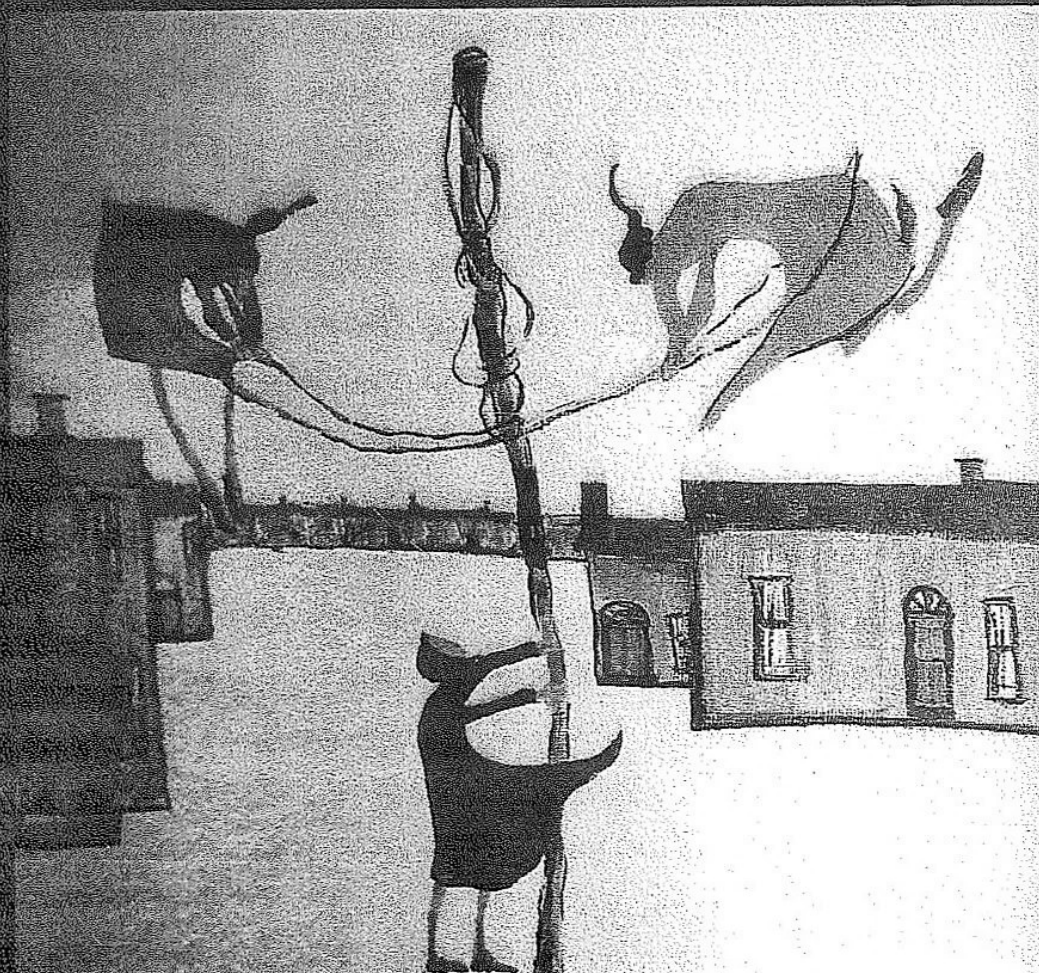


Elke D'hoker, Raphaël Ingelbien  
and Hedwig Schwall (eds)

# IRISH WOMEN WRITERS

NEW CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES



# Reimagining Ireland

Volume 40

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher  
Institute of Technology, Tallaght



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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ADRIANA BEBIANO

## 'Mad, Bad, and Dangerous to Know': The Stories of Chicago May and Eliza Lynch

We need new angels for new shadows.

— EDWIN HONIG

Amnesia would be better

But she wanted to be a lucid dreamer.

