

THE CHALLENGE OF CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

Gottlieb GUNTERN

Edna O'BRIEN

Novelist, short story writer, Ireland

Edna O'Brien is a daughter of County Clare in the west of Ireland - "a beautiful tragic country to be born into." To some she evokes James Joyce's Molly Bloom, for being Irish and lusty; for others, her literary genius recalls that of Colette. The author of five collections of short stories and thirteen novels, she has also been compared with Virginia Woolf, Yeats and Chekov. Her style, nevertheless, is hers alone: vivid, unique, one of words masterfully cascading through intricate plots. Enchanted, alarmed and deeply marked by the history and tradition of her beloved Erin, Edna O'Brien's first love affair was with her country. The mainstream of her novels and stories reflects domestic violence, the inner conflict in women, their complex, most often turbulent relations with men - set to the background of her heart-rending, war-ridden, passion-infested homeland. Her first novel, *The Country Girls*, was burned in the local parish courtyard. Edna O'Brien became notorious and went into self-exile in London, where she still lives and writes today.

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In the marriage feast of Cana water was turned into wine, but in this century Soren Kierkegaard remarked that "Not only do we not make wine out of water, we make water out of wine."

Intuition: the power of the mind by which it immediately perceives the truth of things without reasoning or analysis.

This week we spoke of intuition versus rationality and more or less advocated its supremacy. But that is not the whole story, oh, no. It is too fallible, it is too circumscribed, it does not allow for the fact that we choose the definitions that suit us. Your intuition and mine are poles apart and what determines it is country, religion, ancestry and the sensibility which we cultivate in ourselves from the moment we are born. Is Saddam Hussein a man who works by intuition? Possibly he would think he is. Marat Sade believed that redemption was made possible by a complete debasement of the flesh. Fanatics who flagellated themselves believed the opposite. In both cases they must have responded to their intuition. Peter Abelard, when he submitted to being castrated to atone for his love of Heloise, was probably answering the voice of conscience, whereas she who waited for him all of her life was listening in vain to her own intuition.

Now my private history, like your private history, is a compound and a mishmash. It's the country we hail from, the locality, the known and unknown ancestors and the myriad impressions of childhood.



Yet I have to tell you that my intuition and my mother's differed drastically and especially with regard to literature. I consider literature - and I always did - as an education, a salvation, a quickening of consciousness, and if one is very lucky, a transubstantiation. "Gaiety transfiguring all that dread," Yeats wrote in his irate older years. Literature is a magnification of life, that real life which all of us in our different ways are zealously fleeing from. "Mankind cannot bear too much reality," T. S. Eliot said. Literature, a deepening, a heightening, an ecstasizing, a peculiar magical leap by which an invented universe is made more intense; in Dante's *Inferno*, more frightening; in Shakespeare's history plays, more bloody; in Emily Dickinson's poetry, more mystical. The entire spectrum of passion, of pain, of light, of feeling, of grace and of gross murder made more manifest, so that we as readers rise to it with the gusto that those great authors deserve.

"To read a book is to write it," Sartre said, and he was right. I did not grow up with books, in fact there were none in our village and in our house there were only prayer books and blood stock manuals. There was a cookery book, of course. Yet I had an obsession with language, as if language was a Grail through which one would pass, a Holy Grail, leading to that frontier between sanity and insanity, between hope and darkness. Language was a key to discovery, the alchemy.

Now my mother saw literature as sin, naked unredeemable sin. It was as if in a previous incarnation she had read James Joyce's *Molly Bloom*, or had been Molly Bloom and privy to the prodigal lust which Molly permitted herself. Yet I shared my mother's and my community's feelings about other things, about God, Him of whom Samuel Beckett has said, "The bastard, he doesn't exist," therefore conferring on him existence. I believed God watched every moment of our lives because he was both omniscient and omnipresent. I was once told by a doctor that all Irish Catholics who were venturesome enough to take LSD underwent a crucifixion experience. I can vouch for it. Blood, Christ's blood and the mother's blood, along with the flames of hell were what engulfed me, complete with a plethora of language that married litany and obscenity, that believed the tabernacle housed holy and unholy things. It is interesting that some countries are mothers and some are fathers. We say Mother Russia, we do not say Mother Germany. Likewise I think that there is male and female intuition and that they strike differently. It is not a fixed thing, it is changing just as the atoms and cells in our bodies are altering as we sit here. What we feel about something today, we may not feel so insistently tomorrow, or am I wrong?

