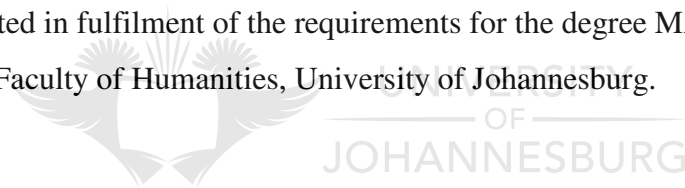


**“AN ART WHICH IS HONEST ENOUGH TO DESPAIR AND YET
GO ON”: THE LIMITATIONS AND POTENTIAL OF
NARRATIVE IN THREE CONTEMPORARY IRISH NOVELS**

By

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

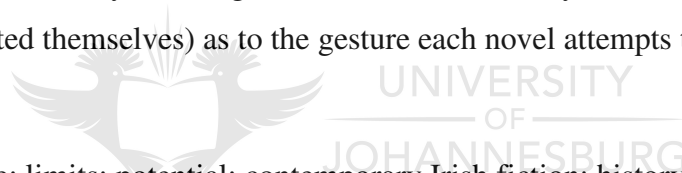
1. Abstract	iii
2. Declaration	iv
3. Acknowledgements	v
4. Introduction	1
5. Chapter 1: Secrets and Grace in Sebastian Barry's <i>The Secret Scripture</i>	14
6. Chapter 2: Trauma That Resists Representation in Anne Enright's <i>The Gathering</i>	51
7. Chapter 3: A Fool's Errand: Reinhabiting the Past in John Banville's <i>The Sea</i>	89
8. Conclusion	116
9. Works Cited	120



ABSTRACT

This dissertation hinges on the exploration of three contemporary Irish novels, namely *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry, *The Gathering* by Anne Enright, and *The Sea* by John Banville. What the three works have in common, besides their nationality, is a preoccupation with what exceeds their grasp: that is, their inspiration is also their limitation. All three set themselves the task of capturing and representing a past. The first two position themselves as rehabilitators of portions of Ireland's history that have been occluded from official versions thereof. (Banville's novel attempts to skirt as many limitations as possible, including a national one, in order to grapple, as unhindered as possible, with what narrative can achieve.) Fictional rehabilitations of what occurred in a phenomenal reality are inevitably fraught because of their form's limited grasp. However, this study seeks to trace each work's fitful engagement with what it cannot encapsulate in order to ascertain the capabilities of narrative, in spite of its inherent limitations. I employ a broadly post-structuralist theoretical framework in order to engage with novels that incorporate into their content an awareness of the parameters within which they are obliged to function. Ultimately, I draw conclusions (which are necessarily limited themselves) as to the gesture each novel attempts to make beyond its bounds.

Keywords: narrative; limits; potential; contemporary Irish fiction; history; fictional rehabilitation; Barry; Enright; Banville



DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that “‘An art which is honest enough to despair and yet go on’: The Limitations and Potential of Narrative in Three Contemporary Irish Novels” is my own original work, that all the sources I have used or quoted have been properly referenced, and that I have not previously submitted this dissertation, in its entirety or in part, at any other university for a degree.

Karen Anne McCarthy

Date



UNIVERSITY
OF
JOHANNESBURG

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I visited my mother's side of the family in what is left of the green of Julianstown in Ireland. My uncle, unsure of how to entertain his oddly-accented niece, took me for "a spin", "up north", and turned on the radio. We arrived at the town of Carlingford, and I cooed dutifully over the castle and the stone wall. To my eyes, however, all of the grey things in Ireland tend to blend together after one has been obliged to coo over as many of them as I have. A silent stroll through the town brought us to a graveyard, and my uncle grunted in the direction of the entrance. When inside, I could not find a stone erected after 1902, and I did the sums that told me that no one alive would be actively mourning for the dead there gathered. My uncle meandered lopsidedly through the cracked stones, stopped at each, and read them with reverence. I marvelled at the time this awkward, wordless and increasingly beautiful man spent on paying the forgotten dead what he obviously felt was owed to them. His silence on the drive home had an expansiveness to it: a depth and a breadth populated by the names he had taken the time to add to his memory. While I would be generating fiction if I wrote that the day's events inspired this project, I did find myself thinking of my uncle's quiet (and, some might argue, inconsequential) gesture when I began writing. If I had not witnessed his act, and if I did not feel a strange compulsion to write it down here, it would have receded into much the same oblivion as the names he took the time to read.

Much like my uncle on that day, the novels I have chosen to engage with in this study, it seems to me, are haunted by the ghosts of the past. My uncle's deferent reading was no doubt inspired, not by the words carved into the stones, but by what exceeded those words.

Ireland's past is weighted with excess, and with dead that the nation's official and mainstream history would not have included, as this study systematically explores. Those who would remember, or attempt to excavate the past in search of what history may have occluded, come up rather abruptly against the limits of their attempt. My uncle's gesture was necessarily limited to a quiet act of deference, and his access to forgotten dead was limited to his reading of the representations of them on tombstones. My opening paragraph records his attempt, but is burdened by being at an even further remove. The act of narrating the past, which the three novels I have selected do with much greater finesse than I am able, contends with the ever-increasing gulf between what they would narrate, and the perspective from

which they attempt that narration.¹ They have the tools of story-telling: remembrance, narration and (necessarily) fiction, which are inherently limited. It is these limitations with which all three of the novels concern themselves. I must add the qualification that these novels are also concerned with their potential, in spite of these limitations.

Gayatri Spivak articulates the complexity inherent in the 'story-telling' that this project concerns itself with as follows: "[w]hereas in other kinds of discourse there is a move toward the final truth of a situation, literature [...] displays that the truth of a human situation is the itinerary of not being able to find it" (1987: 77). Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, and John Banville's *The Sea*, in my view, illustrate Spivak's observation, in that they all attempt to capture a past to which their medium denies them unequivocal access. Each of them hinge on a preoccupation with something that it is beyond their ability to represent fully, and yet by drawing attention to their own limitations in this way: by having something that resists representation as their central concern, they gesture beyond those confines. In 1981, Banville called for precisely the kind of art that I would argue these three novels exhibit. "I hope for an art", he writes, "which is honest enough to despair and yet go on; rigorous and controlled, cool and yet passionate, without delusions, aware of its own possibilities and its own limits; an art which knows that truth is arbitrary, that reality is multifarious, that language is not a clear lens" (Banville, 1981: 17).

An art like Barry's or Enright's (I will come to Banville's own shortly), which has only the language which "is not a clear lens" at its disposal, and which positions itself as the rescuer and relater of those accounts that were not included in official chronicles of Ireland's history, must contend with its own inevitably limited reach, with not being able to "move toward the final truth of a situation", and with "truth" itself being "arbitrary" and "reality" "multifarious". What presents itself as something of an ethical minefield must be navigated with the kind of caution that Banville calls for, and which I maintain the first two novelists conscientiously attempt.

In order to engage adequately with the three novels I have chosen, each of which demonstrates an awareness of the constraints of its form, I employ a broadly post-structuralist theoretical framework. This is because post-structuralism concerns itself with the inherent inadequacy of language, given that it takes its cue from Ferdinand de Saussure's influential

¹ Of course, their pasts are fictional ones, not subject to our temporal terms and perspectives, even when they fictionalise these terms and perspectives.

distinction between the sign and the referent.² All three novels posit things like the past, the truth, death, trauma and secrets as referents to which their form denies them absolute access. In other words, narrative, which can be inspired by these things, is limited in its ability to *be* the thing it represents. Here, narrative comes up against what De Saussure would term “the arbitrary nature of the sign” (2011: 73). What all three novels exhibit, though, is an awareness of their own limitations, and an attempt to gesture beyond these limits, and beyond language. The theoretical work I employ to help me engage with the novels’ complex attempts incorporates Jacques Derrida’s writing on secrecy, testimoniality, spectrality and aporias. (Derrida makes himself useful across the entirety of this study.) In my second chapter, I draw from Cathy Caruth, Roger Luckhurst and Judith Butler’s work on the complexities involved when attempting to represent traumatic experience, which resists such representation. In my final chapter, I make reference to Maurice Blanchot’s work on the Orpheus myth, which he uses to articulate the movement of an art which is inspired by precisely that which constitutes its limitation.

