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Green Fields and Blue Roads: The Melancholy of the Girl Walker in Irish Women's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Lawrence Buell has observed that 'Ecology as green … perpetuates the implication of binary nature-culture separation … and understates the potential for self-intoxicated fetishization of greenery'. The fetishization of greenery has unique connotations for cultural production in Ireland, a country inevitably identified with the colour and with romanticized landscapes. This essay will examine the establishment and maintenance of the myth of 'natural' and pure womanhood, a fetishized commodity central to constructions of twentieth-century Irishness, as represented in novels by three contemporary writers, Clare Boylan, Edna O'Brien, and Éilís Ní Dhuinhne. The discussion will focus on the figure of the girl walking through the Irish landscape, a setting against which the girl appears both as a 'natural' reproductive resource to be cultivated for exploitation and as an embodiment of the contradictions subtending her position caught between ideas of the cultural and the natural. These Irish women's texts, to borrow Joe Kennedy's phrase, 'puncture the pastoral', often by complicating notions of the countryside as retreat and haven, a challenge with implications for women's place in imagining Irish national identity. The girls' relationship to the landscape through which they travel is a traumatised one. At once captured and troubled by their own reduction to the 'natural', their valuation as reproductive resource, they are drawn to the 'green' world, even as they recognise the dangers it represents.

In the revised third edition of Havelock Ellis's 1896 study, *Sexual Inversion*, having noted a 'decided preference for green' amongst the 'inverts', both men and women, whose histories he had recorded, Ellis argues that green 'is rarely the favourite colour of adults of the Anglo-Saxon race, though some enquirers have found it to be more commonly a preferred colour among children, especially girls, and it is more often preferred by women than by men'.[1] The final stanza of a 1905 poem, 'Women's Rights', by lesbian Irish poet and playwright, Eva Gore-Booth, reads, 'Men have got their pomp and pride – / All the green world is on our side'.[2] That green, the colour of the 'natural' world, can also function as the colour of the outsider to masculine heteronormativity reveals the contradictions and ambiguities attending the colour and its associations. Kate Soper defines nature, in 'its commonest and most fundamental sense', as 'opposed to culture, history, convention, … in short, to everything which is defining of the order of humanity'.[3] It is through the idea of 'nature' that 'we conceptualise what is "other" to ourselves';[4] yet, as Soper goes on to note, this same idea 'has been used to condemn the "perversity" of human behaviour', an enlistment of 'nature's' authority to enforce conformity, especially in the assumption of sexual roles and identities.[5] Now that 'green' has become shorthand for ecological responsibility and increasingly popular concerns regarding 'sustainability', 'green' has also become the colour of money in more than one sense. Having been successfully monetised as a marketing strategy, green is no longer necessarily the colour of the outsider.

Within ecocriticism, the usefulness of 'green' as emblem for its core concerns has also recently been debated, an early intervention having been voiced by Timothy Morton in 2010, when he expressed scepticism regarding 'bright green' environmental thinking that is 'affirmative, extroverted, and masculine', conveying 'optimism, intelligence and the sunny world of consumer products', potentially side-lining 'negativity, introversion, femininity',[6] amongst other productively resistant forces. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that reliance on

'green', a single clichéd hue, to reference the environment can evoke an unblemished nature offering an 'innate plenitude, … personal revelations and solipsistic calm'.[7] Lawrence Buell echoes Cohen's observation, saying that 'Ecology as green … perpetuates the implication of binary nature-culture separation … and understates the potential for self-intoxicated fetishization of greenery'.[8] The fetishization of greenery has unique connotations for cultural production in Ireland, a country inevitably identified with the colour and with romanticized landscapes, an identification economically exploited within the country by commercial and government interests.

