crucial, the bulwark, emotion, is what finally matters. With luck, talent, and studiousness, one manages to make a little pearl, or egg, or something . . . But what gives birth to it is what happens inside the soul and the mind, and that has almost always to do with *conflict*. And loss—an innate sense of tragedy.

INTERVIEWER

What Thomas Hardy called “the sadness of things,” and Unamuno “*el sentimiento trágico de la vida*”?

O'BRIEN

Precisely. Not just subjective sadness, though you have to experience it in order to know it, but also objective. And the more

I read about writers, their letters—say Flaubert’s—the more I realize it. Flaubert was in a way like a *woman*. There he was, in Rouen, yearning for the bright lights of Paris and hectic affairs, yet deliberately keeping away from all that, isolating himself, in order to burn and luxuriate in the affliction of his own emotions. So writing, I think, is an interestingly perverse occupation. It is quite sick in the sense of normal human enjoyment of life, because the writer is always *removed*, the way an actor never is. An actor is with the audience, a writer is not with his readers, and by the time the work appears, he or she is again incarcerated in the next book—or in barrenness. So for both men and women writers, writing is an eminently masochistic exercise—though I wonder what Norman Mailer would say to that!

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't the theory of masochism apply to all artists, whatever the art form?

O'BRIEN

To some extent. I was reading van Gogh's letters. My God! I'm surprised he cut off only *one* ear, that he wasn't altogether shredded in pieces! But a woman writer has a double dose of masochism: the masochism of the woman and that of the artist. No way to dodge it or escape from it. Men are better at escaping their psyches and their consciences. But there is a certain dogged strength in realizing that you can make those delirious journeys and come through.

INTERVIEWER

Some don't. There is a high rate of suicide, alcoholism, madness among writers.

O'BRIEN

It is only by the grace of God, and perhaps willpower, that one comes through each time. Many wonderful writers write one or

two books and then kill themselves. Sylvia Plath for instance. She was much younger than Virginia Woolf when she committed suicide, but if she had survived that terrible crisis, I feel she would have written better books. I have this theory that Woolf feared that the flame of her talent was extinguished or dwindling because her last book, *Between the Acts*, lacked the soaring genius of the others. When a writer, or an artist, has the feeling that he can't do it anymore, he descends into hell. So you must keep in mind that although it may stop, it can come back. When I was a child in Ireland, a spring would suddenly appear and yield forth buckets of beautiful clear water, then just as suddenly it would dry up. The water-diviners would come with their rods and sometimes another spring would be found. One has to be one's own water-diviner. It is hard, especially as writers are always anxious, always on the run—from the telephone, from people, from responsibilities, from the distractions of this world. The other thing that can destroy talent is too much grief. Yeats said, "Too much sorrow can make a stone of the heart." I often wonder, if Emily Brontë had lived to be fifty, what kind of books would she have written? Her life was so penalizing—and Charlotte's too—utterly without sex. Emily was thirty when she wrote *Wuthering Heights*. I think the grinding suffering might have killed her talent later. It is not that you have to be happy—that would be asking too much—but if it gets too painful that sense of wonderment, or joy, dies, and with it the generosity so necessary to create.

INTERVIEWER

So the catalyst for your own work was that lecture on Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Before that you said that you read a great deal in Ireland, partly to escape. What sort of books did you read? And which ones influenced you most?

O'BRIEN

Looking back on it, it was not so much escape as nourishment. Of course there is an element of escape as well, that entering tem-

porarily into a different world. But I think literature is food for the soul and the heart. There are books that are pure escapism: thrillers, detective and spy novels, but I can't read them, because they don't *deliver* to me. Whereas from one page of Dostoyevsky I feel renewed, however depressing the subject. The first book I ever *bought*—I've still got it—was called *Introducing James Joyce*, by T. S. Eliot. It contained a short story, a piece from *Portrait of the Artist*, some other pieces, and an introduction by Eliot. I read a scene from *Portrait* which is the Christmas dinner when everything begins pleasantly: a fire, largesse, the blue flame of light on the dark plum pudding, the revelry before the flare-up ensues between people who were for Parnell and those who were against him. Parnell had been dead for a long time, but the Irish, being Irish, persist with history. Reading that book made me realize that I wanted literature for the rest of my life.