Before I illustrate how each novel fits within this study’s concerns, it is necessary to summarise the historical backdrop of the first two. Both have as their central preoccupation stories, the historical silencing of which came about due to what James M Smith calls Ireland’s “project of national identity formation in the decades following political independence”, which “mobilized the heteropatriarchal family and the Catholic Church’s ideal of sexual morality in ways that were particularly oppressive for Irish women” (Smith, 2007b: 432).³ It therefore seems fitting to briefly summarise the forces that brought about the prudery and censorship that characterised the time, which Moira Maguire does very succinctly in her article “The Carrigan Committee and Child Sexual Abuse in Twentieth-century Ireland”:

When Ireland achieved independence from Britain in 1922, Irish political and religious leaders were anxious to distinguish themselves from their former colonizers. This view was clearly articulated in a 1924 article by a Reverend R.S. Devane: “efforts should now be put forth to amend the laws relating to morality, not piecemeal and sectionally, but an attempt should be made to *codify*, as far as possible, all such laws, and thereby set up a national public standard of morality, in complete harmony with Irish Catholic ideals”. Such laws as the Censorship of Publications Act (1929),

² For more on De Saussure’s influential work, see his recently republished *Course in General Linguistics* (2011).

³ James M Smith’s work on the Magdalen laundries provides an invaluable resource for understanding Ireland’s social and political reality during the early parts of last century. Most notably, he has written as comprehensive a history as can be assembled in the absence of official documentation in his book *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (2007b).

the Illegitimate Children (Affiliations Orders) Act (1930), the Dance Halls Act (1935), the Infanticide Act (1949), and the Adoption Act (1952) asserted what was officially regarded as Ireland's distinct Catholic ethos.⁴

(Maguire, 2007: 81)

What Reverend R.S. Devane concisely terms “a national public standard of morality” is the force that was employed to forge (and standardise) Irish national identity in the early post-independence years. This standardisation, in which “church and state fashioned a seamlessly homogenous society” ensured that “internal challenges and contradictions [were closed off] even as they represented society as pure and untainted by external corruption” (Smith, 2007a: 432). While the effects of this particular kind of nation building are far-reaching and virtually unquantifiable, I narrow my focus for the purpose of this study to two of these. Firstly, women who would have presented “internal challenges and contradictions” to what Maguire calls “Ireland's distinct Catholic ethos”, specifically in terms of their sexual behaviour (or even perceived sexual behaviour), were often institutionalised so as to no longer present a contradiction to the established norm. Barry's *The Secret Scripture* pivots around one such woman. The second effect is that of endemic “physical and sexual abuse of children in industrial schools that were funded by the state and administered by both male and female religious orders”, which has received much media attention during the last twenty years (Maguire, 2007: 79). Illegitimate children were, in this case, some of the “internal challenges” that needed to be rendered invisible. Enright's *The Gathering*, while not set in a school, draws on the widespread presence of child sexual abuse in Ireland in her imaginative telling of its effects within one family.

To return to *The Secret Scripture*, it has at its core the secret testimony of Roseanne McNulty, a century-old woman languishing in an Irish mental institution to which she was unjustly committed, who has all but been erased from the society of which she ought to have formed a part. She writes out her life on “unwanted paper”, and then hides it so as to keep it secret (Barry, 2008: 5). She is clearly representative of those uncounted individuals who were deemed to be irregular or contrary during a time when the ‘standardisation’ of public morality was foremost on the Irish government's agenda. A woman who has been tossed aside by her husband, who eventually has a child out of wedlock, is deemed guilty of “that peculiarly Irish sin, perceived sexual immorality” (Smith, 2007b: 431). Smith lists the ‘offenders’ that were

⁴ While an in-depth analysis of these acts is beyond the scope of this study, they all concerned themselves with the control of sexual activity in the Irish populace.

subject to societal exclusion for much of the last century in Ireland as follows: “some were single mothers, some the victims of incest and rape, and some were considered prostitutes” (431). He continues: “[w]ith no official sentence, and thus no mandated release, some of these women lived and died behind the Magdalen’s walls” (431). “[T]housands of Irish women”, he writes, “ostensibly purged their sins by washing society’s dirty laundry: they achieved spiritual renewal through backbreaking labor, endless prayer, and the complete effacement of individual identity” (431).

Importantly, Barry makes no overt mention of the now notorious institutions in his novel (Roseanne is committed instead to a mental asylum, where her fate is no less cruel), and this is perhaps a sign of his awareness that while fiction of the kind that he is in the habit of writing plays an imperative role in telling stories that remain predominantly untold, fiction cannot claim precise equivalence to what occurred. I contend that this is a conscientiousness of the kind Banville mentions, which pervades Barry’s novel. Although my chapter takes pains to place the events of the novel within the historical context that the official records conventionally wrote them out of, I also engage with the difficulties brought about by Barry’s novel being a work of fiction, with an inevitably limited reach.

Further to this, Roseanne’s ‘secret’ testimony, whose secrecy is made complex by its contents being offered up to be read, presents nonetheless an alternative history to the more official, more public version of events that record her sectioning, and its justifications. A secret, which is wholly opposed in form to a public account, is the form that countless untold stories inevitably assume. Barry employs the licence his fictional medium accommodates in order to set Roseanne’s secrets up in an irresolvable alternation with revelation, their reverse, in order for those secrets to form part of the novel that is available to be read. I argue that the half of Barry’s narrative which claims to be a “secret testimony” takes pains to retain the character of singularity and secrecy, in order not to claim to stand in for countless other secrets, which are just as singular. Elements of Roseanne’s story remain unclear even to her, in what I believe is also part of Barry’s attempt to avoid the illusion of a ‘complete’ story, which might seem to claim one-to-one correspondence with stories that remain largely untold. The awareness of its limitations that the novel exhibits places it firmly within the bounds of the art that Banville hopes for, with which this project concerns itself. Finally, I argue that the novel makes an appeal to the reader for belief and forgiveness, and that the reader’s response inevitably lies beyond the limitations of the text. While the novels I engage with in this study show a profound awareness of their own strictures, they each go about gesturing beyond them

nonetheless. Rather than being a study on the limits of narrative, this thesis concerns itself with narrative art that is aware of these limits, yet even so attempts to gesture beyond them: an art that is “honest enough to despair and yet go on”.

Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* is occupied with the representation of a traumatic event which resists such representation. The narrating protagonist Veronica Hegarty’s favourite brother Liam has walked into the sea at Brighton, and committed suicide. The loss of him sets off a compulsion in her to “bear witness to an uncertain event”: the sexual abuse that she may or may not have seen him sustain at the hands of Lambert Nugent, a family friend, the summer Veronica was “eight or nine” (Enright, 2008: 8). Although the sexual abuse that “may not have happened” in the novel occurs within the privacy of a home, Veronica states that the public revelations sparked her memory of her more personal tragedy: “I would not have made that shift on my own – if I hadn’t been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people’s homes” (8; 148).

I argue that while the instance of sexual abuse with which the novel concerns itself is positioned alongside a broader national context of widespread abuse, it makes no claims of being completely and unproblematically representative of the broader situation. Enright here shows an awareness of her limits, and avoids what would amount to violent reduction by not equating an imaginative construction with suffering that took place in a phenomenal reality. Within the bounds of a fiction though, Enright has licence to push the parameters of what language can achieve, which she does with care. An example of this careful handling that demands extensive analysis is the persistent presence of aporias in the narrative. Traumatic experience, which at the moment of experience registers as a non-experience, is characteristically aporetic. An aporia, as I will explore, is an “irresolvable alternation” between two things that are conventionally opposed (Culler, 1983: 96). Aporias feature throughout the novel, no doubt due to the care Enright takes to do justice to her subject matter, in which definitive truths and finitudes are denied. And, the final example of this disavowal of finitude is that she does not conclude her novel with a decisive ending, and the conclusion to Veronica’s trauma, and her return to her life beyond a state of fitful writing (itself evidence of her traumatised state) is left outside of what the text can encapsulate.

I turn now to John Banville’s novel, *The Sea*, which I explore in the final chapter of this study. The novel’s narrating protagonist, Max Morden, has just lost his wife to cancer, and in his fitful state of mourning, he returns to the site of his boyhood holidays where his friends,

twins Chloe and Myles Grace, drowned as children. This 'return' to the seaside village of Ballyless is, I argue, one step in an ambitious attempt to inhabit the past. Max attempts to "live [his] life over" (91) by way of his writing. Of course, such a thing is beyond what his narrative can achieve, yet he tries nevertheless.