— SINÉAD MORRISSEY

Since the 1970s, women studies worldwide have given women a new visibility. Received knowledge has it that female protagonists in history – be it in politics, art, culture, or any other activity deemed 'public' – are very few when compared with the number of male characters found in the archive.<sup>1</sup> The explanations for this absence can be found in history; there is, however, an awareness that it also results from a process of silencing and erasure which took place over centuries and which can – and must – be amended. This invisibility has been equated with 'irrelevance'; it has been explained as 'natural' and used to legitimise past and present attempts at keeping women in the position of the subaltern, playing the role of 'the second sex'. If social and political emancipation for women goes hand in hand with visibility, it stands to reason that, in order to legitimise present aspirations and present achievements, a genealogy – or a 'female line' – needs to be created where it is absent or obscured; that is, it is necessary

1 'Archive' is here used in the Foucaultian sense: not just a passive collection of records from the past but as an active and working system of enunciation (Foucault *passim*).

to re-read and re-write history. Different genres can be mobilised by those strategies, from hagiography and the epic to (as I will be arguing later) the picaresque.

This process of reclaiming the past for women is taking place simultaneously in historiography, biography and fiction. In the case of Irish historiography, Margaret Ward's name springs to mind for the scope and the political range of the work she has been doing towards writing 'Herstory'<sup>2</sup> or, to use one of Ward's titles, towards 'putting Irish women into history' (Ward 1991). In addition to her essays, Ward has also written biographies (a genre poised between history and literature) of Maud Gonne and of Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington. Furthermore, while *The Missing Sex: Putting Women Into Irish History* (1991), or *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women & Wicked Hags* (2004, a joint venture with Louise Ryan) are, in terms of form, examples of conventional academic books, the *Female Line: Researching your Female Ancestors* (2003) is a didactic work that actually teaches and encourages women to research and write their own family history by tracing a female genealogical line. Alongside more traditional methodologies, the use of interviews and other Oral History methodologies is encouraged, which then results in 'life narratives' or 'life stories'. The latter is an increasingly important field within women studies. Ward thus works on all the frontlines of contemporary feminist historiography.

There are, however, lives and stories that the methodologies of history, no matter how thorough, cannot recover, given the absence of documented sources; this is where fiction comes in. Indeed, imaginative writing plays an important role in the emancipatory project of rewriting history from a feminist perspective. This is best seen in a number of contemporary historical novels that feature female heroines, or where historical characters are given roles not attributed to them by dominant historiography.

It could be argued that this is in part the result of a current taste for historical fiction, often of disputable quality. This would partly be a correct assessment; however, fashion and market forces aside, many good novels

2 The concept was first put forward by Robin Morgan in *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970).

have come out in recent years that contribute towards a new visibility for women of the past. These novels are not, of course, history: they might be called – in Sinéad Morrissey's words quoted in the epigraph – 'lucid dreams' for, while being fiction, they are nevertheless 'true'.

Without imagination, quite a few of the lives that help readers make sense of their present lives – say, Grace Marks, in *Alias Grace*, by Margaret Atwood, or Mary Saunders, in *Slammerkin*, by Emma Donoghue – would still be untold and forgotten. Very little is known about them; what saved their lives from complete erasure was their brief encounter with the Law and the state's power apparatus (courts, prison, poor houses, and hospitals for the insane); everything else has to be imagined. On what little material is available a whole life is invented including an inner dimension – dreams, desires and fears. Yet, these are not novels exclusively concerned with the psychological processes of the heroines; rather, they follow the 'life and times' model, often found in biography, and also prominent in historical novels. Atwood and Donoghue are mentioned here for their now undisputed reputation as novelists, which can help legitimise the much maligned subgenre of historical fiction, but other examples could be given.

