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Anne Enright's Short Fiction: "Post-Freudian and Post-Feminist and, of course (three cheers!), Post-Nationalist"?

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Anne Enright's Short Fiction: "Post-Freudian and Post-Feminist and, of course (three cheers!), Post-Nationalist"?

Thierry Robin

I say you're married to the novel, no choice,
whereas short story is more of an encounter
really.

(Anne Enright, *An Instinct*)

- 1 In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction* (1999) which Colm Tóibín edited, he describes Enright's work as "post-Freudian and post-feminist and, of course (three cheers!), post-nationalist" (xxxiii).¹ We shall come back to this revealing triad of qualities—to which one could certainly have added 'post-modernist' with some theoretical profit. Let us remind first that Anne Enright is probably best known now by the general public thanks to or because of the boon or doom that the Man Booker Prize represented in 2007 when she was awarded that most prestigious token of literary recognition in the English-speaking world for her rather sombre novel *The Gathering*. Before writing novels such as *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), *What Are You Like?* (2000), *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002), Enright practised her art in short fiction. Her collection of short stories *The Portable Virgin* was published in 1991. One should also mention an interesting collection of essays on motherhood entitled *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004), which shares some noteworthy thematic features with the short stories under scrutiny here, namely sexuality, humour, love, a quirky sense of everyday life, family. Most of her short stories can be found in the collection entitled *Yesterday's Weather* (2009), which gathers most of the stories from *The Portable Virgin* and those pertaining to the more recent *Taking Pictures* (2008).² As regards short fiction, one could also add her enigmatic contribution to Dermot Bolger's experimental *Finbar's Hotel*.³ To come back to Tóibín's characterization of Enright's work, let us say it deserves some further critical investigation in itself. Beyond Tóibín's witty ternary

remark, if one had to qualify and ascertain the recurring features of Enright's short fiction—while sticking to the triads so dear to their fellow Irish writer Flann O'Brien [1911-1966], as ironically proven in his *At Swim-Two-Birds*—another three characteristics would loom large, which would eventually turn up complementary to those stated by Tóibín: feminine, disenchanted, strange. For her short fiction doubtless remains profoundly marked by feminine voices and a peculiar kind of humour often related to that feminine dimension. Secondly, her stories all more or less deal with the way one relates to their own expectations from life and conversely their frustrations, and the ensuing comical or derisive deflation at an individual level. This strong, individualized, idiosyncratic flavor does not really allow for the perpetuation of any complacent flamboyant mythologised discourse on Irishness or any given ideology at that. Ireland becomes a local anecdotal though necessary backdrop in her fiction, not a major frontal theme. To cut a long story short and to use a clear-cut oxymoron, her work is enchantingly disenchanted on an intimate level little compatible with collective simplifications or indictments inherent to nationalist or committed dialectics or their grandiose purple patches. Thirdly, the atmosphere emanating from her short fiction often proves uncanny and unsettling though wryly funny too. This strange dimension is reinforced by her unusual style combining a disjointed chronology and a warped sense of focalization and structure particularly blatant at the beginning of her writing career—as in *The Portable Virgin* (1991).⁴ Yet again this haunting strangeness has a lot more to do with idiosyncrasy rather than any genre prescription or pre-existing psycho-analytical dogma. Thus Enright's voice is highly original in a manner that remains for us to map out in this article.

FEMINIST VS FEMININE WRITING? BAD SEX AND SOCIAL NORMS...

- 2 Anne Enright's short stories may not be argumentatively or militantly feminist in any overt political, ideological way, yet they remain strongly associated with questions having to do with womanhood and what it feels like to be a woman in Ireland in the contemporary era. Heather Ingman in her *History of The Irish Short Story* has no problem calling Enright's work feminist.⁵ Yet the adjective 'feminist' in turn may reduce Enright's fiction to a sociological and political agenda that the text itself does not justify. As Enright herself clarified in an interview answering a question about the woman who condones her husband's infidelity in "Until the Girl Died": "[...] I don't write in a political way. I don't say here is the problem, this is what men do, therefore we must act in this way or that way and this is how we should respond and how we don't respond and this the ways in which we are foolish" (*An Instinct*). Her writing remains *feminine* though in all the subtlest and implicit pressures and nuances of the term. It also, as a rule, features heterosexual couples. Though acutely aware of men's potential shortcomings and faults, her prose never gives in to gender-based resentment or acrimonious lecturing brewed in generalisations. The offshoots of the numerous downsides to the misunderstandings between partners are rendered through humour or tender irony as in this baroque list of all the twisted lovers Bridget has met in her life:

She liked sleeping with men. It changed them. [...] Bridget divided her disasters into sections and phases. There were the fanatics, who had a tight, neurotic smell and

undiluted eyes. They talked about death all the time or were severely political. There were the outright freaks: bizarre, hairy or double-jointed men who played the saw on the streets or trained to be anaesthetists; men who hated themselves so badly they might injure themselves if left on their own in a room. Some respite was provided by the silent brigade: patriarchal countrymen or foreigners, with rings of perspiration under the arms of their shirts and mothers who ascended bodily into heaven. There were the endearingly stupid. Men with beautiful smiles... (*Portable* 133)

