Anne Enright and postnationalism in the contemporary Irish novel

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Anne Enright has been hailed as one of the most exciting contemporary Irish writers, praised for her lyrical, evocative language and her original style. Her collection of stories, *The Portable Virgin* (1991), was shortlisted for the Irish Times/Aer Lingus Irish Literature Prize and won the Rooney Prize in 1991, her first novel, *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), met with widespread critical acclaim and her subsequent novels, *What Are You Like?* (2000) and *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002), have attracted much interest, as attested by reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Review of Books*. Her account of pregnancy and becoming a mother, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2004), addresses some of the themes in her fiction from a more personal perspective. Although Enright's art is the focus of several ongoing postgraduate projects, her works have so far rarely appeared in studies of contemporary Irish literature. One reason for this may be the preoccupation with issues of national identity and the state of Irish society that informs so much of current criticism, which means that literature that ostensibly avoids these themes or addresses them only obliquely easily gets overlooked. Another explanation may be Enright's fragmented storytelling, which means that themes are not always easily detected or obvious. It seems difficult to find a place for Enright in contemporary Irish criticism, though the primary reason for this appears to be the rather narrow concerns of the critics, not any reservations about the quality of her work.

The story of nation is of course one of the most fundamental narratives in western culture, and foundational myths can be found for almost every society. As Richard Kearney observes, '[o]ne cannot remain constant over the passage of historical time – and therefore remain faithful to one's promises and covenants – unless one has some minimal remembrance of where one comes from, and of how one came to be what one is'.¹ The national narrative is a means of producing communal memory and uniting people who may have little more in common than their residence within a certain set of borders. 'The development

of a national literature is always an important dimension of the modern state-building project', as Joe Cleary points out, and this is particularly important in communities under pressure or in a state of transition, where Ireland would qualify on both counts.² The problem arises when a nation begins to take its roots for granted and denies the presence of counter-narratives or the indeterminacy of the past. 'Whenever a nation forgets its own narrative origins it becomes dangerous', Kearney cautions, because the result of this is too often 'totalitarianism, fascism and fanaticism'.³ The story of nation then becomes a monolith, a grand narrative of the kind questioned in postmodern literature and thought.

When the nation is recognised as a narrative construct, on the other hand, it can be constantly reinvented and reconstructed, and this is to a great extent what is being done in contemporary Irish literature, at least as it is described in works of literary criticism. Studies of literature and nationhood have dominated the scene since the early 1990s, with examples like David Lloyd's *Anomalous States: Ireland and the Post-Colonial Moment* (1992), Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1995), Gerry Smyth's *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (1997), Seamus Deane's *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (1997), Joe Cleary's *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (2002) and Ray Ryan's *Ireland and Scotland: Literature and Culture, State and Nation, 1966–2000* (2002). The final example, incidentally, is the only one that includes also a longer discussion of postnationalist writing. Numerous articles about how literature relates to, questions or shapes the national story can be added to the list. The mainstays of the most common critical perspective are consequently place, nation, region and state and the problems surrounding these concepts, and as far as criticism is concerned it would seem that every Irish novel is about nation or at least that every Irish novel should be read in a national context.

The rapid rate of change in late twentieth-century Ireland has certainly created a need for a literature that substitutes descriptions of present-day experience for former, idealised images of the country, and as Ray Ryan sees it, the canon now emerging from the Irish Republic:

creates the context in which its own work is understood, guaranteeing the naturalness and representativeness of the experience chronicled by establishing a post-mythical landscape; that is, a landscape where meaning is, necessarily, never premature, because no pre-existing or inherited literary tradition has ever accounted for this experience. The absence of a 'natural' and representative Irish identity means that questions of identity, the nation, are subordinate to an examination of the structures of power, the state.⁴

Nevertheless, to replace romanticised versions of the nation with the more detached concept of the state is only to recalibrate the lens somewhat and carry the search for a national identity into the present. The basic pattern remains the same if images of nation are simply transformed into images of state. The question is whether the issue of nationhood is so central in present-day Ireland that every writer has to engage with it, at least at some level, or whether this is a Procrustean bed that relegates other themes to the background. What is striking, moreover, is the dominance of male writers discussed in this type of criticism, and another question that presents itself is therefore how far national or postnational writing is perceived as an exclusively male domain.