In the case of Irish fiction, another issue needs to be addressed: the consensus is that the narrative of the nation, both in fiction writing and in the discourse of criticism, is the dominant one, leaving issues such as class, gender or ethnicity in a minor position. Colin Graham, using the Gramscian model of hegemonic *versus* subaltern positions, puts it in no uncertain terms: '[g]ender becomes subaltern to dominant nationalism, being forced, in Gramsci's terms, into "affiliation" in order to press its claims' (Graham, 2001: 106). In her social and historical analysis, Margaret Ward finds this affiliation on both the Nationalist and the Unionist sides of the Northern Irish divide. The Republican slogan, for instance, could not have been clearer: 'There can be no women's liberation until national liberation.' (Ward, 2004: 191 and *passim*). I would say that the hegemonic political discourse both sides of the border, in which the national identity narrative is highlighted and other issues are obscured or forgotten, is also reflected in the narrative fiction produced by Irish writers. Only in the last decades have issues other than nationalism been problematised in fiction in a significant way. *A Star Called Henry* (1999) by Roddy Doyle is a famous case in point,

to mention only a best-selling novelist: while built around an iconic event of the Irish nationalist narrative – namely, Easter 1916 – it is nevertheless a novel in which both class and gender issues are quite central.

Any rewriting of the past is, of course, informed by present issues: it is always the present moment that produces a representation of the more or less distant past. In the case of women's stories current gender consciousness and feminist agendas cannot be avoided. At this point, another question needs to be raised: which historical figures of the past can be useful to help us think through power structures and create new models for contemporary women? Or, in Edwin Honig's words quoted in the epigraph, what angels do we need for new shadows?

The question first occurred to me while comparing two women dictionaries with my MA students in Feminist Studies: *Wild Irish Women. Extraordinary Lives from History*, by Marian Broderick and the Portuguese *Dicionário de Mulheres Rebeldes (Dictionary of Rebel Women)*, by Ana Barradas. Despite the affinities that their respective titles seem to promise, these two women's dictionaries could not be more different: *Wild Irish Women* is inclusive, and features Saint Bridget and Somerville and Ross alongside Eliza Lynch and Margaret Leeson (an eighteenth-century brothel-keeper); *Mulheres Rebeldes* includes only women who could be judged as socially and ethically (from a feminist point-of-view) acceptable. It features, for instance, women soldiers of the Spanish Civil War (Dolores Ibarruri), Russian Socialists (Alexandra Kollantai), and mostly – and understandably – suffragists and activists for women rights from around the world. Simple victims are given a few entries: Amanda Garcia (1911–1938), for instance, is included for no other reason than having been shot by the Spanish fascists in the Spanish Civil War. There is no place for the notorious: only for the noble.

Barradas' politics of memory is arguably the prevalent model in women's rewriting of history; one has only to remember Margaret Ward, who also concentrates on heroic – or epic – figures. This choice presupposes the notion of an 'ideal woman', even if redefined within the framework of a feminist ethos: 'maidens and mothers', those iconic figures of patriarchal discourse, are replaced by epic figures that assert themselves in the public sphere, paradoxically still characterised – as those figures of old – by virtues



such as 'devotion' and 'self-sacrifice'. To this choice one might apply the concept of the 'utopianised subaltern',<sup>3</sup> which functions eventually 'as a refuge for cultural and political authenticity' (Graham, 2001: 106).

I would argue that, in replacing one ideal model with another and in refusing the mad, the bad and the dangerous their place in our common heritage, such rewritings fail to claim full humanity for women. The epic has its uses as a genre – a male one, re-appropriated by women; yet I would argue that the picaresque can be more subversive and can offer an even more radical critique of culture and society. As a rule, anti-heroes and anti-heroines have an aesthetic appeal which is hard to resist. Sinners are far more fascinating than saints. However, engaging with female 'sinners' – seductresses and the like – might seem to be an act of complicity with the demonisation of women and a sub-product of a patriarchal discourse. But one should at least leave open the possibility of these figures being far more liberating than the creation of hagiographies under new names and shapes. Hence the appeal and relevance of the two texts on which this essay will focus, i.e. *The Story of Chicago May* by Nuala O'Faolain (2006) and *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* by Anne Enright (2003).