The practise of selling the island's natural beauties as site of idyllic pastoral retreat began in the eighteenth century under British rule and persists today, a continuity traced by Seamus Deane, when he describes the 'Irish landscape … as something that could be visited and consumed as a tonic for metropolitan weariness', [9] a phenomenon Sharae Deckard calls 'Irish ecology as abstract social nature'.[10] Deckard addresses the 'cynical manipulation of the word "green" [that] strips it of ethical and political connotations and represses the history of ecological imperialism and violence implicit in the transformation of Ireland into a mythical "emerald isle"'.[11] While Deckard's excoriating analysis of Ireland's 'neoliberal ecological regime' begins with Spenser's desire in the seventeenth century to remove Ireland's native population in order to increase property values, twentieth-century ideas of what constitutes Irishness have relied significantly on myths of Irish womanhood, developed in the predominantly conservative Roman Catholic culture of the post-Independence state. This essay will examine the violence, both implicit and explicit, necessary to the establishment and maintenance of that particular myth as represented in the work of three contemporary writers, *Holy Pictures* by Clare Boylan, *Down by the River,* by Edna O'Brien, and *The Dancers Dancing*, by Éilís Ní Dhuinhne. The discussion will focus on the figure of the girl walking through the Irish landscape, a setting against which the girl appears both as a

'natural' reproductive resource to be cultivated for exploitation and as an embodiment of the contradictions subtending her position caught, as she is, between constructions of the cultural and the natural.

Deckard's essay shares concerns with recent critiques by British commentators, such as Robert McFarlane and Joe Kennedy, of romantic notions of the rural that are too easily coopted by conservative ideologies. McFarlane's 'The Eeriness of the English Countryside' surveys contemporary British artists' refusal of cosy representation of the rural in work that engages with 'the English landscape in terms of its anomalies rather than its continuities, [and is] sceptical of comfortable notions of "dwelling" and "belonging", and of the packagings of the past as "heritage"'.[12] Kennedy expresses admiration for art 'dedicated to a busting of the bucolic, a puncturing of the pastoral', [13] and these Irish women's texts puncture the pastoral, often by complicating notions of the countryside as retreat and haven, a resistance with implications for women's place in constructions of Irish national identity. The girls in these novels experience a traumatised relationship to the landscape through which they travel. At once captured and troubled by their own reduction to the natural, their valuation as reproductive resource, they are drawn to the 'green' world, even as they recognise the dangers it represents for them. Subject to what Ariel Salleh identifies as the 'discursive slur of being "close-to-nature'", [14] women in the West, as a result of their

> socially constructed feminine gender prescription [,]… inhabit a no-man's land between humanity and 'nature' - the primary contradiction… . We women live our days always falling between two nonidentical stools, so to speak, and all the abusive practices which fix our position as reproductive resource testify to this. The felt contradiction is sharpened when as women at

> the interface with so called 'nature', we become sensitised to our thwarted place in humanity.[15]

Salleh's theorisation of ecofeminism as a 'libidinally informed economics' draws on the work of Julia Kristeva and Theodor Adorno, whom she considers the first philosopher of 'embodied materialism'.[16] The girls in these texts are living in the 'fork of contradiction' Salleh describes and suffer the resulting 'nonidentity', – that is, a perceived 'failure' to achieve normative identity – which is potentially 'painful but also thoroughly liberating'.[17]

Women's 'thwarted place in humanity' is felt by the girls in these novels as a constitutive sad hopelessness, the 'blue' necessary to 'green', perhaps especially so in an Irish context. The narrator in Edna O'Brien's novel *House of Splendid Isolation* says of the Irish landscape, 'Blue would seem to be the nature of the place, though the grass is green, different greens'.[18] Melancholy, the particular 'blue' pervasive in these texts, is, according to Morton 'an irreducible component of subjectivity',[19] as well as an appropriate response to our place in the environment. According to Kristeva, the girl struggling to achieve autonomy from the mother is necessarily 'melancholy/depressive', as her murderous impulses against the loved/despised mother must be 'protectively' turned inward. [20] For Heidegger, 'The brightness sheltered in the dark is blueness', [21] the colour of loss of self in relationality, and, by extension, the colour of girls' introjected violence against the self in a culture that requires a rejection of the 'feminine' and the maternal, even as, in the case of Catholic Ireland, motherhood is the most, if not solely, valued womanly identity. Edna O'Brien's husband, Ernest Gébler, notoriously commented on an early manuscript of his wife's, that 'there is no such thing as a blue road'. In her memoir, she recalls her unspoken response: 'I knew there was. I had seen them … Roads were every colour, blue, grey, gold, sandstone and carmine'.[22] Roads in the fiction of O'Brien, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Clare Boylan, and Anne Enright are

many-coloured and various, all leading to revelations about the dangerous realities of women's lives.