At first glance, Anne Enright's 2000 novel *What Are You Like?* does not appear to be concerned with nation or nationality at all. In a series of loosely connected chapters a number of characters ponder the question 'what they are like', which in the Irish idiom is a phrase with several double meanings, expressing the anxious or proud 'how do I look' and the admonishing 'what a mess you are' as well as the more conventional meaning. For Maria, who is the closest to a main character, this question takes on particular significance when she finds a picture of what she first believes to be herself in her boyfriend's bag. The photograph is of a girl who looks like Maria but wears clothes Maria has never worn and has a slightly different facial expression. The photograph becomes a symbol of Maria's unstable sense of self and emphasises the search for identity that is the novel's main theme: 'Maria looked at her and wanted to laugh. She had always felt like someone else. She had always felt like the wrong girl.'⁵ The explanation is that she has a twin sister, separated from her at birth and brought up in England. For Maria, however, the photo becomes a visible sign of her own uncertainty and lack of self-esteem. It proves to her that she has no identity, that she is 'nothing' as she repeatedly thinks throughout the novel.

In the national story, the search for identity can usually be satisfied through information about genetic – and by extension ethnic – background and identification with the nation, but Enright demythologises many of the staples of older Irish fiction, such as rural farm life, family relationships and the moral superiority of nuns, and she does not replace these old stabilities with a new belief in genetics, which could have been logical, since the story concerns twins. Instead of showing the primacy of heredity, Enright argues, like so many postmodern writers, that identity is in constant process. Such a view is at odds with a vision of nationality founded on ethnic origin, and as a consequence both the

characters' personal search for selfhood and Enright's deconstruction of common Irish myths can be linked to a postnationalist position. Hence, the novel *What Are You Like?* can be regarded as a 'postnationalist' text and Enright's narrative strategies as well as the themes she tackles can be linked to a position beyond nationalism. Reading the novel as a postnationalist text is of course to accept the centrality of 'nation' in Irish literature, albeit in a slightly different way, and since every theory is to some extent reductive, privileging the framework of postnationalism will inevitably overlook other aspects of the novel, such as its relationship to feminism or how early separation may affect the lives of twins, which is, after all, the most obvious theme. But given the preoccupation with questions of nation in present-day Irish literature and criticism it is important to include also women's writing in this context and to add expressions of postnationalism to the equation. Thus, it is valuable to consider the elements in *What Are You Like?* that can be related to a postnationalist outlook.

Postnationalism can be interpreted as both a temporal and a political concept and it can be related to a rather vague concept of 'nation' as well as to the political position of 'nationalism'. In its temporal meaning, 'postnationalism' would simply mean that which succeeds either nation or nationalism and does not necessarily imply any interrogation of these as previous stages of development. As a political idea, however, postnationalism would primarily be a challenge to nationalism as an ideology. For Ray Ryan the first definition seems to be foremost when he describes Dermot Bolger, Thomas McCarthy and Colm Tóibín as 'prominent postnationalists' because 'each has engaged with the problem of representing post-Independence Ireland when the mythic sources of Irish identity have been drained first by economic stagnation, then by the astonishing pace of modernization since the 1960s'.⁶ Postnationalism for these writers would then be the representation of a society no longer informed by the ideals of nationalism. The works are set in a society after nationalism, as it were. In his introduction to the anthology *Soho Square* Colm Tóibín writes that the writers included

have nothing in common except a beginning under the same sky, the same uncertain weather. And there is no collective consciousness, no conscience of our race, no responsibilities, no nation singing in unison. Instead diversity, the single mind and the imagination making themselves heard.⁷