INTERVIEWER

And you became a ferocious reader, first of Joyce, then of others. Who else did you read in those early days?

O'BRIEN

I am a slow reader, because I want to savor and recall what I read. The excitement and sense of discovery is not the same as in those days when I would get thoroughly wrapped up in *Vanity Fair* or *War and Peace*. Now I set myself a task of reading one great book each year. Last year I read *Bleak House*, which I think is the greatest English novel—I read a few pages a day. But one's taste changes so much. I mentioned Scott Fitzgerald, whom I read, oh, so lovingly and thoroughly! I loved *Tender Is the Night* and *The Great Gatsby*, which is a flawless novel. So I can say that he was one of my early influences. But now I know that fundamentally I respond to European literature in all its dark ramifications. I think the Russians are unsurpassable. Of course Joyce did something extraordinary: he threw out the entire heritage of English literature—language, story, structure, everything—and created a new

and stupendous work. But for emotional gravity, no one can compare with the Russians. When I first read Chekhov's short stories, before I saw his plays, I knew I had heard the *voice* that I loved most in the whole world. I wrote to my sister, "Read Chekhov—he does not write, he *breathes* life off the page." And he was, and still is, my greatest influence, especially in short-story writing.

INTERVIEWER

Later on, when you tried your hand at drama, did Chekhov come to your rescue there as well?

O'BRIEN

I think so, though it is very dangerous to take Chekhov as a model. His dramatic genius is so mysterious; he does what seems to be the impossible, in that he makes dramatic something that is desultory. And of course it is not desultory—indeed, it is as tightly knit as that Persian carpet. Shakespeare is God. He knows everything and expresses it with such a density of poetry and humor and power that the mind boggles. But then he had *great* themes—*Othello*, *Hamlet*, the history plays. Chekhov, on the other hand, tells you, or seems to tell you, of a profligate family that is losing an orchard, or some sisters who yearn for Moscow, and inside it is a whole web of life and love and failure. I think that despite his emphasis on wanting to be funny, he was a tragic man. In a letter to his wife, actress Olga Knipper, he says, "It is nine o'clock in the evening, you are going to play act three of my play, and I am as lonely as a coffin!"

INTERVIEWER

The greatness of the Russian classics must be due in part to the vastness and variety of their country, the harshness of climate, and the cruelty and roughness of their society (which hasn't really changed) and which enhances the intensity of the emotions and the extremes of behavior.

O'BRIEN

Certainly. It makes for endurance—those long, savage winters. Also being throttled as they have always been. The more you strangle a man, the deeper he screams. Boris Pasternak put his pain to immortal use in *Dr. Zhivago*.

INTERVIEWER

Did that first book on Joyce send you to read the whole of Joyce?

O'BRIEN

Yes, but I was too young then. Later I read *Ulysses*, and at one point I thought of writing a book on Joyce, *comme tout le monde*! I read a lot of books about Joyce and wrote a monograph. Then I realized that there were already too many books on him and that the best thing you could read about Joyce was Joyce himself.

INTERVIEWER

How do you assess him now, and how is he regarded in Ireland?

O'BRIEN

He is beyond assessment—gigantic. I sometimes read bits of *Finnegans Wake* and feel my brain begin to sizzle. Joyce went mad with genius. When you read *Dubliners* and *Finnegans Wake* you feel that the man underwent a metamorphosis between twenty-five and sixty. H. G. Wells said that *Finnegans Wake* was an immense riddle, and people find it too difficult to read. I have yet to meet anyone who has read and digested the whole of it—except perhaps my friend Richard Ellmann. Joyce killed himself with exertion. He went beyond us into a labyrinth of language, and I don't know whether that was a loss or a gain.

INTERVIEWER

The generation before you in Ireland had an important literary

Memoirs for Mrs. R. ①

walks by the rough sea &
says to work the telescope. The
man of course comes to her
rescue, hits it & foam her
pod are. the rise & waves &
he says "It's what you
wanted..." as the Corkman
to look she sees her dream
written etc. in the foam & foam
as she comes back to reality
he is still there..."

Cut to Very Sedate Tea-Room
Cakes.
Cyprian Basque He is ready to
Choc. menu out
Musk. No. No... No.