I want for a moment to refer to something that Mr. Brodsky said the other day. It was an example of his intuition which is also an extension of his hopes and could ultimately be called a wish. He said that in Czechoslovakia, if all the newspapers, instead of printing their political tosh, had decided to serialize *A Man Without Qualities* or *Remembrances of Things Past*, society there would have been changed. I don't believe it. I would like to believe it but I don't believe it. People, all of us, are changed only when we are willing to be changed. The unwilling are not. Roman Roland said that "Art



is a great consolation to the individual but that it is useless against history." W. H. Auden put it differently: "For poetry makes nothing happen." It does and it doesn't. It survives history, it challenges it, but it could not or has not prevented wars, the holocaust and the ongoing catalogue of butchery. The most that one could hope for is that through suffering we learn and produce greater poets, and more devoted readers, people who will want not just to read but to re-read, not out of duty, not out of fashion, but by coming to realize that the secular world for all its pleasures and all its flatteries, is just not enough. We have a spiritual entity and in times of crisis we meet it. "Go seek a draught to slake thy thirst, go seek it in thy soul," Matthew Arnold said. It's good advice.

There is something that often irks me and it is this condescending distinction between prose and poetry. There isn't any difference. Prose if it is any good, has the rhythm and cadence of poetry and a great poem induces in the reader the sudden complex escalation of feelings as say *War and Peace* or a three act play. They filter in and serve the unvoiced necessities within us, they speak directly to the imagination and lift us to another region of consciousness.

"A sweetheart from another life floats there
As though she had been forced to linger
From vague distress or arrogant loveliness
Merely to loosen out a tress
Among the starry eddies of her hair."

W.B. Yeats

Compernelle: You said you didn't bring a movie, but you have created a movie. This is the first time somebody reads some poetry to me and I could see it happen before me, so although you did not bring a movie, you have projected a movie in my mind. Thank you.

O'Brien: Thank you.

Q: I'd like to say that you really brought this atmosphere of mystery that Ireland has. I remember when I was a child, I was probably seventeen, and lived in a town in Ventura, Brazil, and I was exposed to that mystery river when I read the *Portrait of a Young Artist* - an artist by the name of James Joyce. And then all of this stayed in my mind. But I was in your country after being exposed to *Finnigan's Wake* and to our James Joyce. It was the definition of the word that he gave, that magic word, what is pornography, what is not, what is the word by its own meaning? But when I was in your country and when you sent that fellow today, the bastard, under the bastard of not being born there... Thank you very much.



O'Brien: Thank you. I think the question is, aren't we all bastards? Probably, yes. But there are degrees of bastardy and also a distinction between thought and deed. The person I wrote about, who was to some extent based on an actual person, a terrorist, was a bastard to some and a hero to others. Now you may ask why I chose to write about him. Two reasons. I wanted to amplify the fate and the history of my country insofar as I could, to write of a situation imposed on Ireland against the will of her people. By that I mean the dividing of the country in 1922, a division which has resulted in twenty-five years of war, and also to learn as much as I could about a man who was killed for his cause and how it might have damaged him. It was not an easy subject. However, I would say that one of the privileges along with one of the duties of a fiction writer is to explore those very dangerous territories. Newspapers report things, but the writer needs to examine the human toll. This man told me a lot about his life, his decision to join the IRA, having been interned at the age of fifteen, his commitment to his own community and the recognition that by killing he would one day himself be killed. He told me one story that I will never forget. His wife was shot while he was in gaol. On the evening she was shot he had gone to bed early and went to sleep. The warders knocked on his door. He didn't hear. He slept until seven the next morning when the news was about to be broadcast, and his door was broken in. They said to him, "Your wife was shot," and for a minute he did not believe them, because as he said, they were always trying to break you. Then they turned on the radio and he heard it. He believed it then. His grief was enormous, even though he did nothing to emphasize it and I remembered something I had read by a young American soldier in Somalia who, writing to his parents, said, "War is a terrible thing and kills everyone in some way." It does.