*The Story of Chicago May* is a biography of May Duignan, aka May Wilson, aka May Sharp, aka May Avery, born in 1874 in Edenmore, County Longford, Ireland, and deceased in Philadelphia, USA, in 1929. A prostitute, thief and lover to thieves, May left home at sixteen, apparently with money she stole from her family, and led a peripatetic life that took her from London to Paris, New York, Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia. This life of adventure – she was a true 'soldier of fortune' – brought her to court, prison and eventually to death as a pauper in a Philadelphia hospital. It is material for a lurid tale, in the rogue's narrative tradition.<sup>4</sup> Near the end of her life, encouraged by a respectable friend and with the help of a ghost-writer, May wrote her own autobiography: *Chicago May, Her Story. A Human*

3 Graham is here addressing postcolonial discourse; yet I think his concept is also useful to think through feminist discourse.

4 *Moll Flanders* is an obvious reference and model for all female picaresque figures. Furthermore, as a prostitute, thief and lover to thieves, Chicago May is actually a 'moll', in the eighteenth-century street jargon.

*Document by the Queen of Crooks* (1929). The many quotes from that work included in O'Faolain's narrative suggest that this was part of an attempt, in the confessional mode, at 'going straight' and finding redemption; yet she presents her tale with no explanation, apology or repentance. She is quoted as saying that 'crime never occurred to me as being sin' (O'Faolain 2006: 190). Like a picaresque heroine, she is free of shame and places herself outside notions of social morality or honour.<sup>5</sup>

In *Chicago May*, however, it is not the adventurous side of May's life that O'Faolain chooses to explore in depth. In a narrative free from judgment – and thus placed outside notions like 'honour' and 'social morality' – O'Faolain writes a compassionate biography which is also a portrait of the times and places May lived in, very much in the 'Life and Times' tradition. Indeed, the focus is on the lives of all women who shared times and places with May. Thus, while it may be classified as 'biography', it is also 'women's history'. However, O'Faolain does not claim the status of historiography for her book: there are no footnotes, no scientific jargon, no scientific metadiscourse, nor, indeed, any scientifically sanctioned methodology. On the contrary, May's story is also the story of O'Faolain's self-discovery, as she follows May's footsteps in Ireland, continental Europe and America.

However, the narrative uses strategies borrowed from biography and other nonfiction genres: it includes photographs (of May herself, of her connections, of places she has visited), plenty of letters or quotations from letters written by the several characters, the Pinkerton agency reports, transcripts from court trials, and a significant number of quotations from newspapers articles that featured May and her associates' doings. To these should be added quotations from the already mentioned autobiography of May. All this authentic material gives credibility and authority to the narrative, and O'Faolain deserves credit for the seriousness of the research that went into its production, offering us much information about people, places, events and social realities.

5 On the picaresque and its relationship to the concepts of 'honour' and 'shame', see Yovel (2003).

But what kind of history, or biography, is this, given that it starts with the sentence 'Imagine a young woman running', and then goes on explicitly to imagine May Duignan's flight from home at sixteen? (O'Faolain 2006: 13) Imagination, then, is set at the centre of the narrative from the very beginning, and its presence is made explicit throughout by recurrent expressions like 'I imagine', 'it must have been like this', 'she must have felt' or 'perhaps she felt'. However, in her use of imagination as a form of knowledge, O'Faolain is in fact following the dominant trend in a genre which is changing and expanding. Though it is still thought of as 'non-fiction', one has only to remember three recent famous biographies of Shakespeare – Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (2004), Peter Ackroyd's *Shakespeare the Biography* (2005) and James Shapiro's *1599. A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (2005) – to realise that imagination is acknowledged as part of the narrative process in bringing back to life the subject and her or his times.