The historical period covered in the novels runs from the 1920s, in Clare Boylan's *Holy Pictures*, to the late twentieth century. *Holy Pictures* begins and ends with three girls walking from suburban Dublin to a mountain forest for a 'picnic' a few days before Christmas. The opening scene provides no clues as to the identity of or relationships between the girls:

> The children were walking. Doll, as usual, was pushing a pram. Nan carried a paper bag from which came the sound of bells. Mary was struggling with a hen. … They had to go a long way. It was five miles to the mountains which were heaped around the city like old velvet cushions. … At the feet of the mountains burrowed dark corridors of trees and linked shadows which twisted up into the forests.[23]

Mary, the youngest, lags behind, distracted by the sounds of her boots on the path and by the path itself, which 'had the sheen of the ears of black cats and this was called black ice. She bent down and picked at this skin of the pavement to see if it was really black. It was too thin to be lifted. Ahead of her, the big girls glided like nuns' (1). As the girls walk, they notice the everted quality of the 'houses of the poor Catholics', who do not have tended lawns or window boxes, while 'in dark and airless drawing rooms …. Nature had taken over. Green trees bloomed with fairies, ribbons and candles' (4). The various contrasts here, between the darkening cold outside, and the warm, lamplit interiors, between the barren gardens and the verdant drawing rooms, call attention to the moment's subtle challenge to the inside/outside dichotomy, one of the many that will limit the girls' future to a life 'inside', at a remove from

the productive, political, and intellectual 'outside'. The holiday suspension of such distinctions only serves to highlight their inevitability.

After absorbing this image of 'imprisoned' greenery, the girls leave the increasingly sparsely distributed houses behind as they walk 'between fields luminous with frost. A frozen mist had descended and the air swirled like boiling water. Spectral sheep and cows offered up lament' (5). The supernatural which inheres in the natural Irish landscapes is evoked here as the girls themselves undergo a super/natural transformation. A man stops working the earth to watch the girls, comparing and judging their attractiveness. But they 'disappeared into a patch of mist and then came out again, silvery in a spot of moonlight, and the man with the fork frowned because the two that came out first were now women. You could tell by their softness. They passed so close that their breath clouded his face and he thought he could smell the scent of women' (6). The man's discomfiting, erotic appreciation of the girls requires they be children. When they move away, he is 'relieved of his thought. They ceased to be women or children. They were only sticks blackened on the horizon' (6). The recurring emphasis on black in the opening chapter, the fascinating colour of the icy road and the doubly objectified girls, burnt out of disturbing erotic consideration, recalls Morton's observation that the 'ancients thought that melancholy, their word for depression, was the earth mood, in the language of humour theory, melancholy is black, earthy, and cold'.[24]

The sources of misery contributing to the dismal, defeated mood of the opening scene emerge over the course of the narrative which details the girls' lives of dispossession and sexual predation. Fields and forests offer no solace or replenishment in a novel in which the colour green is predominantly associated with the dangerous elements of the natural world, especially the anxieties and fears provoked in girls by sex and reproduction. The faintly menacing, leering man in the early passage wears 'greenish baggy trousers' (5); the letters written to Nan and Mary's father by his secret second wife are written in green ink; a spinster

lodger leaves behind a stash of ‘green putrefied meat’ (62); another ‘sexless’, childless old woman’s green teeth are described obsessively (7, 8, 11, 38); two different characters tell Nan she looks ‘green’ on the day she begins menstruating (98, 108); adolescent school girls, in their green uniforms, being instructed in the sacredness of their ‘impending duties as wives and mothers’ (27) appear as ‘untidy foliage’ (24) and a ‘chaste forest of green serge’ (25), whose worryingly nubile bodies are, in the eyes of the nuns teaching them, ‘undoubtedly structured around ambitious wombs’ (27). The nuns, referenced in the opening passage, dispense contradictory lessons in appropriate feminine behaviour. At the same time as their charges are being told they are destined to be wives and mother, they are directed to emulate the Virgin Mary, whose own association with the colour blue has unintended psychological resonance for the girls being instructed to aspire to the impossible ideal of virgin maternity.