This declaration indicates that for Tóibín, at least, there is no postnationalist programme. Instead, postnationalism is defined by dissonance and divergence in contradistinction to the uniformity of nationalist thought. Discussing contemporary Canadian novels, Frank Davey defines

postnationalism as an attitude that veers between the transnational and the local, where sites are either interchangeable or resolutely confined and political issues are constructed on ideological grounds that have little to do with questions of nation or history, such as aestheticism, feminism or liberal humanism.⁸ For Davey, postnationalism seems to be characterised primarily by its avoidance of national politics. Richard Kearney, on the other hand, is more willing to invest postnationalism with active, not only reactive, meanings and clearly views the political definition as the most important when he emphasises, in his *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (1997), that ‘the attempt to advance a postnationalist paradigm is equally, in the Irish–British context, an effort to adumbrate a postunionist one’, indicating that postnationalism may be the way out of political trench wars.⁹ For Kearney, postnationalism would thus be the term for a political ideology that attempts to reach beyond polarisation. In some ways this position could be seen as a response to the understanding that a politics that only reverses the hierarchy also leaves the terms of opposition in place. As Edward Said puts it, ‘we begin to sense that old authority cannot simply be replaced by new authority, but that new alignments made across borders, types, nations and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity that has been the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism’.¹⁰ In this light it might even be possible to interpret the English–Irish marriages that often conclude nineteenth-century sentimental novels as expressions of postnationalism, though they are generally viewed as conveying a Unionist position. In the context of practical Irish politics postnationalist literature could, however, play a role in breaking up the logjam of sectarianism, but remarkably few writers have chosen to deal with both Northern and Southern Irish society. ‘The state divide conditions the imaginative horizons of Irish novelists on both sides of the border’, as Joe Cleary observes, and both nationalism and postnationalism have become connected with the states, not the island.¹¹

To question ‘nationalism’ must at some level also include a questioning of ‘nation’ as its basis, and the problem is that ‘nation’ is by no means a stable concept. Kearney cites five common meanings of the word, the legal, the territorial, the ethnic, the migrant and the cultural, but in the Swedish language, for instance, the words ‘nationality’ and ‘citizenship’ are usually seen as exact synonyms, which means that only the first two meanings are present.¹² A migrant nation like the nineteenth-century Jews would have given precedence to ethnicity or religion, and the numerous small states of nineteenth-century Germany defined the

embracing German nation in terms of culture and linguistic unity. These divergent definitions of nation obviously give rise to a correspondingly divergent selection of nationalisms, and Kearney lists the varieties civic, ethnic, romantic, economic, separatist, sectarian and cultural nationalism.¹³ No doubt the list could be expanded. In relation to Enright's novel I will use 'postnationalism' as the label for a political attitude that rejects both 'nation' and 'nationalism' in all their varieties as insufficient tools for the analysis of contemporary urban and global experience. This does not mean that postnationalism should be understood as merely reactive. On the contrary, Irish writers today may embrace postnationalism as a means to imagine new social relationships, and different histories and futures both inside Ireland and beyond. Though the interrogation of nationalist ideology is not new in Irish literature, postnationalism in this sense can be regarded as predominantly a late modern or postmodern attitude.