- 3 And the butt of that irony is not purely masculine. Women and their own weaknesses or zany idiosyncrasies also loom large amongst Enright's targets. Thus Bridget's mother is "plastered" with make-up (*Portable* 135) and "When she was not talking about unmentionable diseases she was busy flirting with her own dead husband" (*Portable* 134).
- 4 A certain ambivalent coolness therefore characterizes Enright's humorous tendencies. Since *Yesterday's Weather*, published in 2009, gathers stories written previously, one could venture that these stories loosely bear testimony to the slow emergence of the so-called Celtic Tiger till the moment when the country went from boom to bust in the global financial crisis which erupted in 2008. Yet Enright's stories do not deal with macro-economic or historical events either,⁶ rather, they deal with the sphere of one's intimate life, that of family life or the multiple crises, misunderstandings or exchanges amongst neighbours, friends, siblings, relatives, lovers, husbands and wives or simple fellow-creatures on this Earth. They assuredly deal with the joys and sorrows, grand expectations and fierce disappointments encountered within the framework of the couple, be it married or not, aged or not, blasé or adolescently romantic as in that campus short-story "Pillow" involving young international female flatmates. That main concern for the family unit and for marriage and the question of having kids could easily and stereotypically—thus also arguably—be labeled as feminine in itself. More subtly, Enright's writing allows the reader to see how minute parameters distantly pertaining to social, economic conditions influence one's own sense of identity. This paper though certainly does not aim to solve the dilemma and contradictory tensions characterizing the binary opposition between French feminists belonging to the second-wave feminist "écriture féminine" movement such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva or Catherine Clément on the one hand and third-wave feminists such as Judith Butler.⁷ To cut a long story short, one could quote Peter Barry to encapsulate the problem glaringly displayed by Enright's rich work:

[I]t is clear that the notion [écriture féminine] as put forward by Cixous raises many problems. The realm of the body, for instance, is seen as somehow immune to social and gender condition and able to issue forth a pure essence of the feminine. Such essentialism is difficult to square with feminism which emphasizes femininity as a social construction... (128)

- 5 Precisely that dialectical tension between those two brands of feminism runs through Enright's short stories. One can reasonably assert that they concur with the concept that the experience of women has been singularly shaped and conditioned by gender—that the latter concept should still be a controversial social construct arguably based on and poorly reflecting complex biological facts does not even matter.⁸ What actually matters is the acknowledgement that beyond the diversity of experiences and the infinite variation in terms of individuals and subjectivities, there remains in Enright's fiction such a specific thing as a "woman's condition"—though the labeling process may involve some degree of simplification in its restriction to its sexual dimension. But as

Virginia Blain, Isobel Grundy and Patricia Clements put it in their introduction to *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*: "Their [women's] texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men (viii-ix)."

- 6 This vivid composite consciousness of her own identity as an individual determined biologically, sexually and socially is clearly observable in the introduction Anne Enright wrote to her collection of short stories in 2008. It is loaded with references to women's ability to bear and give life to children and also to specifically matrimonial concerns which appear central to her vision of life.

I thought the most terrible thing about middle age would be *marriage* [...] Worst of all the women in my early stories have children and say that the experience has not changed them. How wrong can you be? It is *interesting* but only in a *sociological* way, to see the sympathy two of my narrators have for men who have just lost their virginity. It is odd but only to me, to read of the *bitterness that exists between female friends* [...]. This gift [collection] is presented not just to the reader, but also to the future—in my case, to an old woman called Anne Enright... (*Yesterday* ix-x, my emphasis).

- 7 Certain blatant heterosexual and gender markers of the norm are obvious here; Enright underlines her own work as that produced specifically by a woman. Instead of opting for more neutral, universal lexical items—which is easily feasible in English—"people have children," "the bitterness between friends," "this is a gift to an old person" etc.—she constantly reasserts her own sexual identity as a woman. The focus on marriage in itself would be sufficient to spot a clue as to some particular heritage in Enright's writing which could be traced back to female writers belonging to the Victorian era (from Elizabeth Gaskell to Jane Austen or the Brontës) and for whom marriage is *the* central topic and event in a woman's life...
- 8 By way of exploration of this dominant narrative feminine-female voice⁹ which can be heard in Enright's fiction, the following data concerning the various narrators' sexual identities and sexualities has been compiled:

| Titles of the short stories | Female/male 1st person narrative (F1/M1) Or 3rd person narrative featuring a female or male main character/focalizer (F3/M3) | Types of sexuality mentioned |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| | | Heterosexual (H) Homosexual/gay/ lesbian (G) |
| 'Until the girl died' | F1 | H |
| 'Yesterday's weather' | F3 | H |
| 'Wife' | M3 | H |
| 'Caravan' | F3 | H |
| 'The Cruise' | F3 | H |
| 'Natalie' | F1 | H/G |
| 'Here's To Love' | F1 | H |

| | | |
|---|------|-----|
| 'Honey' | F3 | H |
| 'Switzerland' | F3 | H |
| 'What You Want' | F1 | H/G |
| 'The Bad Sex Weekend' | F3 | H/G |
| 'Della' | F3 | H |
| 'Green' | F1 | H |
| 'Shaft' | F1 | H |
| 'In the Bed Department' | F3 | H |
| 'Little Sister' | F1 | H |
| 'Pillow' | F1 | H/G |
| 'Pale Hands I Loved, Beside the Shalimar' | F1 | H |
| 'Taking Pictures' | F1 | H/G |
| 'The House of the Architect's Love Story' | F1 | H |
| 'Men and Angels' | ?/F3 | H |
| '(She owns) Every Thing' | F1 | G/H |
| 'The Portable Virgin' | F1 | H |
| 'Indifference' | F3 | H |
| 'Historical Letters' | F1 | H |
| 'Luck Be a Lady' | F3 | H |
| 'Revenge' | F1 | H |
| 'What Are Cicadas?' | M1 | H |
| 'Mr. Snip Snip Snip' | M3 | H |
| 'Seascape' | F3 | H |
| 'Felix' | F1 | H |

