

## Transnationalising the Irish Canon through Contemporary Feminist Psychoanalysis

By Lauren Cassidy

Ireland has often been referred to as a nation of storytellers, and there is perhaps some validity to the claim. Throughout Irish canonical tradition, writers have consistently sought to evince the psychology of their nation; its culture; its idiosyncrasies; its identity. Although an island, Ireland has never been isolated. With a long history of migration, Irish people have traversed the globe, contributing to a diaspora that now stretches across the world, and the emergence of hybrid identities like the “Irish-American”. According to academics Mary Gilmartin and Allen White, “The complexity of migration to and from Ireland, over decades and centuries, makes it a fascinating site for the study of migration and the migratory process” (5). Although Ireland has recently (and quite rapidly) become a centre for immigration, its literary scholarship has failed to keep up with the nation’s changing cultural landscape. This blogpost contends that it is imperative to transnationalise the Irish canon<sup>1</sup>, preventing both monoculturalism, and the marginalisation of migrant experience in contemporary literature. More specifically, it posits that Anne Enright’s *The Green Road* (2015) problematises a stable, monolithic conception of national subjectivity, producing liminal narrative spaces for the exploration of new identities. Evincing the politics of power and privilege implicit in modern national subjectivities, Enright’s *The Green Road* examines the forms of sovereignty accessible to Dan, an exiled member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and Denholm, a refugee living in Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> The “literary canon” was a finite collection of texts considered to be the most influential works in history. These books were generally believed to possess great literary skill, to be receptacles of high culture, and to be written by the best authors of all time. Curated by critics, and plagued by elitism, the canon was almost exclusively comprised of literary works from the West and contained huge gender disparities before the late twentieth century. While some attempts have been made to diversify the Western canon, academics must continue to excavate literary history for the voices that have been lost, as well as to create new, heterogenous canonical traditions.

Booker Prize winner Anne Enright has become a household name, synonymous with contemporary Irish storytelling. Her sixth novel *The Green Road* is a portrait of the Irish nuclear family from 1980 to 2008, which analyses the relationship between the narrative's matriarch, Rosaleen Madigan, and her four children. Rosaleen's eldest son, Dan, keeps his sexuality a secret throughout his adolescence. Escaping to New York in 1991, Dan comes out to a small circle during the AIDs epidemic. Although dispossessed of both family and country abroad, Dan's national identity is hyper-exaggerated in the States. Discussing national identity in an interview, Enright asserted that to her "Irishness, like all nationalism, is something constructed out of stories and myth ... you take those bits you like and discard those you don't".<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Dan appropriates a famous literary reference for the construction of a national identity abroad. At a dinner party, he recites lines from W. B. Yeats' poem "Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" for a predominantly American audience. The novel states, "to everyone's amazement and delight, Dan opened his mouth and a ream of poetry fell out. Line after line – it was like a scroll unfurling along the tabletop, a carpet unrolled. And each of us, as we heard it, realised where we were and who was with us" (Enright 47). Invoking one of Ireland's most internationally recognised poets, Dan participates in a kind of racial performativity, transforming himself into a stereotype for foreign consumption. Dan self-consciously performs his role as an Irish man, indulging in a highly caricatured, orientalist perception of Irishness. However, this hyper-exaggerated performance cannot sustain Dan forever. It may be argued that Enright's *The Green Road* produces a matrixial stratum of subjectivisation, facilitating Dan's assimilation back into the nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Enright is actually being interviewed about her most recent novel *Actress* (2020) in this interview. However, themes of nationality and the construction of Irishness emerge throughout her oeuvre. Sarah Hughes, "Anne Enright: 'Irishness is a myth – people take the bits they like'", *inews*, 21 April 2020, <https://inews.co.uk/culture/anne-enright-interview-actress-irishness-myth-the-gathering-booker-prize-the-green-road-406988>

In her 1994 theoretical work *The Matrixial Borderspace*, Bracha Ettinger described subjectivity as a kind of encounter. Ettinger created her concept of the “matrix” not as an alternative to the traditional psychoanalytic phallic paradigms perpetuated by theorists like Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and even Julia Kristeva, but as a supplementary process which facilitates greater understandings of the Other. According to Ettinger “The matrix is the locus of a process of multidirectional change and exchange on the borderlines of perceptibility. *Metramorphosis* is an out-of-focus passageway composed of transgressive *borderlinks* that transform, simultaneously and differently, co-emerging partial-subjects” (65). The “matrix” of course refers to the Latin word for “womb”, and Ettinger’s matrixial register is comparable to the undifferentiated, intra-uterine experience of a child in gestation. Ettinger posits that an aesthetic object can similarly produce a matrixial stratum of subjectivisation, inducing subjects into an archaic state of being, and altering their subjectivity through an encounter with art. This blogpost posits that following the disappearance of *The Green Road*’s matriarch, a matrixial encounter occurs on the green road (an iconic national landscape), which facilitates the production of a queer national subjectivity for Dan Madigan.

