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IRISH LITERATURE AND FEMINISM IN POSTMODERNITY

Patricia Coughlan

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> *Silence. Repression. Censorship. Long dark winter. Poor food. Nuns and priests everywhere. Drab clothes. Censorship of books and films. Fear and suspicion surrounding anything to do with the body or the personal life. The near total repression of ideas and information. A Catholic state for a Catholic people.*
> —Mary Dorcey

It is now commonplace to remark on the deep and rapid change that transformed Irish society after about 1970.[1] These changes particularly affected women's experience, greatly diminishing the patriarchal character of the state by legal and social reform. Sustaining this earlier patriarchal climate was the ruralist ideology associated with de Valera, which enshrined a traditional sex-gender system within which women were placed as subordinate. Near-universal adherence to a particularly authoritarian and quasi-Jansenist Catholicism was a further factor in restricting women's rights and in establishing coercive arrangements of gender roles and relations. These effectively held both genders under the unquestioned hegemony of a Church whose dominance was sedulously preserved by the élite, in which women played only muted and ancillary roles. Recent socio-cultural studies and effective investigative journalism have revealed more and more fully the regulatory and closed nature of Irish ideology and social morality up to the 1970s.[2] Coming more clearly into view also, however, in a heartening counter-current, are the products and activities of women themselves, individually and collectively during the first fifty years of the State, within and beneath this sternly repressive system.[3]

This system began to unravel from the 1970s on with accelerating rapidity and with marked effects both on women's experience and on Irish self-understanding more generally. Central issues contested were: differential pay; the marriage bar prevailing in employment till 1972; contraception (a struggle conducted for two decades); the automatic disinheriting of non-marital children; de-criminalising homosexuality; divorce and abortion laws.[4] Reform in these and other areas, occasioned by international (especially European) legislation, public policy shifts, and case-law forced

piecemeal by private citizens with liberal lawyers, brought women and members of other subaltern categories nearer to the condition of equal civil subjects.

Cultural alteration is slower to take effect, but the nation's sexual repressions, in-turned emotional culture, and misogynist containment of feminine sexuality were strongly affected by a remarkable series of painful events emerging from the 1980s onwards. These began with the 1984 Anne Lovett and Joanne Hayes cases, now seen as landmark instances of the scapegoating of sexually active women by a prudish and publicly misogynist society (McCafferty, O'Connor "Voices"). Concealed sexual partnerships conducted by prominent Catholic clerics (who had personally preached a rigid sexual morality) were discovered, then many instances of paedophile abuse, also by priests and brothers, and neglect and cruelty visited on generations of children in Church and state care in orphanages and industrial schools (Hug, Arnold and Laskey). Other shocking cases developed related themes, involving multiple paedophile rape, paternal cruelty and family dysfunction, and breaking the previous shamed silence of female rape victims.[5] Finally, the system of those half-known and half-hidden institutions functioning to control, conceal, and punish the sexuality of girls and young women—the Magdalen asylums or laundries—was exposed to public scrutiny in the 1990s. The incarceration of hundreds, sometimes indefinitely, decimated their chance of fulfilled adult lives and typically obliged young mothers to give up their babies for more or less forced adoption.[6] All these dark realizations are intertwined among the positive social changes of the period up to 2000, and the very processes of their revelation became tangled up with postmodern media-driven voyeurism.[7] The concomitant fall of the Catholic Church from its position of unquestionable authority in the minds of the Irish people should be seen as an instance of the departure from foundational thinking characteristic of postmodernity.[8]

With peaks in 1983 and 1992, continuing bitter disputes about abortion law placed women under a glaring floodlight. Minute physiological details of conception and pregnancy were contested daily on national radio. A harsh discourse of condemnation was visited on women who had chosen or might even consider abortion. Even in the context of an articulate pro-choice movement, the wrangle over such intimate bodily processes made many women feel violated by their treatment as objects within legal, medical, and theological master-discourses.[9]

The 1990s brought public revulsion at the scandals, and some disavowal of the past. Despite a self-image stressing close communal bonding, warmth, and moral

probity, Irish society had been secretive, narrowly patriarchal, and obsessed with the concealment and repression of emotional and sexual life, characteristics now seen as disquietingly typical of our earlier psychological culture (O'Connor, *Voices*; Inglis, "Scapegoats"). When it comes to interpreting this history, however, it would be misleading to accept a simple before-and-after narrative of enlightenment, or to posit a completely clear liberal-conservative and urban-rural divide in Ireland, especially where questions of women's status and freedoms are concerned. This, as we shall see, is part of a more general argument about how appropriate the model of modernisation is for Ireland's late-twentieth-century history. Recent social research has shown that the Irish women's movement drew on traditional strengths as well as on international influence and urban, bourgeois, and obviously "modern" individuals and groups (see L. Connolly, *Movement* esp. 3-47 and 56-88). Two apparently non-political groups, the Irish Countrywomen's Association—an active and long-standing organization with a very large membership, focused on farm and village communities—and the smaller, more urban, Irish Housewives' Association, are now both being understood as important examples of self-organization and thus as doing vital work in raising women's consciousness and self-training in collective enterprises (see Clear, Tweedy, and L. Connolly, *Movement*).

In 1990 Mary Robinson's election as President, in the teeth of the main political-party apparatus, gave women a sense of collective power from their unprecedentedly independent exercise of their franchise, and her open feminism and support of women's initiatives countrywide generated a utopian optimism about female participation in Irish public life (see Finlay). Yet, in Irish postmodernity women's liberation is an incomplete project. Many more middle-class women now enter the professions, but a glass ceiling still holds in business and all forms of professional employment (Armstrong). At the upper end of society, power is still differentially enjoyed according to gender, especially in senior management and, overwhelmingly, in politics itself: Irish political culture, north and south, retains its markedly masculine character (Galligan).[10] Though 50% of women are in the paid workforce, they are persistently over-represented among poorly-paid, part-time and temporary workers, and largely excluded from decision-making (Coulter). The "second shift" (Hochschild) prevails in Ireland as elsewhere: women are typically required, in a painful contradiction, both to sustain care and nurture at home and to meet the instrumental demands of increasingly pragmatic workplaces.[11]

The inherited cultural construction of the Irish mother still functions as a powerful background ideal, intensifying this strain.

Working in the European tradition of social theory, Zygmunt Bauman argues that de-institutionalisation and norm relaxation in postmodernity simultaneously liberate and isolate the self. This perspective is especially helpful in understanding the paradoxical condition of contemporary Ireland, where the dissolution of community has two faces: a new freedom, and a disturbing casting of subjects upon themselves (see Hug 4). The rationalising language of the modern, with its emphasis on the personal freedom and autonomy of subjects, ignores personal ties and emotional connectedness, thus placing women, in particular, under new forms of regulation perhaps as dominating as the rural, Catholic, communal-familial system of the past, though differently. Gray perceptively observes these new obligations and inner demands upon women since the lifting of the old oppressions—the harsh judgements and strict rules of a puritan church, and a regulatory state, system (29). Such internalised self-regulation belies the self-proclaimed lightness and freedoms of postmodernist visions. Particularly in the neo-liberal era where economic relations supplant social ones and individualism is the dominant model of selfhood, the drive towards style, affluence, success, and a guise of self-sufficiency places new obligations—including, ironically, the obligation to achieve pleasure—upon increasingly isolated subjects.

Prosperity, however, broadened Irish cultural and ideological horizons and brought influences of modernity to bear, both via the mediatisation of culture and widespread increased mobility. Urbanisation and internal migration caused questioning of the hitherto dominant image (and self-image) of Irishness as essentially rooted in the land, the West, and traditional ways of life. Anne Enright's *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995) is as much concerned with the effects of this shift as it is with gender roles and relations among the young media élite in the Dublin of the early 1990s. Both Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999), and Anne Haverty's *One Day as a Tiger* (1998) also stage encounters between urban or urbanised central characters and rural milieus, and both deliberately unsettle simplified urban-rural antinomies.

Turning to the conceptualisation of Irish social change, there are two attitudes towards narratives of modernisation: "technocratic optimism," unequivocally approving of the economy's rapid growth, and the rejection of this—by social and cultural analysts, labour and ecology activists, and feminists—who see such views as partial, tendentious, and produced by a harshly neo-liberal economics. [12] These reject

the onward-and-upward view of Irish modernisation, instancing rich-poor polarisation, low social provision, and a tax régime overwhelmingly favouring the wealthy and large investors. Women are especially vulnerable to the poor pay, instability and lack of union protection attending "Tiger" jobs.[13]

Furthermore, the presentation of modernisation as not only ineluctable but also benign, and especially as an unequivocal liberation from a traditional culture represented as uniformly oppressive, has been robustly questioned in several quarters. Luke Gibbons argues that it is modernisation which both produces traditionality and depends on this polarised relation to constitute its own progressive self-image, thus fixing into a grossly simplified binary what is in fact a complex shifting and renewal of social forms and practices (qtd. in Gray 21). Irish feminists have been especially sceptical about modernisation narratives, noting their occlusion of women's experiences and agency in Irish twentieth-century history (for example, see Meaney and L. Connolly, *Movement*).

