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***The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* and Visionary Scepticism**

Patricia Coughlan

The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch (2002) is a historical novel with a female figure at its centre, set in nineteenth-century Paris and Paraguay. It is a remarkable achievement which deserves much more attention from critics and readers of serious Irish literary fiction than it has as yet received. In this, her third novel, Anne Enright constructs a plot and realizes a fictional milieu in which she can allow her anarchic imagination full creative play. Far from a costume drama, as it was partly marketed and received, the book engages in a searching analysis of both feminine and masculine ways of being in the nineteenth-century world. The surreal character of her vision comes into its own in this gradually emerging representation of a world in disintegration, of European values, knowledge and order being tested to destruction in South America. A certain deliberate excess of linguistic effect over fictional cause creatively disturbs the surfaces of her previous works, set in quotidian Dublin: this was already evident in some of the most promising stories of *The Portable Virgin* (date), and in the anarchic satirical comedy of *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), her best work before *Pleasure*, postmodernist games with language play an important role in generating a coruscating account of 1990s Irish postmodernity at the moment just before the economic boom.¹ In *Pleasure*, she has changed mode, and the ultimately comic vision of *Wig* is supplanted by dark political and ethical ironies. But her characteristic sardonic insight enables her brilliantly to stage the sheer weirdness of Paraguay and the freakish genius of her central character Eliza, who as she plays out her life goes from “Angel of Mercy to Angel of Death, without a blink of her lovely eye”.² (122).

To choose a nineteenth-century South American setting as Enright does, and to place a female character at the centre of the narrative, is already to perform an implicit rejection of those narratives of masculine identity-formation – within a primarily local, often rural, context – which until very recently have dominated Irish literary tradition. This may help to account for the failure to take much notice of the book in Ireland, and to understand it specifically as an Irish novel. *Pleasure* cannot readily be pigeon-holed either, however (and thereby confined), in the ‘women’s writing’ box: it definitely explores feminine agency, but not in the sense in which first- and second-wave feminists

sought that agency or liberation. It is markedly postmodern in its stress on the performative, and its gender representations are downbeat and wry rather than liberationist. It prompts reflection about questions of post-colonial identity, among other themes, but Enright avails of the distancing afforded by the historical givens of her plot and characters to do this in subtle and non-parochial ways. The book fleetingly and ironically invokes national identities, via Eliza Lynch's own Co. Cork origins – is she “the right kind” of Irish? (p. 141) – and the Scottishness of Stewart the doctor and Whytehead the engineer (from Edinburgh and Orkney respectively). But these topics take their places within a larger interest: to use the *décalage* between Europe and its present or former colonies in the nineteenth century to show the melting away of apparently solid European systems of order and belief in the utter difference of South America. Enright weaves together all these themes in an exceptionally elegant, sardonic and morally disturbing narrative.

Born and brought up in Mallow, Co. Cork, of middle-class parents, the beautiful and clever Eliza in 1854 finds herself in Paris, still in her late teens, giving English lessons and also working as a high-class prostitute, a woman of the *demi-monde*. She encounters Francisco Solano López, the son and heir of the dictator of Paraguay, on his tour of Europe, and goes back with him as his life-long partner. Having been more or less sold at fourteen to her father's friend to discharge a debt, passed on by this first consort to another, and married at fifteen in Algeria to a French army veterinarian (p.123), in Paraguay she acquires the status of a ruling empress, sharing in the immense wealth of López and also in his prosecution of the catastrophic five-year War of the Triple Alliance (1865-1870). As his consort, but denied the respectable official status of marriage, she watches his growing paranoia and the reckless brutality which eventually leads him to destroy vast numbers of his countrymen. The moral outrageousness of Eliza Lynch's evil-queen role affords Enright the opportunity to construct and explore (having borrowed her from history) a female character who achieves the empowerment of wealth and luxury, but who exists outside the bounds of the bourgeois world.³

The publisher's blurb for *Pleasure* suggested an affinity with Márquez ('lavish imaginative richness'), but Márquez' representations of human absurdity dwarfed against the backdrop of a vast indifferent continent play at most a minor role in Enright's imagining of Paraguay: as Hermione Lee has also argued, her vision is quite antipathetic to the 'magic' element in so-called 'magic realism', with its ultimately hopeful and transformative moments.⁴ A far more important intertext is *Nostromo*, Conrad's

apotheosis of radical doubt about Western values which had already staged ethical emptiness on a huge South American scale, and which also critiques what it calls “material interests”.⁵

In choosing this material for her fiction, Enright was entering a field which has involved some contestation, broadly between very negative views of both López and Lynch in Anglo-American historiography, and a different, especially Paraguayan, version of the two as inspiring nationalist leaders (despite both the admitted eventual insanity of López, his cruelties and military rashness, and the life of luxury and acquisitiveness led by Eliza). López certainly became reckless and wildly over-reaching after the war began, but the initial cause was expansionism on the part of Brazil, so that Paraguay had to respond to avoid being dominated in the region, and to attempt to conserve the exceptionally advanced programme of modernization initiated by Carlos Antonio López, Francisco’s father.⁶ Enright takes care to provide a counterpoint to the former, especially Anglo-American, interpretation of the facts, partly by means of the diary-like narrative she creates in Eliza’s own voice. But in the other, alternating sections, mainly told from the viewpoint of Dr Stewart, the reader gets a vivid account of the horrors inflicted during the last phases of López’s failed campaigns and of his murderous personal instability. The book allows for a certain sympathy with the felt need of Paraguayan nationalists to redeem their history, though Enright’s representation of Eliza, adroit as she becomes in performing her role as feminine embodiment of the nation while nevertheless retaining all her carnal humanity, also amounts to a comment on the Mother-Ireland stereotype, oblique but pointedly interrogative. Small grace-notes here and there also show Enright’s playful iconoclasm about items of Irish nationalist reverence. Eliza thinks that in Paraguay she will have a parrot like the one ‘the Clarke sisters’ had in Mallow, which said ‘*Erin Abú! Erin Abú!*’ And she gives López a disapproving equerry called “Valera” who, travelling by train in England, “would not take his hat off his lap, his knees prissily together, the words stalled in his mouth” (p.12). Eliza thinks: “I don’t like his long nose and the way he looks down it, at me” (p.168).

In this period, Paraguay was ruled by a dynasty part-indigenous and part-*colon*. The country had gained its independence from Spain in 1811 (López *père* being a nephew of Francia, the first ruler, called ‘Dictator’). Francia had a policy of forcing the Spanish *peninsulares* to intermarry with the Guaraní-speaking indigenous people, with the result that an exceptionally high proportion of the population was of mixed ethnicity (reckoned now as 95% *mestizo*, the highest in Latin America), including López himself. The

Europeans who travelled there in the 1850s and '60s were individual adventurers seeking a lucrative outlet for their professional expertise rather than colonists in the older sense, in the context of Paraguay's process of national self-establishment. The characters of Stewart and Whytehead (which Enright bases closely on real historical figures) and their presence in Paraguay represent the historical fact of the importing by Francisco's father Carlos Antonio López of 'hundreds of foreign engineers, medical men, scientists, machinists, and advisers' to work on the military projects he had projected as part of his vision of Paraguayan 'opening' – nation-building – and modernization.⁷ Career advancement and the prospect of acquiring some of the fabulous wealth of these former European colonies drew such men, as a little later it thousands of men to Africa, to try their chances in such alien places.