- 9 This clearly shows that in the overwhelming majority of the 32 short stories collected in *Yesterday's Weather*, either the narrator is female (15 female homodiegetic "I" narratives) or the prevailing character-focalizer is female (14 3rd person narratives in

all). This means that out of 32 short-stories, only 3 resort to or feature a male narrator ("What are Cicadas?") or a prevailing male character focalizer ("Wife" and "Mr Snip Snip Snip"). Similarly, actual questions about gender construction or references to sexualities different from the prevailing/normative heterosexual one finally prove pretty sparse. In "Natalie," homosexuality is only referred to as a mild menace to the young female narrator's boyfriend. It is intended as a joke which deliberately sticks to stereotypes: "I say why doesn't he take his own soap in, but my boyfriend looks at me like I am trying to turn him into a queer" (*Yesterday* 60). In "What You Want," the female narrator's son is temporarily gay because it is unexpectedly identified as a way to educate himself.¹⁰ In the revealingly titled piece "The Bad Sex Week-end" the female protagonist's sexual partner claims he travelled in America though she does not believe him at all. He adds that he used to have sex "with an old guy" when he was young and that he met a transsexual in Reno with "breasts you wouldn't believe" (*Yesterday* 118). But clearly in the short story, this dimension is purely anecdotal and reinforces the shallow, unlikely, unreliable, pseudo-exotic, even disgusting, aspect of this male character. "[S]he doesn't believe him [...]" she doesn't want him touching her any more" (*Yesterday* 118-119). In "Taking Pictures," once again the unreliable nature of one of the female characters' boyfriends called Fiach is rendered through the hypothesis or the suspicion he might be bisexual: "'the fucker won't do Saturdays'. Maybe he is a bisexual" (*Yesterday* 196). Apart from "She Owns Every Thing," where an unexpected intense lesbian love seizes Cathy, a woman who sells handbags in a shop and who "fell in love one day with a loose, rangy woman, who [...] seemed to pick her up with the same ease as she did an Argentinian calf-skin shoulder bag" (*Yesterday* 225), the sexuality depicted by Enright is overwhelmingly heterosexually normative, though often problematic or frustrating. The following passage is clear, in a calculatedly awkward comical manner, about the idea that the eye that sees things in the story and the voice which tells it, are those of a White Western heterosexual woman, someone definitely open-minded about culture and sex but still belonging to and illustrating, to an extent, the prevailing norm and its aporias:

"Alison," she said.

"Yes?"

"What is a homosexual?"

I did not know what to say.

"It's a man who loves another man."

"Yes," she said. "But what is it?"

"They are in love," I said.

"But how?" she said. "How are they in love?" And I thought I knew what she meant then. I said they put their things up each other's bottoms, though I used the word "anuses," to make it sound more biological. (*Yesterday* 171)

- 10 Actual decentrings or departures from that sexual norm are rather few. Contrary to Tóibín who thoroughly explored male homoerotic desire, Enright is more interested in female heterosexual desire, which in itself is also rather original in a literary world which may still be seen as somewhat male-centered; even as of 2013, she seems to echo Hélène Cixous' words that "Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity; about their eroticization..." (38). Thus Enright's fiction combines diverse conflicting elements both challenging or abiding by the current social norms in a syncretic home-grown type of feminism.

- 11 Women in her short fiction do not seem to need to vehemently claim independence from patriarchal authority simply because patriarchal authority has long been undermined. Patriarchal lovers are even caustically turned into a soothing "silent brigade," in "Fatgirl Terrestrial" (*Portable* 133). Enright is a good representative of a new generation of Irish writers ranging from Dermot Bolger (born in 1959) or Colum McCann (1965-) to Kevin Barry (1969-) for whom the days of censorship and de Valera's nationalist conservative agenda seem rather remote. Individual problems—love, drugs, marginalization, perversion, isolation, for instance—have therefore superseded collective causes. As Enright analysed: "During the decades of censorship, it was much easier to talk about 'Ireland' than it was to talk about sex, or about the actions of individuals like John Charles McQuaid" (*Diary*). Now her fiction displays the opposite trend, since the question of Irishness (or Irish history) no longer seems to be a direct priority, unless on a light-hearted parodic mode. To return to the post-feminist label issue, a few quotations can sum up the calm conviction which suffuses the collections under our scrutiny as regards women's condition. In "Green," the female narrator puts it quite simply when discussing marriage with her mother:

"Why not marry a nice, well-to-do man?" I said there's better ways to earn your new Sanderson curtains than on your back—I'd get the money myself. Or no money, if that's the way I wanted to play it. And I packed my bag for uni and shook the dust of that damn town off my feet. (*Yesterday* 134)

- 12 Clearly, depending on a man financially does not even seem to be an option any more. Most of the women in the collection, though they may feel betrayed, lonely, bored, loved the wrong way, still display the same qualities, namely natural independence and a critical mind. Consequently, even if a good deal of the ideas conveyed in the collection are rather bleak as regards marriage or even marital life, that bleakness is not the direct consequence of women's specific social alienation but rather of universal parameters determining what could be called, long after Seneca, *taedium vitae*. As Enright wittily remarks "The life of an optimist is a lonely one" (*Portable* 134).
- 13 It is undoubtedly in this ambiguous and more often than not dark perception of life in couples that Enright's originality lies: "Amazing. We are people who have sex. Frank fills the glasses and I see it all stretching out ahead of me. *Couples. I look at the rest of my life and despair*" (*Yesterday*, "Taking Pictures," 199, my emphasis). "The House of the Architect's Love Story" is one of the best instances of the close association between marriage and alienation, family life and conformism which may drive one insane. The ironical way it tackles abortion is thought-provoking: "I don't want anything so *bland* as an abortion" (*Yesterday* 210, my emphasis), especially in a country where having an abortion is just anything but bland precisely. That physical exhaustion mixed with boundless boredom is nearly reminiscent of Michel Houellebecq's exhausted universe: "After seven years you don't know who you are touching, or not touching any more" (*Yesterday*, "Revenge" 264). Paradoxes and hyperbolic isolation then prevail as in the following statements: "Once the fiction between two people snaps then anything goes, or so they say [...] as if you didn't know how lonely living with someone can be" ("Revenge" 264-265). "Revenge" is about swinging couples. But rather than celebrating transgression and libertine love-making, it wryly underlines the enduring ideals and lust for love the characters feel. Though the female narrator mock-grandiloquently states: "Nothing is incomprehensible, when you know life is sad" ("Revenge" 265), she is still eager to be kissed by the stranger whose wife her husband is having sexual

intercourse with at that precise moment in the next room. Her one-night sexual partner speaks about his own wife in potentially misogynous words:

God I hate that woman. Did you see her? The way she was laughing and all that bloody lip-gloss. Did you see her? She looks like she's made out of plastic. I can't get a hold of her without slipping around in some body lotion that smells like petrol and dead animals... I know she is sexy... I just prefer it if someone else does it. ("Revenge" 267)

- 14 But those words spoken by a man are also a clear indictment of the physical constraints imposed violently upon the female body through a whole range of social constraints—makeup, plastic surgery, application of lotions due to fear of old age etc. This final reconciliation between brutal words spoken by a man swinger and feminism may consist of what Tóibín calls post-feminism (xxxiii), that is a moment when men's and women's interests simply converge. The final image in that short story is eminently regressive, reminiscent of the days when as an infant the narrator used to wet her bed—"First it is warm then it gets cold" ("Revenge" 268). After casual sex between exhausted grownups, the image conveyed is that of inescapable helplessness and wry squalid individuated existence. It is through this cunning alliance of irony and disenchanted clear-sightedness that Enright manages to surpass just any parochial or limited bias. Doing so, she also reveals her enduring paradoxical idealism. "Bad sex," desire, craving for true love, skepticism—contradictions are mentioned in one shot. In "Yesterday's Weather," she simply manages to achieve the description of some sort of impossible synthesis between sheer frustration and complete fulfillment in a mother's life. That story is about a young mother coping with her in-laws and with her baby's basic needs, involving changing nappies, cleaning various body fluids etc., while in the middle of a family gathering. The passage presents a vision of womanhood which may appear essentialized but simultaneously deconstructs clichés about so-called natural motherhood.

The baby [...] wiped his nose on her T-shirt. [...] There was *something slightly depressing* about being covered in snot. It was *just not something she had ever anticipated*. [...] The baby's skin, under the downy hair, breathed a sweat so fine it was lost as soon as she lifted her hand. *Women don't even know they miss this* until they get it, this smoothness, seeing as men were so abrasive [...]. (*Yesterday* 15-16, my emphasis)

- 15 In this passage, clichés about women being natural mothers are both stated and deconstructed in a complex, funny way. Being covered in snot or worse happens with babies, and it is something that women, like men, cannot normally anticipate, though the second movement about the baby's skin is more lyrical. This passage is quite in keeping with the tonality to be found in Enright's nonfiction book, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004), whose title sums up her original approach that motherhood does not come naturally. This memoir and collection of essays is quite revealing of her complex conception of women's condition. It may also prove clearer about her subversive values and her caustic humour. As the following samples show, fact and fiction neatly intertwine in her prose since large parts of her memoir could read as fiction and some short stories also read as being strongly rooted into personal so-called "biographical" experience:

Growing up in Ireland, we didn't need aliens—we already had a race of higher beings to gaze deep into our eyes and force us to have babies against our will: we called them priests. It is great being Catholic. [...] In the 1980s while we were fighting for contraception and abortion, they were fighting for the future of the

human race. [...] "Get your rosaries off our ovaries" was the battle cry as we voted, over and over, for or against abortion while the pro-life louts hung around the Dublin streets with their short hair and jars full of dead baby. (*Stumbling* 16)

- 16 In other words, Enright's feminist agenda, if there need be one, can be seen as typically rooted into the traditional fight women have had to lead in order to secure their control over their own bodies. But apart from that 'traditional' or second-wave feminist aspect, which may be discerned here and there in her work, her vision of woman is neither conflictual nor theoretically central. As she says:

Finally and quietly I have to apologize to my family [...]. Starting with my own mother—whose voice comes though my own from time to time—and working down the generations. Like all women who write about their children, I have a wonderful partner—except in my case it is true. (*Stumbling* 13-14)

- 17 Boys will be boys and to some extent women in Enright's fiction more often than not will be mothers. Her post-feminism is feminism with a difference—that is her own idiosyncratic humorous style ("except in my case it is true") influenced by our *Zeitgeist*.

POSTNATIONALIST?

- 18 Beyond post-feminism, Colm Tóibín naturally focuses on Dublin when dealing with Enright (xxxiii), though elements of Ireland as a whole can be detected in her short fiction. The narrator in "Felix" was born in the imaginary small town of Killogue in the West of Ireland. In "Honey," Catherine goes to Killarney only to find out that her flirtatious boss is predictably an unpleasant chauvinist. In "Green," a short story about female rivalry, organic farming and parochialism, Birr (co. Offaly) and Crossmolina (co. Mayo) are mentioned to refer satirically to the Irish countryside. Sligo is also extensively mentioned in "The Bad Sex Weekend": the female character got drunk there once and she likes the way her problematic partner says "'pussies' in a Sligo accent" (*Yesterday* 113). Dublin seems to be a logical prominent spatial option and reference for that author who was born there, studied some time there too graduating at Trinity in philosophy and English before moving on to Canada and Norwich (UK). As of today, she still lives in the vicinity of the capital city, in Bray, co. Wicklow. Dublin though implicitly central is depicted in a very sketchy manner.
- 19 In her short fiction, Enright never actually dwells on places in any emphatic realistic or picturesque manner. Different places outside Ireland are also mentioned as in "Switzerland" or "The Bad Sex Weekend": from Venice, Berlin and Mexico to New York, Bangkok and Wisconsin. In "Caravan" for instance, Irish tourists in Vendée, France, are featured to renew the Irish tradition of fantastic ghost stories, mixing kitchen sink drama with minimalist postmodernist *ennui*. The *Zeitgeist* present in Enright's short stories is definitely that of globalization and one can even make out a multicultural inflection taken by the Irish society as early as the 1990s as in "Here is to Love," in which the narrator's husband is a Vietnamese refugee. Ireland for once is no longer the land of emigration but possibly of immigration. Yet what seems to matter more than actual places is the interaction between human beings or rather the lack of connection, the dysfunctional kind of interaction between them. It is that flawed or intriguing process of linking that seems to interest her first and foremost, as in "Natalie," a piece about death, love, cancer, loneliness and a youth's aspirations and ensuing disappointments. The young female narrator, who looks a lot like a younger avatar of

Anne Enright ("I will be a writer when I grow up and I will put it all down on the page" (*Yesterday* 55), expresses that idea of problematic links somewhat forcefully:

We are not connected.