The consequences of the girls’ official and unofficial tuition are evident in Doll’s fate, slave to her mother’s relentless cycle of pregnancy and birth. Doll appears to be permanently attached to a pram from a young age, burdened with the care of the youngest addition to the family from year to year. By the end of the novel, she has become pregnant herself at the age of sixteen, and the infant in the pram she is pushing to the wintry ‘snow picnic’ in the mountain forest is her own. Early in the novel, Nan, Mary’s older sister, has been told she might not be able to participate in the school play because she has developed a ‘chest’. She is allowed to perform after all, but the reason for the teachers’ concern becomes clear when she goes out on stage and feels men’s eyes on ‘on her knees, now on her face, now on her bosom’ (143), recalling the appraising gaze of the unnamed man of the opening chapter. Nan interprets this attention as a source of power, felt ‘as one feels in a pebble from the beach at the bottom of one’s pocket, the crumbled cliffs, the captive insects, the frothing tides’ (143). Nature as the source of images of all-important but transient feminine beauty and inevitable loss recurs throughout, as when the sisters acquire ‘a view of female life as a brief, colourful

rainbow, an arc which ran to earth at twenty one' (180). While only fourteen, Nan is pushed into the arms of a middle-aged man by her widowed mother, who is struggling to survive by taking in lodgers after her husband's death leaves the family in debt. Nan barely escapes a sexual assault, and when she tells her mother what happened, the response shocks the girl: 'You could have been well married. We could have been looked after for life' (244). Nan is utterly demoralised and dejected by this acknowledgement of her strictly 'natural', that is, reproductive, value.

This is the context for the walk into the mountains, which is picked up again in the following and final chapter. The girls reach the forest line just as the sun is setting:

> 'We'll have to hurry', Doll said. She pushed her pram through the dark lanes of firs which swayed and creaked with the piety of praying nuns. Nan felt unable to go on. She was tired out by the lodgers. She could not imagine what she was doing so far from home, so late, on such a day and remembered then that home was inhabited by a sense of her failure, in the poorness and dullness that she had helped to preserve. 245

The escape to the forest from adult pressures, social and sexual – they cannot elude the darkly disapproving nuns' surveillance – offers no real comfort or release, and sandwiches are hurriedly consumed in panic about the encroaching darkness. Mary suggests to Nan that they get something special for their mother in a moment described as evidence of Mary growing up. Nan suddenly realises that her mother is not the enemy and that theirs is shared misery with no conceivable resolution: 'From now on [the sisters] would live in the real world. They felt for one another's hands and began to find their trail out of the forest' (250). The novel ends where it begins, in a natural setting at a marked distance from the urban/suburban setting

of the rest of the narrative, lending irony to the girls' entrapment in a 'natural' cycle of enforced reproduction, sexual and cultural.

The ironic disruption of assuasive visions of natural tranquillity occurs with more disturbing violence in Edna O'Brien's' *Down by the River,* which opens with a father and daughter walking on a bog road in the Irish countryside:

> Ahead of them the road runs in a long entwined undulation of mud, patched tar and fjords of green, the grassy surfaces rutted and trampled, but the young shoots surgent in the sun: flowers and flowering weed in full regalia, a carnival sight, foxglove highest and lordliest of all, the big furry bees nosing in the cool speckled recesses of mauve and white bell. … the frame of a car, turquoise once; rimed in rust, dock and nettle draping the torn seats, … then at intervals rubbish dumps, the bottles, canisters, reading matter and rank gizzards of the town riff-raff stowed in the dead of night … The road silent, somnolent yet with a speech of its own, speaking back to them, father and child, through trappings of sun and fretted verdure, speaking of old mutinies and a fresh crime mounting in the blood.[25]

Detritus, weeds, and flowers tumble together in undifferentiated, carnivalesque excess. An abandoned car blooms with rust, while 'grassy surfaces' are 'rutted and trampled', denying an image of the 'natural' as smooth, homogenous verdure, at a remove from the human.