Since the national narrative is intended to naturalise the state and shape communal identities, it is usually coherent and linear. The fact that nationhood was a fraught question in nineteenth-century Ireland has sometimes been used to explain why the Irish tradition of the realist novel is comparatively weak. As Cairns Craig puts it, there are obvious parallels between 'the modern nation, with its implication of all the people of a territory bound together into a single historical process, and the technique of the major nineteenth-century novels, whose emplotment enmeshes their multiplicity of characters into a single, overarching narrative trajectory'.¹⁴ Though this is to ignore the workings of Bakhtinian dialogue in traditional novels, it is nevertheless true that a steady, linear progression is characteristic of such texts and that there is generally a sense of closure. Anne Enright, in contrast, deploys a disjunctive narrative style that foregrounds the complexity of the past and prevents any sense of linear causality. The novel begins in Dublin 1965, but the next chapter is set in New York 1985 and the following in Dublin 1971, with different protagonists in each. 'For Enright', Penelope Fitzgerald comments in relation to *The Portable Virgin*, 'the recognisable dimensions of time, speech and thought (though not place) are fluid and interchangeable, while metaphors often become the things they stand for'.¹⁵ This is the case also in *What Are you Like?* Although places retain their individual character and New York remains distinct from London or Dublin, Enright dismantles the unities of time, place and narrative focus by moving between settings, and there is a tension between the main plot element which concerns a mystery of birth – a staple of nineteenth-century fiction – and the fragmented narrative technique which seems to preclude the possibility of a final answer. The novel has

no plot in the usual sense of the word, and this postmodern subversion of conventional storytelling can be linked to a postnationalist position through its replacement of a single centre with multiple locations, time zones and foci. There are occasionally Irish inflections in the language, but there is no attempt to represent Irish speech patterns *à la* Roddy Doyle, which could be taken as another indication that Enright advocates a position beyond the narrowly national. Her disjointed narrative art could also be seen as a reaction to Irish storytelling traditions which would further support a postnationalist interpretation, since Irish myths are persistently connected with a nationalist perspective and an unstable text questions the explanatory function of myth.¹⁶ This is of course not a new idea. As Richard Kearney points out, Irish literature has constantly 'displayed two different attitudes to the nationalist idea of myth' with Yeats and other literary revivalist championing it and cosmopolitan modernists like Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien rejecting it.¹⁷ According to Colm Tóibín, at least, Enright 'has taken up and refined the legacy of Sterne and Flann O'Brien and placed it in a Dublin which, for the first time in its long life in fiction, has become post-Freudian and post-feminist and, of course (three cheers!) post-nationalist'.¹⁸ Postnationalism could consequently also be seen as an always present counter-current to the mythologising tendencies of nationalism, which would make Anne Enright part of a long-standing tradition rather than the representative of something new.

Though an important attribute of the postmodern aesthetic is that meaning resides as much in the mode of telling as in what is told it is obviously not enough to use matters of style alone to suggest a postnationalist outlook. Nevertheless, since the 'postmodern theory of power puts the "modern" concept of the nation-state into question', a postmodern literary style becomes a logical expression of postnationalism, especially when it is applied in a work that also interrogates prominent nationalist myths.¹⁹ The ideology informing the texts of the Irish Literary Revival is an obvious target, since these works were elevated and institutionalised as the foundational literature of the Irish Free State. According to Richard Kearney, 'Yeatsian mythologizing was so imposing that it soon became part of a new cultural orthodoxy', and thus demythologisation becomes an important task for postnationalist literature.²⁰ When Enright destabilises common props of Irish nationalism such as the family, rural life and Catholicism this can consequently be seen as another indication of a postnationalist perspective.

The 1937 Irish constitution emphasises the role of the family in the state-building project, producing an idealised picture of family life that