Because this is what Natalie is saying, isn't it? That we are alone. That there is no connection between me and her, or between Billy and me, or between any of us and Mrs Casey, who might live or who might actually die. Between human beings. (*Yesterday* 63, original emphasis)

- 20 In a globalized world, where the notion of movement, transportation for work or leisure is ubiquitous, the notion of place and fixed identities no longer seems to be so relevant as in "The Cruise," where the narrator's elderly parents eventually visit exotic places while on a cruise. The feeling subtly conveyed once again resorts to the binary of expectations versus disappointment and verges on existential tedium. Thus Kate's parents, immediately after returning from America and the Caribbean, appear somehow frustrated:

They talked dutifully about the islands—the size of the spiders, the palm trees, a manta ray they had seen from the harbour wall in a place called Labadee—but they seemed slightly disappointed with the world, now that seeing it was so easy. Her mother was very taken by the warmth and the endless beauty of the sea, though there wasn't much time for a swim, she said, when they went on shore. Besides, the ship had Jacuzzis and what have you. The big excitement was the ship. (*Yesterday* 49)

- 21 Eventually, places in Enright's fiction do not feature centrally as such. They are peripheral, though necessary, props. Quite revealingly in a world where mobility is a by-word, technology has become a major concern or source of interest, as in "Mr Snip Snip Snip" where the editing room full of monitors allows the male character called Frank to try and figure out what is going on in his own life and his couple. A final impression of frailty and inescapable ambiguity mixing fact and fiction, chance and determinism, chaos and order, prevails in the final metaleptic scene where Frank disappears into the film he has been editing at the moment when his partner Moira is about to disclose the name of the man she cheated on him with. This blurring of boundaries between diegetic levels and between fact and fiction once again privileges the notion of links, connections—faulty though they may prove to be—over stable identities and places.
- 22 The same treatment of *Irishness* prevails in Enright's fiction. It is deliberately deconstructed in a humorous way so that there finally stand out a few hilariously twisted stereotypes and echt linguistic constructs. Being Irish is therefore equated with a mask, not to say masquerade, vaguely reminiscent of the heavy-handed clichés going along with the so-called stage Irishman so fashionable in 19th century plays. In "Pillow," the young student narrator who is studying on a North American campus is so fed up with the questions bearing on her own Irishness that she ironically offers a deal to one of her flatmates: "I said I'd be Irish for her of a Tuesday, but could I have the rest of the week off?" (*Yesterday* 171). This farcical treatment is a standard in Myles' column. Myles is Flann O'Brien's penname when writing his column for *The Irish Times*, as in the following excerpt:

Explain what it feels like to be Irish. State at what age you first realised that you were an Irish person. When did you have your first fight? At what age did you make your first brilliant 'Irish' witticism? At what age did you become a drunkard? Please tell me all, because there can be no cure until the pathological background has been explored. [...] It is in your own interest to tell all. Remember that I too was Irish.

Today I am cured. I am no longer Irish. I am merely a person. I cured myself after many years of suffering. (*Flann O'Brien at War* 105)

- 23 Irish History is not directly discussed in the stories. It becomes a set of conspicuous vignettes or, in other words, it remains present, not because it refers to real events in time, but thanks to or because of its own status as a linguistic construct as aptly analysed by Linda Hutcheon.¹¹ Its own artificiality is played with and underscored as in "Indifference":

I am Canadian, she used to say, it may be a very boring country, but who needs history when we have so much weather?

Irish people had no weather at all apart from some vague shifts from damp to wet, and they talked history like it was happening down the road. (*Yesterday* 237-238)

- 24 History, then, is all talk. Of course the comparison between History and weather is also meant to be funny just as the stereotypical description of the Irish weather as a slight variation from damp to wet is ironical. Similarly, the litany of requests which is to be found in "Switzerland"—"Hello Dublin, [...] Tell me about coffin ships and how you came from Connemara, really. Tell me about potatoes"—also deconstructs the 19th century clichés about the Irish Diaspora and the Great Famine (1845-1852), all the more effectively since they are followed by the description of a paranoid great-aunt seeing eyes everywhere, including potatoes. The result of this ironical approach is once again that hackneyed tropes about collective discourse are done away with swiftly to shift the focus back onto a more individualized and contemporary issue precisely involving individuals as such and not great abstract entities, or Lyotard's metanarratives and "grandes histoires," potentially involving the Famine, the Diaspora, the American Revolution, the Easter Rising to name but a few of those monumental historiographic landmarks.
- 25 This postmodernist carnivalesque aspect is quite clearly illustrated in "Historical Letters" whose title is elaborated upon by the narrator who is "a woman that was born in 1962"—just like Anne Enright—and who says: "History is just the scum on reality as far as I am concerned. You scraped it away" (249). Now even if the latter judgment does not necessarily tell a lot about Enright's position, at least it clearly expresses one possible viewpoint which is recurrent amongst narrators in her fiction—for instance the narrator does not really care to delve into the details of the Vietnam War which left her husband wounded in "Here is To Love." More farcically, de Valera's death is recycled by yet another minor character in "Historical Letters": "When de Valera died, I didn't care either way, but a girl in my class was delighted, because her granny was buried half an hour before him, and all the soldiers along the road saluted as they went by" (*Yesterday* 249). In this case, History is a great mixer of coincidences, funny impostures and unlikely practical jokes. It also serves as a foil to micro-individual history. In other words, just as "Mr Snip Snip Snip" is about infidelity, "Historical Letters" is about the sadness felt at the breakup of a couple, the female narrator's more precisely, when portentous events are incidentally taking place in the background. The same emphasis is laid on the baroque ontological position occupied by people in reality, and in their representation of the flow of time. They are, like the narrator's mother in "Historical Letters" at the crossroads between absolute futility and resplendent grandiloquence or, in other words, halfway between the homely process of drying the dishes and the complex operations of the first Apollo landing on the Moon, as shown in the following excerpt: "I saw them landing on the Moon, but my mother wasn't

bothered. She wanted to finish drying the dishes, so she said, 'Sure I can see the moon, right here in the window'" (*Yesterday* 249).