This is also not a space of innocence and renewal, but a reservoir of a bloody past. The road remembers and speaks, marked by a long history of masculinist violence, murmuring a warning of more to come. O'Brien shares with Ní Dhuibne, and many other contemporary Irish women writers, an interest in Irish folklore and pre-Christian culture.

Their fiction offers a link between an ancient world view of animate, speaking nature and the kind of 'worldview' proposed by 'ecological postmodernism', in which 'nature is, at a fundamental level, reanimated. Recognising the vitality of things in all natural-cultural processes, and the co-extensivity of language and reality, ecological postmodernism perceives nature as being primarily constituted of interacting, interrelated phenomenon. Its intention [is] to "re-enchant" reality'.[26] Enchantment has more than one aspect, however, and fairy tales are dangerous places for girls who wander into the wilderness.

The father, James, has brought along a tape measure to assess imaginary profits to be made from selling chunks of fallow bogland to tourists. He does not regard the land as a speaking entity, but as a potential commodity rendered valuable thanks to the tourist and heritage industries. Rather than attend to the history spoken through the voice of the land, James is eager to 'neuter … absented histories'.[27] 'Touristic representations of … Ireland as idyllic sanctuary', require, as Eoin Flannery has observed, 'coerced silences'.[28] James walks 'several leagues ahead' of his daughter, Mary, his brown hat 'a greenish shard in the bright sunlight' (1), an echo of the way this 'natural' colour both signals and camouflages predacious intentions in Boylan's novel. The sexualised description of James's measurement of the bog is ominous: 'He leapt to the task … extending the metal ruler down the moist seams of black-brown soil. … Pounds, shillings and pence danced before his eyes. … [G]etting carried away with his estimations he spun the metal tape in a wide and apostolic arc, a wand pronouncing his claim over the deserted but fabled landscape … his empire' (2).

The embedded references to colonial and religious domination contribute to James's illusions of patriarchal might, feebly but disastrously realised in the rape of his thirteen-year-old daughter, who, like the berries too early to pick, is yet 'rawly pink', not yet ready 'to come forth in pained fruition' (1-2):

> Darkness then, a weight of darkness except for one splotch of sunlight on his shoulder and all the differing motions, of water, of earth, of body, moving as one, on a windless day. Not a sound of a bird. An empty place cut off from every place else, and her body too, the knowing part of her body getting separated from what was happening down there. … An eternity of time, then a shout, a chink of light, the ground easing back up, gorse prickles on her scalp and nothing ever the same again and a feeling as of having half-died. (4)

The speaking land has fallen silent as embodiment for Mary becomes an agony from which she must disengage. The helpless silence of the violated girl finds an analogue in an evacuated 'nature', also being materially exploited by the same despoiler. Setting the appalling rape in an apparently bucolic setting creates a juxtaposition that speaks to a traumatised landscape that can at the same time be malevolently seductive. Mary's mother is dying of cancer in this early part of the narrative, and it is revealed that she had tried to drown herself years before her diagnosis, but was prevented from doing so by a passing stranger. When Mary becomes pregnant after being raped again by her father after her mother's death, she also considers suicide, unconsciously walking the same path to the water's edge, reproducing the death-impulse of the mother, a gesture of a primal desire to merge with her, and, thereby, 'to merge with sadness'.[29] At an unconscious level, Mary regards her own suffering as fated, as 'natural'. As Patricia Coughlan observes, 'O'Brien's pervasive melancholy answers … to the old, constitutively misogynist structures, which had … formed the social order she so sceptically appraised, in the Ireland of the four middle decades of the last century'.[30]

The misogyny of the social order bears down on Mary with considerable force once she is caught trying to travel to England in order to obtain an abortion.[31] Her crime becomes a

national scandal. In the media she is known as 'Magdalene' and is virtually kidnapped by an ant-abortion group in order to guarantee she carry the baby to term. The name Magdalene has an especially shameful significance in an Irish context, as recently recalled by Anne Enright in a series of lectures from 2015 and published in *London Review of Books*. In the piece, Enright discusses the unburied, dishonoured dead, in particular, Ireland's unwanted, 'illegitimate' children, born to young women and girls locked away in Magdalene laundries and mother-and-baby homes, both run by the Catholic Church, charged with erasing the social visibility of those who belied the ideal of pure Irish womanhood.

