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**Notes from a 'world that had forgotten how to give':
Edna O'Brien's Stories of Resilience**

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For Edna O'Brien, who said in an interview she would die now if tomorrow morning she could not write—"It's my life. Writing is my breathing"—the obsession to write derives from an intensity of feeling which normal life cannot accommodate (Rustin, O'Hagan, Guppy 21). To her, literature is not about "describing a field or a gate or a bog or an avenue; it's the emotional association with those places that makes a line come true or alive" (Rustin). Similarly, the "*voice* that she loved most in the whole world," her "greatest influence, especially in short-story writing," is Chekhov, the writer of intense emotions. In her view, he does not write "but *breathes* life off the page" (Guppy 25, original emphases). Her short stories fittingly expose an unswerving dedication to giving voice to the intense emotions of the marginalized people of Ireland. Accentuating Chekhovian empathy, she portrays characters in mental and spiritual distress; thus John Banville deems Edna O'Brien "a poet of vulnerability" (x-xi). Behind this persistent interest in depicting scenes of emotional turmoil lies her strong ethos, more precisely an Aristotelian *eunoia*; she sees herself on a mission to introduce "emotional gravity" whereby she cultivates a relationship with her reader and gains their trust (Guppy 25). O'Brien does not just write, but like her master, she breathes life off the page and offers her reader "a company to keep," as Wayne Booth argues in "Stories as Friendship Offerings," all stories can be viewed as companions, friends and gifts from would-be friends (175). Read from this perspective of ethical literary criticism, O'Brien's short fiction can be understood as a gravitational field that not only accommodates intense feelings and vulnerabilities but also offers a model for recognition and restoration.

Three short stories with three different narrative voices from her collection, *The Love Object*, “Irish Revel,” “The Rug,” and “The Doll,” establish O’Brien as a poet, not just of vulnerability, but of Chekovian resilience and emotional agility. Contrary to Frank O’Connor’s premise, in which short stories are offered as a site of failing encounters often among kindred, these short stories trigger a realistic investigation about human bonding and extend the limits of the genre. Instead of remaining “remote from the community—romantic, individualistic, and intransigent” (O’Connor 21), they develop “moral capacities without which citizens will not succeed in making reality out of the normative conclusions of any moral or political theory, however excellent” (Nussbaum 3).

“Irish Revel” (1969) is a story told by a reliable third-person narrator who depicts a failing encounter between Mary and the neighboring community that surrounds her. The seventeen-year-old Mary, “a girl from a mountainy farm in Ireland,” naively revels in being invited to her first party. Despite her mother’s sadly gained wisdom that prophetically notes “all outings were unsettling—they gave you a taste of something you couldn’t have” (3), Mary leaves in bliss. Against all odds, she wants to revel and be a part of the revel. Despite the opening image of “the rotted front tire” of her bicycle which declares the ever-present tension, “Mary hoped that the rotted front tire would not burst” (3). During the trip, no less challenging than the pilgrim’s progress, she heroically demonstrates perseverance, out of happiness “speaks to her bicycle,” and walks all the way to reach the destination, bluntly named “the Commercial Hotel”: “As it was, the tube had a slow puncture, and twice she had to stop and use the pump, maddening, because the pump had no connection and had to be jammed on over the corner of a handkerchief” (3) Despite the adversity, Mary feels joyful because she is allowed to go and to wear the black lace dress, the only dress she could wear, the dress “that belonged to no one in particular.” (4) She also dreams of meeting John Roland, the English painter who had come to their district two years ago and exchanged a brief conversation with her: “two years since; she had never given up hoping—perhaps this evening” (5).

She reaches Mrs Rodgers' place only to find that she is called merely to provide domestic help, to be "given work to do and she blushe[s] with shock and disappointment" (7). With the two girls Doris and Eithne who offer no help but constantly give orders, "Do this! Do that!", Mary is featured as a Cinderella-like figure forced into servitude and tormented by the other girls who eat sweets but don't offer any to Mary and leave the heavy end of the table to her to move (8). As she starts polishing the glasses, shivering in her lace dress, tears run down her cheeks in darkness. The story shows Mary experiencing intensely negative feelings in this cold and unfair place. However, she still finds a way to console herself: for instance, "remember[ing] how once she had danced with John on the upper road to no music at all, just their hearts beating and the hum of happiness" (11). Upon cleverly protecting herself from the drunken O'Toole's harassment, as if in an efficient mindfulness practice, she perceives herself from outside and says to herself: "I was at a party. Now I know what parties are like" (24). She leaves the place early in the morning when everybody is sleeping. The narrator depicts Mary as a strong girl awakened to her limitations and resolved to move on rather than stay there like a victim. To move, she pumps the flat tire for an hour to no avail; but though it remains flat, Mary regains her strength in fresh air and walks "briskly, sometimes looking back to see the track which her bicycle and her feet made on the white road" (25). Soberly wondering if all parties were as bad, she sees "her own house, like a little white box at the end of the world, waiting to receive her." (26)