Irish writers have struggled to shatter ever since. In the first chapter of *What Are You Like?* Enright describes family as very much a matter of coincidence and a solution to practical problems. Maria and her twin sister are taken out of their dead mother's womb, and, although this is not revealed until later, their father Berts decides that he can only take care of one of the girls. He also realises that he will have to marry again to be able to cope, and when his new wife Evelyn goes downstairs to heat milk for the baby the first night after their honeymoon Enright comments that '[t]hey were a family'.²¹ There seem to be no feelings involved, simply practical necessity, and Enright describes Berts's decision to make Evelyn pregnant in the same emotionless terms. There is no comfort or warmth in the family, with Berts perceiving his daughter as a monster that has been given birth by a dead woman, the child Maria's eyes saying 'things that cannot be unsaid about her dead mother and her living father and the child he had conceived to supplant her',²² Evelyn desperately wanting to find a way to make friends with her children but having to realise that they remained strangers to her, and Berts having an affair with a woman from work partly because of the lack of physical closeness in his marriage.²³ The novel's epigraph from the *Book of Job* 38 highlights the themes of procreation, parenthood and family but also raises questions about the meaning of origin: 'Has the rain a father . . . What womb brings forth the ice?' (n.p.). God as the Creator is speaking in the extract, which seems to emphasise and solemnise the matter of origin, but, on the other hand, since the Bible verses are about creation, about entities that were never born, the epigraph also seems to suggest that once something is brought into the world it has no family except, perhaps, for the similarity that exists between siblings like water and ice.

The clearest indication that family ties are not automatically strong is Berts's choice to give up one of the twins for adoption. Marie, as the hospital nuns call her, is renamed Rose by her new parents and grows up in England. For her, family and nationality are obviously even more of a coincidence, especially since the household is also filled with a succession of fostered boys who belong to the family for a short while and then leave. Anton, who carries the photograph of Rose that Maria finds, is one of these boys. But even though all the families that appear in the novel are in some manner dysfunctional Enright also shows the importance of knowing your background. Rose is shown to be constantly searching for information about her birth parents. Everywhere she goes she studies the faces of the people she meets, silently asking if one of the strangers might be her mother.²⁴

While Maria has eyes ‘in which the generations that made her regressed like opposing mirrors’, Rose is unable to trace her origins in her face since her physical resemblance is to people she does not know.²⁵ She has no link to her past and no way of finding out what her heredity might be, but becomes obsessed with the idea that knowledge about her background will explain her talents, looks and behaviour and provide her with stability: ‘This was why she played, because she was musical. Because somewhere out there, her real, musical mother was listening’.²⁶ At the same time Enright suggests that there is an endless variety of reasons for people’s characteristics and behaviour and that only some of them are related to genetic heritage. Rose picks at her food ‘because she was a Capricorn, because when she was a baby she had choked on a spoonful of puréed parsnip, because she had a famine gene, or a food-picking gene, or because when she was young her mother told her to sit up straight and not wolf her food. She picked at her food because she was middle class.’²⁷

A central question for Rose, however, is what it means to be Irish, and her feeling of disconnection becomes acute when she is reminded of her Irish origin and attempts to produce a list to define herself, but manages only to register contradictions:

She was Irish.

Her favourite colour was blue.

Her favourite colour was actually a deep yellow, but she couldn’t live with it.

She was English.

She was tidy. She was polite. She hated Margaret Thatcher.

She was a mess.

She was someone who gave things up.

She was someone who tried to give things up and failed all the time.²⁸

Whereas the descriptions of Maria largely show that genetic background is no valid source of identity, the descriptions of Rose consequently demonstrate the importance of knowing one’s roots. There is a tension in the text between this need for family connections and the alienation from their families most of the characters experience. Ray Ryan notes that in Dermot Bolger’s work adoption and absent parents are tropes that ‘sponsor a civic identity that counters [Patrick] Pearse’s ethno-cultural identity’ because adoption ‘ruptures any apostolic ethnic linkage to the past, announcing instead the beginning of a new symbolic order whose integrity is faithful, above all, to the present’.²⁹ If the national is conceived as a matter of ethnicity, the postnational then needs to reveal the arbitrary meanings of genealogy and genetics and show that ethnic origin has little to do with identity. The meaning of adoption is not

quite so straightforward in Enright's novel. To some extent, Rose's adoption may be seen as an expression of a postnationalist attitude, since it represents a break with both ethnic origin and history. It is certainly a way of showing that ethnicity loses some of its meaning in a world of international adoptions and immigration. But there is also the real sense of loss that permeates Rose's life and makes her feel that there are no certainties against which her identity can be defined. Her question about what it means to be Irish is not related to civic identity but to exactly the kind of ethno-cultural identity that Bolger challenges, and her tragedy is that it can no longer be found in a society after nationalism.