In O'Faolain's work, the process of imagining May's life is also the process of imagining women's lives from whatever records she could find. On the synchronic axis of the narrative, May's life is invented on the basis of other documented lives: working women in rural Ireland or in Chicago shanty towns, prostitutes in New York at the turn of the century and so on. On the diachronic axis, analogies are drawn between then and now, all having the author herself as a focal point.<sup>6</sup> Often she constructs May's feelings from her own experience – May reading in chapel while in prison is reconstructed from O'Faolain's memory of reading in chapel in convent school, as a young girl. This brings autobiography into the text in a mixture for which there are also precedents: one only has to remember Richard Holmes, who, back in 1985, was already combining autobiography with imaginative biography in *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*. In other words, O'Faolain's methods have been already legitimised by a body of work that has experimented with the boundaries between biog-

6 There is almost as much self-analysis here as there is in *Are you somebody?*, O'Faolain's autobiographical first book, published ten years previously (O'Faolain 1996).

raphy and fiction without calling into question the classification of the text as 'biography'.

The empathy between the author and the object of writing, however, does not lead to a bowdlerisation of May's life. Her career in crime is not justified by circumstances – say, the difficulty of women's lives or some other such excuse. She is not represented as innocent or as a victim with no choices. For instance, her prostitution is neither a fall from grace nor the only way out of dire straits; rather, it is viewed pragmatically: prostitution and theft are always referred to as 'her work' and, in fact, as a form of agency: 'selling herself kept at least some agency in her own hands' (38).

It is in the analogies with other historical figures, however, than one can see imagination at work and also discern where O'Faolain comes closer to an apologia of the character. After having been sentenced for complicity in the attempted murder of an ex-lover, May ends up in the British prison of Aylesbury, roughly at the same time that Countess Markievicz was also there, after having been spared execution in the aftermath of the Easter Rising in 1916. Upon this coincidence, and very little evidence, O'Faolain creates a *relationship* and a symbolic kinship between them based on their common womanhood and Irishness (189 and *passim*). O'Faolain acknowledges that the Countess does not mention May in her letters, 'but I am sure the two of them did know each other. They would have been bracketed by the prison authorities, in whose eyes they were both vile traitors to England' (208). Furthermore, O'Faolain goes on to refer to the two of them in the same breath as the 'two Irish patriots' in an imaginative leap that is not borne out by the rest of the narrative. In fact, what is happening here is the need to legitimise May's personality in some way that is valued by society in general; and O'Faolain derives this from the narrative of the nation – again, the one that proves dominant, the one that has the authority to give social meaning and significance to any human life, including the life of someone who has placed herself outside the community of the nation.

In fact, May was an 'outlaw' also in the sense that she was no 'sister' or patriot; self-interest and survival instinct alone moved her – again, characteristics of (fictional) picaresque characters. Any explanation for May's choices in the wider context of the nation's narrative is difficult to sustain.



The radical imaginative act lies in the bringing together of two types of heroine that have nothing in common as individuals.

Or maybe not quite. One of the more useful models to think about configurations of womanhood is Marilyn French's model of the masculine principle *versus* the feminine principle. In a book about Shakespeare's plays which, in fact, largely transcends the Shakespearean corpus, French discusses key female characters or types in the Western canon, using the dichotomies conventionally used to define the feminine and the masculine – nature/culture, reason/emotion, and so on – as a starting point. She then goes on to divide the feminine principle into the categories of the *outlaw* and the *inlaw*, that is, female characters who move inside the patriarchal Law *versus* the ones that transgress it, thus asserting themselves as 'power-in-the-world' (French 1982) independently of the shape this performance may take. If one follows French's categories one may find, after all, a strong kinship between Chicago May and Countess Markievicz – and between these two and O'Faolain herself. Perhaps women's genealogy needs to be built around *all* outlaw figures: all those that transgress patriarchal Law and assert themselves as power-in-the-world – escaping thus the temptation towards hagiography, or, worse, a celebration of victimhood, both of which deny women agency and their full humanity.