- 26 Representations and linguistic constructs as dynamic ambivalent notions take precedence over facts and meanings as univocal landmarks in these stories. This is often achieved in a humorous and paradoxical manner. Enright's use of Irish idioms or what she identifies as typically Irish turns of phrases serves the purpose of a minimalist kind of national satire. This is precisely what Flann O'Brien does too with Gaelic when he underlines its indeterminacy and wavering semantics:

The Irish lexicographer, Dinneen, considered *in vacuo* is, heaven knows, funny enough. He just keeps standing on his head [...]. That of course, is why I no longer write Irish. No damn fear. I didn't come down in the last shower. Call me a bit fastidious if you like but I like to have some idea of what I'm writing. Libel, you know. One must be careful. If I write in Irish what I conceive to be "Last Tuesday was very wet," I like to feel reasonably sure that what I've written does not in fact mean "Mr So-and-So is a thief and a drunkard." (*The Best of Myles* 276-277)

- 27 Echoing this funny lack of semantic clarity, Enright adopts the same strategy with her own contemporary language that is modern Hiberno-English. Let us quote the following dialogue centering on the character's wife's state of mind:

How's Maria?

"Oh. She's up and down," he says.

"Right."

Because "up and down" is Irish for anything at all—from crying into the dishes to full-blown psychosis. Though now that I think about it, a psychotic is more usually "not quite herself." (*Yesterday* 70)

- 28 Of course the violent semantic gap between reality and its potential linguistic translation through a mild euphemism—i.e. "up and down"—is funny. Enright loves playing with the notion of steep ironic contrast. Precisely what is funny is the discrepancy the reader notices between the narrator's stream of consciousness and what is actually verbalized somewhat euphemistically. This dimension in Enright's work further stresses the problematic boundary between the world outside the mind and outside characters and the intimate imaginary or cogitative mind within them. These are further excerpts from the same short story about a man and a woman (the narrator) who are both Irish and meet in Paris a long time after they used to go to college or work together. They used to be friends but the gap between them has widened in an irreconcilable manner. This is particularly well rendered in the immediate juxtaposition of actual speech uttered by the characters and thoughts kept to themselves and piquantly made accessible to the reader through interior monologues.

"The thing I like about you," says Shay, "is you tell it like it is. You get old, you get fat, it all turns to shit, you die."

"Yeah well."

So now it is my fault [...]. (*Yesterday* 72)

- 29 The same irony due to the same blatant gap between what is said and what is thought runs through the following lines:

[...] Shay starts to realize how old Hoa [my husband] is. He does the thing men do when they think I might not be getting the ride; amused but surprisingly vicious, too. *I'd fuck you.*

And I smile. (*Yesterday* 74)

- 30 Here the coarse insertion of projected free direct speech in italics followed by "I smile" precisely causes the reader to smile. The same brutal discrepancy between representations/judgments and reality can be observed when the female narrator defines her friend's wife as the one he "gets... to load his dishwasher for him, every night of the week" (73) or when ironically the same narrator inverses roles in a simple thought like "He is depressed now. The whole business of accusing me has worn him out" (75). Similarly, the main female character in "Luck Be A Lady" displays a strange homely conception of happiness: "'This is being happy,' she thought, scattering the contents of the night bucket over the scutch grass or trekking to the shop" (*Yesterday* 255).
- 31 All these short stories exhibit a huge playful interest in psychological meanderings and the intricate subtle mechanisms which prompt human beings to act or not, to make mistakes, to lie, to love or hate, to feel emotions or just blunder about... The actual psychoanalytic value of her work then remains to be assessed in that tongue-in-cheek humorous perspective.

POST-FREUDIAN?

- 32 In the introduction to the book they edited, Susan Cahill and Claire Bracken mention an interesting quote by Enright concerning Freud, after stating that psychoanalysis is "a major influence on her work" (2); Enright declares: "I see how important my reading in psychoanalysis is to my work. I read all of Freud when I was in college and sort of loved Freud's work and laughed at it as well. But it's a great way to think about things. And he is also a wonderful stylist and writer" (Cahill, Bracken 2).
- 33 The potential irony present in those lines will not escape the reader. Enright read "all of Freud," but in her college days, and "sort of loved" his work, and "laughed at it as well." Finally what she retains from him may not be his ideas or theories which make up one option amongst others, but that he was "a wonderful stylist and writer"—a statement which may sound slightly ambivalent as regards hard facts and psychoanalytical 'science,' so to speak. However it makes perfect sense to analyse parts of Enright's work through psychoanalysis as Sarah C. Gardam did for *The Gathering*. In her article, Gardam resorts to Lacan's split subject and trauma theory to account for the complexity of the narrator Veronica Hegarty's struggles against and within language and sexuality in the wake of her brother Liam's suicide after he was abused sexually. More concretely in *Yesterday's Weather*, what Anne Enright says in the introduction could also make her fiction sound as therapeutic or centered on the analysis of the self in an empowering process of making oneself conscious of one's own errors and conflicting views:
- These stories are not written by the person who has lived my life and made the best of it, they are written by people I might have been but decided against. [...] They are the shed skins of the snake. None of this matters—my life, and how it is reflected or distorted in the stories here. (*Yesterday* x)
- 34 It is not absolutely certain though that Enright's short fiction, which characterizes itself by an extreme dogma-proof tongue-in-cheek approach to all discourses and fields of knowledge, could be harnessed so systematically as a talking or rather *writing* cure. In some passages, hyperbolic caustic humour through antiphrasis has the upper hand over subtle analysis: "But before I go completely self-hating, I do actually like my hair,