The piece begins with a description of a particular kind of burial plot, the 'cillin' or 'children's graveyard'.[32] These burial sites are for the remains of unbaptized children who could not, before the Second Vatican Council, be buried in consecrated ground. Enright observes that these graves are often situated liminally, located at boundaries, between kingdoms, or 'by the water's edge'. Enright visits cilliní in Connemara, some of which 'command a mighty view', set against spectacular scenery: 'The bodies of infants were buried by a father or an uncle, often at night. The scant ritual and the isolation of the setting is offset by the beauty that surrounds it: the place feels both abandoned and sacred'[33]. Poignant features of the Irish landscape, these forgotten places may be obscure, but are yet locatable. Other, more shameful, entirely disavowed burial places are suspected to be lying beneath the grounds of several mother-and-baby homes around Ireland, as detailed by Enright. A similar forgotten and unmapped burial place lies at the end of a walk through lush greenery made by Orla, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of Éilís Ní Dhuinhne's *The Dancers Dancing.*

The novel focuses on two weeks in summer in the late 1970s, while Orla is away from her urban Dublin home at Irish school in rural Donegal. She is surrounded by adolescents from around the country, all tortured by hormones, changes, and anxieties. Orla feels her own anxieties to be particularly keen, especially those stemming from two sources of unhappiness:

her first-ever separation from her mother, Elizabeth, a disorientation exacerbated by Elizabeth's failure to reply to any of Orla's letters; and the agonising embarrassment of having a relation near the Irish school, a spinster aunt of whom Orla is desperately ashamed and makes strenuous efforts to avoid. This latter source of misery keeps Orla from participating in trips to the seaside, as she does not want to pass her aunt's house, which leaves her alone for extended periods.

The one comfort Orla discovers is a largely hidden burn (small stream) that flows from a field near where she is staying. She follows its track from field to field, where yellow ragweed 'wears a bleak and sinister look, as if small, malevolent creatures were hiding under the ragweed, smiling'.[34] At this point the burn becomes faster and deeper and 'there is something about the harsh, glaring light that affects her negatively. She thinks she should turn back, something tells her that the safe, good thing to do is to turn and go home' (83). Her body appears to be moving independently of her will, however: 'her feet are sure and practised, they cope much better than she would have given them credit for' (83). She comes to what at first appears an impenetrable thorny hedge, but even that impediment magically gives way and

> she finds herself in a verdant tunnel so green the air itself has a mossy green tincture, a delicate reflection of the thick solid green of the roof and the sides of the tunnel, which are made of hazels, brambles, willows all tangled together. At first the roof is so low that she has to crouch, but soon it raises and forms a high green dome over her head. …it is like being in a hidden green cathedral, deeply centred in a vast forest of shrub and bramble. (84)

Orla experiences a profound sense of freedom walking along the burn, released from her agonising self-consciousness, evident in her body's confident, independent navigation of the slippery stones, an instance of somatic knowledge linking her to her surroundings, a 'reconciliation of Sprit and nature', as Adorno calls this kind of impulse, which, 'intramental and somatic in one, drives beyond the sphere of consciousness. …. With it, freedom reaches deep into experience'. [35] In this overdetermined womb-like space, Orla relishes her embodiment, something she has never before been able to do in a country where women were expected to guard 'their rebellious bodies' (89). She finds gleaming red berries, forbidden fruit: 'Sweet tangy, cool fresh wild, tinged with an exotic flavour … a flavour that is a confirmation, for her, of the jewel-studded world that awaits exploration, that in all its richness is waiting for her to step into, to experience, sometime soon, when she grows up' (84). This transformative moment allows Orla to imagine an adult life different from her mother's.