While the novel makes no attempt to emphasise its Irish setting (it is obliquely referred to) and the 'past' it tries to represent is decidedly fictional, its concerns make it a valuable addition to this thesis. By skirting the constraints and ethical challenges that having an overtly national boundary would impose, Banville is at liberty to pursue his primary preoccupation, which is clearly narrative's potentialities, in spite of its limitations (an art "honest enough to despair and yet go on; rigorous and controlled, cool and yet passionate, without delusions, aware of its own possibilities and its own limits"). Judiciously, he structures his narrative so that it is inspired by the things that also limit it: death and the past. To articulate this, I will make use of Maurice Blanchot's notion of the Orphic descent, which he uses to describe as art which is inspired by what it cannot re-present. Max's attempt to re-present the past, and to go where the dead have gone is a doomed one, but the novel traces his compulsive effort with care, all the while showing a profound awareness of what it cannot adequately attain. The plot structure is circular, as a result of the plot line ending where it begins, with the death of Max's wife (which is both its inspiration and its limitation).

Literature Review

Of the three novels I have chosen to analyse, Barry's *The Secret Scripture* has received the least critical attention. Tara Harney-Mahajan's recent article, "Provoking Forgiveness in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*", is the only available scholarly article in which the novel receives more than a cursory mention (2012). She usefully situates the text within the "ongoing debate in Ireland about social justice, the complicity of the public at large, and finally, questions of reconciliation and forgiveness" (56). Her reading of the novel in conjunction with James M Smith's pivotal work on Ireland's Magdalen laundries is illuminating, and apposite. She quotes Smith as follows: "the Magdalen laundry exists in the public mind chiefly at the level of *story* (cultural representation and survivor testimony) rather than history (archival records and documentation)" (59). She argues for the "importance of [these] cultural representations [of which Barry's novel forms a part] given the continued refusal to release important archival records" (59). One of her primary contentions therefore matches my own: fiction of the kind that Barry produces performs an

invaluable role in informing the “public mind” of what “‘history’, defined as archival records and documentation, would rather forget” (59). Her argument falters, in my view, in her failure to pursue her article’s intriguing title adequately in her text. Her primary concern, given its repetition throughout the article, is how the “novel weaves together the concepts of memory, forgetting, history (official history versus personal history), and happiness, all of which are intimately coupled with forgiveness”. But the “forgiveness” which she states will be her concern receives only perfunctory mention, and little analysis (56). She characterises the “inexplicable force that allows for forgiveness [which, in her view,] lies at the centre of Barry’s novel” as “happiness” (56). Unconvincingly, she states that happiness is “the emotion holding the power to provoke the ability to forgive” (70). I think that her title, which alludes to the novel *provoking* forgiveness is most appropriate, given that the text enacts a (most unlikely) forgiveness between an unjustly incarcerated woman and the psychiatrist who did nothing to discover the truth of her circumstances while she was in his care. As I argue in my chapter, the provoking that the novel does attempts to reach beyond the bounds of the text in an appeal to the reader, for a forgiveness of Roseanne’s inconsistencies, contradictions and regular concessions of “I don’t know” (Barry, 2008: 27). This forgiveness, I contend, corresponds with “grace”, a term that appears no fewer than twenty five times in the novel. The correlation between “happiness” and the delicate forgiveness of the novel is tentative, at best.

I move now to the literature on *The Gathering*, which has received significantly more attention from scholars. In her 2011 article on the novel entitled “Flesh and Bones: Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*”, Margaret Mills Harper describes the protagonist, Veronica Hegarty’s endeavour to represent a traumatic experience as an attempt to “bring into language a prelinguistic experience buried in her past” (74). Drawing on theorists like Cathy Caruth and Judith Butler, both of whom have informed my own conception of traumatic experience and its fraught representation in literature, she states “[a]n aesthetic paradox characterizes a traumatized condition, we know: it cannot be expressed directly, though it creates a need for expression” (75–6). “It follows”, she argues, “that ordinary language or temporal narrative, with their logical and linear structures, do not suffice as means through which such experiences can be articulated” (76). Her argument has much in common with my own, though her engagement with the complexities brought about by the novel’s self-reflexive attempt to represent that which it can never render fully and unequivocally is limited to a fairly concise assertion of language’s inherent inadequacy. Rather than engaging

with the novel's complex treatment of that inadequacy, as I attempt to, Harper performs a close reading of the novel so as to trace more 'circumstantial' evidence of Veronica's trauma. Our arguments converge once again when she states that, as readers of the novel, "[i]f we perform our role properly, we must insist on keeping closure at bay" (79). The novel resists the finality of a conclusive conclusion, and wisely leaves any healing or "closure" beyond its bounds, which is appropriate, given language's inadequacy when tasked with representing traumatic experience.

While Harper mentions the historical circumstances in Ireland that give rise to fiction of this type obliquely towards the end of her argument, Liam Harte's 2010 article "Mourning Remains Unresolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*" situates the novel within the context of the aftermath of "the litany of child abuse scandals – and their systematic concealment – involving church- and state-run institutions that have attracted a torrent of media attention since the mid-1990s" (187). He states that the novel is "the most compelling fictional representation to date of the devastating chronic effects of the trauma of child sexual abuse on identity, agency, and relationships in an Irish context, one that powerfully underlines the corresponding imperative to counteract silence and forgetting through truthful disclosure", and he therefore puts forward a line of reasoning that recognises the importance of the role of fictional narrative within a context such as this. That said, he inserts the important qualification that while he "endorse[s] trauma fiction's truth-telling powers", he simultaneously acknowledges "the distinction between firsthand experience and novelistic invention" (188). Our arguments cohere here, and we both engage with Enright's own cautious treatment of the distinction in her novel.

He notes the novel's laudable attempt at "narrating what was formerly unspeakable" (188). Usefully, for my purposes, he discusses how the effects of "traumatic events [reverberate] outwards from the individual to the social group, from the body of the victim/survivor to that of the nation" (188). He also argues that Enright's text confirms several of the "central insights of trauma theory", which he articulates as "the radical disruption of memory and its reliability; the imperfectly known past; the body as the site of an unnamable wounding; and the belated, overarching urge to testify to a dubious, haunting event that was not fully understood or integrated at the time it occurred – if occur it did – and which may or may not be susceptible to meaningful retrospective narrative formulation" (191). His perceptive and careful reading sustains what is a persuasive argument. His concerns differ from Harper's in so far as he engages with Enright's attempt "not merely to *present* trauma's effects but to

encode them in the novel's form and narration", which is precisely what I attempt to trace through the novel (189). Harte also articulates the force and strength of the novel's deliberate indeterminacy in its conclusion as a "scrupulous refusal to redeem history by suggesting that the far-reaching effects of traumatic memory can be completely erased or transcended" (188). As his title suggests, he also concludes that the work of "mourning", in the case of traumatic experience, must remain "unresolved". Of all the critical work on *The Gathering*, I found Harte's to be the most lucid, rigorous and influential.

Finally, Carol Dell'Amico's 2010 article, "Anne Enright's *The Gathering*: Trauma, Testimony, Memory" states that the novel "prompts questions about national identity and the effect of its construction" (59). While determining how the novel is situated within Ireland's social context, she also navigates the related complexities generated by its utter lack of truth claims. "[A]n empirical, realist standard of mainstream historiography", she writes, "cannot be applied to trauma testimony" (63). Ironically, the novel's very indeterminacy is what makes it as accurate a portrayal of traumatic testimony as narrative allows. While this does not equate with the kind of "empirical, realist standard" that "historiography" would require, she argues that Enright places emphasis on the novel's indeterminacy, "not in order to question the veracity of those Irish who related these horrific stories. Rather, Enright's tale enacts postmodern lessons concerning histories' bias in order to point to the problem of certain groups' invisibility within the discipline of Irish historiography, the process of Irish national imagining, and in Irish society in general" (63). While I find this line of argument persuasive, occasionally her article descends into a perfunctory reading of the novel, and a mere summary of its events.

Her most arresting insight is that "[b]y focusing on Veronica, and only faintly tracing the contours of Liam's life, Enright facilitates her book's exploration of the larger problem of ignored groupings within Ireland beyond the specific matter of neglected children. Liam is a vestigial, ghostly presence in the text, vague enough in outline to gesture toward all of the book's marginalized individuals and groups" (69). His absence, according to Dell'Amico, is a "figure for all those missing and unacknowledged in Ireland's past and all those in the process of being effaced in the fairytales of the new Ireland" (70). While I argue that the novel avoids claiming any equivalence to Ireland's broader situation, and rather contains judicious resonances, I find this portion of her analysis convincing, in that she qualifies the novel's 'equivalence' by asserting that it must be undermined by its necessary indeterminacy.

Where I disagree with her findings is in her concluding remarks, where she claims that Veronica “is healed, finally, by her decision to speak out” (73). I contend that while the novel ends amidst Veronica’s decision to both confess what she may or may not have witnessed to her brother, a priest, and to live her life rather than to fitfully write about it, that it nevertheless leaves anything as definitive as “healing” beyond its bounds, aware as it is of its restricted grasp.