The book focuses on the profound shock of such characters, born and bred in Europe, at encountering the quintessentially different landscape, physical, political and ideological, of South America. Enright shows this primarily through Stewart, who finds his semi-conscious basic presumptions and his whole view of the world shattered. Her story-material has, then, a distinctly 'masculine' character, and the figure of Conrad looms behind the book. Indeed, its intertextuality with *Nostramo* deserves further analysis in its own right. In constructing by *bricolage* his imaginary turbulent Republic of Costaguana, Conrad drew heavily on G.F. Masterman's account of his own imprisonment and torture by the López régime, *Seven Eventful Years in Paraguay* (1869).⁸ Enright's narrative is both a kind of prequel to *Nostramo*, and a searching commentary a century later on Conrad's great 1904 fiction of political failure and disillusionment amid cruelty and chaos, and the hardened heart. A study of the two together would find especial interest in the contrasting representations of femininity: a major theme of Enright's work is the gender system and what might happen to it in a decolonizing country thousands of miles from the Europe that sustained it. It is the defect of Conrad's sweeping anatomy of civilization in *Nostramo* that he left this system largely untouched. Thus Conrad's Mrs Gould, the angel of her cool white mansion, remains a pool of quietness and loving calm amid the disintegration of order in Sulaco, and Conrad sees to it that the domesticity she elaborates in her "old Spanish house" retains its mystique unparodied and undisturbed. The constructed and performative mode of Eliza Lynch's simulacrum of housekeeping is all the more marked by contrast. Lynch also differs from Emilia Gould in that Enright places her at the centre of the fiction and conceives her as a reflective agent. Another significant disparity of perspective is evident between the

tendency to approve Britishness which, at least ostensibly, characterizes Conrad's thinking, and Enright's counterweighing of Stewart's taciturn probity with Eliza's flamboyant Irish quickness of feeling.⁹ In her 'Acknowledgements' Enright hints at that Anglophone prejudice in the historiography noted above: Lynch, she says drily, 'seems to provoke in her English-speaking biographers all kinds of sneering excess.'¹⁰ Clearly approaching the available facts otherwise, Enright appropriates and deploys them for a powerful interrogation, not only of the sex-gender system of the West, but of post-colonial *versus* metropolitan-European reality at the moment of "the transition from old colonialism to new imperialism" (Parry, p. 99): the two are inextricably bound up together in her vision.

Enright flagrantly outflanks the restraint and understatement typical of colonial and post-colonial adventure-stories (such as those by Greene and Farrell, which have their ancestry partly from E.M. Forster). Her style combines an intense, sensational eye with the dry detachment adopted in such writings; English-ironic is only one of the tones adopted in *Pleasure*, and that in momentary, sometimes parodic instances in the Stewart sections. The novel demands a complex response on the reader's part. It conducts the narration as a series of alternating scenes, moving forward, then back, so that story time and discourse time are at odds. Though the action is set within a clear chronological frame between 1854 and 1873, the effect is deliberately disorientating. So are the switches of viewpoint, between Lynch and Stewart, the outwardly phlegmatic Scottish doctor who sails with her and López on the voyage to Paraguay and remains throughout the rest of their history in that country, again accompanying them on their final flight to his death in the Northern mountains at the hands of Brazilian troops. Stewart presents to the world an appearance of dry detachment, which outwardly seems to be punctuated only by his rare bouts of drunkenness. Eliza's own narrative voice contrasts sharply with the tone of the Stewart sections: we are drawn into her direct consciousness, which, diary-like, is unmediated, while his thoughts are held a little at bay from us in their filtering by a third-person narrator. A brief opening section recounts the first sexual act of Francisco with Eliza in Paris, their sumptuous tour of Europe, and the preparations for their departure to Paraguay. The omniscient narrator sets no store by Victorian decorum, opening with the intentionally blunt 'Francisco Solano López put his penis inside Eliza Lynch on a lovely spring day in Paris, in 1854' (1). For both strands of the book, Enright has devised a style of sometimes dreamlike, sometimes feverish, immediacy. This enables her to represent and explore extreme otherness without

subordinating it to a master-narrative which could (with a consoling Victorian notion such as being higher up a scale of civilisation, or a member of a superior race) assuage the anxiety produced by such marked cultural difference.

Hermione Lee argued in a review that Enright places at the centre of her narrative ‘so-called women’s subject matter’, which she identifies as ‘domestic details, clothes, female bodies, sexuality and pleasure, pregnancy and childbirth’. The most salient such topic, however, is food: of the ten parts of the story all but the last three are called after items of food or drink, mostly luxurious ones: “Fish”, “Melon”, “Asparagus”, “Veal”, “Truffles”, “Champagne”, “Coffee”, and the last three invoke the graces of a comfortable domestic life: “Flowers”, “Clean Linen”, and “A Little Dog”. Food is one of the book’s primary narrative images. It works to insist on the irreducibility of the body, and, showing a rather Swiftian aspect in Enright’s vision, links both with death in general and killing in particular. An especially arresting series of motifs connects bodies with food and food with bodies, implying a disconcerting vision of life as a process of consuming and being consumed.¹¹ Lee’s labelling of “women’s subject matter” points to the dethroning of the larger, “masculine” themes, such as those of Rankean historiography (government, the military, high politics) from their usual eminence, so that they have to jostle for attention with the more immediate life of the embodied self. But Enright does not relinquish them, only forces them to accommodate and contend with that embodied life.¹² Indeed, even though one of the two centres of consciousness in the book is a man’s, and he does try to reflect on the conduct of the war, on the character of Dictator López, Eliza’s moral nature, and on the existence of God, he too finds himself obsessed with physicality and beset by a yearning above all for comfort both bodily and emotional, placed as he is in the midst of the suffering of others and of an overwhelming strangeness. The tormented and the gratified body both force themselves unavoidably on our attention.¹³ It seems to be Enright’s project to render the physical facts of existence so opaque as to disrupt the conventional arrangement of facts and values, that is as a hierarchy where the former lead upward to the latter. Mao Tse-Tung, merciless leader of another, and a nearly ungovernable, non-European country, wrote ‘seek truth from facts’, acknowledging that this process *is* a quest and that it is a formidably difficult one, not a foregone conclusion.

The body-food images are many and various. They include people relishing meals and starving for the lack of them, but also, as in Hamlet’s macabre witticism about Polonius, bodies being themselves eaten. As the *Tacuarí* docks at Asunción, Eliza sees ‘a

scrabbling crowd' through her porthole which reminds her of her first voyage on the packet to Plymouth from Queenstown, as her parents flee Famine Ireland: 'the poor at the door' have become insistent and one woman grazes the ten-year-old Eliza's cheek with a 'purple knuckle', 'saying, in a soft kind of way, that she would eat me, I was so lovely and fat' (p. 207).¹⁴ At the beginning of the book, when she is in bed with López she has a disturbing memory of '[a] starving man she saw once, his legs set wide, and his thing hanging down in the gap, lush and fat' (p. 8). It is perfectly possible to motivate this passage in its context: e.g. the huge wealth of López draws Eliza on with its prospect of plenty and of protecting herself against such any future risk of such horrors. But such is the sinewy force of Enright's language that it is impossible to dispel the fleeting notion of the penis as meat. A few lines later she sees 'a shudder in the hanging *meat* of his face' [my emphasis], a word which, however ostensibly metaphorical, places López as Eliza's prey. The sheer fleshliness of bodies is always in evidence. During their grand tour of Europe, when he takes her to be spectator for a day at the Crimean War, she picnics on cold chicken in a honey glaze while hussars 'risk their body parts and lose them... [s]he would recall with perfect simplicity the dryness of the chicken... its cold, dimpled skin; the crunch where the fat met the bone' (p. 13). Motifs of this constant two-way traffic occur often: meat being incorporated into human flesh and human flesh being turned, one way or another, into meat. I cite only a few instances of the motif. The Paraná, of course, contains the flesh-eating *piranha* fish (p. 28); López's servant Miltón adapts the sailors' porridge-like food into a starch for Eliza's dresses which have grown limp in the heat, making a comic-grotesque link between two of her pleasures, food and costume (p. 34); there are the howler monkeys, whose cry Eliza thinks is 'the sound of all animals eating each other' (p. 41).¹⁵

So pervasive is eating that at times it seems the book's governing concern, and Enright anarchically links it with love, beauty and the ideal, thus overriding the immanence-transcendence dualism which structures Western thought about both women and the body. For instance, Stewart is woken from a drunken stupor by a dog licking vomit out of his hair; he has at first mistaken it for his mother's hand caressing him (p. 69). Making love with Francisco, thinks Eliza, herself swapping food and sex, 'the eating is never done; there is always another course...' (p. 103). When she wears an especially beautiful delicate sky-blue dress, which to her is 'armour... and transcendence', he looks at her 'as a man looks at a good dinner before he eats it'.¹⁶ The inextricable embroilment of beauty with disgust, appetite and need is never more brilliantly expressed than in an

early scene.¹⁷ During a stop on the river passage, to bury a sailor who has died aboard, Eliza sees fifty or more enchantingly beautiful butterflies ‘as though in colloquy’ on the sand by the Paraná (‘the most astonishing blue. I have not seen such a blue since leaving Paris’). They

sat and stirred like ladies in a garden, their skirts parting to show underskirts of more beautiful blue, a flash of violet, a swish of peony edged with black. They spread them to sit, and played with their fans, and flicked open their parasols in the sun. (pp. 26-7).

