

Eibhear Walshe. *Kate O'Brien. A Writing Life*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006, 194 pages.

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Virginia Woolf stated in *The Art of Biography* (1939) the importance of a biographer's achievements: "by telling us the true facts, by sifting the little from the big, and shaping the whole so that we perceive the outline, the biographer does more to stimulate the imagination than any poet or novelist save the very great. For few poets and novelists are capable of that high degree of tension which gives us reality".

It is evident that a biography implies a selection of the large material any life generates, a verification of "the true facts" and great accuracy to identify the key elements in it. However, nothing could be achieved without the necessary empathy that must exist between the biographer and the biographee, some amount of complicity, some universe shared by both. Only in this way can a biography aim at higher targets than a mere chronological presentation of events, because quite frequently the artistic/academic approach overshadows the human dimension of a writer. Fortunately this is not the case of Eibhear Walshe's book.

The "high degree of tension" mentioned by Virginia Woolf is ever present in Kate O'Brien's life. Her biographer has faced the challenge of dealing with an author largely neglected and unhonoured in her own country, since only in the 80s, when Arlen House reissued her works, a true revival of interest in her came about. Traditionally there had been an uneasy reaction to this banned writer, with an unconventional physical appearance and a distinctly *unIrish* behaviour. Walshe goes so far as to hold that her own imagination was influenced by a sense of racial defensiveness and protectiveness towards Irish writing and that her fiction was in some ways the angry reply of the colonized writer. But above all he emphasizes her status as a *subversive novelist*, an author who pulled down many moral barriers and who dared the narrow and claustrophobic scope of her native Limerick. His commitment to recover and restore her position in Irish Literature is clear from the very beginning of the book.

Kate O'Brien is approached not only as the author of a good number of successful novels, plays, travel books, essays and biographies. The book particularly stresses the role she played as the representative of a class— the Catholic bourgeoisie— that had been practically non existent in Irish fiction. Walshe makes clear that in writing novels about the Irish bourgeoisie she was creating a literature from scratch, since most of Irish writing in the nineteenth century had been from the perspective of the Anglo Irish Ascendancy. And although Joyce had provided something of a model in his depictions of Irish middle class domestic life, a period of silence followed until her own voice sounded. Throughout seven chapters chronologically arranged, the book traces the endless number of addresses of O'Brien's nomadic existence, offering an interesting intersection of her *sense of*

*place* and her *sense of self*. Both factors intertwined in her life and work and are crucial to understand her process of self assertion. Therefore Ireland, Britain and Spain prove everlasting references in her lifetime, each framing different stages and experiences.

Kate O'Brien illustrates the Irish writer's anxiety to possess a space of his/her own and the different strategies generated by it. One of the most frequent is that of transposing/ translating Irish experience to other scenes, something that Fintan O'Toole perfectly highlights when he says that "Ireland is something that often happens somewhere else". Distance was essential for O'Brien to render the details of her own country and her own class, as she herself puts it : "I for my part cannot write of Ireland without a great effort of exile, spiritual attachment". Therefore she expanded her views towards Europe, seeking new horizons for a new Ireland we have not read about previously,

The writer's controversial relationship with her own country— her *odi atque amo* attitude — pervades this biography from her childhood in Limerick until the end of her life. She was educated at a time of nationalist and religious conflict and some of these conflicts find resonance in her fiction. Her contact with De Valera's Ireland was hostile, increasingly antagonistic towards the kind of the country being created, an inward-looking and isolated one. She felt a sharp contrast between the cultural insularity of the Irish Free State and the enlightened, European Catholicism of her imagined Mellick. On the other hand, Walshe draws our attention on the important role played by Britain, both in her life and her work. Ireland /England epitomizes an axis of conflicting loyalties which no doubt had a great influence on her writings, particularly the fact that she wrote for a British readership. She turned to Ireland for imaginative material—the fictitious universe of Mellick— and used the Irish bourgeoisie to create characters that did not accommodate to the English stereotypes about the Irish, of which she was very conscious. Walshe rightly points out that a central impulse within her novels was to teach her English readers that Ireland had a civilised and educated bourgeoisie, as civilized as any in Europe, and that this was to be one of the strongest motivations in her novel making. In spite of that, she often sees Ireland as a place apart and the Irish as a race apart, and she deals with this matter in terms of other-worldliness.

This biography explores the ways in which she invented a literary identity for her own Irish bourgeois class and a successful independence and viability for her young Irish female protagonists, generally Catholics at odds with the sexual codes of her religious education and yet still enraptured with the beauty of its ceremonies and its liturgy. The business of being a European Catholic proved a defence against the colonial stigma of "mere Irishness" during Kate's working life in Britain and was a key element in her elevation of the newly emergent Irish bourgeois. Living in England, she was free to invent her own version of Irish Catholicism where individual conscience and personal choice of moral uses was possible. But Walshe particularly emphasizes the fact that Catholicism operates in her fiction as a cultural symbol and that Spain was crucial to transform her imaginative concerns. Her Spanish intellectual and spiritual heritage

outstand as a landmark in her artistic development, she being strongly attracted towards Castilian austere landscape and the lives and beliefs of its great mystics and writers. O'Brien also dealt with a number of diverse subjects – contemporary politics, historical characters, the tradition of Spanish painting or her veneration of Teresa of Avila, of which she published a short biography. However, her relations with Franco's official Spain were never easy, though her work was translated into Spanish and freely available in the country.

It is this diverse and colourful sense of place that gradually provided the writer with a fuller selfhood, a stronger self assertion. Walshe approaches her complex and multi faceted personality with remarkable objectivity. Thus he raises the controversial question of O'Brien's homosexuality and has no hesitation in maintaining that, given the evidence of her life patterns, Kate was a lesbian and that her sexuality was conditioned by her upbringing, her religious experiences and her culture. However, he makes clear that the web of interconnected relationship in her life is the only reliable biographical material available for an evaluation of it. He respects the writer's own silences regarding private matters, such as her marriage, and he carefully values the reliability of every source. Eibhear Walshe has managed to offer a detailed and dignified view of the thorniest aspects of her life, such as heavy drinking, financial problems or utter loneliness, as well as a true profile of her commitment to democracy and freedom. Well structured, documented and balanced, this biography stimulates our imagination, as Virginia Woolf recommended, but above all reinforces our interest in Kate O'Brien's and her work.