Last Lines. but what do you want now
Musk. I want you to make love
to me as if the first time
Musk. What is a sense it is.
There faces on the

scene: Yeats and Lady Gregory and the Abbey Theatre group, and all the people around them, which ran parallel to London's Bloomsbury group and Eliot's circle. Did you have anything similar in Ireland when you started?

O'BRIEN

Nothing on that level. There was a sort of Irish literary scene but I wasn't part of it. One reason was poverty, another that I didn't have an entrée; I was just a chemistry student in a bed-sit. I heard of people like Sean O'Faolain, Frank O'Connor. Samuel Beckett had left and vowed never to return, Sean O'Casey was in England. But it was good for me not to be part of any scene because it meant that I had to do my apprenticeship alone. Sweet are the uses of adversity, are they not?

INTERVIEWER

What about women writers? You haven't mentioned any as a major influence so far.

O'BRIEN

Every woman novelist has been influenced by the Brontës. *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. The poetry of Emily Dickinson, the early books of Elizabeth Bowen—especially the one she wrote about her home in Ireland, *Bowen's Court*. My admiration for Jane Austen came much later, and I also love the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Nowadays there are too many writers, and I think one of the reasons for the deterioration of language and literature in the last forty years has been the spawning of inferior novels. Everybody writes novels—journalists, broadcasters, TV announcers . . . it is a free-for-all! But writing is a vocation, like being a nun or a priest. I work at my writing as an athlete does at his training, taking it very seriously. Whether a novel is autobiographical or not does not matter. What is important is the truth in it and the way that truth is expressed. I think a casual or frivolous attitude is pernicious.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any area of fiction that you find women are better equipped to explore?

O'BRIEN

Yes. Women are better at emotions and the havoc those emotions wreak. But it must be said that Anna Karenina is the most believable heroine. The last scene where she goes to the station and looks down at the rails and thinks of Vronsky's rejection is terrible in its depiction of despair. Women, on the whole, are better at plumbing the depths. A woman artist can produce a perfect gem, as opposed to a huge piece of rock carving a man might produce. It is not a limitation of talent or intelligence, it is just a different way of looking at the world.

INTERVIEWER

So you don't believe in the feminist argument that the differences between men and women are a question of nurture and not of nature; that women look at the world differently because they have been conditioned to do so?

O'BRIEN

Not in the least! I believe that we are fundamentally, biologically, and therefore psychologically different. I am not like any man I have met, ever, and that divide is what both interests me and baffles me. A lot of things have been said by feminists about equality, about liberation, but not all of these things are gospel truth. They are opinions the way my books are opinions, nothing more. Of course I would like women to have a better time but I don't see it happening, and for a very simple and primal reason: people are pretty savage towards each other, be they men or women.

INTERVIEWER

Yet your own success is, to a certain degree, due to the fact

that your writing coincided with the rise of the feminist movement, because invariably it portrayed loving, sensitive, good women, being victimized by hard, callous men, and it hit the right note at the right time. Would you agree with that?

O'BRIEN

I would think so. However, I am not the darling of the feminists. They think I am too preoccupied with old-fashioned themes like love and longing. Though one woman in *Ms.* magazine pointed out that I send bulletins from battlefronts where other women do not go. I think I do. The reason why I resent being lectured at is that my psyche is so weighed down with its own paraphernalia! No man or woman from outside could prescribe to me what to do. I have enough trouble keeping madness at bay.

INTERVIEWER

Your description of small towns and their enclosed communities reminds me of some of America's Southern writers, like Faulkner. Did they influence you?

O'BRIEN

Faulkner is an important writer though an imperfect one. I did go through a stage when I read a lot of Southern writers: Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor . . . Any small, claustrophobic, ingrown community resembles another. The passion and ignorance in the Deep South of America and the west of Ireland are the same.

INTERVIEWER

This is the opposite of the high society and the aristocratic world of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, which has also been a major source of inspiration to you.