Scholarly work on John Banville’s thirteenth novel, *The Sea*, is unsurprisingly more plentiful. He is one of Ireland’s most celebrated writers and his work has attracted academic attention for several decades. Articles that concern themselves with the novel are often part of larger projects that scan Banville’s sizeable oeuvre however, and I think it more appropriate to include work that is devoted solely to *The Sea* here because the novel receives little more than a passing mention in these broader studies. One review and two articles devote themselves to the novel exclusively, and are therefore worth considering.

Rüdiger Imhof, in his oft quoted review entitled “*The Sea*: ‘Was’t well done?’” states that the novel is likely to “leave many a reader at sea”, given its ambitious complexity (165). He begins a section of his investigation with the promising opener of “*The Sea* is a novel about [...]”, which then descends into a protracted list, citing “guilt and atonement”, “grief and loss, the transience of human existence, the senselessness and gratuitousness of life” and he goes on to say that “the novel offers a meditation on the indifference of the world, and it is about the supposed comfort of the past” as well as “fraught relationships” (165). The list gets longer, and I cite it here to illustrate the novel’s manifold concerns, as well as to proffer an explanation for the preoccupations of the two articles I discuss below differing quite significantly from my own. I do not explore Imhof’s review at any more length than this, given that his primary objective, as his title suggests, is simply to ascertain whether the novel is “well done”, and his final opinion is that it is.

Joanne Watkiss’s 2007 article by the name of “Ghosts in the Head: Mourning, Memory and Derridean ‘Trace’ in John Banville’s *The Sea*” classifies the novel as a piece of “Irish gothic fiction” (1). While there are no overt appearances of ghosts in the novel, she states quite rightly that “Banville’s postmodern Gothic is concerned with the *idea* of the ghost rather than the ghost itself; the importance of the ghost does not lie in its revelation, but the way it is understood (or not understood, as the case may be)” (1). In my analysis, I characterise the central preoccupation of Banville’s novel (the thing that he is both inspired and limited by) as

death. Watkiss, by contrast, casts this preoccupation as ghosts. I would argue that the two have much in common. Where ghosts and death are concerned, “meaning depends upon a difference that is not accommodated for in binary oppositions”, since both exist beyond language and the play of difference and binary oppositions upon which it depends (5). As with death, “[a]rticulating the ghost depends upon reference to an opposition, but in this case, this does not exist”. She continues, “there is no specific discourse to rely on in order to articulate spectrality, and the space between two polarities is the only place the ghost belongs” (6). With such a preoccupation (be it death or ghosts) and only the means of narrative to attempt to encapsulate it, the novel traces its own fitful engagement with what will always remain beyond its capacity to represent.

Her summation of the protagonist Max Morden’s state matches my own. She writes that “[m]ourning prompts memories that are returned to by locating oneself spatially and mentally in moments that have passed” (2). I argue that his attempt to “return” to “moments that have passed” goes beyond a mere desire to occupy them “spatially” and “mentally”. He is, I contend, attempting to orchestrate a comprehensive return to times past, which is a manifestation of being in mourning. I maintain that the sea as a trope becomes a (necessarily inexact) analogue for death, or more precisely for the place that narrative cannot go: the place (or placelessness) where those he has lost have gone. His first loss of the twins by drowning makes the connection between the sea and death clear, and this connection is more obliquely constructed in relation to the loss of his wife to cancer. Quite rightly, Watkiss states that “[a]s a space, the sea is not definite; it is not contained within a particular zone. It cannot be ‘housed’, like other spaces depicted in the novel” (6). Its ‘indefiniteness’ makes it an appropriate metaphor, or even catachresis, for death. That said, I would take issue with her contention that there are spaces in the novel that exhibit the quality of being “housed” or ‘homed’. I am of the opinion that Max is systematically ‘un-homed’ within the present moment, and by extension within any space he occupies in that moment, given his compulsion to re-present the past. Watkiss reads the trope of the sea as an expression of the fluidity of Max’s memories and ‘traces’ of the dead, which he is trying to archive so as not to lose. While her argument is certainly not flawed, it is clear that we perform quite different readings of the novel.

Finally, “‘The Old Illusion of Belonging’: Distinctive Style, Bad Faith and John Banville’s *The Sea*” by Monica Facchinello attempts to engage with the novel’s mesmerising style. Her objective is to prove, “[b]y simultaneously exploring style as manner of writing and manner

of expression distinctive of its writer”, how, “in *The Sea* Banville complicates the notion of style while setting out on a new exploratory journey into the slippery realms of identity, authenticity, home and belonging” (2010: 34). She traces a trend through Banville’s other novels of their protagonists’ attempt, in their variously fractured states, to find something as coherent as authenticity, home, or identity in language. As she states, “[s]ooner or later, all his protagonists come to the same conclusion, namely that there is no such home for them to be found” (35). She quotes the novelist himself, who in an interview stated that “[t]here is no answer to these questions of identity and authenticity [...] all you can do is try to find new ways of posing the questions” (2006). While her argument is quite divergent from my own, I find her articulation of Banville’s protagonists’ language-based attempts at the impossible convincing and influential. My own argument, after all, traces Max’s *narrative*-based attempt to inhabit the past. Facchinello’s analysis examines Banville’s use of “strange equivocations of language”, “idiosyncratic expressions” and “recurrent motives”, often reading the novel as one would a poem, in order to tease out the manifold effects of the author’s stylistic innovations. While I find her project fascinating, her preoccupations with style diverge from the thematic concerns on which I focus. It is a credit to Banville’s considerable skill that his novels encourage such divergent readings.



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In sum, this thesis engages with a selection of successful fiction which has come out of Ireland in recent years. These three novels are all inspired by excess: one that inevitably exceeds their grasp. An awareness of their limits, which they each show, enables them to negotiate those limits shrewdly, and gesture beyond them. For the first two novels, the potential of gesturing beyond their limits gives them the capability of resonating beyond the confines of their respective texts, in the Irish reality in which they are situated. Banville’s text is concerned with narrative itself, and with the *art* it constitutes, which in order to continue and to be “rigorous and controlled, cool and yet passionate, without delusions”, must remain in a perpetual dance with its own limitations, in the hope of gesturing beyond them.

CHAPTER 1: SECRETS AND GRACE IN SEBASTIAN BARRY'S *THE SECRET SCRIPTURE*

Roseanne McNulty, the protagonist of Sebastian Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture*, is an inmate at the Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital, a "charitable institution for the 'healthful asylum and superior correction of wounded seats of thought'", where she has outlasted the torn papers that record her reason for being there (Barry, 2008: 16). Nearing the end of her hundred-year-long existence, she determines to collate her memories and to "write out [her] life on unwanted paper – surplus to requirements" and then, significantly, to "imprison it under the floorboard", so as to keep it secret (7). While she carries this out, her caretaker Dr Grene (the 'author' of the other first-person account in the novel) attempts to perform a formal evaluation of her in order to determine whether, as he rightly fears, she is one of the many Irish people "sectioned for social rather than medical reasons" (18). Roseanne, as it turns out, is one of the victims of Ireland's post-independence "project of national identity formation" in which "church and state fashioned a seamlessly homogenous society that closed off internal challenges and contradictions even as they represented society as pure and untainted by external corruption" (Smith, 2007a: 432). The consequence of this alliance was that "those who [did] not fit the model [were] excluded, silenced or punished" (Conrad, 2004: 3). Such individuals were often relegated to an array of church and state-run institutions, of which the now notorious Magdalen Laundries formed a part. Roseanne is one of these, and her story, which history would have occluded, is the one she writes on "unwanted paper", which can imply that it is a historically unsanctioned narrative.¹

Roseanne has no official claim to her surname "McNulty". Her marriage was annulled in order to liberate her husband, within Catholic parameters, to marry again. The knowledge that she is in fact Roseanne Clear is as secret as her testimony. Her 'label' of "Mrs McNulty", which fails to convey who she is, marks instead her absence in the official, historical version of her story, signifying her erasure from the authorised version of events. This erasure, and Roseanne's attempt to counteract it, is this chapter's primary concern. To briefly summarise the novel's events, the circumstances leading up to her sectioning begin with a marriage to Tom McNulty, whose devoutly Catholic family resent his marrying a Protestant woman. The

¹ The institution that Roseanne is sent to does not bear the name of 'Magdalen Laundry', however the reasons she is sent there and the treatment she endures while there are comparable to the circumstances that surround many women's sectioning during this time, as I explore shortly. As Dr Grene tellingly writes, "no sensitive person would choose to be the historian of the Irish asylums in the first part of the last century, with its clitoridectomies, immersions, and injections" (15).

family succeed in having the marriage annulled, after she is accused of having an extramarital affair by Fr Gaunt, the village priest (an accusation her text denies). Her account traces the years in which she lived in isolation in a hut on the outskirts of town and the intimate encounter with Tom's brother Eneas, who has been similarly tossed aside by the McNulty family. This encounter results in a child, and at the time this story is set, as far as Irish society was concerned, like "other 'undesirable elements' within [that] society, unmarried mothers were expected to be hidden away from public view" (Luddy, 2001: 798). They remained "social deviants often cast out from hearth and home" (798). Her child is taken from her, she is committed to a mental asylum, and she is made to believe that she committed infanticide.