At the meta-level where we attempt to understand the direction of culture, many argue that the true partners of neo-liberal economics, extreme individualism, and globalised capitalism are postmodernist narratives of philosophical and cultural disintegration. It follows that the interrogation of postmodern*ism* is especially vital for those living postmodern*ity*. In 1990 Fredric Jameson and David Harvey provided classically sceptical critiques of the high-priestly and ultimately nihilistic character of postmodernism. Moynagh Sullivan's indispensable essay developed these critiques within the problematics of a specifically Irish feminist criticism, interweaving them with the continuing tendency to marginalise or objectify women—and a symbolic feminine—within even the most sophisticated writing of cultural nationalism. If second-wave feminism knew itself to be a narrative of emancipation and of solidarity, and as such to be both socially focused and teleological, how far can those just gaining a tentative agency perform that joyful abandonment of subjectivity, amid an allegedly free play of signs, so relished by the *soi-disant* floating selves of the mandarin postmodernists? Such confident inheritors of Enlightenment reason can afford to preach the relinquishing of agency; subaltern and disadvantaged groups cannot be expected, in the name of postmodern play and fluidity and under a harsh free-market régime, to renounce what they are only just laying hold of (see also L. Connolly, *Movement*). A tactical essentialism may be a necessary stance. On the other hand, must such emerging subjects be denied, or deny themselves, the pleasures of such play and the enabling

aspects of the indeterminate? Such renunciation would seem to place women all over again in the position of self-abnegation associated with the obligations of womanly meekness and compulsory motherhood in the past. The four novels I discuss here, in varying ways, both delineate this dilemma and offer possibilities of negotiating it.

Avoiding this impasse, since the 1980s third-wave feminisms have developed a more pluralistic character, along with, and partly by virtue of, their critique of white Anglo-American bias in 1960s-70s feminism. Adapting insights from postmodernism itself, they expressly interrogate identity narratives and place themselves in their interstices: in the "borderlands" (see Anzaldua in Segal, Nicholson). It is not that these "difference" feminisms have abandoned central aims such as redressing the widespread inequalities—material, political, and cultural—in women's lives. Projects defined during the second wave certainly still need allegiance, but as part of a broader, more tolerant agenda. Relativism has widened our understanding of essential objectives, and inscribed characteristically feminist feelings and positions in other contemporary projects worldwide, such as ecological movements and the struggle against capitalist globalisation. These contemporary feminisms afford spaces of action and reflection within several disciplines, including psychoanalysis and literary criticism, as well as showing themselves in women's creative work, including these four novels.

How are the stories of Irish identity refracted through such discourses of difference? The later 80s and earlier 90s brought the growing interrogation, and partial disavowal, of the monolithic nationalism inherited by earlier-born Irish generations. This turn in cultural discourse has not always been adequately recognized as another instance of the decline in ideological certainties characterising postmodernity in the wealthy Western democracies. The issue is, however, considerably complicated by the widespread modification of nationalist positions among some of their most articulate exponents via another classically postmodern move, the celebration of hybridity. Evident from the late 1980s onwards, this perspective and the Robinson version of Irishness (directly influenced by the "soft" phenomenological postmodernism of University College Dublin philosopher Richard Kearney) show some reciprocal influence. The strategy of "parity of esteem" devised for the Anglo-Irish Agreement (1998), which brought to the North the first sustained peace and serious hope of ultimate reconciliation, strengthened and augmented such positions.

Within literature itself, in 2003 Declan Kiberd in his Parnell Lecture deprecated what he saw as the tendency of Irish writers to keep looking back and producing dark,

melancholy narratives of emotional distortion and oppression, expressing a wish for upbeat celebration of Irish economic and other achievements.[14] I cannot concur in his regret about the depressed mood of Irish writing: much unfinished business remains to be done in Irish psyches. Besides the specifics of sexual repression, long a theme among somewhat too-smug social commentators from abroad, there remain many other ills: the unspoken, unassimilated loss of so many emigrants, endemic lies and suppressions in the interest of appearances and of respectability, widespread marital non-communication over generations, Church, state, and community hypocrisy about the pretended care and nurture of the marginal, masking their actual exploitation and abuse, and the near-universal casual patriarchal domination of women and children, both inside and outside the family and deeply rooted in, even constitutive of, Ireland's, especially Dublin's, world-famous pub culture. Readers of the eloquent memoirs and investigative journalism produced during and since the 1990s can find ample evidence of these and other social ills and traumas. Such texts' expressions of past suffering, and their interrogation of its psychological and social legacy in the present, have surely been necessary and are sometimes aesthetically compelling, apart from their power to move and their representative role in giving voice to those silenced in earlier periods.

There is abundant evidence of the positive reconstruction and performance of cultural meanings in postmodern Ireland. Much of this creative work has been by women, a fact rarely granted *as such.* Many of the most interesting of these – not necessarily doom-laden, but often hopeful – re-interpreters produce work not exclusively centred in either an urban or a rural milieu, nor indeed necessarily or even primarily set *in* Ireland. *I* will focus, briefly, principally on four novelists who I think stand out. There are, of course, many other figures who claim particular attention but whom we don't have time to discuss: Garry Hynes, the visionary theatre director who works by means of collective practice rather than as a haughty *auteur*, the film-maker Pat Murphy, poets Ní Dhomhnaill, Ní Chuilleanáin, Moya Cannon, and Cathal Ó Searcaigh, cultural critics Angela Bourke and Maureen Murphy (working both in Ireland and the United States), historian and feminist Margaret MacCurtain, feminist Irish critic and film-maker Bríona Nic Dhiarmada.[15]

I believe that these figures, together with novelist Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, whom I shall discuss, are especially important for their revision of the meaning and role of the past, the country, the West, and the Gaeltacht. Most of these women are (as it were)

amphibious as between Ireland's two languages, and none adopts an exclusionary perspective. All seek to connect the Irish present with the Irish past, which however they conceive as various and multiple; all resist *both* the broad sweep of traditional nationalist narratives as transmitted and received, *and* the baby-out-with-the-bathwater gestures of Foster's or Longley's revisionism. Sharing the Left's critiques of neo-liberal globalisation and the reinscribing of citizens as consumers, feminists nevertheless find themselves constrained to insist upon the differential social positioning, status, experiences and demands placed on women *as* a group which is still, or yet again, blandly subsumed into allegedly universal affluence, marginalised, or *spoken for* in despite of women's interests, rights and just claims. Within the powerful nationalist critical/cultural establishment, the well-oiled engines of patronage and patriarchy drive onwards. Some distinguished figures celebrate Irish business prosperity and the national genius of entrepreneurs and financiers and urge writers to desist from gloom and dark introspection. Others sure-footedly negotiate a claim of continued Irish national subalternity, averting their eyes from the *facts* of power and privilege (sustained, ironically, by a transatlantic investment, neo-colonial in structure, in the Irish academy and the literary institution, by wealthy Irish-America). The ablest among such cultural-nationalist critics adopt a post-colonialist overlay or, we might say, alibi. In their writings and their practice of patronage within the critical and academic literary institutions, however, the old nationalist occlusion and subordination of the feminine is still at work. The radical potential of feminist thought is, it seems, a threat to, the new corporate university, or at least it can with impunity be blocked/starved of resources). Closing that bracket, however, I have one more general observation to make which particularly concerns male critics and scholars who might be said, one way or another, to be writing the nation.

I think one can see here and there, a current reinvocation and reinstatement of a pre-modern, atavistic feminine. It remains to be seen how typical this is, and how far it may flow together with the increased atomisation within postmodernity of ideas and practices, perhaps of the very memory, of solidarity or collectivity (including that of women and other marginalised groups). I will briefly mention two examples. *The Book of the Cailleach* is a formidably scholarly work by the distinguished folklorist Gearóid Ó Crualaoich, which has been very positively received, has been the subject of an RTE radio series, and been reprinted. Its subject is the extensive tradition of past

symbolizations of the feminine in Irish traditions: Ireland-as-a-woman, whether sovereignty goddess or *aisling* heroine, the Cailleach Bhéarra and the wise-woman-healer. The book presents this feminine as an immemorial and ineradicable presence, within a neo-Jungian framework which, in my view, does not, as it claims, celebrate and re-empower women, but is fundamentally oppressive because it sites feminine agency as essentially exercised *within the non-rational and the not-modern*. The enthusiastic reception of Ó Crualaoich's work suggests a reactionary desire to look away from the actuality of 2000s Irish women's lives, roles and aspirations, and contain them by reinscribing them as telluric personifications, symbols rather than persons. The highly able critic Joe Cleary, too, in a recent study of modern Irish culture, seeks, bizarrely, to refunction the "Great Mother" figure as an important motif of resistance to post-modern neo-liberalism in 1990s and 2000s Irish culture; he draws, among other heterogeneous items, upon Sinéad O'Connor's female-deity fantasies to do so.