Asked why they gather on certain spots, Miltón ‘shrugged and... said that they go where an animal has pissed, or a man has pissed. Then he rolled out his tongue, as though to lick’. Eliza remembers her life in Paris and ‘the salon of the Princess Mathilde’ where ‘yes, women like myself, newly arrived in town’ sat ‘all clustered and fluttering, when a rich man speaks. And when he leaves the room, a general business with fans, as we settle on his words and eat’ (p. 27).

During this same pause, while the sailor’s grave is dug Whytehead takes Francine, Eliza’s French maid, out of sight and they have sex. As she returns walking barefoot on the riverside earth, she is bitten by a sandfly and infected with the flesh-eating disease called leishmaniasis, of which she eventually dies.¹⁸ Summoned to tend to her, hidden away in Eliza’s house, Stewart looks upon ‘the open meat of her face’, her mouth and nose obliterated (p. 66). The doctor’s distancing professional language – ‘it was a classic presentation’ – cannot save him from the horror of the sight. Drunk at his own wedding, he tries to escape his memory of this terrible death and his own intolerable empathy with such suffering by assuming a brutalised pose, which entails turning savagely upon women (‘I like them when they’re sick’). He tells himself that this is because ‘they broke a man’s heart’, but it is clear to the reader that it is occasioned by the cultural placing of women essentially as in-dwellers in flesh or earth, the blunt dual reality of their making all men within their own bodies and of the mortality of those bodies. Yet despite the necessary repression of the facts of mortality, shown in the oblivion he seeks in whisky, Stewart can sometimes bring to consciousness a piercing insight: ‘In the body, that was where the truth of it was’(p. 83). Outside Francine’s door, he has found that Miltón too has made the diagnosis, saying simply: ‘Sandfly. They like white *meat*’ (p. 66, my emphasis). The episode ends with Eliza’s gift to Stewart of a basket of cherries on a bed of ice. But since nothing is exempt from the book’s relentless vision which insists that all is prey, that even fruit is not safely Edenic, and that while we may consume we are always ultimately

consumed, the cherries have ‘thick, dark skins’ and are ‘red as an old wound’ (pp. 66-7).¹⁹ Enright’s representations are unflinching, but not voyeuristic: such is the energy of her imagination, the exactness of her words, and the pertinence of the fictional items she has invented, that everywhere the language of metonymic description (scene-setting, background) is infused with the force of metaphorical signification. So these recurring flesh-food and food-flesh motifs are an integral part of the book’s overall argument, rich in thematic suggestiveness. Literal instances of hunger and feeding take their place in the sequence, which as a whole unsettlingly sweeps away the conventional boundaries between fact and symbol. Thus the starving Stewart, doing surgery on the battlefield, cannot stop himself salivating at the sight of a wounded man’s last meal when he opens the abdomen (p. 134); and the dogs they find raiding ‘his medical heap of discarded flesh’ are cooked and eaten (p. 135). Ultimately Enright is reminding us of the fundamentally paradoxical relation between the incontrovertible fact of embodiment and the capacity for rational consciousness.²⁰ A third term, largely unattended to in the *world* which the book constructs, though not in *the book itself*, which brings it forcefully before the reader’s mind, is compassionate inter-subjectivity, which is daily betrayed in people’s consumption of one another, in war, in the abuse of power, and the struggle between the wealthy and the wretched.

Another marked characteristic of the book’s style is the presentation of narrative items as dissociated and discrete, often in partial, glancing form, so that we must piece together an event from fragments: as I have suggested, metonymy is always poised to become metaphor. This technique increases the excess of sense-experiences over explanations.²¹ Patricia Waugh has argued that dwelling on ‘the luminous detail’ is a characteristically postmodernist form of resistance to the discredited ‘totality’ of concepts.²² Enright’s narrative does this at the micro-level of each sentence, and also in her consistent privileging of scene over summary in the way she tells the story. Waugh’s remark that ‘[t]otalising systems create the ‘same’, the universal, through exclusion of the ‘other’” and that ‘[p]ostmodernism has been referred to as a romance of the marginal or the other’ (p. 34), throws light on the nature of the radical critique which underlies the apparent sensationalism of Enright’s novel. *Pleasure* presents experience as discontinuous and also as inescapably concrete because based in the bodily.

At the level of thought, meanwhile, naming and rational reflection are always already the product of representation, and never give access to unshakable truth. Stewart, tending the wounded on endless successive battlefields, can gain an overarching vision of

the war only by thinking of it as a painting on a giant commemorative canvas (pp. 125ff). This effects both a distancing and a placing of it within a familiar ideological structure (the history painting) which makes it tolerable to conceive of. The resulting 'magnificent canvas' succeeds in dwarfing both individual endeavour and individual suffering. One might read this conceit of Enright's as an instance of what Lyotard calls 'the unrepresentable' or the postmodern sublime: a terror, something unspeakable except *as* a representation.²³

Shuttled between the warp of Stewart's intensifying bewilderment and the weft of Eliza's slow river journey – along the thousand-mile navigable length of the river Paraná – towards the landlocked heart of Paraguay, we are drawn into the fabric of the book. It is a journey to which each of its four main sections returns, as if to insist upon its defining effect on the travellers. The two strands, Stewart's and Eliza's, as Enright spins and interweaves them, jointly go to make up a densely linked set of ultimately philosophical reflections. Is either gender the truer custodian of empathy, justice or mercy, than the other? How can human self-realization be brought into an acceptable relation with human feeling? Stewart and Lynch live out their lives, as they must, within the framework of the social conventions regulating their time in history, and it is one of the marks of Enright's intelligence as a novelist that she gives full value to the role of nineteenth-century ideology in moulding these two selves. But the story she has partly borrowed from history, and partly and brilliantly re-imagined, goes far beyond either period accuracy or local colour. The mournful eloquence of Stewart's thoughts, full of compunction, and the wry humour of Eliza's resourcefulness combine to realise a virtual, fictional world that compels the assent of the reader in its sheer withholding of a ready redemption, its steely insistence upon the reality of the dystopia they both live out and have contributed to making.

Of the two central figures, Stewart's mode of thought is easier for readers to recognize because it is closer to the conventional narrative mode of classic realism. Yet the further one reads, the more Stewart reels away from such familiarity. His own sense of shrinkage and fear of an entire loss of self is an index of this process (p. 133). Enright's project depends on the fictional realization of extreme, out-of-proportion and – to realism – unconscionable circumstances. As I have suggested, she stages the growing bewilderment and psychological disintegration of Stewart in order to dismantle the pretensions of Western world-views to universality and remind the reader of the hypocrisy and hollowness of European discourses of morality once they are placed in

theatres of military and political action either sufficiently distant or sufficiently practical in terms of bloodshed and oppression (or both). These are insights from twentieth-century history, applied to the nineteenth. The social order the book delineates is in the process of toppling out of whatever tenuous balance it may, in a recently decolonised state, have possessed and it therefore fails to guarantee its members the coherence and stability which European régimes arrogate to themselves, however misleadingly. Thus, performing his prosperous expatriate's role, Stewart paces Whytehead's gardens and tobacco field, 'all alive with the wind and the shifting backs of peons labouring among the leaves', while the two discuss, not the war, but 'the weather, like gentlemen' and 'put their shoulders to the wheel, which was the wheel of History itself' (p.112). Yet their social markers, including the sense of progress, coherence and moral solidity in a (white, professional) man's career, are obliterated by the radically unsettling circumstances of their own awareness that they are part of a brutal system of exploitation:

The fact was that it was hard for a gentleman (or what passed for a gentleman in Paraguay) to apply himself to the wheel of History when the driver of the Juggernaut was a tyrant like López. Not to mention the slaves toiling at the ropes. (p. 113)

Caught in the intertwined processes of his own contribution to the progress of Paraguayan modernisation and the savage and wasteful acts of the López dictatorship, as in a mangling machine, Stewart helplessly lives out his own reactions as a witness to the intolerable: the many bloody battlefields, then the summary executions and daily floggings on the final flight north. As the war escalates out of control, he tries to make tolerable his own continuing service of López as Army Surgeon General, who has answered the invitation to come and make his fortune in 'the colonies', by a bitter conceit that 'El Mariscal' (as López becomes known, in recognition of his Napoleon-complex) may be an animal but is only a furry one who has not read his Homer and therefore does not know 'that one should make wars only one at a time' (p. 117). Yet Stewart's true perception is that the Dictator's grandiose projections are in the process of rendering Paraguay a moral desert in which casual death, cruelty and oppression are the only things that flourish. All else is crushed by the 'monstrous modernity' (p. 128) of the period's war-devices so, exemplified in the new ironclad ships of the Brazilians which, impervious to all resistance, sweep upriver to shell Asunción.

The book's gender theme is not confined to Eliza: Stewart, tending in the military camp to the hundreds of wounded, experiences maleness as lack, a moment represented in terms recalling Freud's Oedipal myth of phallic-male and castrated-female modes of

being. The women camp-followers collect unexploded enemy shells from the battlefield, to sell in return for food. The narrator remarks that ‘sometimes one would, *under a woman’s gentle touch*, revive, and so explode’, invoking stereotypical femininity with a savage irony (p. 131, emphasis mine). On these occasions Stewart

faced the problem of the women whenever their anatomy ambushed him in the operating hut – every time he panicked that a man’s member had been blown away and grubbed through blood and hair looking for the non-existent wound. Every time he unbuttoned a shirt and found a breast, or two, beneath, he would sigh at the problem of the women. (pp. 131-2)

Women’s bodies here seem to be either too much (‘a breast or two’) or too little (the member which has been ‘blown away’). The ‘non-existent wound’ both recalls and undermines the notorious account in classical psychoanalysis of how the infant boy discovers the alleged castratedness of women, including that of his hitherto all-powerful mother.

The very identity of the expatriate Britons itself dissolves in these surroundings, where so much is put in question. Thus the engineer Whytehead recalls how as a boy he used to hit his sisters, and now worries about it (a screen-anxiety about a small past wrong which works to mask the far greater and current one that his miners work in chains, which disturbs him ‘just to think about it’). However unphilosophical by nature, he also finds himself driven to ask: ‘And who was that boy, anyway? I am not entirely sure if that boy was me’ (p. 116). It is as if the British are denatured. While retaining his Christian belief in the Last Judgement, he has lost some thread which hitherto held together his selfhood, and insists that this is: ‘[t]he boy on whose actions I will be judged’, as if he had suffered one of those disruptions of consistent selfhood which are ruefully acknowledged by Locke, and *the boy* and *he* were indeed two different beings. He responds with laughter to Stewart’s tentative venture that he has been ‘very taken, recently’, by ‘the idea of a compassionate God’ (p. 116). In the same scene, Stewart finds Whytehead has set up a quintessentially English domestic life, complete with an ‘actual manservant from actual Yorkshire’, flock wallpaper, plush curtains, and a photograph of ‘*The Queen at Balmoral, seated on her horse Fairy*’. Here, sustained by his icon of Victoria, respectable Other of the outrageous Eliza, Whytehead, who has impaled his hand on a nail and needs the wound tended, sits ‘gazing into the middle distance from behind his florid, solid moustache’ (pp.110-111). As a vivid representation of beleaguered Britishness very far from home, this is worthy of the scene in *A Passage to India* where bottled peas are shipped from England to accompany the ‘fish... pretending to be plaice...

cutlets, trifle, sardines on toast', the ensemble served in the sweltering heat.²⁴ But Enright goes beyond comedy of manners and the gentle satire of colonialism. During the two men's conversation, there is a wonderfully surreal moment:

He would like to marry Whytehead, Stewart thought. There would be enormous comfort in it. No need for speech. Everything ordered and on time. A little woman who works a hole in her hand, when you are away. (p. 111)

The weirdness of this passage is far from gratuitous: gender roles are being rearranged to a purpose. Stewart, carer for the sick and wounded, capable of compassionate scruple, is himself in a sense feminised in the larger world of the book, even playing female to Eliza's masterful male (which may perhaps occasion his compensatory fantasies of a sexual conquest of her, edged, as we shall see, with aggression (p. 150)). Here, however, he resumes a masculine role to play Victorian husband, but, comically, to Whytehead's preposterous 'wife', and with the macabre alteration that in place of her needlework, this 'wife' inflicts a wound on her own body. This cries out to be read as a version of that alleged feminine lack which figures so prominently in psychoanalytic theory: the wound where the phallus is not and the penetrable vagina, the 'wound', is. Overdetermined in its meaning, like all literary wounds, this 'hole' is also a stigmatic emblem of Whytehead's self-torment, his 'own little crucifixion', as Stewart thinks to himself (p. 111). Another tormented body. Later in the scene Whytehead lies on the grass in his impeccable English garden (where, however, the ants who 'get everywhere' have eaten away the leaves from the topiary and signifying death, left the mere 'skeletons of bushes which had been cut into the shape of singing birds'). Stewart sits 'close by his head' and finds 'the arrangement uncomfortably erotic', when à propos of nothing Whytehead quotes the plangent 'Oh, for the touch of a vanished hand...' from Victoria's Laureate, Tennyson (p. 115). Eventually Whytehead – Chief State Engineer and supplier of mined metal for the war – hangs himself after the string of defeats. Like Stewart, in his own eyes he is a failure, overwhelmed by the incommensurable realities of Paraguay's climate and terrain and its political tyranny, itself the product of the previous colonial state. There is a homologous failure of the gender system, overtly challenged by the flair, creativity and determination of the Irish 'whore' Eliza. And finally there are the unreadable Guaraní masses of infantry who follow López like a Messiah: I shall discuss Enright's representation of them at the end.²⁵

Thus, submerged in the physical vastness and moral indifference of Paraguay and its war, it is significant that at one point in the narration of this desolation, when

considering the men who have served López's régime in order to make their own fortunes, Enright delivers Stewart's interior reflections in the very language of Conrad's own English narrators, an evidently intentional pastiche with its clipped inarticulateness and its inability to name the realities of class, greed and power:

It was the money that maddened them now, the better sort of British man trapped in Asunción... Still, they held on. If anyone were to funk, it would be late at night after too much to drink with something blurted and wrong – the chances a chap had of making it overland to Buenos Aires... or whether López was 'sound'... And Stewart, being sober, would sit in a corner, silently answering each in disgust that, No, a chap had no chance... López went to the wrong sort of *school*, don't you know... (p. 117)

In this feverish subtropical milieu, Eliza flourishes and seems to Stewart to grow, while he himself and his pale wife Venancia, rigorously chaperoned till marriage by her vigilant family, seem to shrink (p. 133).