The novel's two narrative strands are titled "Roseanne's Testimony of Herself" and "Dr Grene's Commonplace Book", respectively. The former, a 'secret testimony' is, at least initially, diametrically opposed to the other, which, again, initially, takes the form of an official assessment conducted by a psychiatrist. This assessment, in form, resembles the authoritative or 'legitimate' records, written on a different kind of paper to Roseanne's, which would have authenticated her committal to an asylum. Accordingly, Tara Harney-Mahajan argues that the official story of Roseanne is "shaped by the powerful few", and that it has become "part of the grand narrative of history" (2009: 55). Given the power of such documents, written on such 'official' paper, "her personal account, given the outcome of Irish history, would be utterly lost" (55).

Physically hidden, and further insulated by Roseanne's determined silence, as well as her societal isolation within an institution, her "personal account" assumes the form of a secret. The label "testimony", that she herself gives her writing, becomes ironic, given that it is not written to be read or publicly received in the manner of conventional testimony. Her narrative takes on the character that her life has assumed. She is hidden, and 'secret', and her portrayal of her life reflects this. As this chapter explores, secrecy characterises Roseanne's narrative. She is both subjected to it and, paradoxically, she wields it. After all, secret testimony is, by its very nature, the precise antithesis of the official version of events which Roseanne refers to as "history", which has marginalised her. Roseanne's secret testimony is therefore a counter-narrative, private instead of public, which it is most appropriate for Roseanne to produce. Instead of being laid bare and offered up for scrutiny, it is protected. Rather than being a general account that silences the unique voices of individual players, it is supremely individual. This secrecy and its implied individuality achieve a singularity, in spite of the

iterativeness implied by the written form of her testimony.² This singularity, in turn, achieves an insulated, independent and self-protected victory: her story is complete, uninterrupted and courageously voiced by the person whom the events of that story have effectively silenced.

Contrary to this secrecy, though, is the fact that Roseanne's testimony is offered up to be read. While she does not intend for her testimony to be made public, Barry constructs the novel so that its two strands of narrative, initially opposed in form, conflate at the end: Roseanne's is ultimately revealed, read, and accommodated, within Dr Grene's account. The personal and unofficial nature of Roseanne's account comes to characterise his, as a result of his own need to document his individual story. This personal and unofficial tone contrasts with his official pursuit of the 'truth' behind Roseanne's institutionalisation. The more formal pursuit is thwarted both by her secrecy as well as by the scant documentation that records what history has meant to conceal. What is required to access her secrets, it seems, is a much gentler and human approach, and an unofficial tone.

In a way, Dr Grene comes to represent the present-day attempt to write a new kind of history, which blends Ireland's secrets with its records. Unsurprisingly, he finds both of these sources of 'truth' unyielding. Ultimately, Roseanne's hidden pages are delivered to him and he holds up her version against the story told about her by the agents of history. As I explore later, our 'reading' of Roseanne's secret is mediated within the novel by the reading that Dr Grene performs of her narrative, softened as he is by his own human tragedy (the death of his wife, and that of his brother). This reading within the text – which I call an internal reading – mimics that performed by the reader of the novel. This facilitated revelation of her writing results in Roseanne's narrative being voiced: it is not silent or secret at all. Importantly, the novel is sustained by an aporia in which secrecy and revelation are caught up in an “irresolvable alternation” (Culler, 1983: 96),³ in which neither is granted transcendental authority.

My project has as its primary concern the potential and limitations of fictional narratives tasked with representing the past. This chapter addresses this concern and is held together by three threads of enquiry. First, I analyse Roseanne's attempt to write a counter-narrative to the one which resulted in her sectioning. This is achieved through a close examination of the juxtaposition of her secret version of events with the more official narrative force that Dr

² Something singular is always iterative. However the iteration never violates the core of singularity which is always secret, or hidden, or deferred, which I explore later in this chapter.

³ Jonathan Culler uses this description to characterise the fitful condition of an aporia.

Greene's narrative initially accommodates. Second, I look at the trope of secrecy in the novel so as to determine its effects. Finally, I look at what the novel requests of the reader: I explore the ways in which Roseanne's secrets are unravelled, gently, so as to preserve their small victory, and to give that victory the chance of resonating beyond the pages of the novel.

History's Leftovers

As Fintan O'Toole has observed, Barry's oeuvre is characterised by his attention to "history's leftovers, men and women defeated and discarded by their times" (O'Toole, 1997: vii). *The Secret Scripture*, as its title suggests, comprises, in part, the hidden writings of Roseanne McNulty. The title has further significance however, illustrating O'Toole's assessment. Barry lifted the phrase from the final lines of a haunting sonnet penned by Tom Kettle, a young Irish journalist, fledgling politician and soldier who died fighting for England in the First World War on 9 September 1916.⁴ Such an individual, who died for a country of which his own was simultaneously loosening the colonial shackles, would, as Liam Harte notes, be "excluded from the Irish nationalist master-narrative" (2012: 103). The sonnet, entitled "To My Daughter Betty", was written by Kettle to his infant child, whom he would never meet, days before he died. He concludes it as follows: "Know that we fools, now with the foolish dead, / Died not for flag, nor King, nor emperor, / But for a dream, born in a herdsman's shed, / And for the secret Scripture of the poor" (Kettle and Dawson, 1916). This final message of a man who was about to be forgotten by history has a great deal in common with Roseanne's. Sensing that he was about to die, as she does, he desired to pass on a version of events that countered the mainstream chronicle of what happened. He refutes the story that would characterise men like him as traitorous by stating that he did not die for flag, king or emperor, but rather for a secret scripture of his own. As a thread of Irish history which counters the characterisation of those like Tom Kettle (as servants of empire) reveals, many Irish men enlisted in the British army because this would alleviate their severe poverty.⁵ Also,

⁴ The Easter Rising took place between 24 and 30 April that year, and people like Tom Kettle, who were at the front in the name of the British, would not have fought in it. Irish history has traditionally venerated the 'heroes' who died in the Rising, however Irish men who died simultaneously for a cause that this history deems less valuable have been largely forgotten. Their heroism has certainly not been featured in Irish history to the extent of that of their Easter Rising compatriots. For more on this, see Terence Denman's book-length study on the subject, *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers: The 16th (Irish) Division in the Great War, 1914-1918* (1992).

⁵ According to Thomas P. Dooley, an Irish historian, three economic factors lead to an Irish man enlisting as a soldier for the English army in the First World War. "Firstly", he states, "the nature, type and availability of pre-war employment and the level of wages were inadequate; and his housing and general living standards were substandard. Secondly, [...] economic hardship and [...] standard of living worsened in consequence of the war. And thirdly, enlistment into the army offered immediate financial relief and also the potential for economic and social improvement" (Dooley, 1995: 103).

according to Harte, many were given to believe “that their actions would yield the dividend of Irish self-government when the war ended” (2012: 104). This less popular story, which amounts to a “*secret Scripture of the poor*” has a rather similar purpose to that of Roseanne: to give voice to those who have routinely been rendered voiceless. Barry has written about a collection of similar characters to Kettle in his 2005 novel *A Long Long Way*. In an interview, he stresses the importance of lifting those like Roseanne and Tom Kettle out of the obscurity to which they have been relegated within Irish history:

I'm afraid of the damage that is caused by not speaking of people like Roseanne, the unmentioned first wife, like so many families' old uncle Jacks who died in the first world war fighting for England. I'm concerned these silences leave a gap in yourself which then leaves a gap in your children and can ultimately lead to a hole in the country's sense of itself. Ireland's history is so much more rich, exciting, varied and complicated than we had realised. What I'm trying to do is gather in as much as I can. It's not to accuse, it is just to state that it is so.