I would distinguish sharply from such highly questionable moves as these the thought and work of the women intellectuals I have listed above. Attention to, the transmission, and especially the reshaping, of the past in general, and in particular of instances, figures and experiences of feminine *agency* in the past (and the West) *is* culturally healthy and indeed indispensable. All use material from the subaltern culture of the western seaboard, from Kerry to Donegal and (like those novelists whose depressive vision is partly deprecated by Kiberd: John McGahern and Edna O'Brien) from the *Irlande profonde* of inland counties far from Dublin; they address what are sometimes terrible histories (see Bourke's *Burning*), but also new-millennial experiences and forms of understanding. Ní Dhomhnaill not only reworks myths, oral narratives, and West Kerry traditions; she integrates them in a markedly feminine account of Irish urban (and suburban) postmodernity which is both interrogative and celebratory, weaving them together with psychoanalytic ideas and insights from the age of European modernism. We might see such cultural expressions as "subjugated knowledges" or metaphorically and linguistically *mestizo* writings (see Segal, Nicholson). The enlightened relativism of difference feminisms, including standpoint theory (see Hartsock) and Friedman's "locationality," together with the increasing importance within postmodern feminisms of the ethics of care, maternal thinking, and a psychology of mutual recognition, finds echoes both in Irish women's writing and in women's studies discourses (see Shildrick, Kittay, Ruddick, Benjamin).

As Claire Connolly observes, Irish feminism has always distinguished itself from other ideological positions in keeping communication open with the world beyond the island of Ireland, and in drawing strength from women's movements abroad (3). The project emerging more and more clearly from Ní Chuilleanáin's work over two decades exemplifies such cultural positioning: to refunction positive aspects of the Irish Catholic past from before the Republic, and revalorise the half-hidden creative worlds below its barren overt authoritarianism, towards the construction of as yet unrealised futures. Breaking out of the Irish-British binary, she consistently reframes Irish culture as European (see "Acts and Monuments"). In writing that culture she reimagines models and instances of feminine agency, often in what, to modernisation-theorists, are surprising places: the lives of nuns, medieval resurrection-doctrines, relic cults, high medieval thought and writing, and—especially—motifs of magical or ritual transformation in popular Catholicism.[16]

The predominance of women and of bilinguals in this list—to which one might add others—suggests that these writers are performing a crucial mediation in contemporary Irish culture, between past and present, the West and the city, older social forms and the still-emerging present. All are also markedly feminist in their self-description, and together with the influential figure of historian Margaret MacCurtain, they deserve recognition for revalorising positive elements in traditional Irish society without forsaking the fundamental liberationist impulse which unites feminisms.

On a different note, the postmodern era has brought certain changes in the literary institution which are also relevant to the production, generic location, and reception of women's writing. Important positive factors are the advent of the literary prize, national and international, and the partial professionalising of the literary vocation.[17] Others are more equivocal in effect: increasing commodification has produced the magnetising and deforming influence of the new category of "chick-lit." Itself, I suspect, mostly decidely non- or anti-feminist in its projecting of consumerist and socially reactionary values (with the honourable exception of Marian Keyes' sceptical, comic writing), chick-lit is sometimes tactically invoked to downgrade women's fiction in general.[18] Blurb writers appropriate liberal-feminist language and apply it indiscriminately to any writing by women; in a sense this replicates, though in cynical mode, older distinctions and debates in 70s and 80s feminism itself between those trying to found or discover an ideologically feminist literature, and others willing to celebrate all and any women's writing.[19] Kate O'Brien's own work, often

seeming to be positioned between high and low fiction, has indeed sometimes prompted similar questions.

Discussion of Novels

Among the novelists involved in such re-examination of Ireland and Irish culture, both Mary Morrissy and Anne Haverty strikingly explore the internalising of obligation and consequent solitude of the individual subject in postmodernity, with a female and a male protagonist respectively and with quite different tones. As *The Pretender* (2000) develops, Morrissy delicately deepens our consciousness of the absence of a fixed, defining centre at the core of the individual, yet of the creative genius of selfhood, reconceived as the capacity to project a ceaseless series of guises. Morrissy's choice of non-Irish material outflanks those masculinist narratives of Irish identity which have both constricted and marginalised women's share in representation.[20] In *One Day as a Tiger*, Haverty represents the *Weltschmerz* of a man equivocally urbanised, belatedly seeking communal reintegration in a rural Ireland passing inexorably into postmodernity. Enright and Ní Dhuibhne each adopt a more comic stance.

Enright constructs a protagonist who enters gleefully into postmodern atomised individuality and encounters 1990s Ireland as a kaleidoscope of fragments. The novel concerns her adventures among these bits and pieces, resisting any reconstitution of totalities, and her arrival at intimate attachment while preserving her freedom and agency. *The Wig My Father Wore*—the most evidently urban, "cool," postmodernist, of these novels—succeeds remarkably in proposing a provisional ideal of inter-subjective connection without closing off play or pleasure. *The Dancers Dancing* sets up a play of two times and places against each other, and engages most directly of the four with "the matter of Ireland," though with a light touch: it considers the continuing cultural uses, at the turn of the twentieth century, of the remote west, the Irish language, and Irish history. Ní Dhuibhne articulates this theme via a rite-of-passage plot about the self-discovery of a young Dublin girl passing a summer month in Donegal. *Dancers* thus unobtrusively reviews Irish postmodernity, with its relative freeing and affirmation of children and the feminine, its increased toleration of difference, and its remarkable arrival, in the Belfast Agreement, at the capacity to accept North and Republic as torn halves without totalising insistence on their unification. Pointedly avoiding a jeremiad about the fading of the Irish language, *Dancers* unifies the vitality of the teenagers while they practise their *cómhrá* and their dancing—and enter upon their sexual being—with

a passionate celebration of the north-western landscape. It implicitly insists on the indispensability of such places to the national cultural consciousness.

Enright's investigation of Irish gender and cultural identity has a notably sceptical relation with dominant masculinist narratives of Irish identity and historical agency. She effects a comic, sometimes frenetically disruptive, representation of Dublin life in the pre-Tiger early 1990s, but with unsettling moments of tenderness. The rehearsal of female self-empowerment in *The Wig My Father Wore* scarcely replicates the prescriptions of naïve second-wave feminism, and in formal innovation and thematic irony it ranges well beyond the usual realist and Oedipal-confessional territory of Irish fiction at large.[21] Television provides the cynical milieu, where the product is quintessentially disposable and the producers—the book's main characters—find themselves caught in a peculiarly contemporary crisis of representation and valorisation. In particular, the rural versus urban (or rather suburban) antinomy which Dermot Bolger approached with naturalist earnestness in *The Journey Home* (1990) is revisited in Enright's snappy dialogue with an abandon that leaves no fixed point from which to make definitive judgements. If late-twentieth-century Dublin is in no sense a point of triumphant arrival, neither does the rural west ("Bumfuck, Co. Leitrim") function as a site of original authenticity. Grace was named "Gráinne" (after the lover of Diarmuid in the Irish tale) but switched at school because her classmates called her "Groin." *Wig* opens with her acquisition of a male angel, Stephen, as cohabitee (though he will not at first "put out" for her). A vigorous contestant in the gender wars, she is far from being either submissively feminine, the acquiescent object of exploitation, or a Bridget Jones sighing for a spouse.

The eponymous wig is the book's emblem of the unspoken in Irish culture: in plain view of the whole family since the day in 1967 when their father came home wearing it, it is never mentioned, its name being in the category of "forbidden" words (63).[22] His concealed baldness stands in a metonymic relation to the whole hidden life of the body, its joys, its odours, and its innocent ungainliness.

Enright renders 1990s Irish urban culture from a position of cool scepticism. The recent lifting of so many sexual taboos and restrictions has not really produced a stable or contented way of life (Grace's older colleague Frank maintains his life-disrupting obsession with "younger ass").[23] Enright uses a focus on questions of representation—sharpened by the TV setting—to interrogate changing values and the largely altered character of national experiences, but does not indicate a dilution of the Irishness of

these experiences, even within the élite RTÉ milieu, itself a sign of postmodernity in its multiple mirroring and deregulated conduct of social relations. Grace significantly fails to respond to the ardour of the Englishman who desires to have a child with her; perfect, fair and blue-eyed as he is, she finds that disconcertingly her body has "deserted me, it had slammed the door and pissed off home" at the crucial sexual moment (58). "Home" seems therefore still to have a real existence and a name.