which is black and really glossy, especially when it is, like totally saturated with grease" (*Yesterday* 56). What is obvious though is that sex—including bad sex—, language, transgression and a very original kind of uncanniness typify *Yesterday's Weather*, which probably features fewer phallic symbols than *The Gathering*, if one bears in mind the provocative criticism Enright quotes about her novel: "Someone told me that there were more penises in *The Gathering* than in a medical textbook; I was interested in that disapproval. Surely sex is an incredibly valid thing for a woman to write about" ("Gender Envy").

- 35 That sincere interest in sex sometimes turns heavily intertextual as in "Felix" which may read as a condensed and parodic rewriting of *Lolita* by Nabokov from a female point of view. That story tells the physical passion a middle-aged woman named Iris feels for a young boy called Felix. Yet the baroque linguistic strangeness which the critic Patricia Coughlan identifies (349) is probably one of the most striking elements when reading Enright's work. This could incidentally offer some kind of reconciliation—if need be—with Freud, if one bears in mind his own definition of the uncanny as *Das Unheimliche*.¹² Tropes, especially similes, confer a special quality on Enright's short stories. As in "Here is To Love," when the narrator's sleeping husband "might as well be a sheet of paper—a blank sheet of paper—stretched out on the bed" (*Yesterday* 74), or as in "Pale hands I loved, Besides the Shalimar," where the narrator has sex "sweet as rainwater" (192), or again the narrator's partner in "Taking Pictures" whose face looks "like setting concrete" (200) when having to listen to his guest's lengthy and erudite digressions on bird-watching. In "Felix," the passionate narrator declares about her young lover that she "wanted the whole world inside me, with Felix at its center, like a small hard pip" (303). In "Historical Letters": "Sleeping with you is like watching a man in a wet suit cleaning windows, in with the otters on the other side" (248).

- 36 Thus the linguistic games Enright plays often achieve the realization of the haunting strangeness of reality itself. In "Luck Be a Lady," a short story about a lady who is excessively lucky at the lottery, the baroque accumulation of statistical data and numbers fragments the character-focalizer's world into slightly worrying and hilarious bits and pieces:

I have had sexual intercourse 1,332 times in my life...65% of the occasions took place in the first eight years of my marriage, and I was pregnant for 45 months out of those 96... I've been married for 33 years and a bit, that's 12,140 days, which means an average of once every 9.09 days. I stopped at 1,332 for no reason except that I am scared beyond reason of the number 1333... She wanted him. It was as simple as that. A woman of 55, a woman with 5 children and one husband, who had sexual intercourse 1,332 times in her life and was in possession of 14 coal scuttles, wanted the 3-fingered man, because he had three fingers not 4. (*Yesterday* 254-258)

- 37 Finally the strangeness permeating most of the stories, echoing again the beginning of *The Third Policeman*, also shares the same ambivalent humorous aspect with O'Brien's work. Most notably, "Felix" displays blatant thematic and stylistic echoes with O'Brien's:

| | |
|-------|---------------------|
| Felix | The Third Policeman |
|-------|---------------------|

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>I was born in 1935 in Killogue, a small town in the West of Ireland. My father was a small, introverted man of uncertain stock, who ran the pub that faced out on the town square. My mother died of creeping paralysis in my seventh year, and nothing remains of her in mind save the image of a woman sitting in the parlour in a perpetual Sunday dress [...] (295)</p> | <p>I was born a long time ago. My father was a strong farmer and my mother owned a public house. [...] my father was out at work on the farm and my mother was always in the kitchen [...] I never saw my mother outside the kitchen [...] then a certain year came about the Christmas-time and when the year was gone my father and my mother were gone also. (6-7)</p> |
|--|---|

- 38 The main difference between O'Brien's work and Enright's certainly consists in their opposite treatment of sex. O'Brien, who was born in 1911, still had to cope with a sternly repressive censorship while Enright belongs to her times that is those of a more tolerant, more globalized Ireland where TV shows on RTE—a national TV network for which Enright used to work—such as *The Savage Eye* can even feature the Irish Roman Catholic Church and paedophile priests as regular butts to their jokes.
- 39 Colm Tóibín in his catchy assessment of Enright's prose definitely spotted a complex defining feature in her work which is related to a peculiar sense of chronology through the Latin preposition "post." Her short stories, as shown above, may well be regarded as post-feminist, post-nationalist, post-Freudian, and even post-modernist in that they delineate a new globalized Ireland where a literature which deconstructs, recycles, or even exorcizes her collective ghosts is not only possible, but increasingly inescapable. Yet to remain faithful to Enright's writings, one should not view the chronological implications in the prefix 'post-' as mostly negative or oppositional; that prefix rather marks an extension, or some further lively criticism of the concepts involved: feminism, the nation or powerful insights into the workings of the mind. While resorting to female narrators and sticking to feminine points of view, her short fiction goes amply beyond the realm of women's writing. Also, while anchored in Ireland by its idioms, its (Dublin) settings and its exploration of the long and rich tradition in Irish comic literature (Mercier), these stories go beyond the strict framework of any nation to combine "stylistic subtlety with emotional depth" (Ingman 250). In a sense, all those post-ending prefixes also point in a melancholy direction that is not so much about modernity as mythology, as Enright explains:
- ... I realise very often that I write the same stories over and over again...as a repeat of this endless theme I have, the Orpheus and Eurydice thing that I find I've written all the time... Orpheus looked back because he was bringing Eurydice out of the underworld and when he looked back he lost her. So it's both about death and desire. The people in my work are always trying to pull the dead back somehow, but also there's a point about desire, that you lose it in the instant. ("An Instinct")
- 40 Ihab Hassan, as a major theorist of postmodernism in literature, also focused on Orpheus as a telling metaphor of contemporary writing in his *Dismemberment of Orpheus*. In that sense the quality presented in Enright's work is both an aspiration to cancel reality and an expression of that human feeling that somehow people are bound to experience, whenever they speak that simple phrase "it is too late," voicing more than ever their own inexorably fleeting fugitive dimension. Enright's short fiction precisely provides elegant and witty solace for those regretting that "no one ever stopped to describe yesterday's weather" (*Yesterday* 24).