Turning to Eliza herself, before she ever sees Paraguay she already exists in a relation of marginality to bourgeois Europe, first because of her equivocal role at the edges of Paris society, and second because of her origins in the obscurity of Mallow rather than in London or Paris. She is also unfixed, floating, in another sense. She knows several languages, which gives her potential leverage in terms of her own identity and perceptions, making her an interpreter between forms of difference themselves irreconcilable and an expert at passing between systems:

...[S]he romped in French, married in English, and she ate in the Irish of her childhood kitchen. She had school Latin and spa German, but her fate, now, was in Spanish, and she would die in Guaraní, which is to say, obscurely. The lover in her head spoke Russian, in whispers. The devil in her head spoke Portuguese. (p. 3)

Lynch's outsider status is partly the product of her Anglo-Irish origins. But what ensures her dislocation from the bourgeois social order is her *louche* past and downright scandalous present, which preclude the attainment of respectability. In making such a character the novel's principal centre of consciousness, Enright chooses to present Victorian and Second-Empire values from an extreme and unsympathetic distance. The crucial determinants of her life are economic and patriarchal ones: her father's improvidence and his readiness to barter his daughter away. She has never had a choice but to live by her wits and exploit her sexual attractions to keep herself afloat. Enright

vividly represents both the social forces which constrict the development of Eliza's moral life, and the avenging impulses which drive her to seize and consolidate her opportunity for security and prominence. In juxtaposing Stewart's tormented reflections with Eliza's own narrative, Enright represents the dishonesty of the Victorian sexual double standard **as** indissolubly linked with the ideologies, themselves interconnected, of modernisation and the exploitation of the less developed world.²⁶ Stewart himself, painfully aware of the moral strain between his own right-thinkingness, nurtured as it has been by his Edinburgh aunt, and his concomitant desire to make his fortune in Paraguay, is best placed also to observe that Eliza has an inner life and experiences impulses of attachment and social communion, as well as emotional devastation (only he observes her visiting the grave of her stillborn daughter).

Yet as we have seen, Stewart still thinks about women in strikingly polarised categories such as 'Angel of Mercy' and 'Angel of Death' (p. 122). A woman must suppress her desire – the natural consequence of her embodiment – and meekly subsist within the symbolic order which is founded upon her very subordination, in the Name of the Father. If she seeks the fulfilment of her sexual will, or if – as in Eliza's case – her virginity (the object of social fetishizing) has been compromised, she incurs almost certain exclusion from social acceptance and even the means of bodily subsistence. Asunción society replicates these Manichean qualities of the European gender system. The beauty and talent of *'La Lincha'*, in the absence of bourgeois married status, inspire in men only the desire to possess her sexually, and the averted gaze and snubbing rejection of respectable women. Eliza's need for personal recognition is thus bluntly denied. Having achieved sexual happiness in her mating with López (and been so carried away that she fails to protect herself from pregnancy), she had begun to anticipate a more general self-fulfilment in the prospect of her new life in Paraguay.²⁷ As the boat draws alongside the dock in Asunción, Eliza recalls the jealousy she saw in all the men she had to do with as a young girl, and hopes that 'here... I will be safe'; for 'they were all, I think, jealous of me, as a man might be jealous of a painting that he may pay for, but will never properly have. As men are jealous of all beautiful things' (p. 209). This reflexive moment demonstrates both Eliza's ample awareness of her object-status to men, and her presence to herself as a thinking, self-aware subject. But in the event Asunción high society, which adheres to Spanish-colonial mores, draws away its skirts in disgust from the spectacle of Eliza when she appears, flagrantly pregnant, on López's arm on the ship's gangway. She is in pale lilac: 'a shard of Paris ice... a Juno, skin so fair, eyes so

blue' (p. 50). Even as this 'vision smiles her visionary smile', all the family carriages drawn up to greet the returning heir wheel away in the dust. This initial ostracism is sustained at length.²⁸ Among the Spanish aristocrats 'with more surnames trotting after them than they had horses', men may sow 'wild oats' but female sexual will is still kept in an iron cage of restraint.²⁹ Nevertheless, though the mere illicit appendage of a man, 'the tart from County Cork' (p. 2) emerges as a person acting rather than acted-upon. In Paraguay she finds something which answers to her own fierce and sensual being, and in that milieu raises herself to a position not merely of wealth but of social elevation, in successful defiance of the strictly regulated values of Spanish colonial society. She elaborates this identity consciously and with full coherence from qualities central to her nature: her aesthetic sense, which informs her dress and her surroundings even in the glorified tent where she establishes herself during the protracted wars, and that capacity for 'pleasure' (sexual, culinary, and visual) which gives the novel its title.

Enright's rendering of Eliza shows her as actively *living* her (female) body, but *performing* her femininity as a succession of social selves which she constructs with careful craft and full consciousness of their effect. A sub-theme of the book is the agonistic encounter between her burning, intelligent will and her own embodiment, entailing, as I have noted, ideological as well as physical constraints. Thus, late in her pregnancy, she feels with chagrin that she is now like the feeble daddy-long-legs she killed at her sister's request, in their Mallow childhood: now she herself is 'the beastie with my belly huge and my limbs all feeble and waving, and bits gone...' (p. 102). At the end of the long voyage from Europe, she experiences a crisis at her utter dependency ('as her belly grows, [she] withers away'). She looks at López and sees 'what he is'; when she turns, distraught, to her maid Francine and asks what she must do, Francine replies simply '[y]ou must love him. There is no other way' (pp. 209-210). This Eliza decides to do, and together the two women squeeze her great belly, already contracting, into her clothes so that she can make her opening appearance. In inspired and disturbingly concrete language, Enright gives her the insight that 'I must love him, because through such narrow gaps in our lives we all must squeeze and crawl' (p. 210). The slow river journey, with its long final phase, like a birth canal, between the Piranha's walls of impenetrable vegetation, shows Eliza recomposing her life: as the metaphor suggests, at the end she is delivered not just of her first child but of her own new Paraguayan self.

It is not, then, that Eliza does not inhabit her changing roles, and indeed the book shows her as trapped within them, in contrast to the insouciance of some

postmodernist notions of pure joy in the free play of performances.³⁰ In the terrible war, she becomes an icon of civility and culture to the troops and the whole country. Stewart sees below these glittering surfaces. Gleaning the rumours about her sumptuous life, but her deprivation of the company of her equals, he thinks: 'You could say she has everything, except the satisfaction of having it. Also perhaps, that she cannot relax, because she is not real' (p. 59). Yet Eliza's 'First Lady' life at her rural retreat, La Recoleta, includes the growing of plants and sending of interesting cuttings to Whytehead for his would-be English garden. Stewart can hardly credit 'this slippings and samplers conversation she held with Whytehead across town; a traffic of chutneys and jams, umbrellas for the sun and galoshes for the rain' which feeds into Whytehead's own absurd performance of Britishness, complete with his clock which 'ticked Britishly on' (pp. 112, 113). Yet Enright's vision seems utterly sceptical about anyone having an essence beyond such performances, another theme prominent in *Nostromo*, which so dwells on interior emptiness and the force of reputation in keeping the self in being. Stewart's growing consternation in Paraguay is precisely concerned with his sense that he is losing his defining identity.

But the 'pleasure' of the title is also a metonymy for power, the satisfaction of desire, and of triumphing over those who have wronged her. Thus her characterization is an experiment in representing adventurism in a female character: one of the book's implicit aims is the demonstration that she is not so different from Stewart and Whytehead: all three are adventurers. While she comments to herself sarcastically on how women are the servants of men's desire, her own rise to power is based on the only means she has to hand, namely the clever exploitation and manipulation of that very desire, as well as on her own capacity to give and enjoy sexual pleasure, so shocking to the well-bred (p.106). Enright is at pains to show that in Eliza's earliest recollections she already has an impatience at weakness, or so at least she reminds herself in the narrative of her self-invention which is unrolled during the Atlantic journey. She recalls with a certain aversion the victim-status of her mother, who has been repeatedly ambushed and immobilised by the irresistible force of her own maternal love (p.175). Morally, the reader shrinks from her contiguity with López's paranoid and vicious acts: she lives in full view of horrors. Yet, herself not actively cruel, she is ambiguously placed as *both* subject to *and* benefiting from his insane appetite for domination. It is one of the most markedly postmodern features of the novel that her moral state is left thus indeterminate.