O'BRIEN

Proust's influence on me, along with his genius, was his preoc-

cupation with memory and his obsession with the past. His concentration on even the simplest detail—like one petal of a flower, or the design on a dinner plate—has unique, manic intensity. Also, when I read his biography by George Painter I felt the tenderness of his soul and wished I could have met him as a human being. You see, Joyce and Proust, although very different, broke the old mold by recognizing the importance of the rambling, disjointed nature of what goes on in the head, the interior monologue. I wonder how they would fare now. These are more careless times. Literature is no longer sacred, it is a business. There is an invisible umbilical cord between the writer and his potential reader, and I fear that the time has gone when readers could sink into a book the way they did in the past, for the *pace* of life is fast and frenetic. The world is cynical: the dwelling on emotions, the perfection of style, the intensity of a Flaubert is wasted on modern sensibility. I have a feeling that there is a *dying*, if not a *death*, of great literature. Some blame the television for it. Perhaps. There is hardly any distinction between a writer and a journalist—indeed, most writers *are* journalists. Nothing wrong with journalism any more than with dentistry, but they are worlds apart! Whenever I read the English Sunday papers I notice that the standard of literacy is high—all very clever and hollow—but no dues to literature. They care about their own egos. They synopsise the book, tell the plot. Well, fuck the plot! That is for precocious schoolboys. What matters is the imaginative *truth*, and the perfection and care with which it has been rendered. After all, you don't say of a ballet dancer, "He jumped in the air, then he twirled around, etcetera . . ." You are just *carried away* by his dancing. The nicest readers are—and I know by the letters I receive—youngish people who are still eager and uncontaminated, who approach a book without hostility. But when I read Anita Brookner's novel *Look at Me*, I feel I am in the grip of a most wonderful, imaginative writer. The same is true of Margaret Atwood. Also, great literature is dying because young people, although they don't talk about it much, feel and fear a holocaust.

INTERVIEWER

What about your own relationship with critics? Do you feel misunderstood and neglected by them, or have they been kind to you? Have you ever been savaged by them?

O'BRIEN

Oh yes! I have been savaged all right! I believe one reviewer lost her job on the *New Statesman* because her review of my book *A Pagan Place* was too personal. She went on and on about my illiterate background. On the whole I have had more serious consideration in the United States than in Britain or Ireland. Perhaps because I am not known there as a "personality"! I do not despair though, for the real test of writing is not in the reading but in the rereading. I am not ashamed of my books being reread. The misunderstanding may be due just to geography, and to race. The Irish and the English are poles apart in thought and disposition.

INTERVIEWER

It may also be due to a certain—and very un-British—*démésure* in your writing; I mean they find you too sentimental.

O'BRIEN

I am glad to say that Dickens was accused of sentimentality and, by God, he lives on!

INTERVIEWER

You were brought up as a devout Catholic and had a convent education. At one point you even contemplated becoming a nun. What made you give up religion?

O'BRIEN

I married a divorcé, and that was my first "Fall." Add to that the hounding nature of Irish Catholicism and you can dimly understand. We had a daily admonition which went:

You have but one soul to save

One God to love and serve
One Eternity to prepare for
Death will come soon
Judgement will follow, and then
Heaven—or Hell—*For Ever!*

INTERVIEWER

In your novel *A Pagan Place*, the heroine does become a nun. Was that a vicarious fulfillment of a subconscious wish?

O'BRIEN

Perhaps. I did think of becoming a nun when I was very young, but it went out of my mind later, chased away by sexual desire!

INTERVIEWER

Another interesting aspect of that novel is that it is written in the second-person singular, like a soliloquy. It is somewhat reminiscent of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in *Ulysses*; were you conscious of the influence?

O'BRIEN

I didn't take Molly's as a model. The reason was psychological. As a child you are both your secret self and the "you" that your parents think you are. So the use of the second person was a way of combining the two identities. But I tend not to examine these things too closely—they just happen.

INTERVIEWER

Religion has played such a crucial part in your life and evolution, yet you have not dealt with it on any philosophical or moral level, as have Graham Greene or Georges Bernanos; you haven't made religion the central theme of any of your novels. Why?

O'BRIEN

That is perhaps one of the differences between men and women who go through the same experiences. I flee from my persecutors. I have not confronted religion.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you ever will?

O'BRIEN

I hope so—when I have got rid of the terror and the anxiety. Or perhaps when I know exactly what I believe or don't believe.

INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about the subjects that are dealt with in your work, its central themes, which are romantic love and Ireland. Some people—and not only feminists!—think that your preoccupation with romance verges at times on the sentimental and the “romantic novel” formula. You quoted Aragon in answer: “Love is your last chance, there is really nothing else to keep you there.”

O'BRIEN

Other people have said it too, even the Beatles! Emily Dickinson wrote, “And is there more than love and death, then tell me its name?” But my work is concerned with *loss* as much as with love. Loss is every child's theme because by necessity the child loses its mother and its bearings. And writers, however mature and wise and eminent, are children at heart. So my central theme is loss—loss of love, loss of self, loss of God. I have just finished a play, my third, which is about my family. In it for the first time I have allowed my father, who is always the ogre figure in my work, to weep for the loss of *his* child. Therefore, I might, if the gods are good to me, find that my understanding of love has become richer and stronger than my dread of loss. You see, my own father was what you might call the “archetypal” Irishman—a gambler, drinker, a man totally unequipped to be a husband or a father. And

of course that colored my views, distorted them, and made me seek out demons.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why, in nearly all your novels, women are longing to establish a simple, loving, harmonious relationship with men, but are unable to do so?

O'BRIEN

My experience was pretty extreme, so that it is hard for me to imagine harmony, or even affinity, between men and women. I would need to be reborn.

INTERVIEWER

The other central theme of your work is Ireland. It seems to me that you have the same love-hate relationship with Ireland that most exiles have with their native country: on the one hand an incurable nostalgia and longing, and on the other the fact that one cannot go back, because the reasons that made one leave in the first place are still there. There is a constant conflict in the soul.

O'BRIEN

My relationship with Ireland is very complex. I could not live there for a variety of reasons. I felt oppressed and strangulated from an early age. That was partly to do with my parents, who were themselves products and victims of their history and culture. That is to say, alas, they were superstitious, fanatical, engulfing. At the same time they were bursting with talent—I know this from my mother's letters, as she wrote to me almost every day. So I have to thank them for a heritage that includes talent, despair, and permanent fury. When I was a student in Dublin my mother found a book of Sean O'Casey in my suitcase and wanted to *burn it! But without reading it!* So they hated literature without knowing it. We know that the effect of our parents is indelible, because we internalize as a child and it remains inside us forever. Even when the

parents die, you dream of them as if they were still there. Everything was an occasion for fear, religion was force-fed the way they feed the geese of Strasbourg for pâté! I feel I am a cripple with a craving for wings. So much for the personal aspect. As for the country itself, it is no accident that almost all Irish writers leave the country. You know why? Ireland, as Joyce said, eats her writers the way a sow eats her farrow. He also called it a warren of “prelates and kinechites.” Of course there’s the beauty of the landscape, the poetry, the fairy tales, the vividness. I have shown my love and my entanglement with the place as much as I have shown my hatred. But they think that I have shown only my hatred.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why they had an auto-da-fé of your first novel in your native village?

O'BRIEN

It was a humble event, as befits a backward place. Two or three people had gone to Limerick and bought *The Country Girls*. The parish priest asked them to hand in the books, which they did, and he burnt them on the grounds of the church. Nevertheless, a lot of people read it. My mother was very harsh about it; she thought I was a disgrace. That is the sadness—it takes you half a life to get out of the pits of darkness and stupidity. It fills me with anger, and with pity.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that after all these years and through your books you have exorcised the demon and can let it rest?

O'BRIEN

I hope not, because one needs one's demons to create.

INTERVIEWER

After that small auto-da-fé, did anything else of that kind happen?

O'BRIEN

They used to ban my books, but now when I go there, people are courteous to my face, though rather slanderous behind my back. Then again, Ireland has changed. There are a lot of young people who are irreligious, or less religious. Ironically, they wouldn't be interested in my early books—they would think them gauche. They are aping English and American mores. If I went to a dance hall in Dublin now I would feel as alien as in a disco in Oklahoma.

INTERVIEWER

You are not a political writer because, as you say, politics are concerned with the social and the external, while your preoccupations are with the inner, psychological life. Nonetheless, considering your emotional involvement with Ireland, how have you kept away from the situation in Northern Ireland—terrorism, the IRA, etcetera . . . ?