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NOTES

1. Enright's work is actually given great prominence in that book since she corresponds to Tóibín's conclusion in his introduction to the overview of Irish literature.
2. In *Yesterday's Weather*, 7 short stories originally published in *The Portable Virgin* are missing: "Juggling Oranges," "Liking," "Science and Nature," "Fruit Bait," "Eckhardt's Dream," "Fatgirl Terrestrial," "The Brat."
3. *Finbar's Hotel* is an experimental collection of short stories where for each story the author's identity is left for the reader to decide. According to Thomas Brendan Murphy from TCD, in his article "Model-Based Classification With Constraints: Who Wrote Each Chapter In Finbar's Hotel?," Anne Enright wrote chapter 3 (or story number 3) entitled "No Pets please..." Murphy resorts to statistics and a Bayesian approach.
4. Read for instance "Mr Snip Snip Snip," "Juggling Oranges" or "Fruit Bait" (*Portable Virgin*), where the actual narrative voice and focus of narration often prove unstable and the "plots" non-linear or heavily fragmented. This transgressive treatment of narratological entities and of ontology could be called post-modernist by Brian McHale or even Ihab Hassan. This is what she says about her style: "I don't write necessarily in a conventional arc or with a conventional structure... Yes, well, it's various incompetencies that I have that I try to turn into strength somehow. I was always worried about not writing proper books and every time I tried to write a proper book I got too bored or it just got wrong or it got too false. So I tend to not write proper books. I don't write third person, past tense, 'beginning, middle and end' books" ("An Instinct")
5. Ingman goes so far as to say that "The Brat" (*Portable*) by Enright is "a cheeky feminist rereading of Joyce" (256). Yet on the question of feminism, she also qualifies her statement as regards the 1990s Zeitgeist: "In contrast with the previous decades, in the 1990s and beyond, Irish short stories by women became less preoccupied with using the realist mode to register an angry feminine protest against the conditions of marriage and motherhood than with exploring the changing nature of femininity and the instability of female identity in a playful, postmodernist style" (Ingman 249-250). This echoes Tóibín's characterization of "post-feminist." (xxxiii)
6. Though she owns up in the same interview that humour in her work "[is] part of the fact that the country is emerging from fairly poor circumstances and that's what keeps people going, they make jokes. It's not crass jokes, it's like twist...and it's empowering as well" (*An Instinct*).
7. To identify that third-wave feminism seeking to avoid what it considers the second wave's essentialist misconceptions of femininity, one can read Judith Butler's seminal *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.
8. Usually sex is seen as objectively biological and gender as a more questionable social construct though some theorists have increasingly criticized that binary going as far as to assert the

interchangeability of both concepts as Butler does: "If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" (10-11).

9. Both spheres of womanhood and femininity are deeply intertwined, if not to say, undecidable in Enright's short stories. Though women's sexual identities seem to be "natural" or obvious, they keep being questioned or criticized in their social manifestations somewhat indirectly through what Percy Lubbock identified as the *showing mode* (62-63). Ingman aptly analyses the character's dying her hair blonde or applying make-up to her face in "Fatgirl Terrestrial" (249) as so many rituals or routines which make fakeness look real, which is also incidentally a central paradox in femininity according to Butler (60-61). See more specifically Butler's analysis of the Lacanian concept of "masquerade" of femininity and "the slippery distinction between 'appearing' and 'being,' 'a radicalization of the comedic' dimension of sexual ontology" according to her (60).

10. "then he wasn't gay [...] he was just looking for an education" (*Yesterday* 105).

11. "[...] recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; *they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality.*" (Hutcheon, 105-106, my emphasis)

12. In his famous 1919 essay entitled *Das Unheimliche*, Freud defines the uncanny precisely as what is not familiar.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article a pour but de parcourir l'ensemble des nouvelles d'Anne Enright publiées entre 1991 et 2008 afin d'en identifier les caractéristiques singulières et ce à partir de l'analyse que fait Colm Tóibín de son travail dans son anthologie de la littérature irlandaise (1999). En effet, selon lui la fiction d'Anne Enright se prête à une analyse post-freudienne, post-féministe et post-nationaliste. Après un état des lieux des récits courts d'Enright, une quatrième caractéristique se fait jour rapidement : celle de postmoderne. L'examen de chacune des trois autres révèle en regard de ce quatrième attribut une tension systématique tantôt ludique et délibérée, tantôt spontanée entre norme et transgression. Il en ressort que les nouvelles d'Enright déploient un féminisme très idiosyncratique et syncrétique entre deuxième et troisième vagues (Cixous, Butler). De même, Enright réussit à dépeindre une irlandité authentique sans avoir recours aux marqueurs habituels de la nation pourtant bien présente métonymiquement. Le volet psychanalytique renforce encore cette interprétation postmoderne de l'écriture d'Enright, étrange, drôle et désenchantée, adogmatique, puisant ses thèmes orphiques dans des invariants mythologiques insoupçonnés résonnant fortement avec la pensée d'un Ihab Hassan (*The Dismemberment of Orpheus*).

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