(Wroe, 2008: 13)

Due to statements such as these, Barry has been classified by Harte, among others, as part of the “revisionist strand of Irish historical and cultural discourse” (2012: 104). Barry's assertion that he is trying to “gather as much as [he] can” of what history has silenced, or simply left out, is a contentious one, given that the final product of this research is fiction, which conventionally makes no claim to the status of ‘truth’. Addressing this, Harney-Mahajan, who has traced the resonances of the Magdalen Laundries in *The Secret Scripture*, stresses the important role played by what she terms “cultural representations” that concern themselves with recuperating lost stories, of which Barry's fiction undoubtedly forms a part. She states that such representations “remind the public of the existence of these women – an existence that ‘history’ [...] would rather forget” (59). The laundries were institutions run by nuns for women guilty of what James M Smith, one of the authorities on the subject, terms “that peculiarly Irish sin, perceived sexual immorality” (2007b: 431). Roseanne, as the novel reveals, was sectioned for what Fr Gaunt (the priest who investigates or quite possibly fabricates the official version of her tale) calls “nymphomania” (181).⁶ As Smith laments, “the Magdalen laundry exists in the public mind chiefly at the level of *story* (cultural representation and survivor testimony) rather than history (archival records and documentation)” (Smith, 2007b: 433). Harney-Mahajan and Smith both note that official records from these institutions have, rather distressingly, never been released to the public.

⁶ The brutal irony here is that she is essentially imprisoned for perceived sexual sin, only to be sexually assaulted in the mental asylum to which she is sent.

Imaginative reconstructions of the stories of lost women, like Barry's, take on a significance under these circumstances, which he articulates above as having untold importance for the health of the country. The effect of the "silences" in history, as he notes, is to "leave a gap in yourself which then leaves a gap in your children and can ultimately lead to a hole in the country's sense of itself". These gaps and holes can be understood to be the placeholders of secrets that have not formed a part of Ireland's official history. While their content is not known, they are absences with enough presence to puncture the nation's "sense of itself". In spite of the fictional nature of Barry's novels, he here articulates their significance. And while the realities of institutions like the Magdalen laundry continue to "exist [...] chiefly at the level of *story*", fiction (whose form is equipped to relay story) will play an invaluable role in informing the public mind.

Again, Dr Grene's role, in which he straddles the uncomfortable divide between individual testimony and formal documentation (or the lack thereof), symbolises a larger project. Historical rehabilitation of this kind, and the approximations it requires, inevitably cast it into the realm of fiction. Grene observes that the "one thing that is fatal in the reading of impromptu history is a wrongful desire for accuracy. There is no such thing" (225). Harney-Mahajan pauses briefly to wonder whether Barry might "[take] on too much, however, in insisting on representing that which remains hidden from the public at large" (59). I consider her reservation valid, although in light of the sheer lack of official documentation, as well as the way in which the 'paper' we do have access to is obviously complicit in a broader story the fledgling nation was trying to construct about itself, I believe that fiction has an invaluable role to play. Harney-Mahajan herself remarks:

If and when the records relating to incarcerated women are released into the public domain, Barry's novel will continue to remind us that the official archive is only one version of the story. A vacuum of information will remain around the stories of the women that are no longer alive or did not survive their incarceration.

(63)

In another interview, Barry discusses the inspiration for the character of Roseanne, which he drew from an excavation of his own family's history, and the obscured existence of one of his great-aunts:

I first heard about her in about 1989 (I was 34). I was driving with my mother through Strandhill, a little seaside place in Sligo. We passed a ruined hut with a stone chimney, and she said "That's where your woman was put". I asked, which woman? My mother didn't know her name, but said that she had been the piano player in the band that used to play there in the Plaza dancehall. She had married my mother's

uncle, and then been considered ‘no good’ in some fashion, and was eventually committed to Sligo Mental Hospital, where indeed her father-in-law was the tailor. My mother thought her real crime had been ‘beauty’.

(Rochester, 2008)

Barry duplicated these scant circumstances in his novel. Inevitably though, the construction of the story that takes place between the circumstances is a fiction. The power to ‘write’ their stories has not conventionally been afforded women like Roseanne, who lived and often died in institutions like Sligo Mental Hospital. Their stories, presently, take the form of secrets (of holes and gaps), which haunt the public imagination of a contemporary Ireland, whose awareness of their existence, thanks to fictions like Barry’s, is growing.⁷ Barry replicates the circumstances of these women with care, and through imaginative writing, he affords Roseanne the historically denied opportunity to write her story. Near the beginning of her testimony, she makes the following observation:

The terror and hurt in my story happened because when I was young I thought others were the authors of my fortune or misfortune; I did not know that a person could hold up a wall made of imaginary bricks and mortar against the horrors and cruel, dark tricks of time that assail us, and be the author therefore of themselves.

(7)

From the onset, she titles her writing “my story”, and thus claims it as her own. The version of events she narrates is cut off from the influence of generalised “others” who would impose their version. The power of the grand narrative authored by these “others”, to which Roseanne has fallen victim, is later described by her as a great arc that reached over her head, over which she had no authority. “There are things that move at a human pace before our eyes”, she observes, “but other things move in arcs so great they are as good as invisible” (48–9). Great arcs, of which Ireland’s nationalist project is a prime example, were “as good as invisible” to Roseanne, and they swept up over her head, reached the ground before she did, and predetermined the path she would be obliged to take. The form this arc took was a grander story that Irish nation builders were constructing. Smith characterises the post-independence era in Ireland’s history as “emphasizing the repressive aspects of the Irish condition, the stifling eradication of individuality in the face of an indomitable church and

⁷ The Magdalen laundries have featured in several other works of fiction, notably Patricia Burke Brogan’s *Eclipsed* (1994) and Marita Conlon-McKenna’s *The Magdalen* (1999). Several films have been made too, including the critically acclaimed *The Magdalene Sisters*, directed by Peter Mullan in 2002, *Washing Away the Stain*, directed by Sarah Barclay and Andrea Miller in 1993 and *Witness: Sex in a Cold Climate*, directed by Steve Humphries in 1998. (Films are listed in the works cited under the names of their directors.)

state politics, and the relentless but often arbitrary cruelty that enforced social conformity” (Smith, 2007a: 433). A nation-wide imperative to enforce “social conformity” at the expense of “individuality” came about as a result of the nation attempting to tell a reductive, unifying story, unhindered by the vagaries of individuality.

A nuanced articulation of the inextricably bound forces of narration and nation building (such as defined post-independence Ireland) can be found in Homi K. Bhabha’s introduction to *Nation and Narration*:

the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force. This is not to deny the attempt by nationalist discourses persistently to produce the idea of the nation as a continuous narrative of national progress [...].

(1990: 1)

Implicit in his argument is the notion that nation building is complicit with a process of authoring and authorising certain versions of history – that the nation is, in some sense, created by a “symbolic force”. What Bhabha calls “a continuous narrative of national progress” will, in service of its need for a “continuous”, linear and unitary narrative of progression, silence contradictory voices. Indeed, it will write over, or simply omit, those strands that do not serve the arc of the nation’s constructed narrative. Roseanne, and the marginalised women she represents, are among those victimised by the violent linearity of this arc. They are the people that history silences and omits in the name of “nation”.

In response to a story of this magnitude, so grand that it is “invisible” from Roseanne’s perspective, she ensures that her own telling of her life is just as invisible: it is secret, and therefore in no danger of vying with grand narratives, and of being overpowered by them. While her testimony is secret, though, it can claim equivalence in form to the arc that reaches over her head, in that they both exist at the level of story.⁸ Interestingly, Roseanne’s life (and the story she writes of it) forms something of an arc of her own: Barry has imagined the unlikely circumstance that a woman as vulnerable and as marginalised as her has been

⁸ Hayden White, amongst others, has discussed that fiction and historical discourse are identical in form, that is, they take the form of narrative. In his book *The content of the form: Narrative discourse and historical representation*, he argues that modern historical writing is implicated in an act of translating facts and dates, and that these factual aspects have to take on a narrative form. According to White, “[t]he transition is effected by a displacement of the facts onto the ground of literary fictions or, what amounts to the same thing, the projection onto the facts of the plot structure of one or another of the genres of literary figuration” (1987: 47). As he later continues, “the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth” (57).

preserved for a century, and that her life has extended for long enough to outlast those who determined its path in service of post-independence Irish tyranny of sexual conduct.