Returning frequently to this secret place, Orla begins to feel it is instilling courage, reducing anxiety:

> Something has happened to her, there in the chestnut water, in the green tunnel. She forgets about Elizabeth for a while. She stops worrying about the letters. She forgets about Aunt Annie, or forgets that she is a problem waiting to be solved.
>
> Being down in the burn has made her happy.
>
> In the burn, she was part of whatever whole encompassed the water and the weeds and the raspberries and the drooping willows. … Orla belonged to the river. She was nothing there, nothing more than a berry dipping to the water or a minnow floating under the surface of the pool. Nothing. And

> completely herself. Orla Herself. Nor Orla the Daughter of Elizabeth. … Just Orla. (86)

Salleh would describe this as a moment of nonidentity, as a potentially liberating 'disengagement with "what is"',[36] a moment of nascent political awareness, enabled by an immersive experience in non-human nature. Nonidentity is certainly bliss for Orla if it means disassociating herself from Elizabeth, at once beloved and feared as an energetic enforcer of patriarchal imperatives.

Orla is confronted with a sharp reminder of the forces ranged against her emerging self-confidence and hopes for a liberated, fulfilling adulthood, however, in her last trek along the burn's path, when she goes deeper than she has dared so far. She makes this excursion after her first attempt to visit her aunt, a walk 'down the blue road' to acknowledging an embarrassing female forebear (217). She is relieved, however, to find no one is at home and celebrates her respite with a last return to the burn, where she dares herself 'to try out all the taboo words she knows', in order to hear them echoed back. Her words, 'Feck and bleddy and bloody and bastard' (234) – this last word will prove to be an ironic choice – also echo diagetically as her walk proceeds and the sense of menace that accompanied her first entry to the burn returns:

> She begins to feel tired, and the damp greenness of the burn seems to be seeping into her stomach, pressing upon it. … it is as if something is dragging her down to the water. … [S]he begins to make her way to the bank. This tangle of briar and hazel and weed looks precarious, soft, insidious. Anything could lurk in there but she knows at some stage under all the mess she will find solid earth and just at this moment that is what she needs. (235)

Orla gains the bank, drained of energy ‘and sad at heart as well’. She feels she has ‘escaped’, but:

> On the third step her foot strikes something very hard. It does not feel like a rock, however. It is harder and smoother than that.
>
> … On the next step her foot feels the same shiny hard thing under it. She begins to scrape with her feet, pushing away the grass and weeds. A white stone begins to emerge. White, smooth as a pearl.
>
> She knows what it is. In fact she knew, really, when her foot felt the shine and the smoothness the first time. Horror does not overcome her at all, but curiosity, and she brings her hands to the job, pulling and scraping.
>
> Skulls. Half a dozen, small round white skulls. Tiny skeletons, with bones as delicate as the pieces of Airfix model airplanes. (236)

As if no longer able to avoid the realities of female embodiment, Orla begins menstruating in the next chapter, and, like Nan and Mary, part of her ‘maturation’ appears to be entering the ‘real world’ of limited expectations and accepting her fated connections to Elizabeth and Aunt Annie, making common cause with the women she has resisted.

Unlike the darkly comic, pessimistic vision of Boylan’s work, however, in both the O’Brien and Ní Dhuinhne novels, the girls’ futures do promise change, offer some qualified hope of autonomy and claim to power. As Mary’s pregnancy advances, she becomes increasingly alienated from her own body, all bodies, dreading to be reminded of blood, ‘Her father’s, her mother’s, her ancestors’, her own’ (216). She counters this and finds strength and succour by insisting on materiality, literally touching her ‘natural’ surrounding, trees, her

sheepdog, the 'thriving' shrubs her mother planted. The novel concludes, after Mary's miscarriage, with her singing for an audience: 'a great crimson quiver of sound going up, up to the skies' (265), embracing the 'dignity of the corporeal',[37] merging her somatic expression with the elements. The adult Orla in the last chapter of *The Dancers Dancing* has made some compromises, expresses nostalgic regrets, but is a successful writer, also engaged, like Mary, in artistic expression. In both cases, the girl-heroes effect a transmutation of their experience, use melancholy, as Kristeva suggests artists do, as source of creative inspiration. Morton argues that 'melancholia is an ethical act of absolute refusal',[38] part of his 'dark ecology' which champions 'negativity' and 'weakness', as gestures of resistance. Similarly Jack Halberstam advocates 'failure' as a mode of protest: 'Success in a heteronormative capitalist society is equated too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation'.[39] Salleh has noted, 'Women's socially reproductive labours are exploitatively resourced at many levels in the capitalist patriarchal system',[40] but she also suggests that a 'negative' gesture, similar to that endorsed by Halberstam and Morton, is the welcoming of nonidentity; inhabiting nonidentity is a political stance, an act of defiance, a withdrawal of 'energy and commitment from the hypocritical totality'.[41]