There is an especially revealing tête-à-tête between the book's two principals, in the longest Stewart section, sardonically entitled 'Truffles'. In this scene, which feels like the inner core of the novel, Enright sets up with particular insight the inextricable tangle of sexual desire with empathy and anger in Stewart's response to Eliza. She has barred him from her company while making all the other élite males welcome to her *soirées*, perhaps because of his very knowledge of her earlier, shipboard self. But she does invite him to the sumptuous dinner she serves during the war in her field-bungalow, which has walls of canvas but a blue Aubusson carpet and tasselled velvet hangings. After López has swept the other guests off to study maps, she turns to Stewart and says: 'I am immensely weary, Doctor, of being Eliza Lynch'.³¹ He experiences an urge to free her, 'not from the war, not from the world, but from the terrible prison of herself' (p. 148). But this movingly phrased longing to liberate her is simultaneously a sexual and a violent impulse, intermixing chivalry and aggression: in his mind he 'threw her over the pommel of an imaginary horse and rode her out of there... [H]e would grab her and kiss her and take her most violently, and in so doing release her...' A moment of pastoral innocence, of whose incongruity he is painfully aware, concludes this fantasy amid the iron reality of the war and the world with the unspoken plea: 'Come with me and we will simply live. There will be butterflies in the meadow, and so on.'

In the ensuing conversation Eliza shows her piercingly clear understanding of the workings of the sex-gender system, within which she is contained and controlled:

'For every enemy that he [López] has, I have two, because for every man that hates him there is another who says that whatever he does it is at my urging; because a woman's ambition is a fathomless thing – as though I was some witch who hexed him into my bed and whispered 'You must, my darling, invade the Mato Grosso before the spring' ...' (p. 151)

She adds: 'And so we suffer, Doctor' – suffering being the opposite of doing, of action – and concludes: 'A woman has no limits, because she may not act. She is all reputation, because she may not act. So, even as we do nothing, our reputations grow more impossible, and fragile, and large.' A comment by Conrad's narrator in *Nostromo* about Mrs Gould, the ideal of feminine love and domesticity, is implicitly withering about women who would seek to 'act':

It must not be supposed that Mrs Gould's mind was masculine. A woman with a masculine mind is not a being of superior efficiency; she is simply a phenomenon of imperfect differentiation – interestingly barren and without importance (p. 67).

This insists on the laws of sexual difference; Lynch, by contrast, evidently *is* gifted with a ‘masculine mind’, but also with a nuanced feminine awareness of the impression she is making. So she knows when and how to mask her intelligence with mild flirtation and expressions of sympathy. She has to a degree thwarted the constraints of gender while staging superb performances from its repertoire of quintessentially feminine roles. An engaging scene encapsulates this inspired excess. When she walks abroad in the ubiquitous mud underfoot produced by the war, she brings with her two adoring boys, each with a board, which they take rapid turns at placing beneath her satin slippers in a kind of ceaselessly turning wheel. But while she thus capitalizes on her own beauty and plays out her role as a goddess-figure, elevated above mere mortals, she always knows that her power is indirect, because in a crucial sense she embodies it rather than disposing of it, as men do (p. 133).

The classical novels of modernism often, implicitly or otherwise, substitute an aesthetic, virtual world, where order and beauty obtain, for the irredeemably failed and tainted one of actuality. In contradistinction to this, *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* shares with other important postmodern work a representation of the aesthetic realm as not exempt from implication in oppression, as itself capable of being made instrumental. The beauty of Eliza’s *mises-en-scène* and of her person seem works of art which she has made, Nietzschean constructs of her will, and, while being intimations of transcendence so enchanting as to break men’s hearts (as Stewart’s is broken), are devastatingly instrumental, disposable, and impermanent too. They are also obscene because of their conjunction with cruelty, death and the laying waste of the land and the people; Enright represents all this with an eye clear though not cold. Along with her bravura costumes, the sumptuous dinner Lynch conjures up during and in despite of the war is an instance of her creative talent and of the role of the aesthetic in feminine performance; indeed, of its identification with the aesthetic. Served in the tent, the meal dazzles the élite (though half-starved) guests like a dream ‘in all its ritual loveliness: soup, salad, fish, game, meat’.³² Stewart thinks it looks ‘as beautiful and familiar as another life – a life he might have led but had not.’ (p. 145)

Near the beginning of the book, Enright inscribes a complex of the book’s central ideas which jostle one another for priority – pleasure, the body, the necessity of money, moral imperatives, the importance of beauty – into one reflection which passes through Eliza’s mind as she lies having sex with López: ‘Eliza cried out. She had tried to be good, had wanted to be good, but the curtains had cost her a month of fucking and

they were far too blue...’ (p. 8). This interweaves the aesthetic – the curtains too blue to be tasteful – both with the work she has had to put in for their acquisition (‘a month of fucking’) and, in addition, with the nature of that work, which infringes the clear rubrics of ‘goodness’. The formulation of the bourgeois-feminine moral imperative is tellingly naïve, as if Eliza has carried the simple framework of childish prohibitions into her otherwise knowing adult life. Within that framework, for a girl, to be good is not to fuck, but that is an aspiration which is literally beyond Eliza’s means.

It is not, then, that Enright celebrates mindless physical excess and domination, but that she resists the dualistic subordination both of the body and the feminine which underpins Western thought. And in the public sphere, she does not glide over cruelty, but refuses hypocrisy about allegedly advanced civilisations. The Eliza-Victoria analogue might be turned back upon Britain: is there much to choose between the hideous violence practised by López and unprotestingly witnessed by Eliza on the flight to Cerro Corá, and, for example, the lashing of sepoys to cannon in the reprisals – systematic, military, officially sanctioned – in the reprisals after the Indian Mutiny?³³ As Stewart himself finds, this non-European milieu brings them all face to face with the unconscionable and thus radically disturbs the civilised surface of the ‘gentleman’s’ life: wealth *is* exploitation, states depend upon domination, no self exists which is distinct from its social acts and roles, and love and compassion are almost inseparable from power. The immensity and violent disorder of Latin America, with its alien climate, landscape, and people, are combined in Enright’s vision with the terrible vulnerability of human embodiment to overthrow the self-assurance of that nineteenth-century European ideology possessed by Stewart and his British colleagues, and to show everyone as equally engaged in improvisation. Eliza’s resourceful challenge to that ideology in the practical conduct of her life does not keep her from its moral taint. Nobody is thereby freed into moral security or emotional peace. By the end almost nothing is left standing in the ideological world of the book: systems, states, gender roles and relations, the would-be moral innocence and practical value of work well done (medicine, mining), which in Conrad might have withstood much, are all razed to the ground, just as so many of Paraguay’s people have been mown down in the war. Yet from her own dark vision, within the dystopia it has shown, Enright salvages one site of consolation and of utopian hope: the Guaraní people’s belief in the existence of a ‘land without evil’.

This is of especial interest to the possible development of a post-colonialist reading of *Pleasure*. I have argued that Enright is too sanguine to represent the Irish or Scottish as unequivocally subaltern, and she subtly registers their complex positioning and the shifts they must make in the world. Historically, indigenous Guaraní speakers in the 1850s shared a largely amalgamated culture with the ethnic Spanish, and even before Francia's policies of ethnic hybridization, extensive intermixing had taken place. There is nothing romantically originary about Enright's representation of these 'Indians', though in 1857 they had already become the object of *Indianista* romance in neighbouring Brazil.³⁴ We see the Guaraní exclusively from either Eliza's or Stewart's viewpoint, but there is irony and nuance in these glimpses. Eliza is shown as quickly gaining an especial affinity with Miltón, whose naming may not be entirely sardonic and who becomes her personal servant, even accompanying her back to Europe when all is over. There is nothing sentimental about this: offhandedly affectionate, she is also amused in a rather Voltairian way: 'He has taken, my little savage, to telling me things. It is a flattery of sorts'. She calls him 'a very leaky Indian' and 'a very philosophical Indian' (p. 159).³⁵ Herself expert in appearances, she is intrigued by his poise and thinks 'he ignores me well', as he stands stock still in the bow of the *Tacuarí* (p.20). Stewart finds that the Guaraní soldiers refuse to 'lend' him the names of places he points to (pp.179-80), and Eliza at first finds herself baffled, looking into the 'mineral eyes' of Miltón, to imagine 'what these people might believe; whether they even have souls like ours – lost or otherwise' (p.19). However, this is Lynch's attempt to come to grips with her new milieu by applying prejudices from the old, and the joke is on her. Such simple, implicitly racist binaries are impossible to uphold in Paraguay. López calls his father a 'nigger'; but when she asks him 'what they believe', he identifies himself too as a 'native' and says he believes in nothing (p.21). Nevertheless, Enright carefully elaborates, in small strokes, her account of cultural difference. The mass of *indigenos* are repeatedly characterised as keeping silent, and also as particularly valuing silence. Stewart notices that 'they do not listen to words' (p. 180), but watch the body, and 'make you feel not so much wrong-footed but wrong-faced'; at the play – a romance of inter-ethnic union – put on in Eliza's new theatre, crowds of 'Indians' at first stand 'enormously silent' (p.62). Still, when Eliza is in labour and Stewart too drunk to attend her, Miltón calms her by intimating the presence of daemons whose beautiful song can only be heard in quietness (p. 213), showing an empathetic, almost parental care of Eliza in her travail.