Enright's ludic imagination makes the texture of her work a constant delight, but these incidental pleasures are also purposeful. Avoiding the classic-realist alternation of scene and summary, the narrative method is one of fragmentation, offering short scenes in rapid succession, with only minimal setting, and withholding summary. This technique, writerly in Roland Barthes' sense, carries a more general implication about the espousal of values: that most general assumptions are impossible to hold reliably without self-deception or untruth to the phenomena of experience, which is quintessentially opaque and resistant to meaning. Such deliberate suppression of explicit connection between elements of a text is a tactic common to modernist and some postmodernist representations: it may be paralleled with the rejection of foundationalism in several domains of contemporary philosophy. Enright's juxtaposition of jarring or incommensurate moments sets the different discursive systems invoked by each moment to "interrupt" one another. Collage and montage, methods Enright uses extensively in *Wig*, are forms of parataxis, which invite the reader to establish connections not explicitly expressed by the writer.[24] The coherence thus narratively destroyed, or frustrated, figures the false order constructed by the authorities and regulators of Grace's social world. These regulators are sometimes internalised by the characters: her father's wig in its aspect of concealment may be understood as an example of such inauthentic coherence. Accordingly, when he suffers a stroke, Enright makes of his verbal incoherence a kind of Shakespeare's-fool access to unconscious wisdom. One example is when in the middle of nonsense-talk he suddenly and clearly says: "Don't patronise your parents" (78); another is the Beckettian passage where he calls Grace but stays silent on the line, responding to her question "Is that you?" with an inspired "No" (119-20): he truly is not himself, or as Rimbaud put it, "*Je est [sic] un autre*" (347).

The tone of *Wig* is more one of blatant farce than quiet ironic poise. Good manners and polite restraints are resolutely resisted, and we are never allowed to lose sight of the body, which keeps thrusting itself forward in all its manifestations,

grotesque, painful, or pleasurable, and in street register: “a ride,” “fuck,” “piss,” “bollocks” are all part of Grace’s routine diction.[25] This frankness is not limited to Grace herself, as when she explains that Stephen has a “virginity complex” and her mother drily responds “Gráinne, he came to the wrong house” (37).

The social world of *Wig* is more or less devoid of organised religion, which in itself pointedly departs from received ideas about Irish fiction. However, Enright does appropriate elements of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, but refunctions them significantly. Thus the angel-figure is taken over from the bible, theology, and Christian mythology, but is used as a figure of masculinity: Stephen plays spirit to Grace’s flesh. This use of the angel/spirit *versus* human/body homology to formulate a position about gender is not new. In Patrick Kavanagh’s poem “Raglan Road,” the loved woman is “clay” to the poet’s angel who will “lose his wings” through wooing her: *The Wig My Father Wore* mentions the sung version, a popular Dublin pub- and party-piece (71). The mutual attachment of Grace and Stephen, as full human subjects—by contrast with Kavanagh’s frustrated misogynist idealisation—de-rails the traditional sexist arrangement whereby women were assigned the (human) body and men the (angelic) spirit or mind. This is because Grace the TV professional, acid satirist of Irish manners, and reflective thinker about morality and meaning, most decidedly inhabits mind as well as (bawdily) body. Stephen progresses from his initial purely spiritual existence, comically indicated by his painting everything in the house white, serving pure white meals, and breaking the toaster (which, of course, turns something white into something brown). Gradually each approaches the other’s condition, Stephen taking on more and more physicality, Grace gaining in sheer emotional simplicity and moral optimism, till eventually they make love and Grace conceives a child (196).

Enright’s vision is of a secular society, as signalled by the parodic annunciation with which the book opens (the angel knocking on Grace’s door).[26] The previously confessional nature of Ireland makes its presence felt, however, in the snatches of text from the 1930s and earlier which she finds when she strips the wallpaper in her house. A kind of anthology of Irish culture, especially in its devotional aspect, from the previous hundred years, these include promises of a “Medal for Every Catholic” and “Brown Scapular or An” [*sic*], whose miraculous powers are detailed, though half of the sentence is missing (86-89). References to Our Lady’s protection of Franco’s troops in the 1930s are jumbled together with a Theatre Royal 1939 playbill, a nostalgic emigrant’s letter, and a recipe for “Faggots.” These fragmentary signals keep breaking

up, allowing Enright to play significant games with bodies, food, and chopping up, beginning hilariously with: "*4 persons*. Wash well in salt and water," and stressing covering and blanching (88). A kind of Last Supper for lunatics, this exploits overtones of the symbolic cannibalism underlying the Eucharist meal. The need to cleanse the body of impurities and to "rub" away any "clots of blood" is a displaced version of sexual prudery and, with the insistent injunction to "cover," of the whole unease with the body which characterised Irish life and which stunted emotional development. There are strong symbolic links with the idea of the covering wig: the anxiety about nakedness, comically focused on the bald head in turn indicates fear of the baring and potential loss of self in inter-subjective attachment. In the rubbing, mincing, chopping, simmering, and blanching (another instance here of whitening, such as Stephen embarks upon), Enright finds an inspired language for this whole underlying anxiety about incorporation and about the leaching away of selfhood which *Wig* stages so vividly.

The book closes with Grace, now pregnant and cycling on an isolated Connemara road, leaving a trail of leaked milk. On the literal level it is the boxes of milk on her carrier which leak, but this is a metonymic displacement of the idea that bodies—and selves—are not sealed units, and a prefiguring of her milk which will come in when the baby is born.[27] A lactating woman "leaks" milk, but that milk provides the first human nurture. The leak is thus a figure for the book's theme: that covering and sealing of identities are neither necessary nor possible, and that the impulse to join inner and outer being, self and other, is a human universal. When Grace teaches Stephen, just before he leaves, how to fold bed-sheets, she is already imparting a motherly skill, and the shared nature of this quintessentially domestic task—which is hard to do alone—has an important meaning: Grace is already learning, and teaching, how not to cover and how neither to gobble up the other nor to shun him. Stephen, the man-angel, does not know how, but in showing him she, too, gains understanding.

This scene echoes a narrative image a little earlier, when as Grace sits with her brother Phil (Greek "to love") on the sofa at home, both visiting after their father's stroke, she feels how "[a]ll the time, stretching and twisting between myself and Phil on the sofa, is 'our childhood, in three-ply' " (a gauge of knitting-wool [162]). This is an intensely suggestive maternal and domestic motif which invokes an earlier Ireland, lightly buried beneath the urban, mediatised surface of Enright's book, where women knitted clothes for their families.[28] Winding wool takes two, and is a quintessential

image of productive inter-subjectivity. Enright's phrasing suggests that Grace and Phil—adult as they now are—are still acquiring the equivalent emotional skill to interact. The observation a little earlier that "we [the siblings] grew up a few years ago and started to look at each other while we spoke" (158) similarly indicates the absence of intimacy, which was the norm in Irish families.

Though presented in her professional life at the TV station with its quasi-Hegelian cut-throat model of human interrelations, Grace gradually learns to engage differently with others. According as Stephen takes on her body in the book's conceit of their process of intermingling, she finds herself beginning to float free of her earlier *ressentiment* at the success of Marcus' ferocious ambition. A kind of creative intermingling is staged as the climax of the book's twin plots approaches (Grace and Stephen's romance, and the last episode of the egregious *LoveQuiz*, which teeters between cheesy and voyeuristic). In narrating the final, chaotic live broadcast, shot through with farce, Enright brilliantly renders the ersatz version of real emotion aroused in mass-culture performances: "tatty sex and the helpless heart," in the phrase of the director, known as "the LoveWagon" (206).[29]

Enright markedly refrains from staging Grace's impending motherhood as a capitulation to the idealisation by Irish ideology of the maternal and its proper metonymic realm, the domestic. Despite her move away from Dublin and the hip urban world of the TV station to Connemara, it is difficult to imagine the woman who earlier has literally turned her house inside out as in any sense returning to an iconic West as to a foundation.[30] The *Wig*'s vision scatters and reassembles the constituent items of human existence, achieving in the process a vividly postmodern immediacy. It also passes beyond the ideal of an atomised or autonomous self, associated with rationality, masculinity and modernity. Grace's description of her daily Atlantic swim is significant: "The sea . . . is something to lie on . . . . I cannot find the edge of myself . . . as if I could not carry my heart anymore; it had burst and spread, like an old yolk" (182-83).

One Day as a Tiger (1998) rehearses Oedipal Irish masculinity in a post-modern mode: Anne Haverty's vision is partly comic, partly dark and grotesque. Her protagonist Marty Hawkins is the younger son of a well-to-do farmer in Co. Tipperary. Marty is a grown-up orphan who forms two inappropriate attachments. One, an emotional bond, is with a lamb, "Missy," which has been modified in the breeding by the experimental addition of human genes. The other, a sexual attachment, involves his

brother's wife Etti.[31] Marty cannot contract functional adult relationships, but wavers between the infantile and the exploitative.[32] His interior monologue, which constitutes the book, oscillates accordingly between sentimentality and sardonic judgement. Previously ensconced within the enclosed life of Trinity College, Dublin, where his professor has been grooming him for academic success, Marty, whose keen intellect coexists with a childlike emotional vulnerability, cannot sustain his intellectual promise after the accidental deaths of both his parents. One May he suddenly throws up his career and returns to the family farm in the depths of the countryside, irresistibly drawn by its warm, lush natural beauty. There he lives as his brother's dependent.