O'BRIEN

I have written one long piece on Northern Ireland for the German magazine *Stern*. My feelings about it are so manifold. I think it is mad, a so-called religious war, in this day and age. At the same time, I can't bear the rhetoric of the Unionists; I mean Ireland is *one small* island, and those six counties do not belong to Britain. Equally I abhor terrorism, whoever does it, the IRA, the Arabs, the Israelis. But when I stayed in Northern Ireland to research and write the article, I realized that the Catholics are second-class citizens. They live in terrible slums, in poverty, and know no way of improving their conditions. I have not set a novel in Northern Ireland simply because I do not know enough about it. I dislike cant—you get that from politicians. Writers have to dig deep for experience. I might go and live there for a while, in order to discover and later write about it. But so far I have refrained from bringing the topic into a book merely as a voyeur.

INTERVIEWER

Let's get back to Virginia Woolf . . . Why and when did she become an obsession for you? After all, you are very different as writers and as people.

O'BRIEN

I first read her critical essays, *The Common Reader*, and I saw a woman who loved literature, unlike many critics who just *use* it. The essays are on Hazlitt, Wordsworth, Hardy, everyone. I was overwhelmed first by the generosity of her mind and its perspicacity. Later I read *To the Lighthouse* and my favorite, *Mrs. Dalloway*, which is very spry and sprightly. Then I was asked to write a play about her and I began to read everything she had written—diaries, letters, etcetera . . . I realized that she gave of herself so utterly, so *shamelessly*. Her photographs show her as aloof, which she was in some ways. But in the diaries and letters, she tells *everything!* If she buys a pair of gloves she has to commit it to paper. So I came to know her and to love her.

INTERVIEWER

Some critics pointed to the play's neglect of her intellectual vigor and her bitchiness. Do you think her bitchiness was due to lack of sexual gratification?

O'BRIEN

She did have a bitchy side, but alongside it a childlike need for affection. She called people pet names, waited for her husband to come home, adored her sister Vanessa and wanted her approval. I saw Woolf as a troubled, *needful* creature. Her bitchiness was diminishing, certainly, and she would have been a grander figure without it. I selected those parts of her that chart her dilemma, her march towards suicide. Another writer, say an English homosexual, could write a very waspish, very witty play about her. I hope that mine was valid.

INTERVIEWER

Having been successful at novels and short stories, you tried your hand at drama—plays and screenplays. How did that come about?

O'BRIEN

I was asked to adapt my own novel *A Pagan Place* for the stage and it opened a new vista for me. Then with some experience I tackled Woolf. Now I have written a third play, which for the time being is called *Home Sweet Home*, or *Family Butchers*. I feel drama is more direct, more suitable for expressing passions. Confrontation is the stuff of drama. It happens rather than is described. The play starts in the early morning, the voice of an Irish tenor comes over the gramophone—John McCormack is singing “Bless This House, Oh Lord We Pray,” then he’s interrupted by a gunshot followed by another gunshot. The lights come on, a man and a woman appear, and you know that this is a play about passion and violence. You go straight for the jugular.

INTERVIEWER

When you start a play, or a novel, or a short story, do you have a basic idea? Or a sentence? Something that triggers off the process of creating the work?

O'BRIEN

I always have the first line. Even with my very first book, *The Country Girls*, I went around with this first sentence in my head long before I sat down to write it.*

INTERVIEWER

Once you have started, do you have the whole scheme in your mind or do characters and plot take their own course and lead you, as some novelists say they do? I mean, Balzac was so surprised and moved by Old Goriot’s death that he opened his window and shouted, “*Le Père Goriot est mort! Le Père Goriot est mort!*”

* “I wakened quickly and sat up in bed abruptly.”

O'BRIEN

I know more or less, but I don't discuss it with myself. It is like sleepwalking; I don't know exactly where I am going but I know I will get there. When I am writing, I am so glad to be doing it that whatever form it takes—play, novel, etcetera—I am thankful to the Fates. I keep dozens of pens by me, and exercise books.

INTERVIEWER

When success came and you began to be famous and lionized, did it affect your life, work, and outlook in any way? Is success good for an artist, or does it limit his field of experience?