Roseanne herself observes: “[o]f course this is the fate of most souls, reducing entire lives, no matter how vivid and wonderful, to those sad black names on withering family trees, with half a date dangling after and a question mark” (13). A recording of someone’s name with two dates underneath it, rather than the indeterminacy of the question mark, is considered to be complete: their whole “vivid and wonderful life” is bracketed and contained within a “sad black [name]”, and two dates. A death, then, completes a life, as far as the historical text is concerned. Furthermore, a black name is malleable in that it can be overwritten, or simply erased. This summation of a life, a name and its dates, is contrary to what we may consider a ‘complete’ life to be; however the indeterminacy of a question mark may do more justice to the vividness and wonder that exceed history’s narration.⁹

Roseanne’s life has not yet come to an end. Even history, and its violent reductions, is obliged to insert the indeterminacy of a question mark after her black name. She uses the last of her life to attempt to fill that indeterminacy with, it bears repeating, a secret testimony. At its most reductive, history will record the date of her death and will consider it, preceded by the date of her birth, a narration of her life. The nation’s narrative moves on with its summaries, omissions and full stops. Her (secret) counter-narrative, which accounts for a little more of the wonder of her life, will, unbeknownst to history, (secretly) occupy the indeterminate space taken up by the hyphen between the dates.

We must not forget that the authors of the narrative to which Roseanne has been subjected, who she calls the “authors of [her] fortune or misfortune” (those who would be authorised to place her name, date of birth and ultimately her date of death in the official records), have signed their summations of her life, and published them in the form of her literal incarceration. So, while both narratives exist on the level of story, she describes the very real effects of the tale these authors wrote down as “terror” and “hurt” (7). Here lies the primary difference between her arc, or story, and the invisible one she describes: the latter has the power to condemn and to harm. Her version, in line with it being antithetical to the official one, is characterised by an absence of power. Her retrospective telling in which she is the

⁹The first line of the novel reads “[t]he world begins anew with every birth, my father used to say. He forgot to say, with every death it ends” (7). Her father “forgot” to say this, because the completion, “end” and reduction a life undergoes as far as history is concerned when a person dies was probably something as invisible to him as the arcs of which Roseanne speaks.

“author [...] of [her]self”, while told from her perspective and furnished with her previously silenced voice, is pervaded by the ever-present inevitability of her institutionalisation: her life’s unavoidable destination (7). Add to this that she is penning her story very near the end of her life, when any revelations it may contain do not have the ability to alter her story’s outcome. At one point, just before she writes of her younger self being caught by the village priest talking to a man who was not her husband (the action which spelt her undoing), she poignantly calls out to her younger self in a futile attempt to undo the inevitable: “Roseanne, Roseanne, if I called to you now, my own self calling to my own self, would you hear me? And if you could hear me, would you heed me?” (154).

The powerlessness of her account is paradoxical, however. She has found an ability to speak on her own behalf – in writing, and (strange as it may be) in secrecy. While this is not ‘power’ in that it has no ability to change her circumstances, it is something that is exclusively her own, which is significant, given that almost everything has been taken from her. This ability is a resistance against those with power, and the narratives they have constructed. Like her deceased father’s battered copy of Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* that she has kept with her, her personal history, and her version of that history (however battered) is still hers. She responds to Dr Grene’s query about whether she reads anymore with the statement, “I cannot read as well as I used to. I read Thomas Browne, but then I know the writing off by heart mostly” (95). Significantly, she does not read anything other than her own ragged volume, which illustrates her isolation from other narratives. Her own one, which she knows “off by heart” is cut off from those narratives. To know something off by heart is to need no external reminder or prompt to be able to reproduce it. Roseanne has closed herself off from external influences, and she keeps what she knows.

The construction of “imaginary bricks and mortar against the cruel dark tricks of time” would appear not to have protected her. They constitute, rather, the boundary that she has created between herself and the outside world, behind which she writes her story. The nature of this boundary is complex however. It may be a product of her imagination that she uses to shield her story, yet this boundary has a real-world parallel in the walls that cut her off from the world in which she might have lived. Much like the irresolvable alternation that the novel sustains between secrecy and revelation, another is sustained between self-imposed protection, and isolation imposed by others. “[I]maginary bricks and mortar” may also be Barry’s little insertion of his own contribution to Roseanne’s story, and to the stories of those

like her. ‘Imaginary’ constructions, fictions in this case, have an ability to *house* the stories of those that history forgets.

From within her own complex construction of “imaginary bricks and mortar”, Roseanne devotes a substantial percentage of her testimony to memorialising her father, Joseph Clear, a Presbyterian gravedigger and an ex-police sergeant in the Royal Irish Constabulary (or RIC). Presbyterians were, during the early parts of the last century, the equivalent of an “ethnic minority”, according to John Coakley, in his article on religion and national identity in Ireland (2002: 5). The RIC was a sub-section of the population that was routinely hunted and shot during the tenuous period Roseanne found herself as a child.¹⁰ To be born into a family with such a father, and a mother who it is revealed succumbed to insanity, would have provided Roseanne with a position in the world already undermined by uncertainty. Both of her parents presented strains of story that the Irish grand narrative was beginning to exclude. Before I trace her father’s preservation in her narrative, it is worth noting that her mother recedes, gradually, within the same account. Approximately midway through the novel she remarks, “I am looking for my mother in these memories, and I cannot find her. She has simply disappeared” (124). It is later revealed that her mother suffered a fate similar to that of Roseanne: that she was committed to and that she died in what was then called the “Sligo Lunatic Asylum” (30). When Roseanne herself is committed to the institution, she asks in her distress to see her mother, to which the reply is “[y]ou cannot see her, no one can see her, she is beyond seeing” (214). Cissy Clear is characterised in both of these extracts as invisible, which she is, as far as history is concerned. The family surname “Clear” takes on new significance, in that those who bear it are doomed to suffer from a kind of transparency, or irrelevance. That Roseanne’s preservation of her father appears to come at the expense of any preservation of her mother illustrates that there are many stories that have receded irretrievably into the abyss of Ireland’s forgotten history. Perhaps it is these stories, albeit irretrievable, that would bring greater ‘clarity’ to a sense of national history. Such clarity, it should not be forgotten, is also connoted by the surname “Clear”.

The tattered but determinedly preserved copy of *Religio Medici*, a gift to Roseanne from her father, is an external marker of the determination with which she preserves his memory. It is

¹⁰ In an article titled “The Problems of Disbandment: The Royal Irish Constabulary and Imperial Migration, 1919–29”, Kent Fedorowich summarises the events of this period in Irish history, in which the I.R.A. and British security forces (the Royal Irish Constabulary) clashed in Ireland’s vying for independence. “When the truce between the British government and Sinn Fein was implemented in July 1921”, he states, “405 policemen had been killed and 682 wounded” (1996: 90–91).

a relic which she eventually gives Dr Grene to give to the son she had before she was institutionalised (who it turns out, in the novel's rather criticised ending,¹¹ is Dr Grene himself). She seems to have given the book the designation of symbolising her family's untold history, which, thanks to Barry's generous authorial intervention, is passed on to the next generation in her family. Appropriately, Browne's book was banned in Ireland, having been classified as "prohibited reading for Catholics", which formed part of the Papal "Index Librorum Prohibitorum" (Comyn, 1969: 42). The book was therefore filled with writing that could not be read, much like Roseanne's secret scripture. This banning and exclusion was inevitably due to the unorthodox nature of Browne's thought. Contradictions of this kind would have had to be censored in Ireland, in which anything that countered the unifying story the nation was constructing was not permitted to exist.

An Internal Reading of Those who Embarrass History

It is my contention that Roseanne's preservation of her father is a small-scale replication of what the novel asks of the reader. In her narrative, stories that he himself told are faithfully relayed. Important to note is that many of his stories are outlandish, ridiculous, and difficult to believe.¹² For this reason, they would certainly not feature in the grand narrative that Roseanne is writing against. The novel, which accommodates her own stories (and his, through her), is attempting, it seems, an act of preservation of its own. Further to this, what the plot of the two intertwined narratives results in is a safeguarding of Roseanne's own *Religio Medici*, or secret scripture, by Dr Grene, who ultimately reads and decides not to pass judgement on or to dismiss her personal account. What his 'internal reading' simulates is the reader's own engagement with the book, and his act of acceptance and belief (regardless of her text's inconsistencies and doubts) is present to guide our reception of her story.

The preservation of story within story seems then to be the business of the novel. The survival of her father's memory is contingent on his proclivity for anecdotes and story-telling, which, she asserts "keeps him now alive in me, like a second more patient and more pleasing soul within my poor soul" (13). As she recalls, he found stories to be "a reward to him for

¹¹ Harney-Mahajan notes, for example, the reservations of the prestigious Costa Prize selection committee, who "found it necessary to object to the conclusion" (55). Although the novel was awarded the prize, the chair of the awards panel stated that the judges "agreed that it was flawed, and almost no one liked the ending, which was", he claimed, "almost fatal to its success" (Jeffries, 2009). I discuss the novel's unlikely ending towards the end of this chapter.