While the story candidly exhibits the limited extent of entertainment in 1960s Ireland, especially for a young woman, and portrays an Irish revel that offers only "an intense awareness of loneliness" to Mary (O'Connor 18), it also presents a model of resilience. Unlike Joyce's Eveline, "*passive*, like a helpless animal" (43), or Perrault's Cinderella, saved by accepting the prince's marriage proposal, Mary walks briskly on the hard frozen ground hoping to have a sweetheart, with the awareness that he would be "something to hold on to" (26). Mary's "first ball" offers an Irish rite of passage through which she is not only awakened to the cruel and unfair environment

surrounding her, but also gains resilience to cope with it. Despite O'Brien's well-known admiration for Joyce, as a story about adolescence, "Irish Revel" offers a more resilient variation upon the theme of Irish paralysis. Mary is portrayed as a tenacious figure walking, despite her broken bicycle, thinking of her family and observing the world covered by frost as having "an appearance of sanctity" (26). Although Mary recognizes her house "like a little white box at the end of the world, waiting to receive her," she achieves mental and emotional distance from her past and her surroundings.

What turns Edna O'Brien's stories into sites of resilience are not only disconcerting encounters with unkind, indifferent, unfair, and even cruel people, but also surviving a set of unhappy incidents. The "Rug" (1963) is a story about a mother told by her daughter in the first-person. The child narrator recounts her mother's happiness upon receiving a black woolly rug sent from Dublin via parcel post without the name of the sender on it. Mama considers all the neighbors, relatives, friends and distant contacts one by one, but cannot find any clue to identify the generous and kind-hearted sender she imagines. Determining that "T'will be one of life's mysteries" (96), she accepts the rug as a life-affirming miracle that could finally beat the gloom of the family's grisly routine, which never allows for positive surprises. The daughter summarizes the tediousness of Mama's everyday life: "Though she was always hoping, she never really expected things to turn out well" (93). Four weeks later, a knock comes on their back door bringing a threat to their newly found domestic bliss as the visitor declares, "I've come for the rug. [...] I hear you have a new rug here. Well, 'tis our rug, because my wife's sister sent it to us months ago and we never got it." The young narrator focalizes the narration of this shocking moment upon Mama's disappointment describing her whole being drooping, "shoulders, stomach, voice, everything"; yet, she quickly rolls and hands the rug to the man, and "she wept, not so much for the loss—though the *loss was enormous*—as for her own foolishness in thinking that someone had wanted to do her a kindness at last" (97). Like the chorus in Greek drama, O'Brien's characters repeat the recurrent theme of

thwarted hope: "All outings are unsettling and one should never expect things to run out well!"

However, the story's finale is stronger than this traditional refrain; it reveals the all-pervading stamina solidified in the image of a tight knot. Trying to recover from the emotional turmoil, Mama readily provides a thoughtful frame for what has happened; she distances herself from the heat of disillusionment and cogently states, "We live and learn" (97).

Edna O'Brien leaves her reader with the image of a resilient woman trying to develop the kind of "emotional gravity" described by Angela De Souza, "a balance, which can be restored when we understand the power that exists within us and the power that exists around us" (7). As Mama re-establishes her balance: "she undid her apron strings, out of habit, and then retied them slowly and methodically, making a tighter knot" (97). Told from the point of view of a young girl observing her mother's resilience building process, the story's regenerative power lies in its vivid portrayal of Mama as an "emotionally agile" character such as Susan David describes, an "emotionally agile person can hold difficult emotions with self-acceptance, clear-sightedness, and an open mind," and when not ignored but faced courageously and compassionately, emotions can "move past" to ignite change in our lives (cover). As such, "The Rug" ceases to be a mere story of a mis-received gift but Mama offers a resilient role model both for the narrator/daughter and for the reader. As the man's "stupid[ly]" curt remark seems to justify Mama's conviction that it is foolish to think people can do kindness, the story draws attention to, and implicitly condemns, his absence of empathy and kindness. Mama's choice of the first-person plural in pronouncing her conclusion "We live and learn" realigns the axis of the story in unity with her daughter, creating a resilient familial bond. The symbol of a mis-received rug rolled with a piece of cord around it and returned functions as the reminder of the need for kindness and good company, but the will to survive without it remains nevertheless.