O'BRIEN

It depends on the degree of success and on the disposition of the artist. It was very nice for me to be published, as I had longed for it. But my success has been rather modest. It hasn't been meteoric. Nor was it financially shattering—just enough to carry me along.

INTERVIEWER

But you have had a great deal of social success: fame, publicity, so on . . .

O'BRIEN

I am not conscious of it. I go to functions more as a duty than for pleasure, and I am always *outside* looking in, not the other way round. But I am grateful to have had enough success not to feel a disaster—it has allayed my hopelessness. Undoubtedly success contributed to the breakup of my marriage. I had married very young. My husband was an attractive father figure—a Professor Higgins. When my book was published and well received, it altered things between us. The break would have come anyway, but my success sped it up. Then began a hard life; but when you are young, you have boundless energy—you run the house, mind the children, *and* write your despair. I don't know if I could do it all now. Looking

back I realize that I am one of the luckiest people in the world, since no matter how down I go something brings me back. Is it God's grace or just peasant resilience?

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps it is the creative act of writing. John Updike once said that the minute he puts an unhappiness down on paper, it metamorphoses into a lump of sugar!

O'BRIEN

I think he was simplifying. The original pain that prompted the writing does not lessen, but it is gratifying to give it form and shape.

INTERVIEWER

Did money ever act as a spur? You were very prolific in the sixties, and still are.

O'BRIEN

I have never written anything in order to make money. A story comes to me, is given me, as it were, and I write it. But perhaps the need to earn a living and my need to write coincided. I know that I would still write if tomorrow I was given a huge legacy, and I will always be profligate.

INTERVIEWER

How do you organize your time? Do you write regularly, every day? Philip Roth has said that he writes eight hours a day three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Do you work as compulsively?

O'BRIEN

He is a man, you see. Women have the glorious excuse of having to shop, cook, clean! When I am working I write in a kind of trance, longhand, in these several copybooks. I meant to tidy up before you came! I write in the morning because one is nearer to the unconscious, the source of inspiration. I never work at night

because by then the shackles of the day are around me, what James Stephens (author of *The Crock of Gold*) called “That flat, dull catalogue of dreary things that fasten themselves to my wings,” and I don’t sit down three hundred and sixty-five days a year because I’m not that kind of writer. I wish I were! Perhaps I don’t take myself that seriously. Another reason why I don’t write constantly is that I feel I have written all I had wanted to say about love and loss and loneliness and being a victim and all that. I have finished with that territory. And I have not yet embraced another one. It may be that I’m going towards it—I hope and pray that this is the case.

INTERVIEWER

When you are writing, are you disciplined? Do you keep regular hours, turn down invitations, and hibernate?

O’BRIEN

Yes, but discipline doesn’t come into it. It is what one has to do. The impulse is stronger than anything. I don’t like too much social life anyway. It is gossip and bad white wine. It’s a waste. Writing is like carrying a fetus. I get up in the morning, have a cup of tea, and come into this room to work. I never go out to lunch, never, but I stop around one or two and spend the rest of the afternoon attending to mundane things. In the evening I might read or go out to a play or a film, or see my sons. Did I tell you that I spend a lot of time moping? Did Philip Roth say that he moped?

INTERVIEWER

Don’t you feel restless and lonely if you have worked all day and have to spend the evening alone?

O’BRIEN

Less lonely than if I were bored at a dinner party. If I get restless I might ring up one of a handful of friends who are close enough to come to the rescue. Rilke said, “Loneliness is a

very good practice for eternity.” Loneliness is not intolerable—depression is.

INTERVIEWER

Before the film script on Joan of Arc that you are writing now, you wrote another two. One of them, *Zee & Co.*, starring Elizabeth Taylor, was a big-budget, Hollywood film. How did you enjoy that experience?