Haverty's management of tone is impressive, catching Marty's intellectual scorn and snobbery (he resembles a sardonic John Banville protagonist), but also his self-delusion, emotional helplessness, and inability to make workable moral choices. Marty's sense of pathos about Missy is kept delicately hovering between the poignant and the ridiculous, and this bond comes to seem an emblem, as the book develops, of his own only-half humanity: a monstrous infant or infant monster, Missy eerily expresses the inadequacy of Marty's own being. Toddler-like, he cannot endure separation from his mother, then from his mother-territory. But also in the manner of a toddler let rule over his surroundings and grown both bewildered and tyrannical, he brings the whole family world down about his ears.[33] Stuck in Freud's castration complex, Marty fails to identify with any of the potential father-figures he encounters, and therefore fails effectively to emulate them as ego-ideals: his real father Robert, his mentor Professor Harvey, or his fond and indulgent older brother Pierce. So, still eluded by Freud's prescription for normative masculinity, Marty never learns to sublimate and re-direct his infantile desire towards the productive goals of culture: he remains a mammy's boy without a mammy, except for the forgiving embrace of Foilmore and Fansha, the farm and townland which were his whole childhood world.

Beneath the surface of the novel's adroit social comedy, Haverty's exploration of this failure has evident implications for her representation of Irish social forms. She has invented a dysfunctional male figure with exemplary failings. Profoundly ignorant of his own feelings, Marty sleepwalks through life, masking his moral ignorance and unreflectiveness behind a self-importance deriving from his class confidence and his comparatively exalted education. Mistaking his intellectual prowess for understanding (a little as Freddie Montgomery does in Banville's murder novel *The Book of Evidence*), he is ambushed and laid low by his first intense emotional experience, the loss of his

loving and protective parents. This causes him to regress into the safe topographical world of his childhood, and to seek to substitute his brother and sister-in-law for the lost parents. Thus in a darkly humorous way, Haverty achieves a perversely Freudian rightness in the plot device of Marty's desire for Etti, the credulous small-town Jocasta with whom he eventually runs off to France, taking Missy along. Further, when Marty divests himself of his half of the farm in Pierce's favour, apparently a generous gesture, it merely rids Marty of his share of adult moral responsibility and loads on his brother the obligation to "be good" for both of them. The complete adequacy of Pierce's masculinity, by contrast with Marty's, is made clear, as is the smoothly correct path of his development from boy to man: "Pierce was manly, there was no one more manly. But somehow also boyish, as if the boy and the man were of a piece. The man harmoniously and gracefully nascent in the boy" (66). Pierce also embodies complete and contented integration into his life on the land and the accompanying strong-farmer social roles and relations. Haverty, however, implicitly interrogates this ideal of integration: she gives Marty, by contrast, a Wordsworthian response to the landscape, which is intimately connected with his infantile state. In flight from the city and the combined freedom and responsibility of modern adult selfhood, he projects upon Foilmore and Fansha the role of a maternal Nature, into which he plunges his agonized isolation. But Haverty also decisively discredits this Romantic-sacramental view of the country. Missy, the GM sheep, is there to show that nature is always already partly human, thereby satirically reinscribing Coleridge's Kantian remark that ". . . we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live." Missy is GM because in postmodernity (and there could scarcely be a more postmodern motif than genetic engineering) nothing is authentic or pure, and there are no foundational *realities* any more than there are foundational *discourses* about them.[34] But she is also a kind of blasphemous splinter-figure of the "Lamb of God," monstrous, childlike, and transgressively female. Haverty explicitly associates her with the discourse of sainthood and the traditions of Irish Catholic devotion, via Etti's awed attribution of a holy odour to the sheep, and the last phase of the book, when the trio of Marty, Etti, and Missy live clandestinely but luxuriously in Deauville on credit, parodies the flight of the Holy Family (with Deauville's best hotel for Egypt and Pierce's appropriated four-wheel-drive for donkey). The variations of tone between pathos, hilarity, and the grotesque produce quintessentially post-modernist effects of disorientation.

Haverty also invokes and undercuts stereotypical items of rural Ireland and its constitutive representations in ideology. In a turf-cutting scene the weakling Marty soon wearies and is outpaced by his coeval Augie Delaney, muscles glistening, "an archaic type; a man playing the part of the archetypal countryman" (116). Augie's overdone masculinity makes a pointed contrast with Marty's own equivocal version, and "the bog-talk, ceremonial and inevitable," is a markedly Mylesian moment (117). But Haverty constantly allows us to glimpse that behind Marty's self-serving delusions of superiority lie further ironies, rather than an ultimate authenticity. Fansha is modernising—swapping the "long low farmhouse" for the "white hacienda" (49)—and this includes the constant replaying, on the giant TV in the crossroads pub, of Tipperary winning the All-Ireland: a sort of Golden Vale version of Freud's "compulsion to repeat," but with the video doing duty for the screen of the psyche, a literalised screen-memory.

Thus Marty's failed self-differentiation is played out against the parish's communal existence. *Tiger* is innovative and unsettling precisely because Haverty pointedly refrains from validating *either* the rooted and fixed values of Fansha, *or* Marty's inchoate break with them and his attempt to transform his own life-course: his "one day as a tiger." There is no ultimate vindication of the country as touchstone of reality, sanity, or moral clarity, such as McGahern staged, for example, in *The Pornographer* (1979), whose protagonist returns to the land to settle down and marry his nurse-girlfriend, finding his truth un-ironically in nature, community, and the stable maternal feminine. But neither does rural Tipperary connote merely oppression, brutality, and mute emotional deprivation, as does the country parish in Keith Ridgway's dark *The Long Falling* (1998), contemporary with *Tiger*.

The poise and playfulness of Haverty's imagination makes the book a joy to read, but without masking its disturbing qualities. Marty eventually comes to see Fansha as neither lush pastoral nor repressive backwater; in the light of his experience of France, it "assum[es] only its actual importance, that is to say, none" (87). By the end of the book there is no place to stand: while he longed to be immersed in Fansha's rural beauty (figured by the chestnut blossoming in the pasture (41), and also to be re-enfolded in the frank simplicity of parental love, now he is forced to see that his desire is unattainable and that the projection of his salvation upon his brother and his brother's wife is a recourse barred to him, because what he desires is not there, or not there any longer. It is not only a moral evil—deepened by the biblical resonance of the taboo on

marrying your sister-in-law—it is an impossibility. The novel's indeterminate ending does not blind Marty like Oedipus, but rather curses him with clearer sight by adding to the death of his original father that of the surrogate father of his projection, his beloved elder brother, also in a road accident, as he rushes after the absconding couple.[35]

From the outset Ní Dhuibhne's *Dancers* establishes a clearly feminine perspective: the plot concerns a crucial moment in a teenage girl's development. It combines this, however, with questions about Irish traditions and identity narratives. Ideologically, while lightly sketching – in a spirit more of wry comedy (e.g. 7) than of anger or sadness – the prevailing system of closure and regulation, it implicitly celebrates cultural items and practices emanating from those narive traditions which were the object of prescription during the earlier history of the Irish state, and then of repudiation by the modernisers: the language, Irish dancing, the west. *Dancers* proposes to release these items from their enlistment in the coercive and puritanical nationalisms of earlier decades, lightly reassigning them amid experiences of pleasure and play.[36] It also reroutes feminist feeling around [i.e. to circumvent] the old roadblocks of misogynist Catholicism and gendered nationalism which had to be assaulted by the second-wave activist women in Ireland post-1969 [instance contraceptive train, & Boland's *A Kind of Scar*]. Furthermore, while it affectionately registers the beauties of Donegal, *Dancers* interrogates their instrumental deployment, both in touristic cliché and in native self-image.[37] The novel's 1972 setting, together with the unusual device of present-tense narrative, allows Ní Dhuibhne to juxtapose two historical moments, one before and one after Irish society saw its most vertiginous changes. She collocates the worst period of the Northern Troubles (early '70s) with that of the major ceasefires and the 1998 Belfast Agreement (late '90s).

The story recounts a summer stay at an Irish college in the Donegal Gaeltacht by a group of teenagers mainly from the cities. The experience is practically a national rite of passage: in the context of "compulsory Irish" at school, generations of Irish people, mainly from the Republic, spent a month in one or another Gaeltacht, from Kerry to Donegal (see Ní Dhuibhne interview 103-04).

At first glance, *Dancers* might seem part of the "chick-lit." phenomenon. This impression is enhanced first by its shortlisting for the Orange Prize—specifically for women's fiction, and won by such capable but ultimately "feel-good" fiction as Ann Patchett's 2002 *Bel Canto*—and second, by the cover of the *Dancers* 2001 reissue,

which shows a trio of floaty-dressed girls cavorting on a vaguely delineated sunny beach [NOTE: check the current edition?] It is true that its mode is optimistic, and its focus primarily feminine, but it is a good deal more searching, complex, and interrogative than the dismissive epithet warrants. The ideological stance taken in the novel is emphatically pluralistic. Ní Dhuibhne very deliberately situates her representation of a Gaeltacht culture and life-world amid various forms of difference: the Protestant farms of Donegal, distinguishable by their neatness and their flower-gardens; the Englishness of Orla's mother, from the Isle of Wight, and the Gaeltacht origins of her gentle tongue-tied father; the Derry girls' otherness in Dubliners' eyes; the constricting effects of class embarrassments and anxieties, focused in Orla's own sense of inferiority *vis-à-vis* other girls' better accents and more affluent lives, and especially in her desperate desire to disavow all connections with her Auntie Annie, eccentric and shabby, living at subsistence level by the road to the beach.