Enright makes the millenarian, mythic nature of the Guaraní thought-world play with a ghostly, fitful illumination upon the different European sensibilities of her two main characters, and she does not subject these beliefs – perhaps these alone – to irony. The recurring, poetic moment in her representation of the Guaraní focuses on their belief in ‘the land without evil’ somewhere to the north (pp. 157-8). When, sailing upstream, the *Tacuarí* comes to the confluence of the Paraguay and the Paraná, the water is streaked with red. Down-to-earth Whytehead gives a geological explanation for this (no doubt the empirically correct option), Eliza a florid symbolic one in the European literary manner: ‘It might be some battle... or a wounded god, staining the far waters red’, and López a geographical location: he says it comes from the far north, from the Mato Grosso, the very region of which his rash invasion exacerbates the war, at this point still in the future. Last, Milton ‘sidles by’ to say that ‘the red earth comes from a place without evil’, and explains that ‘it is indeed blood’ that comes down the Paraná (pp. 157-8), a symbolic anticipation of the blood of the thousands yet to be shed. The little scene has great narrative elegance and poignancy.

On the nightmare final trek into the northern Cordillera by the ragtail army weakened by hunger and disease, a small Guaraní girl attaches herself to Stewart, walking beside his stirrup. In the final scene Stewart feels someone’s eyes on him as he walks with his daughter in the streets of Edinburgh, and well before he sees Eliza, thinks ‘it was the darkie, Milton’; but he also experiences Milton’s smile as

such an open, friendly thing, that was the mystery of it. It was the smile the girl gave him as she held on to his stirrup, high in the Amambai mountains.

Deliberate and yet free: it was a gift. It was always so much more than he deserved, Stewart thought – wherever these people got it from (p. 227).

After she dies of cholera, Stewart first feels obscurely that ‘something is missing’, then recalls with some difficulty that she fell and, lacking any medicines, he did not pick her up (p.199). As they were struggling on, ‘the farther they went in the northern hills the smaller and more helpless’ she had seemed. He thinks: ‘So perhaps it was true. They were going to a more innocent place, after all’ (187).³⁶ Thus, finding reality intolerable and powerless to change it, he falls back on *indigeno* belief and rewrites mortal illness as growing innocence, a shedding of suffering.

The effect resembles the beautiful consolatory moment which concludes Pat Barker’s *The Ghost Road* (1995). The English doctor Rivers has done anthropological research on a Pacific island. Serving in a London military hospital in the 1914-18 war, he

is cast into despair by the terrible death of the young officer whose brain has hung visibly for days outside his dying body. As he sits by the bed, he sees the shaman Nijru from the island come slowly down the hospital ward at dawn, chanting the song of exorcism which at once acknowledges that all is always passing away and salves grief: ‘*There is an end of men, an end of chiefs... then go down and depart. Do not yearn for us, the fingerless, the crippled, the broken. Go down and depart, oh, oh, oh*’.³⁷ But it is also different. Barker makes a recuperative contrast between the poetic faith of the shaman and the felt powerlessness of Rivers, at the peak of positivist Western medicine. Enright does not so load Guaraní mythology with transformative feeling. In *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* the ‘land without evil’ is no more than the place of hopeless yearning: the doomed *indios* march in their thousands, ‘in dull-eyed ranks and rows, ever advancing’ towards a common destruction (p. 127). In the end it seems that only the powerless can sustain belief in another, better world, and only they are absolved from guilt and responsibility.

¹ See my ‘Irish Literature and Feminism in Postmodernity’ (*Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 10, 1-2 Spring/Fall 2004, 175-202.)

² *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 122.

³ In characterizing Eliza, Enright may well have drawn on historical female figures, such as Queen Matilda and Joséphine, and on Eva Perón, whose self-presentation as adored embodiment of Argentina echoes passages in the real Eliza Lynch’s self-exculpatory *Exposición y Protesta* (1875), (Asunción: Fundación Cultural Republicana). I thank Carla Lane for linguistic help with this text. For an understanding of the historical facts I have relied mainly on R. Andrew Nickson, *Historical Dictionary of Paraguay*, 2nd ed. (Metuchen, New Jersey and London: Scarecrow Press, 1993); Pelham Horton Box, *The Origins of the Paraguayan War* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967); José Alfredo Fornos Peñalba, ‘Draft Dodgers, War Resisters and Turbulent Gauchos: The War of the Triple Alliance against Paraguay’, *The Americas* 38, 4 (April 1982), pp. 463-479. Josefina Plá, *The British in Paraguay 1850-1870*, tr. Brian C. McDermot (Richmond: Richmond Publishing and St. Antony’s College, Oxford, 1976), an exceptionally interesting account by a noted poet and cultural historian, who gives personal details about the expatriates’ lives, which Enright puts to highly effective use.

⁴ In a review, Lee noted Enright’s experience of writing classes with Angela Carter and suggested that ‘there’s something of Carter’s sensual, self-fashioning adventuresses in Eliza. The novel keeps edging towards the magical realism which Carter enjoyed. But, in fact, there are no ghosts or visions or talking birds. This is more like a feminist version of Conrad than like Márquez, as if *Nostromo* had been told from a woman’s point of view’ (‘All Reputation’, review, *London Review of Books*, 17 October 2002, 19-20).

⁵ See *Nostromo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, p. 81) for ‘material interests’.

⁶ See Nickson, p. 353, and Dannin M. Hanratty and Sandra W. Meditz, eds., Library of Congress Country Study on Paraguay, 1990 (<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html>), accessed 26 September 2005.

⁷ See Box, p. 185; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2000 edition, article on the history of Paraguay.

⁸ See Norman Sherry, *Conrad’s Western World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 147-199. Benita Parry, *Conrad and Imperialism: Ideological Boundaries and Visionary Frontiers* (London: Macmillan, 1983, pp. 99-132) is an effective analysis of the many layers of Conrad’s meaning and of the radical qualities of the critique of ideology which underlie the opaque surfaces of his fiction.

⁹ Conrad based Charles Gould, steadfast English owner of the silver mine, on his friend R.B. Cunninghame Graham, though his vision is always complex, and it is fair to admit that Gould, despite a largely positive characterization, becomes cold-hearted like his silver under the pressure of events, and leaves his wife in emotional neglect.

¹⁰ She pointedly disclaims any historiographical intentions, explaining that ‘[s]ome facts seem to remain constant and it is around these facts that this (scarcely less fictional) account has been built. This is a novel, however. It is Not True [*sic*]’ (p. 231). This did not prevent reviewers of two popular history work on Lynch – both, by a curious coincidence, appearing late in 2002, months after Enright’s – from commenting on *Pleasure* rather as if it too laid claim to historical accuracy. Thus a curious remark by Jean McNeil, who

seems to base her judgement on these works alone: 'Enright's fictional Eliza meditates on her pregnant state and understands she has become "evil". But *after reading the biographies* it's hard to believe Eliza was capable of lush subjectivity, that she was anything other than a utilitarian individual, inhabiting an interior desert of bare acts' ('The Shadows of Elisa Lynch', *Independent* 18 January 2003; emphasis mine). This itself reads quite like 'sneering excess' to me.