O'BRIEN

The film world is inhabited by gangsters. I have met many producers and very few of them could I accuse of being sensitive, or interested in writing. They are businesspeople whose material is other people's imagination, and that invariably leads to trouble. People in the clothing industry or the motor business are dealing with merchandise, but the producer's raw material is first and foremost the writer. So I can't say that I had a happy experience. But it is possible; low-budget films like *Gregory's Girl* or *The Country Girls* do get made. I had a marvelous time with the latter; they didn't have *four* writers all rewriting my script. It restored my faith. I do believe that cinema and the television are the media of the future, more than books, simply because people are too restive. I put as much into a film script as into anything I write—it is, I believe, an art form, and great directors like Bergman, Buñuel, Hitchcock, and Fassbinder have made it so. What happened with *Zee & Co.*—and what happens generally when you get involved with Hollywood—is that you give them the script and then the director or leading actress proceeds to write their own stuff. They are often as capable of writing as I am of brain surgery! So they just disembowel it. And they do it for two reasons: one is ego and the other is ignorance. They know nothing about writing and therefore think they can bring their own *ideas* to it. Now, in the theater when actors want something changed they ask the author.

INTERVIEWER

If someone had time to read only one of your books, which one would you recommend?

O'BRIEN

A Pagan Place.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that your best book, the one that every writer aspires to, is yet to come?

O'BRIEN

It had better be! I need to develop, to enlarge my spheres of experience.

INTERVIEWER

When you say you are changing your life, do you also mean that the subject matter of your fiction will change with it?

O'BRIEN

I think so. I am giving a lecture in Boston next month about women in literature. I had to come to the forlorn conclusion that all the great heroines have been created by men. I had an anthology of women's writing called *Bold New Women* in which the editor, Barbara Alson, very wisely says that all women writers have written about sex, because sex is their biological life, their environment, and that for a woman a sexual encounter is not just the mechanical thing it can be for a man but—and she uses this wonderful phrase—“a clutch on the universe.” I have written quite a lot of love stories; I don't think I want to write those anymore. I even find them hard to read! It doesn't mean that I am not interested in love anymore—that goes on as long as there is breath. I mean I am not going to *write* about it in the same way.

INTERVIEWER

Could it have something to do with age?

O'BRIEN

Bound to have something to do with age. The attitude toward sex changes in two ways. Sexual love becomes deeper and one realizes how fundamental it is and how rich. At the same time, one sees that it is a sort of mutual game and that attraction makes one resort to all sorts of ruses and strategies. To an outsider it is all patent, even laughable. Shakespeare saw through this glorious delusion better than anyone and *As You Like It* is the funniest play about love, yet it is steeped in love.

INTERVIEWER

What about the new cult of chastity? Germaine Greer's new book advocates restraint—a backlash against a decade or so of permissiveness. Have you been influenced by the changing mood?

O'BRIEN

I have always espoused chastity except when one can no longer resist the temptation. I know promiscuity is boring, much more than fish and chips, which is comforting.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find sex scenes difficult to write, considering your puritanical background?

O'BRIEN

Not really. When you are writing you are not conscious of the reader, so that you don't feel embarrassed. I'm sure Joyce had a most heady and wonderful time writing the last fifty pages of *Ulysses*—glorious Molly Bloom. He must have written it in one bout, thinking: I'll show the women of the world that I am omniscient!

INTERVIEWER

What do you think the future has in store for literature? You have been very pessimistic so far. For example, last year nearly three hundred novels were published in France, and few except the ones that won the big prizes were read. Will we go on endlessly writing novels with so few making a mark?

O'BRIEN

As you know the future itself is perilous. But as regards books, there is first the financial aspect of publishing. Already books are very expensive, so that a first novel of quality will have less of a chance of being picked up. Say a new Djuna Barnes, or indeed Nathalie Sarraute, might not get published. If Woolf's *The Waves* were to be published today it would have pitiful sales. Of course, "how-to" books, spy stories, thrillers, and science fiction all sell by the millions. What would be wonderful—what we *need* just now—is some astonishing fairy tale. I read somewhere the other day that the cavemen did not paint what they saw, but what they *wished* they had seen. We need that, in these lonely, lunatic times.

INTERVIEWER

So if we manage to save the planet, is there hope for literature as well?

O'BRIEN

Oh yes! At this very moment, some imagination is spawning something wonderful that might make us tremble. Let's say there will always be literature because the imagination is boundless. We just need to care more for the imagination than for the trivia and the commerce of life. Literature is the next best thing to God. Joyce would disagree. He would say literature *is*, in essence, God.