The business of the book is to broaden Orla's understanding: along its course, she learns to see differently. In its basic plot bringing an easterner to the west and a young character, still being formed, to encounter difference, *Dancers* is in a tradition of Irish writing going back to Maria Edgeworth and Lady Morgan, with the variation that the visitor is female, unlike the English or anglicised young men of those optimistic pre-Famine fictions. But when Orla learns to embrace Auntie Annie and her house, and to value her capacity for traditional storytelling (*via* the college teachers' interest in collecting her stories), it is possible to see her as recapitulating the process of self-understanding and cultural intertwining undergone by Edgeworth's callow heroes. This is even more true when she comes on the "banatee"'s son Micheál standing stock still in the river, stalking salmon, for the first time notices his romantic red-haired beauty, and experiences a *coup de foudre*.[38] But most of all, Orla's largely solitary explorations along the course of the wild burn are what lead her to new knowledge, both of herself and of the external world.

The novel's central cluster of meaning lies in this connection between the heroine's emotional and sexual development and the Donegal countryside. In Auntie Annie, whose house is placed between Orla and the strand, which she must eventually visit, Ní Dhuibhne devises a variation on the Loathly Lady theme, widespread in European medieval, and especially in Irish, literature, as well as occurring in Séamus Heaney and John Montague's poetry (Coughlan, "Bog Queens"). This theme in its classic form concerns an encounter between the male hero and the hag-at-the-well, in

which the hero must kiss or lie with the crone, so that she turns magically into a beautiful young woman; she is a version of the Sovereignty Goddess who embodies the land, which the hero thus possesses by overcoming his repulsion (Coughlan, Herbert).

At the quasi-realist and *bildungsroman* level, Orla starts to move out from/develop beyond the confines of her Dublin world and her peers' normative urban-middle-class values. In terms of the mythic structure that underlies the narrative, she must overcome an obstacle such as the hero faces on his quest-journey. Considering the episode as a comment upon Irish ideology's dealings with the west and the Irish language, there is a suggestive analogy with the moment, at the end of Joyce's *Portrait*, when Stephen Dedalus sees that he must struggle all night and overcome the old Irish-speaking man in the far west with red eyes, but that he "mean[s] no harm" (317).

A recurring water motif is signalled by "wildness and wet" in the epigraph, Hopkins' "Inversnaid." The village's name "Tubber" (Irish *tobar*, meaning "well"), is an obvious intimation of its symbolic status as a source, prefiguring the unfolding of Orla's self-discovery which forms the main plot. Water is also a dangerous element, and one particularly associated with the feminine. Four girl scholars from another college drown, off the next strand to Tubber; there is also a moment when the older, sexier Derry girl, Pauline, seems briefly at risk of drowning. But once Orla has overcome her fear of passing her aunt's house, she immerses herself joyfully in the boundless, fluid element of the sea.[39]

In exploring the burn, officially out of bounds, Orla finds a hidden place that fills her with completeness and peace: the flowing stream suggests ceaseless natural process. Behind a luxuriant screen of wild natural growth, she discovers a green tunnel and follows it beyond a little waterfall. All this symbolises Orla's interiority, specifically the mystery of her developing selfhood and her own strength, of which she has been unconscious. Along these hidden banks, she feels more intensely herself (72, 115). In a narrative of developing female agency, this suggestion of a special feminine kinship with nature may risk returning women to that subaltern position where culture, with its binary logic, has traditionally placed them.[40] On the other hand, Orla finds *inside herself* the space that indicates her subjectivity, and begins to discover it: it intimates a potential she already has within.[41] Furthermore, far up the burn she stumbles over a tiny skull, which reveals the presence of a *cillín* (this is also the day on which she first menstruates).[42] The discovery shows that nature is always bound up with history, never merely mute or chthonic: what Orla finds is a buried *social* secret, associated with the

shaming of women and the fear of female fertility. Thus, despite the role of wildness in *Dancers*, Ní Dhuibhne, like Haverty, represents the natural as already interpenetrated by the human: neither Marty nor Orla finds a natural realm untouched by history, discourse, and representation.[43] *Dancers* gracefully negotiates all the risks which might wreck its optimistic vision (drowning, pregnancy, heartbreak), and emerges as a poised, touching celebration of youth and vitality, whose vision of nature is *natura naturans*, process and performance seamlessly merging.[44] Its climax has a moment of pure joy, as Joe the headmaster watches "[t]he Irish college dance before his eyes," with "every movement perfect": "It's Carrickmacross lace, it's the river running, it's the salmon leaping, it's the ploughman ploughing, it's the spinner spinning, the boatman sailing, the fellow fishing, the fire flaming. It's the dancers dancing" (236).

Mary Morrissy's novel *The Pretender* (2000), in a more sombre tone, also stages very deliberate reversals of convention and questions the tenability of identity politics, in constructing a radical reinterpretation of a famous twentieth-century life and a notorious claim to identity. This movement towards disintegration rather than integration of selfhood, taking place in a social world coming unstuck historically and geographically, parallels the dismantling of rural Ireland and of Marty's life in *Tiger*, and Grace's simultaneous peeling off, in *Wig*, of the layers of Irish contemporaneity and of the smart, cool selfhood she imagined herself to have perfected.

The Pretender takes the familiar story of the woman who called herself Anastasia and claimed to be the youngest daughter of Tsar Nicholas of Russia, murdered in a cellar with his wife and children at Yekaterinburg in 1917. But Morrissy turns altogether away from almost all the usual cultural meanings of the Anastasia phenomenon, as they have been played out in film and popular culture. Instead, working against the background of the terrible violence of northern Central Europe in the early decades of the last century—what we might call a constitutive instance of modernity—she makes an exploration of the nature of identity and selfhood which is poignant and arresting, while emphatically refusing the mystique of imperial blood which usually surrounds the figure of Anastasia. Eschewing Irishness altogether, Morrissy tells a story of collapsing régimes, migration, and the appropriation and renaming of territories and communities in the course of the twentieth century. Her central character passes through many identities: Anastasia Romanova, daughter of the Tsar; Franziska Schankowska, Polish country girl and wartime factory-worker in Berlin; and, perhaps most

significantly of all, *Fraülein Unbekannt*, Miss Unknown, in the asylum for the insane. In making poignantly present the broken, hard, wrecked life of this woman, who also loses her lover to the war, *The Pretender* offers an emblematic representation of the millions of forgotten, nameless lives which were swallowed up in the cataclysmic history of Europe in the earlier twentieth century.

Morrissy's narrative works backwards, opposing the time of story to that of discourse as do many great fictional texts (notably *Wuthering Heights*, *Nostromo*, and *The Sound and the Fury)* and capitalizing on her readers' vague familiarity with the popular myth-mixed-with-fact which she is using as the skeleton or armature of her fiction. Thus the lost princess, sole survivor of the massacre, seems an iconic central character whose repeated losses and gains of selfhood and self-recognition become, by the end, moving and representative instances of the convulsive upheavals of modernity. Morrissy inverts the romantic Anastasia story, so that the more the reader is drawn into the selfhood of "*Fraülein Unbekannt,*" the more s/he is brought to relinquish the oppressive mystique of royalty, and to acknowledge and honour the poignant universality of the underling: the real story that is the life of the peasant's daughter Franziska Schankowska. Franziska's real experience displaces the martyr-myth of Tsarism, and is shown as a process of loss and gain just as momentous as any imperial overthrow. For the cellar butchery of Nicholas and his family, Morrissy substitutes a munitions-factory explosion as the cause of Franziska's terrible wounds, such as cost thousands of ordinary women doing hazardous work during World War I their health or their lives.

Morrissy's turn-of-the-century meditation looks for its material as far back as the 1910s, but addresses the fragility and the layered and shifting quality of identity which mark twenty-first-century perceptions of subjectivity. One of two governing `motifs in the book is a visually familiar item, the set of Russian *matryoshka* dolls, each inside the one before and each smaller than the last, which is one of the only two objects Franziska brings with her from home. As the book goes on the reader becomes gradually aware that, like one doll inside another, the self of the central character is a composite and gradually developing entity, never fixed and always being removed to reveal a smaller core. Paradoxically, this self becomes truer as it becomes smaller, so that ultimately the ordinary woman is, we come to see, no more complex or significant than the Emperor's daughter.[45] Morrissy has devised an elegant narrative structure which permits this

revelation only slowly to take shape, and this is the significance of the backward-moving narration, in a novel whose pace and rhythm is managed with great skill.