As a story told by a first-person narrator with hindsight, "The Doll" (1979) similarly explores women's processes of resilience building. Drawing attention to the narrator's ability to

cope with emotional turmoil, the story reasserts that making mindful responses helps manage negative experiences and strengthens resilience. At first the narrator tells about her schoolteacher who harboured a dislike for her for no reason, was annoyed by her diligence, taunted her and proclaimed “what a goody goody [she] was,” making jokes about her appearance and clothes, which made other girls laugh as the teacher referred to her as “It” (107). The teacher’s ill-treatment extends to the “monstrous” act of confiscating her most precious doll, which she generously brings to feature as “a most beautiful Virgin” in the school play (109). After the play, the teacher hides it in the cookery press. Her mother thinks that the teacher must be teasing and will return the doll, but she takes it to her own home without any explanation. The story showcases the young girl managing this brutal treatment by establishing emotional distance: “No one did anything and in time I became reconciled to it” (110). When her mother sends her to the teacher’s house with a loin of pork as a present, she declines the invitation to go in and see the doll with similar stoicism. Like Mary in “Irish Revel,” the girl responds more wisely and moderately than many of the adults around her. Preparing to go away to boarding school, she is portrayed as thinking soberly in her already achieved emotional distance: “I knew that I would be free of her forever, that I would forget her, that I would forget the doll, forget most of what happened, or at least remember it without quiver” (110). Rather than depicting her anguish, the story presents a resilient girl who manages to preserve her self-sufficiency in the face of adversity. Enjoying an unfaltering commitment to hope, she observes the world around her with “mindsight,” a term coined by Dr. Dan Siegel denoting, “our human capacity to perceive the mind of the self and others.” Siegel describes it as a type of attention through which we can “get ourselves off of the autopilot of ingrained behaviours and habitual responses” and enables us to “‘name and tame’ the emotions we are experiencing, rather than being overwhelmed by them” (xi-xii).

The temporal distance provided by the narrative shift at the finale of the story enables a comparison between the narrator’s child and adult selves, as she later returns for her aunt’s funeral

after so many years. The narrator is now clear that the teacher kept the doll “out of perversity, out of pique and jealousy” (111), but this realization does not bring paralysis. As in “Irish Revel” and “The Rug,” the story ends on a note of self-realization. As she walks down the street, she thinks that this world is “rife with cruelty and stupidity”; this is a “world that had forgotten how to give,” but, remembering that she would leave the next day, she realizes that she still has the desire to escape and “the strenuous habit of hoping” (112). It is the capacity for hope that fuels her willingness to act and enables the resistance to adversity.

The short story genre enables O'Brien to depict her characters' intense emotional experiences and the resilient responses they develop within a compact form; it allows her to describe both the adversities and the recoveries, both the tension and the springing back from tension in a condensed form, which effectively makes the transformation moving. Her short fiction can be understood as “an agent of transformative experimentation and collective awareness,” a repository that stores the verbal and emotional corrective while depicting the isolating forces often labelled as intrinsic to Ireland. While Joyce's stories are structured by epiphany, O'Brien's are punctuated by the pull between the recognition of the harsh world and renewed hope. This motif of tension between futility and hope reverberates as an appeal to collective awareness throughout her stories. Describing literature as “a dying animal” waiting to be resuscitated, “a dying flower” to be tendered, Edna O'Brien employs her imagination to give voice to the marginalized people of Ireland and their power to not only endure but move beyond. Informed by a chronic sense of disillusionment triggered by failing encounters often among kindred, O'Brien's stories can be regarded as invitations—offerings and gifts—in an act of ethical investigation about bonding and survival (Booth 175). In the idiom of Martha Nussbaum, who sees literary imagination as public imagination with its imaginary judges that will “measure the quality of life of people near and far” (12), Edna O'Brien's fiction encourages us to exercise moral imagination, to see life from others' perspective, and to develop “an intense awareness of human loneliness” (O'Connor 18) while, at the same time imaginatively constructing a land of hospitality as

remedial to the “land of shame, a land of murder, a land of strange sacrificial women” (O’Brien, “A Scandalous Woman” 89). Read with the recognition of those hostile forces behind Edna O’Brien’s statement: “Writing is my breathing,” it becomes more obvious that the stories she tells have not only helped her to become more resilient but also created a world that reminds us how to survive and to give.

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