Where Maria is concerned, Enright rather exposes the limits of genetic heritage which in a postnationalist paradigm suggests a critique of nationhood as founded on ethnic origin. In contrast to Rose, Maria knows the identity of her birth mother, but when she is taken to meet her grandparents there is no automatic sense of belonging. Instead, she feels that she is among strangers. Her connection with the past has been severed by her mother's death, and, like Rose, she experiences the effects of a broken lineage. Her grandparents' farm is incomprehensible and meaningless to her and the biological ties are not enough to make her fit in. In Revivalist literature the rural image represents 'a tested, endured solitude and the generous supportiveness of community; the patient effort of labour and the nobility of suffering; the ideal of dedication and the reward of courage'.³⁰ This 'richly ceremonious national idea' underlies much nationalist rhetoric and poses an opposition between the rural as authentic and true and the urban as false and opportunistic.³¹ The Irish countryside has no such deeper meaning for Maria, however:

Maria is just bored. All she wants to know is how to become less bored as she feeds the calves in the haggard, hitting them on the skull with a chair leg when they've had enough. All the wrongness of the farm does not strike her, the calves sucking each other's ears, the cows who mount each other as they crush together in the gateway of the yard. She wants to know something, but it isn't this. She doesn't know what she wants to know. They're just cows, that's all. She is so bored she can hardly speak.³²

Life on the farm is a frozen moment where nothing new happens. Everything has always already happened and is a memory even before it occurs. Rural Ireland is a lost world that exists only as a remembrance even when it is visited, and it provides no sense of identity for the Dublin-born Maria. Alone in the barn she realises that the places and buildings of the farm only cause her to feel alienation and insecurity. Outside, she 'would have been a girl from Dublin caught in the

rain, but here in the barn she was anything at all'.³³ There is no sense of liberation in Maria's unstable farm identity, only loss and confusion.

Nevertheless, when she is asked about her background by one of her New York employers Maria resorts to the nationalist myth of rural Ireland, because she expects this to be what her employer wants to hear. Instead of describing the suburb of her childhood, she invents a story about a farm with a view of distant mountains.³⁴ The old myths will not give way without resistance. Nationalist images are still what define Ireland in other people's eyes, as Maria sees it, and the reality of city life cannot measure up to their expectations. Just like Rose's constantly thwarted hope that there might be an explanation for what it means to be Irish, this juxtaposition of mythic and real 1980s Ireland acknowledges the tenacity of nationalist imagery at the same time as it shows how inappropriate it is for descriptions of contemporary conditions.

The fact that she was born in Ireland has had little impact on Rose's upbringing, except for through religion. 'But that's why we went to Mass, all those years', her mother says, viewing Catholicism as a matter of birth, something that is inbred in Rose because of her Irish origin.³⁵ The conflation of religion and nationality is an important facet of cultural nationalism, and by questioning the meaning of religious rites and offices Enright challenges a central aspect of nationalist thought. Religion in *What Are You Like?* is depicted as a series of empty gestures, as when the nun Misericordia goes through her prayers 'in jig time', both unable and unwilling to reach out to the God she prays to, or when Maria's class for First Communion learns the drill '[t]he body of Christ. Amen. Tongue', their instruction focused completely on their behaviour.³⁶ Faith becomes solely a matter of how to comport oneself in church. 'Anne Enright is not fond of nuns', Gabriele Annan concludes in her review of *What Are You Like?*, and 'her snide takes on them are among the most enjoyable passages in the book'.³⁷ Ruth Scurr comments that Enright 'draws on the full comic potential of the Church'.³⁸ To make fun of dignified and elevated phenomena takes away their sacred and exalted status, and Enright's postnationalist Ireland is also post-Catholic, a country where Catholicism has lost its function as definition and support of national identity.