Within the life of Franziska/Anastasia, Morrissy nevertheless realises moments of meaning which open like unexpected flowers: the fierce attachment of the unstable Clara to *Fraülein Unbekannt* in the asylum, the sisterly care of Doris and Louise, co-workers in the factory; and the memory of her father's early unconditional love of his small daughter (61-62), and of her veritable status as princess in his regard, before her displacement by the young brother and male heir, and her resulting expulsion from the magic sphere of protection.[46] Before, that is, the breaking of the egg which forms the second of *The Pretender*'s three central narrative images (along with the nest of dolls and a drowning-motif).[47] These are threaded through the narration with skill and poignancy, and their recurrence generates a deeply satisfying aesthetic pattern, a poetic grace.

Perhaps *Pretender*'s richest and most clearly defining single moment is the scene in the photographer's studio where Franziska goes with her lover for a joint portrait on the eve of his conscription (153-55). They are offered a range of costumes, signifying the range of possible identities which they may don during the little interval before the photograph is made, and they gladly and sweetly assume these successive offered selves, like delighted children playing with many-coloured stones on a beach. Pretending is here shown as a creative process, a necessary lie and one which, the book as a whole indicates, it is necessary constantly to renew, because *all* our selves are pretences. The multivalent verb "to pretend" means, of course, to play a childhood game, to dissemble—implying either moral deceit or a more theatrical process of acting—and, historically, to lay claim to something, especially a royal identity which might ultimately gain the pretender a throne. The woman characterised in Morrissy's title is this latter kind of pretender, but also both the childlike and the dramatic, performative kind; the force of the book is to dispel and disclaim the existence of *any* unchangeable or constant reality in the phenomenal world. When *Fraülein Unbekannt* is, by a fluke, recovered from the freezing river where she has tried to drown herself, brought to the asylum where her terrible scars are observed, and cannot name herself, such are her sufferings that the application of moral disapproval to her denial of an identity would be monstrous. The motif of the *matryoshka* dolls approaches this same question of identity by other metaphorical means: one selfhood is within another, waiting to emerge on the removal of what has served as a viable identity but then becomes a mere dispensable carapace: a process which continues without end. In the case of the

dolls, of course, there *is* an ultimate, inner, tiny doll at which it is possible ultimately to arrive. Yet while this would seem to constitute an incontrovertible core of identity, Morrissy's use of the symbol rather suggests poststructuralist and other late-twentieth-century anti-foundationalist accounts of selfhood (such as those of Lacan, Althusser, or Judith Butler). In these there is no moment of arrival at an ultimate point of authenticity, but rather endlessly shifting accommodations of the subject to her or his conditions—"subject-positions" (Lacan)—or successive enactments or performances of identity (Butler), or ways of being and acting which are internalised by the individual subject in the ceaseless work of ideology (Althusser). There may be some creative tension in Morrissy's thought between the reinstatement of an essential identity, towards which the doll-motif seems to gesture, and the notion of successive and shifting guises which seem actually to constitute the self. Thus Franziska-Anastasia may genuinely not know whether she *is* Franziska or Anastasia (and be trying these selves on like the clothes), or she may know and be pretending. In the end what we realize is that she is neither and both. In the chronologically final one of her incarnations, she is Mrs. Jack Manahan in Virginia, *but also* Anastasia, having been found and married by the Irish-American Southern gentleman-Professor who ardently desires to believe in her Anastasia-ness. This closing scene of her journey through life, which is the opening scene of the book, retrospectively gathers a delicate, humorous poignancy as the reader moves onward through the novel.

Such is the power and compassion of Morrissy's imagining of her character that Anastasia-Franziska-*Fraülein Unbekannt* becomes a kind of twentieth-century Everywoman: the girl neither German nor Polish nor Russian, with her Jewish lover who is lost in the First World War; the institutionalised inmate of the prison-like asylum where with others she is forcibly detained; the sweated labourer in the deathly armaments factory where lives are consumed weekly by the poisons in the air, lethal chemicals, and terrible accidents; the happy girl at school in the country village before Germany sweeps in and all the names are changed; the loving daughter, straining to do her best, of a brutal, careless father who abandons her to dote exclusively on his son; the attempted suicide; and finally (and first of all, as we read her) the querulous grubby old lady, herself *matryoshka*-like in her layers of incompatible clothes, dependent and queenly (3). The implication of Morrissy's book is that everyone is a pretender, obliged to lay claim, to project, to play. We may imagine that our real true selves lie hidden away within, tiny interior figures concealed from the gaze of the world and maybe also from our own knowledge, but in reality they are

constituted precisely by the sequence of pretences which enable us to conduct our lives, hour by hour and day by day.

The welcome appearance in 2002 of *Field Day V-VI: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (ed. Bourke *et al.)* has served to keep the troubled relation of gender with canonicity before our minds. Despite the growing appearance of enlightened reviewers and academic critics sympathetic to the feminist project, the whole system of reception of contemporary writing still shows a marginalising of women's work. Even when individual items are praised they tend to figure as engaging addenda to the somehow more real or more central series of men's books. This "tennis and women's tennis" phenomenon continues to arrogate the ultimate authority of representation to men's work and to receive women's as supplementary, and differential standards go on being applied.[48] For instance, one critic recently excused his failure to discuss any women's texts by alleging their absence from the Irish canon, thus perpetuating a situation he claims to deplore. He even acknowledges the Oedipal character of his own problematic: "I do not believe that a solid canon, or counter-canon, of recent or contemporary Irish women's writing as yet exists, and the problem with the essentially agonistic model of cultural production in use here is that it has the effect of seeking out suitable groups of opponents who can be pitched against each other" (McCarthy 43). Against such crass assertions, there is evidently a continuing need to assert the validity of women's contributions to Irish literature not merely as an alternative to the still-persisting normative though strongly gendered (masculine) Irishness, particularly given the recent history of Irish social change and the postmodern milieu of 1990s Ireland. These four recent Irish novels, Enright's *The Wig My Father Wore*, Haverty's *One Day as a Tiger*, Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing*, and Morrissy's *The Pretender*, attest to the aesthetic excellence of women's current writing and the importance of its collective contribution to the development of Irish literature.

NOTES

[1] For some critics, this is already an orthodoxy: "[W]here once there was the clichéd rural Ireland, now there is the clichéd urban Ireland" (Jeffers 3); "[T]he words 'modern Ireland' and 'change' seem to have become indissolubly linked" (Smyth, *Novel* 174).

[2] See Hug, Milotte, O'Connor, Raftery, and O'Sullivan, Crotty and Schmitt, several essays in Byrne and Leonard, and the Reports of the Commissions on the Status of Women. The social data in various ESRI reports are also indispensable to the student of contemporary Ireland. Bradley and Valliulis offer much useful socio-literary discussion.

[3] See Clear, L. Connolly (*Movement*), Coughlan ("Self"), Bourke ("Languages"), and discussion below.

[4] All charted in Hug, who notes: "Four successive contraception laws have eroded the grip that Catholic teaching has had on individual consciences . . . as well as umpteen bills, tabled, rejected or shelved, a few directives and some 20 years of dogged determination" on the part of campaigners (140).

[5] Sophia McColgan and Lavinia Kerwick each broke this hitherto rigidly enforced silence. See McKay, McCormack.

[6] See Milotte's brilliantly researched account of the exploitation of these unmarried mothers by Irish convents and nursing homes, with Church approval, to supply a lively semi-underground market in white babies for adoption in the US. The main proviso was that the adopting family would sign up to rear the infant as a Catholic.

[7] Breda Gray, for instance, puts most stress on the "enforced telling" which she sees as a product of these scandals, and on its working as a further pressure upon emotional life (29); some would see Kerwick's media presence in the 1990s as an example of this destructive process.

[8] See Inglis *Monopoly* and skirmishes about the interpretation of falling Mass attendance, following an MRBI poll showing this at less than 50% among self-proclaimed Catholics, (*Irish Times* September and October 2003).

[9] Obstetrical medicine commonly has a patriarchal character (Murphy-Lawless), but its persistence was shockingly detailed by a controversy, from 1999, about the extensive practice up to the 1960s of symphysiotomy (the surgical breaking of a woman's pelvis in difficult labour). This operation left grave lifelong side-effects and was discredited elsewhere, but was done on hundreds of women in preference to Caesarean sections by Catholic doctors who believed sections might encourage women to seek sterilisation (Morrissey, O'Brien). Another scandal involving many unnecessary and unauthorised sterilisations of women after childbirth concerned an individual obstetrician but exacerbated a widespread negative perception of Irish obstetrics among women (Donnellan).

[10] A spectacular rise in the numbers of women elected to the Dáil in 1995 was not sustained, and by 2003 the Republic was once again near the bottom of a world scale in terms of female public representatives. Even the official establishment, from the mid-90s, of a 40% quota of female appointments to state and local-government boards was flouted by the relevant authorities themselves (Ward and Galligan).

[11]With grossly inadequate child-care, women are especially torn between competing demands and desires. Gray describes the tension that arises between workplace imperatives and the vital responsibilities of childbearing, mothering, and domesticity, still felt, both by women themselves and by the surrounding society, to be central to feminine identity (29).

[12] McCarthy views historical revisionism as an *ipso facto* part of modernisation theory: see 13-41 for a particularly trenchant critique, and 26 for "technocratic optimism."