The blue girls walking through these novels intuit the green world's complexities, and see their own reflected there. They proceed like tightrope walkers, negotiating the unstable binary tensions constraining human experience in the service of structures of subordination and experienced by young girls with special coercive force. They also hold out the promise of the pleasures of embodiment, the 'dignity of the corporeal', achievable when identifying our human identity as part of nature ceases to be 'taboo'.[42] These novels ultimately extend the invitation in Gore-Booth's poem, addressed to men and women: 'Rise with us and let us go / To where the living waters flow'.

[1] Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume II: Sexual Inversion,* Third Edition, Revised and Enlarged (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1915), 299. The final phrase, 'and it is often preferred more by women than by men', did not appear in the original third edition of 1901.
[2] Eva Gore-Booth, 'Women's Rights', in *Poems of Eva Gore-Booth: Complete Edition*, ed Esther Roper (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans Green and Co., 1929), 408.
[3] Kate Soper, *What is Nature: Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 15.
[4] Ibid., 16.
[5] Ibid., 28.
[6] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 16.
[7] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Introduction to *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xxi.
[8] Lawrence Buell, Preface to *Prismatic Ecology*, x.
[9] Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 148.
[10] Sharae Deckard, 'World Ecology and Ireland: The Neoliberal Ecological Regime', in *Journal of World Systems Research* 11, 1 (2016), 151.
[11] Ibid., 147.
[12] Robert McFarlane, 'The Eeriness of the English Countryside', *The Guardian* (10 April 2015). http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane
[13] Joe Kennedy, 'Terror in the Terroir: Resisting the Rebranding of the Countryside' *The Quietus* (13 December 2013) http://thequietus.com/articles/14114-country-life-british-politics-uncanny-music-art
[14] Ariel Salleh, in conversation with Meira Hanson, 'On Production and Reproduction: Identity and Nonidentity in Ecofeminist Theory', in *Organization and Environment* 12, 2 (June 1999), 211.
[15] Ibid., 212.
[16] Ibid., 209, 212.
[17] Ibid., 212.
[18] Edna O'Brien, *House of Splendid Isolation* (New York: Plume, 1995), 3-4.
[19] Timothy Morton *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 186.
[20] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia,* trans. Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 27-30.
[21] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1982), 147.
[22] Edna O'Brien, *Country Girl: A Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 125.
[23] Clare Boylan, *Holy Pictures* (London: Abacus, 1998), 1. Subsequent parenthetical references will refer to this edition.
[24] Morton, *Ecological Thought*, 16.
[25] Edna O'Brien, *Down by the River* (New York: Plume, 1997), 1. Subsequent parenthetical references will refer to this edition.
[26] Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, 'Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity', in *Ecozone* 13, 1 (2012), 78.
[27] Eoin Flannery, 'Ireland of the Welcomes: Colonialism, Tourism and the Irish Landscape', in *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts,* ed. Christine Cusick (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010), 95.
[28] Ibid., 95-6.
[29] Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 12.
[30] Patricia Coughlan, 'Killing the Bats: O'Brien, Abjection, and the Question of Agency', in *Edna O'Brien: New Critical Perspectives, e*d. Kathryn Laing, Sinéad Mooney, and Maureen O'Connor (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006), 176.
[31] The novel is based on the notorious 'X-case' in Ireland (1992) of an adolescent rape victim attempting to secure an abortion in England.
[32] Anne Enright, 'Antigone in Galway' *London Review of Books* (December 2015,) 11.
[33] Ibid., 11.
[34] Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, *The Dancers Dancing* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1999), 83. Subsequent parenthetical references will refer to this edition.
[35] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 228.
[36] Salleh, 'On Production and Reproduction', 210.

[37] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* 192.
[38] Morton *Ecology without Nature*, 167.
[39] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.
[40] Salleh, 'On Production and Reproduction', 213.
[41] Ibid., 212.
[42] Ibid., 210.