In her review of *What Are You Like?* Penelope Fitzgerald points out that in 'women's fiction women often go slightly or quite mad'.³⁹ There is a long tradition of this, from Charlotte Brontë's madwoman in the attic through Dorothy Perkins Gilman's woman in the room with the yellow wallpaper and Sylvia Plath's woman in the bell jar (whom Gabriele Annan, incidentally, also uses as a reference point in her

review).⁴⁰ The reason for these women's madness is inability to live up to the identities prescribed for them, a need to break out of a cage that is thwarted and results in madness instead. In Enright's novel both Maria and Rose suffer nervous breakdowns, but the reason is rather that there is no role available to them. When Maria returns to Ireland after her breakdown she has lost her sense of connection both to her family and her country. Christine St Peter cites Enright's novel *The Wig My Father Wore* as an example of a type of women's exilic fiction that presents 'narratives of women who depart from and then return to Ireland, a process that leaves them feeling strange in, or even estranged from, their natal land'.⁴¹ Though the notion of 'exile' probably presupposes a stronger attachment to the homeland than what can be found in *What Are You Like?*, this feeling of estrangement is certainly present in the novel. At the same time, there are attempts to replace the haunting figure of the exile with global citizens who move freely between locations. Most of all Maria wants to work in an airport, but can only find a job as a fitting-room attendant which she regards as the next best thing.⁴² Both airports and fitting-rooms are liminal places where change is always imminent, but they are also examples of the 'denationalized and deterritorialized realm that transcends rather than engages, observes rather than participates in the social'.⁴³ Instead of the value-loaded places from Irish nationalist history – the countryside, the church, the home – Enright suggests that present-day urban life takes place in in-between places that can never become symbols of nationality because they only exist from moment to moment. The fitting-room – like mirrors, photos, dress-making patterns and clothes – becomes a metaphor for how identity and its representations are always transitory. Clothes are described as 'other selves', as more real than the women who wear them so that it becomes possible to slide in and out of identities simply by changing clothes.⁴⁴ In analogy with this, Maria is shown to think of her First Communion dress as something that she has to fit rather than the other way round:

She lies in bed and tries to tell what size she is. When she closes her eyes her tongue is huge and her hands are big, but the bits in between are any size at all. When she opens her eyes she is the size of the dress. Or she might be.⁴⁵

Just before they break down, both Maria and Rose also lose their ability to recognise themselves. Maria cannot identify her own reflection and does not know what she looks like any more, and Rose finds herself unable to fill in the information on the passport form.⁴⁶ There is no stability at all, and the characters descend into nothingness.

At the very end of the novel Maria and Rose finally meet and can see themselves in each other. For some reviewers this is a cheap let-down, a simple solution that diminishes the complexity of the work.⁴⁷ For others it is a redemptive moment when '[t]win meets twin, England meets Ireland, and there is much rejoicing and comparing of notes', though this comment also carries sarcastic overtones.⁴⁸ If the reunion of the twins is placed in a postnationalist context, it could be seen as further underscoring the importance of the present as opposed to the myths of the past. Rose and Maria find at least a temporary stability in the fact that they are 'like' each other. Nevertheless, Enright is anxious to point out that even the likenesses between twins contain elements of coincidence and cannot only be genetically explained. Among the things Rose and Maria discover about each other are the facts that they both had a best friend at school called Emily and that they both have two veins instead of one on the inside of their left elbow, but Enright places these similarities on the same level, though one is purely coincidental and the other a matter of genes.⁴⁹ The sources of identity are thus placed in the contemporaneous, in the similarities between siblings instead of in linkage with the past, but at the same time they are shown to be unstable and accidental rather than essential. There are no answers to questions of identity or belonging, only the establishment of a temporary relationship based on likeness, corresponding, perhaps to a postnationalist view of temporary alliances and shared interests. According to Ray Ryan, at least, this preoccupation with the 'now' and its concomitant rejection of history is characteristic of postnationalism as the expression of a 'self-generation unconnected to any collective entity called Ireland'.⁵⁰ But this rejection of the past has a price, since there is nothing to take the place of the rejected images. Through her description of Rose in particular, Enright indicates that the negative characteristics of a postnationalist society are alienation and loss. Though obviously critical of nationalist idealisation, Enright does not advocate a happy, utopian mongrelism as a solution, but acknowledges that dismantling old certainties may be disabling, too.