[13] Coulter offers emphatic and well-substantiated arguments for this position, which stresses marked economic dependence on multi-nationals and the transfer pricing which enables these corporations to glean vast profits.

[14] See Kiberd Parnell Lecture, 2003. Following Edna O'Brien's and John McGahern's works from the 1960s, up to McGahern's masterpiece *Amongst Women* (1990), this bleakness has persisted in recent fiction and memoirs such as Patrick McCabe *The Butcher Boy* (1992), Julia O'Faolain *Are You Somebody?* (1994), and Hugo Hamilton *The Speckled People* (2003).

[15] Ó Searcaigh, a powerful Irish-language poet and self- avowedly part of postmodern popular culture, is "out" about being not only gay, but also a native speaker of Donegal Irish (a conjunction hard to imagine before the 1990s).

[16] See especially "'The Real Thing,' St. Margaret of Cortona" and "Our Lady of Youghal" (Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Brazen Serpent* 16, 24, 25), and "Crossing the Loire" and "Autun" (Ní Chuilleanáin, *The Girl who Married a Reindeer* 32, 34).

[17] Both Enright and Haverty won the Rooney Prize, for *Wig* and *Tiger* respectively, Ní Dhuibhne reached the shortlist for the lucrative international Orange Prize with *Dancers*, and Morrissy has won Hennessy and Lannan awards and been shortlisted for the Whitbread Prize.

[18] Women readers' long-standing appetite for popular fiction and increased disposable income are now newly interesting to the market.

[19] A closely related issue is whether one sees a continuum or sharp distinctions between literary and popular fiction; this intersects with a more general discussion about relating the aesthetic to ideology, feminist or otherwise. On the role of popular women's writing, see St. Peter.

[20] Novels closely contemporary with *Pretender* by both Enright—*The Pleasure of Elisa Lynch* (2002)—and Haverty—*The Far Side of a Kiss* (2001)—offer further examples of such going outside Irishness (though *Elisa Lynch* does include sceptical reflection about national, including Irish, identities).

[21] In 2003 Enright commented trenchantly on Ireland's inhospitableness to the novel of ideas (Interview 57).

[22] The title also gestures irreverently towards "The Sash My Father Wore," signature anthem of populist unionism. I owe this observation to Deana Rankin.

[23] We might relate the cultural phase Enright is representing here to Bauman's discussion of the difference between modernity and postmodernity in respect of attitudes towards social structures and regulations (3).

[24] I draw here on Friedman's discussion of "locational feminism," where she argues we can link the "cultural parataxis" within postmodern feminism to what in anthropology is called "conjuncturalism," namely "the juxtaposition of different cultural formations for the new light shed on each such formation by this epistemological juncture," and for "the way in which each discursive system 'interrupts' the other" (18).

[25] Upside-down motifs recur: the production team at their celebration dinner all bend down under the table together, and: "[t]here were our legs, frank and tender without their torsos, thinking about the possibilities of mix and match" (49), and at 200-01 the final broadcast goes out upside-down, to the delight of Grace's now-incoherent father.

[26] This reflects the pervasive secularisation of Irish society during the 1980s, as documented by many social researchers (see Hardiman and Whelan).

[27] As Beckett wrote in *Murphy*: "the human eyelid is not tear-tight." See Shildrick on postmodern feminist thought about the body, and Kristeva on milk and tears as "the metaphors of a non-speech, of a 'semiotics' that linguistic communication does not account for" (311-12).

[28] Caitríona Clear gives a vivid account of that Ireland, albeit through somewhat rose-tinted glasses.

[29] In its coupling of opposites, this recalls Althusser's celebrated definition of ideology as "the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (162).

[30] In this respect the close of *Wig* contrasts strikingly with that of *The Journey Home*, which for all Dermot Bolger's aspiration (itself admirable) to give a fictional body and a name to contemporary Dublin life, stages a scene of arrival in the West as the ultimate homecoming indicated in his title.

[31] "Etti" is short for Maria Goretti, the Catholic saint who, as a young girl threatened with rape, died for her virginity, and was widely presented as a role model in Irish convent schools.

[32] This indicates one of Haverty's main purposes, to anatomise Irish masculinity. Nainsí Jean Houston interprets the book like this, whereas Gerry Smyth ("Shite and Sheep") sees it primarily as a post-modern dystopia of gene manipulation and offers an ecological reading.

[33] See Benjamin's argument that the child who has begun to perceive itself as an agent crucially needs the counter-assertion and maintenance of its parent's (usually its mother's) otherness as a separate entity in the world, so that it can form and recognize its own reality (32-37).

[34] My argument here coincides in part with Smyth's suggestive reading ("Shite and Sheep").

[35] This could be read as an elegantly muted Oedipal allusion to the killing of Laius at the crossroads, while also remaining an *effet du réel* from 1990s Ireland with its alarming road accident statistics.

[36] The novel's playful games with language and ideology enact with elegance that hybridity gestured to (sometimes a little ponderously) by post-colonialist critics (see 18, 35-37, 42-44).

[37] See Connolly on the genre of John Hinde scenic postcards of the west in the 1950s and 60s (*Theorising* 6-9).

[38] "Banatee" renders phonetically in English the Irish phrase *bean an tí*, the landlady. Micheál makes an excellent "Wild Irish Boy," after Lady Morgan's eponymous heroine.

[39] Both the Pauline scenes and Orla's own passion for swimming suggest a connection with Ní Dhuibhne's imaginative interest in mermaid motifs. A marked emphasis is placed on Orla's sense of complete fulfilment while swimming (153), and extended in the explicit representation of Pauline as most sexually alluring when she comes dripping from the sea, and her marked sexual maturity is repeatedly described in the context of her bathing (166-67).

[40] See the concept of "literalisation" which Margaret Homans advances in her discussion of nineteenth-century novels, where she shows how women and external nature are connected by a perceived shared order of being, from which men are differentiated by being situated in public and social space, and by the ascribed rationality of their actions (26-35).

[41] *Dancers* thus recalls the empowering representations in Angela Carter of active feminine desire and of female hero-figures (such as Red Riding Hood and "Wolf-Alice" in her wolf stories (113-14, 124-25).

[42] A *cillín* is an unsanctified burial place of stillborn or secretly carried infants. The reader may conclude that the ban on going near the burn is only ostensibly to do with the drowning story, but really concerns the presence of the *cillín*, a community secret (200-202). *Cillíní* were often in liminal places, such as the very edge of sand dunes above a beach. Ó Cadhain's fine story translated as "The Road to Brightcity" concerns a woman's lifelong secret grieving for her stillborn infant. Ní Dhuibhne also edges this with a darker tone by giving Orla a dream about the local infanticide trial, perhaps a century before, of a young woman with her own surname (*Dancers* 210-11).

[43] Lying on the hillside with her boyfriend, the local girl Sava also registers the lovely views, consciously recalling the praise of Donegal as an item in a cultural repertoire.

[44] The passage alludes to Yeats's address to the chestnut tree which concludes "Among School Children": "Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? / O body swayed to music, o brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (263).

[45] The layered clothes (3) and the forced stripping by asylum staff of the amnesiac rescued from the river echo the one-inside-another conception which is at the novel's core (29, 32); together with the probing "inside her" of the vaginal examination which follows (36), this violence becomes emblematic of the invasion and imposed alteration of identity on the macro-historical level which is experienced in the Schankowskas' Polish village. In the latter episode Morrissy's book strongly echoes Irish historical narratives of colonisation.

[46] Franziska is characterized, despite her misfortunes and the apparent vulnerability of her sex, as a strong and stubborn person. She seeks agency, does not forgive her father for turning away from her to Walter, and ultimately makes herself into a princess again. Her intelligence and her enquiring mind are emphasized (in school she searches the map for her village and its placement in the larger world), indicating her general questioning nature (225). Despite her subaltern status, she refuses to be defined by the nameless drudgery of subsistence living, whether rural or urban.

[47] The egg recurs in jewel-encrusted Fabergé, painted-for-Easter, and other forms; Morrissy draws out the motif's full suggestiveness, invoking safe enclosure and fragility but also transformative potential. The accidental drowning of Franziska's precious younger brother is echoed in her own attempt to drown in the freezing Spree, and occasions a self-culpabilisation which is intimately bound up with her adult unhappiness.

[48] See *Field Day V-VI* editorial sections *passim*, Fogarty, Smyth "Piano." Smyth (*Novel*) cites a remark by Roddy Doyle on the "difference in marketing between his own 'woman's story' (*The Woman Who Walked into Doors* [1996])" and "a number of similar texts [by women] appearing around the same time—Kathleen Ferguson's *The Maid's Tale* (1994), Lia Mills's *Another Alice* (1996), and Mary Morrissy's *Mother of Pearl* (1996). Soft-focus covers and flyleaf blurbs are just one way of ensuring that these texts are contained under the disabling rubric of 'women's issues' " (87). In 2003 Enright remarked that bookshops "don't sustain the women's list. They will have books of variable quality by any number of male writers and they will keep them"(Interview 56).

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