<sup>3</sup> Upon Rosaleen’s discovery on the green road, Enright states, “Dan, who had stayed by the little famine house, lingered in the doorway of the inner room and did what Rosaleen loved him doing best. He talked to her ... the moon was rising in the north-east over Knockauns mountain. A sliver of a thing, the pale light lifted the landscape to his eyes, and there it was, the most beautiful road in the world bar none” (287-8). Literally on the border of a threshold, Dan is in proximity to both the maternal body, as well as a world outside of the maternal

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<sup>3</sup> *The Green Road*’s denouement is worth the wait, as the iconic landscape for which Ettinger’s novel is named comes sharply into focus. Following an argument at Christmas dinner, Rosaleen Madigan goes for a walk on the green road. At first, Rosaleen imagines herself hiding on the well-worn path, and indulges in a fantasy of her children’s mounting worry. However, as dusk begins to settle on the horizon, Rosaleen realises that she is truly lost on the road she has known since childhood, and slowly, freezing to death. Despite their differences, Rosaleen’s four children venture out in the dark in search of their mother.

body. In these lines, Enright explicitly references Lady's Gregory's play "The Rising of the Moon" (1907), a Celtic Twilight tale about homosociality, and alternative forms of nationalism. An intra-uterine moment of metamorphosis is produced between Dan, his mother, and Enright's intertextual reference, which alters the green road, renovates Ireland's cultural landscape, and facilitates the constitution of a queer national subjectivity for the eldest Madigan son. A road that once led to nothing now leads to new possibilities for Dan, with futures he did not anticipate. However, this sense of belonging, possibility, and identity are not accessible for all members of the population in *The Green Road*.

Dan is not the only queer character in *The Green Road*. Approximately halfway through the novel Enright introduces Denholm, an asylum seeker who lives with Emmet, the youngest Madigan brother. As a refugee, Denholm is without community in Ireland. Forced to exist in a transient state, he is marginalised for both his racial identity, and sexuality. Describing Emmet's embarrassment at not being able to invite Denholm home, Enright writes, "Why did he not invite him home for his dinner? He just couldn't. It was not a question of colour (though it was also a question of colour) ... The only route to the Madigans' Christmas table was through some previously accredited womb. Married. Blessed" (211-2). Unwelcome at the Madigans for Christmas, Denholm is literally unable to take his seat at the table. Instead of being accepted by *The Green's Road's* maternal figure, Rosaleen fetishises and orientalises Denholm's body. Enright states, "The veins of her old hand were purple under the thin white skin, and the surface of Denholm's arm very opaque by comparison. Rosaleen reached for Denholm's hand, quite slowly. She held it up off the table and ran a curious finger along the side of it" (307). While it is vital that writers reflect on the diversity of modern Ireland, positions of privilege must be acknowledged, ensuring that literature does not appropriate, tokenise, fetishise, or speak for new members of the Irish

population. Academic Elena Moreo writes that “In many countries in Europe migrants partake unwillingly in a ‘metaphorics of representations’ wherein they become the repository of white Europe’s repressed fantasies, fears and anxieties about economic globalization and the melting of traditional social structures and values” (77). Although Enright describes Rosaleen’s fascination with Denholm’s body, a matrixial episode is not induced by their encounter. It is interesting that *The Green Road* concludes with Denholm and Rosaleen sitting together at a kitchen table, with the Madigan matriarch becoming increasingly agitated about her own ignorance. The narrative ends with Rosaleen’s line, “ ‘I have paid too little attention ... I think that’s the problem. I should have paid more attention to things’ ” (Enright 312). Similar to Enright’s Rosaleen, academics must continue to pay more attention to Ireland’s changing cultural landscape, transnationalising the national canon for greater inclusion, and diverse representation. Interviewing migrants with experiences of racism and homophobia in Ireland, The National LGBT Federation compiled a report in 2018. One interviewee argued that the media could help with inclusion: “ ‘I think the first step to full equality comes with an understanding and acceptance, which I feel can be achieved through representation in Irish TV, film and other areas’ ” (14).<sup>4</sup> While Enright’s novel explores concepts of representational autonomy, *The Green Road* is not entirely successful in its constitution of new national identities. However, it may be argued that this is intentional. Although Enright evinces the marginalisation of migrant experience in Ireland with the inclusion of Denholm, she does not speak for him. The narrative ends ambiguously with Rosaleen and Denholm’s conversation at an interim; the next to speak is unclear.

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<sup>4</sup>The National LGBT Federation (NXF) commissioned the report “Far from Home: Life as an LGBT Migrant in Ireland” following the death of Sylva Tukula in 2018. Tukula was a transgender woman living at the Great Western direct provision centre at the time of her death. Her burial without the presence of friends, colleagues and family catalysed investigations into the treatment of LGBTQIA+ migrants in Ireland.

## **Conclusion**

Applying psychoanalysis to contemporary Irish texts can aid in the exploration of new national identities, evincing the psychology of a modern, multi-cultural generation of Irish citizens. Juxtaposing Dan and Denholm's search for national subjectivity in *The Green Road*, Enright draws attention to the politics of power and privilege implicit in contemporary conceptions of identity. It is imperative that both contemporary Irish writing, and contemporary Irish scholarship reflect on the diversity of Ireland's changing nation, without tokenising, fetishising, or speaking for new members of the Irish population. Transnationalising Irish canonical tradition is the only way to produce an authentic literary mirror of contemporary culture; the only way to constitute new, inclusive national subjectivities in literature; the only way to allow new voices to enhance our worldview; the only way to continue the long legacy of Ireland as a nation of storytellers

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