It is possible, perhaps even probable, that Enright's novel could not have been read as a postnationalist text in another literary culture where questions of nationality are less dominant than they are and have been in Irish literature and criticism. As a text that represents life in a modern, urban society no longer in the grip of nationalism it fits a postnationalist paradigm, as does its confrontation with prominent nationalist myths. As a text that probes the importance of genetic and ethnic heritage it is more divided, however. In another cultural context the postnational themes might have been overshadowed or not even

detected, because it is certainly possible to interpret *What Are You Like?* also as, for instance, a feminist work describing the insecurity of women who have rejected old female roles but not yet found any certainties to replace them with, or as a moving story about the impossibility of forging true and lasting bonds with other people. Another approach would have been to focus on Enright's poetic use of language and view the novel as a purely aesthetic product. It is striking that, apart from noting the significance of the twin story, the reviewers have all concentrated on different aspects of the book, which of course means that postnationalism is as good a framework as any other, but also demonstrates that the fractured narrative makes a range of interpretations possible. The emphasis on personal responses and emotions could be seen as an attempt to ground the political content in individual experiences instead of constructing overarching narratives or myths. The main criticism directed against the novel, however, is that the characters fail to engage, which ultimately means that their search for identity becomes less interesting and weakens the political power of the text. The absence of linear causality in the tale may be the only appropriate way to mediate a postnationalist experience, but it also means that the postnational society is defined mainly in negative terms: fragmentary, not whole, confusing, not stable, transitory, not solid. In the end, then, Anne Enright's novel becomes as much a critical exposition of modern, urban existence as an attack on the straitjacket of a nationalist past.

Notes

- 1 Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 81.
- 2 Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 51.
- 3 Kearney, *On Stories*, pp. 81–2.
- 4 Ray Ryan, *Ireland and Scotland: Literature and Culture, State and Nation, 1966–2000* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 144.
- 5 Anne Enright, *What Are You Like?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), p. 37.
- 6 Ryan, p. 143.
- 7 Quoted in Ryan, p. 144.
- 8 Frank Davey, *Postnational Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 259–60.
- 9 Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 2.
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- 11 Cleary, p. 77.
- 12 Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, pp. 2–5.
- 13 Ibid., p. 1.
- 14 Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 9.
- 15 Penelope Fitzgerald, 'Bringers of Ill Luck and Bad Weather', *London Review of Books*, 2 March 2000, p. 8.
- 16 It would be possible, however, to claim that Enright actually attaches to traditional Irish storytelling since there are endless varieties of the Irish myths and it is impossible to determine which version should take precedence. But within the confines of each version there is usually coherence, a linear progression from beginning to end and a satisfactory explanation of events. See, for instance, Georges Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001).
- 17 Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 113.
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- 19 Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 61.
- 20 Ibid., p. 124.
- 21 Enright, p. 13.
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- 26 Ibid., p. 129.
- 27 Ibid., p. 136.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 140–1.
- 29 Ibid., p. 159.
- 30 Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 57.
- 31 Ibid., p. 58.
- 32 Enright, pp. 44–5.
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- 36 Ibid., p. 84, p. 29.
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- 46 Ibid., pp. 145–6.
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- 50 Ryan, p. 147.