It follows that I read the narratives around morally ambiguous historical characters such as Chicago May and Eliza Lynch not as having aesthetic appeal – of a type often offered by rogue literature – but as politically emancipatory, particularly when no attempt is made to whitewash characters. If this is the case with Nuala O'Faolain's *Chicago May*, it is even more so the case with Anne Enright's *Eliza Lynch*. The 'Lady Macbeth of Paraguay', as she is sometimes called, Eliza Lynch was made infamous by her greed and by her complicity in the ruthless rule of her lover, Francisco Solano Lopez, Emperor of Paraguay.

*The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* follows Eliza from Paris (where, aged 19, she first met Lopez in 1854) to Paraguay, between 1854 and 1870, the years of power and prosperity. After these years, we only get a brief glimpse of her in Edinburgh in 1873, at the very end of the novel, and we are spared her down-and-out life and eventual death as a pauper in Paris in 1886. The novel is the story of her years of power and it could well be read as a

study in the nature of power, ambition, and the dark side of the self that the appetite for power can lead to.<sup>7</sup> It is tempting to read the story of beautiful Eliza and psychopath López as a variation on the 'Beauty and the Beast' theme, but this does not quite work for Enright's narrative; in the novel, theirs is a marriage of kindred souls. Eliza's thoughts, lying next to the sleeping Lopez, may exemplify this affinity of souls: 'I feel a terrible foolish, falling urge ... To tell him everything; to have all known, the men who were frantic or fond or kind, and my own cruelty. I would have him known the blackness of my heart' (Enright 2002: 96). The narrative is a tragedy of self-knowledge, not focusing on facts, deeds or actions, but – like *Macbeth* – on inner selves, hallucinations and dreams.

Half the narrative is told in the voice of William Stewart, Eliza's doctor, a voice that is as reliable as possible in a narrative always on the verge of fabulation. Stewart functions as a kind of reason within madness in the novel's economy. While working for both her and the tyrant Lopez, and even if half in love with Eliza, he knows her inside out: at some point he wants to tell her that 'she was beautiful' but 'she was evil too' (122). There are several instances of her cruelty, e.g. a memory of her childhood, when she would maim and kill little animals (102), a pastime usually associated with male children; her pleasure at the sight of a sailor going blind in terrible pain; the picnic episode, when she makes the ladies of Asunción, who have snubbed her, sit in the sun for ten hours; or her playing the piano while López shoots so-called traitors nearby. Killing, or the pain of others, brings both Eliza and her lover an appetite for the world. After he tells her, in atrocious detail, of the first man he killed, she asks him: 'Was the sky more blue? ... More full of birds? ... Was the grass sweeter?' The answer is 'yes, definitely' (102).

What exactly is the 'pleasure' of the title? Absolute power, yes; but it is best signified, I think, in Eliza's permanent hunger and voracity. One might be tempted to link this voracity with a previous experience of hunger. After all, Eliza and her family had left Ireland because of the Great Famine

7 It can also be read as an allegory of colonialism and a rewriting of *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad's book and *Macbeth* are, to my mind, the two important intertexts here.

(46).<sup>8</sup> The hunger motif connects the novel with the picaresque narrative, where hunger is a recurrent theme, and where the behaviour of characters who will do anything that breaks social and moral codes with no shame and no sense of sin is grounded in their hunger, whether present, remembered or imagined.