¹¹ During the war a story circulates that Eliza sustains herself by eating the flesh of the dead, and that '[s]he said it tasted like pork, but gamier – like the truffle-hunting boars you get in the Auvergne' (pp. 134–5). The inimitable gourmet touch of the truffles' exact provenance gains it credence, and the men of the army do not 'exactly blame Eliza her portion', but blame rather 'this gaping world, into which you threw bodies, perhaps your own body, as though the sky itself were starving' (p. 135).

¹² There is resistance among traditional critics and reviewers to such alterations of perspective: John Bayley has alleged that the Rose Tremain's work 'dehistoricize[s] the historical novel'; contrasting it with Scott's, he says dismissively: 'hers is a purely feminine form of history... her purpose seems to be to use the past as a convenience for her own peculiar brand of literary intimacy' (quoted in Susanna Rustin, interview with Tremain, *Guardian Review*, 10 May 2002, 20–2). This could not reasonably be argued about Enright, and is somewhat unfair to Tremain.

¹³ The book weaves an elegant web of narrative images which only becomes fully visible on a re-reading; right at the outset, for instance, Eliza's sparsely furnished room in the rue St Sulpice nevertheless contains 'a statue of the flagellated Christ', prefiguring of the fate of so many Paraguayans (p. 1).

¹⁴ Here the child Eliza is placed on the side of the fed, not the starving, indicating the complexity of her positioning, an unstable combination of subaltern and hegemonic: a reader of Voltaire who has sold sex.

¹⁵ Miltón and Eliza quickly form a personal and lifelong bond, and he becomes her servant as much as, or more than, López'.

¹⁶ In a beautiful fragmentary instance of the motif, when Stewart returns from Whytehead's house he takes a path whose Guaraní name is 'the path where my kisses eat your mouth' (p. 109).

¹⁷ Recalling Swift's 'Celia, Celia, Celia shifts' ('The Lady's Dressing-Room', l.116), but pragmatically rendered, stripped of Swift's misogyny.

¹⁸ Enright first, however, sets the reader wondering if Whytehead has given Francine syphilis.

¹⁹ Even darker is the narrative of López' brother Benigno being killed, late on the fugitive march. Enormously fat, he has been stealing meat from the starving army. Before being executed he is harried, naked, running in a circle. Stewart represents this grotesque spectacle to himself as the just treatment of a 'man-pig' who 'squealed fantastically well', thinking of how Benigno had diverted from the men 'all kinds of fat bacon and shoulders of lamb, lard and cutlets and blood sausage and tripe' (p. 188). The narrator merely registers Stewart's own concomitant awareness that 'somewhere on the road [he] had become a creature of López' (p. 188).

²⁰ Swift said humanity would be better described as *animal capax rationis*, an animal capable of reason, than as a rational one.

²¹ For instance, when Eliza shows Stewart into the room where the maid Francine is hidden away with her terribly disfiguring disease, 'he followed her to a distant door with no sense of what might be behind it, except that it would be everything' (p. 65). Yet each scene is so rendered, everything as an illusion of revelation, but turning out to be, in the event, all and only itself, irreducible to an explanatory schema.

²² Patricia Waugh, *Practising Postmodernism, Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), pp. 32–6.

²³ *The Postmodern Condition* (1985). Qtd. in Waugh, 30. The War of the Triple Alliance has been called the *original* 'war to end all wars', that is, the first modern Armageddon.

²⁴ E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*. 1924. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 47.

²⁵ As soldiers, the Guaraní are unfailing in their self-sacrifice to the psychotic López; fighting fiercely, ever advancing in 'dull-eyed ranks and rows', they follow their grandiose general 'with a kind of pilgrim light in their faces' (pp. 157), stemming from their quasi-Messianic belief in him. In a comic moment, Stewart, at his most blasé and cosmopolitan, comes up against this strangeness: 'Miltón says that López is not his father's son. "Undoubtedly", says Stewart, "he is more European than his father, fresher, with more *brio*. No", says the Indian, wrongfooting him: "like Jesus – like Jesus is not Joseph's son"' (pp. 57–8).

²⁶ See pp. 12, 14, 105, 128 for reminders of the aspirations towards modernity and 'opening the nation' which marked the régimes both of Francisco Solano López and of his father, the old Dictator.

²⁷ 'By the time she realised [that she is pregnant], they were in Rome. By the time she was accustomed to procure her *bondon*, she was knee-deep in Vatican bankers and Sèvres china. Besides, Francine had no Italian – she could hardly go into a pharmacist and mime' (p. 15). A *bondon* is a kind of plug.

²⁸ The announcement by Mme Cochelet, wife of the French envoy, that 'she would rather break bread with a *nigger* than eat at the house of the Irish whore', is representative (p. 51).

²⁹ The cage around female choice is more than metaphorical: it is literally realised in the fate of a former object of López's desire, Carmencita Cordal, which is caught by the reader in glimpses, dispersed amid the

principal narrative. In piecing together these fragments, it emerges that Cordal has refused the youthful López, upon which he and his brothers hideously murder her preferred suitor by dragging him after their horses through Asunción. When Cordal goes insane as a result, she is eventually kept in a cage and – ‘that witch Cordal’ – later raped for a dare by the teenage Pancho, López and Eliza’s eldest son (pp. 57, 197). As the old Dictator is dying, Carmencita Cordal, Ophelia-like, ‘started to walk at night and was seen abroad, naked, or bloodstained or dressed in white. In the morning, people found flowers jammed between doors and their lintels, and wreaths floating downstream’ (p. 61). Enright attends only tangentially to the specific motivation of López; significantly, however, he recounts to Eliza his and his brothers’ killing of Carmencita’s fiancé as ‘something which changed the whole world’ and, in a classic instance of *machismo*, ‘a thing we had to do’ (p. 101). The incident is closely based on fact (see Box, p. 180).

³⁰ This lack of identity between self and its performances is made clearly in the narration. When Eliza makes an entrance to her box in the Asunción theatre, Stewart thinks ‘she has made herself, and it is to the woman who created this, as well as to the woman who *is* this, that they offer their deep and ironical homage, as though, in her beauty, she has transcended herself. Her dress, it seems, is spun gold...’ (p. 62)

³¹ We might read this as the voice of an inner self which is more than the sum of her performances, or as yet another guise even more bewitching in its proffered intimacy than the public ones.

³² This may allude to a scene from another classical-modernist fiction, the dinner offered in *To the Lighthouse* by the ultimate mother-figure Mrs Ramsay; it strongly resembles parts of Woolf’s lyrical dinner-description: ‘...[R]ising above the glittering crown of cruets and épergnes, a centrepiece of flowers and – could those be grapes?’ (p. 145)

³³ ‘The murder of women and children enraged the British, but in fact some British officers began to take severe measures before they knew that any such murders had occurred. In the end the reprisals far outweighed the original excesses. Hundreds of sepoys were shot from cannons in a frenzy of British vengeance (though some British officers did protest the bloodshed)’. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2000, “Indian Mutiny” article.

³⁴ José de Alencar’s 1857 novel *O Guarani*, a romanticizing tale of Amerindian life, was made into an opera and followed by other such fictions.

³⁵ Greeted on reaching Paraguay by boatloads of naked dark-skinned men, Eliza jokes that this doesn’t infringe her feminine ‘virtue’ since they are ‘so brown’, calmly observing also that López is now as brown or more, since ‘the sun has licked the white off him’ (p.160).

³⁶ In the final scene Stewart feels someone’s eyes on him as he walks with his daughter in the Edinburgh street, and thinks ‘it was the darkie, Miltón’; but he also experiences Miltón’s smile as ‘such an open, friendly thing, that was the mystery of it. It was the smile the girl gave him as she held on to his stirrup, high in the Amambai mountains. Deliberate and yet free: it was a gift. It was always so much more than he deserved, Stewart thought – wherever these people got it from’ (p. 227).

³⁷ Pat Barker, *The Ghost Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), p. 276.