The titles given to most chapters make this *leitmotif* apparent: 'A Fish', 'A Melon', 'Asparagus', 'Veal', 'Truffles', 'Champagne', 'Coffee'. In 'A Melon', Eliza hallucinates about eating a melon in the heat; the asparagus are the exotic European food she throws overboard on the picnic episode, leaving Venância, Steward's bride, with a craving never to be satisfied; in 'Veal', it is Francine, her French maid, whose bruising she fantasises about, 'as you might bruise veal, the more tender to have it when the time comes to throw it on the pan' (104–105). Having it, throwing it away, making it suffer. Or eating it – 'it' being food or people, anything and everything she wants to absorb. She even has a fantasy of eating López's thigh: 'I am turning cannibal' (39), she then tells him. And of course, during the war – in 'Truffles' – stories of her cannibalism circulate. The voracity is part of a sensuality that knows no boundaries and recognises no moral or social code that cannot be transgressed in the pursuit of an absolute.<sup>9</sup> 'Power-in-the-world' as she is, 'you could say she has everything, except the satisfaction of having it.' (59). In this, she is very much like Lady Macbeth, as read by Freud in his essay 'Those Wrecked by Success' (1990).

There is nothing really shocking or appalling happening in the narrative. But the reader keeps asking herself: what is happening out of sight? There are intimations of worse things happening somewhere else, never explained but hinted at, as the 'early whippings and late dinners' Eliza was meant to stay away from. Why do the Guarani soldiers, who never eat meat, smell of meat and 'fart meat' during the war campaigns? And what is that wound in the Chief Engineer's hand, 'as if a nail had been driven through it, in a small crucifixion'? Wounds and deaths and disappearances

8 The hunger motif was explored by Susan Cahill (2007).

9 Hedwig Schwall argued for 'the spirituality of the flesh' in Eliza Lynch in 'New Forms of Magic in Anne Enright & Sinéad Morrissey' (2007).

happen, or are referred to, and remain unexplained, helping to create an atmosphere of horror.

This is also strengthened by the uncertainty that surrounds events: what happens in reality and what happens in the mind? Quite often the reader is not sure. Did Stewart kiss Eliza in the cemetery on a midnight walk? (118) Why is Eliza also Dora, a dying sailor's fiancée, not only in his mind, but in *her* mind? (42–43, 95). Enright has got us used to her fabulating vein, even in a realist novel like *The Gathering* (2007). Characters hallucinate; the dead keep them company. But there are many kinds of hallucinations – some bring comfort, and ghosts can be cuddly, or bring redemption, as in *The Gathering*. In *Eliza Lynch*, light thickens as the jungle closes in.

Eliza is the ultimate outlaw figure who thrives on transgression. As an adolescent in Mme Hubert's school for young girls in Bordeaux, Eliza is given a book of rules for good girls: 'She must not! Look steadily at any one, especially if they are a gentleman; ... nor place her hand on any part of the person she is talking to, such as their collar or one of the buttons; she is not to cross her legs ...' (31–32). I could go on quoting, but such rules will sound familiar to anyone who ever attended a convent school. These are rules for 'inlaw' women that Eliza immediately rejects: 'the reverse, if she would be a whore' (32). Or, one might add, 'the reverse, if she would be outlaw', using Marilyn French's terms. This story is 'Not True', as the author states in the acknowledgments at the end of the book. We knew it: it's all about rumour, and talk, as Stewart's narrative keeps reminding us (51) 'The Irish whore', or 'esa grandísima puta', is still food for the imagination.

Both O'Faolain's biography and Enright's novel – a fictionalised biography – may be read as an enactment of what bell hooks formulates as 'a biography of desire' (hooks 1994: 256), that is, an alternative to the biography of achievement or to a narrative in the (typically male) epic mode. The picaresque may provide a break from the formal and ethical constraints of the epic while providing us with a whole array of empowered subjects.

There is a lot of work being done in building, or recovering the 'female line'. Being fully aware that the present interferes with our knowledge of the past – in other words, that this rewriting is not only 'scientific' but also part of a political project – this search for knowledge is still crucial. If



thinking springs from social practices, social practices spring from thinking, or, one might add, from narrative writing. We write stories to make sense of ourselves; we also write stories to build futures. If less history means less future, then more history must eventually translate into more future. We need new angels for new shadows; we need lucid dreaming.

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