¹² One of his stories from his youth has him meeting an "Indian gentleman who sold scarves and other items" from his motorbike (15). He characterises the man as "The Indian Angel" because, according to his account, the man sprouted wings and flew over a wall he was about to collide with (15).

being alive, a little gift of narrative that pleased him so much it conferred on himself, in dreams and in waking, a sense of privilege, as if such little scraps of stories and events composed for him a ragged gospel” (13). The sacred status her father affords narrative is something that Roseanne has internalised. Just as she *reads* his copy of *Religio Medici*, she reads his narratives (although, external reading is no longer necessary, given that she has read them so often that she knows them “off by heart”). Her reading is taken up (or inherited) by her son Dr Grene, and in reading the novel, the reader is appended to that lineage.

“It is funny”, Roseanne declares, “but it strikes me that a person without anecdotes that they nurse while they live, and that survive them, are more likely to be utterly lost not only to history but the family following them” (13). She here distinguishes between the oblivion associated with being lost to “history” and that of being lost to “the family following” a person. The grand narrative of a nation (that is, its history) should ideally comprise smaller arcs of individual lineages (although in actuality, it is often generated in opposition to these), in which stories get passed down from generation to generation. Yet, Roseanne’s own lineage is one that, as I have already observed, barely features in Ireland’s grander history. To illustrate this, Barry places her along what is characterised as a lineage of absence: her father, the gravedigger whom she fondly labels the “titular custodian of the dead” is also called the “king of absences” (35). Her mother is rendered invisible, and Roseanne herself is “a thing left over, a remnant woman”, and a trace awaiting imminent death and the reduction that that implies (8). Her child, “that tiny person vanished from the space he should have occupied” forms an absence that follows her (213).¹³ The novel’s generous stroke is that the final absence in the line is no longer an absence. Dr Grene is the “tiny person vanished from the space he should have occupied” and he has now returned in order to ensure that while his mother may indeed be lost to history, she is not lost to the “family following” her.

To return to her rendering of her father’s “ragged gospel”, the unease in her account is muted by her persistent adoration of him; a jolly, often foolish man, whose awkward bulk, unlikely tall tales and failures she accommodates gracefully within her narrative:

¹³ Eneas McNulty, Tom’s shamed brother, is the father of her child. Before she is institutionalised she is relegated to the seaside hut that Barry reconstructs from what he knows about his great aunt’s story. It is here that they meet, having both been exiled from Irish society (he as a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary, she as a woman of perceived promiscuity). When she asks him why he is there, he responds: “I’m not really here”, and qualifies this with “I shouldn’t be here, and I should be gone shortly” (192). This inverted moment in which they disobediently inhabit space they ought not to results in the conception of a child. It is this, her ultimate disobedience, which results in her sectioning.

My father loved the world and his fellow humans in it, without much reservation on his part, considering as a good Presbyterian must that all souls are equally assailed, and hearing in the rough laughter of the cornerboy a kind of essential explanation of life, and thereby a redemption of it, in fact believing that since God had created everything, so everything by him must be approved, and also that the devil's own tragedy is *he* is author of nothing and architect of empty spaces.

(54, original emphasis)

This description of her father's character casts him as a concentration of quite exceptional love and acceptance of his "fellow humans", which is remarkable, given his suffering at their hands. The notion she claims he nursed, that "all souls are equally assailed", would appear to have been summarily contradicted by the history that omits his life, and 'assails' him in a manner markedly different from that with which it assails his "fellow humans".¹⁴ She seems to outline the doctrine of his "ragged gospel" above, within her own 'secret scripture' and she invests a faith in him that pervades her narrative. The religious language used to frame both his story and her own is ironic, given that it was the blurring of lines between state governance and church doctrine that led to the suffering in both of their lives.

The binary she establishes between "God" and "the devil" is paralleled with that between presence and absence. God "created everything", and the inversion of this is the devil's domain. The evil that befalls Roseanne is that her existence undergoes an erasure: she becomes a "nothing" relegated to one of the devil's "empty spaces". Amidst the nothingness of her societal placing, though, she realises that the binaries of good and evil, and presence and absence, prove not to be so simple. Herein lies the significance of the irony generated by the religious language in her account. The realm of 'presence', or of those permitted legitimately to occupy society, is constructed as God's domain. That said, the parameters of what is meant by 'God' as well as what is required by Him in order to be counted as 'present' has been set by Ireland's branch of the Catholic Church. Her scripture and her father's gospel constitute counter-currents to the official version of presence, which is why history counts them as absent. Roseanne has inadvertently discovered, though, that there is agency in absence and validity in what exists within "empty spaces", or at least within those that are perceived to be empty. These too can have scriptures, and sacred things. Her narrative, from an outsider's perspective (an outsider from whom her scripture would historically have been

¹⁴ When looking for documental evidence of Joseph Clear's existence, Dr Grene notes the unlikelihood that "such arcana survive" (204). He doubts whether "anyone would have bothered to protect them if they had. The Free State army, trying to bomb the irregulars out of the Four Courts in Dublin, burned almost every civil record to ashes [...] wiping out the records of the very nation they were trying to give new life to, actually burning memory in its boxes" (204).

kept secret), is the result of her being an “author of nothing”, because she is “a thing left over, a remnant woman”, a ‘nothing’ (8). She hides her writings in a place that is, ostensibly, an “empty space”. From within this realm, secret to the world beyond, she writes a narrative containing a tribute to her father, whom she elevates as the “the king of absences” (35).

When Dr Grene asks why Roseanne refuses to see the asylum’s resident priest (or any cleric for that matter) she says “I don’t like the religious [...] they are so certain about things” (153). This ‘certainty’, which has had catastrophic effects on her life, does not feature in her secret testimony. Such certainty is of the variety that would have constructed simple and rigid binaries like God and the devil, sexual purity and impurity, presence and absence. Her narrative is rather shot through with uncertainties and regular confessions of “I don’t know” (165). The certainty of Fr Gaunt, the priest responsible for her undoing, is described by her as “a force unknown, like a calamity of weather waiting unknown and un-forecast to bedevil a landscape” (82). Ironically, the certainty of someone like Fr Gaunt generates uncertainty in Roseanne: he is “a force unknown”. What she writes here is perhaps a more accurate description of a character like him, in spite of her uncertainty. The power he wields is the kind that “bedevil[s] a landscape”. A landscape could be understood to represent one of the spaces created by God, or within the parameters of the binaries discussed above, it could be one of the spaces in which one’s right to be ‘present’ is predetermined by one’s conformity to a particular ideal of what it is to be ‘Godly’. The priest *bedevils* such a space, and brings to it what Roseanne (quite rightly) perceives to be a kind of evil. She here problematises the simplicity of the binary according to which someone like him would have lived. Dr Grene later reads the account written by Fr Gaunt of Roseanne’s life and notes that “he betrays at every stroke an intense hatred if not of women, then of the sexuality of women, or sexuality in general. For him it is the devil’s cloak and hood, whereas for me, it is a sort of saving grace of being alive” (187). This illustrates the fundamental difference between the kind of narrative Fr Gaunt has written, and that written by Dr Grene. The former is implicated in a grand narrative *constructing* female sexuality as evil, indeed, as “the devil’s cloak and hood”. Dr Grene, while his account will be considered ‘official’, is less invested in patriarchal constructions of this kind which contribute to nation building. He writes, rather, from his individual experience and personal conviction. I’m sure it is no coincidence that what turns out to be his own mother’s sexuality is what he inadvertently terms a “saving grace of being alive”. Were she not ‘guilty’ of ‘sin’ of this nature, he would not be alive.

A pivotal scene in Roseanne's account, which features Fr Gaunt at his most fearsome and begins her father's undoing, occurs when she is twelve years old. The Irish civil war,¹⁵ which forms the threatening backdrop to the first stage of her story, results in three young men dragging the body of their fallen comrade onto the cemetery, where she and her father have delayed at the end of a day. She is dispatched to fetch Fr Gaunt to legitimise the haphazard burial. The young men, excommunicated by the church due to their ill-chosen loyalty, are accosted by the Church-endorsed Free Staters when Roseanne and the small, neat priest return. The outcasts' leader, Willie Lavelle, accuses her of betraying them as he is led off to be executed (he subsequently escapes and re-enters her story. He is the man to whom she is found speaking alone, which leads to her marriage being annulled on the basis of "nymphomania"). Her father's unfortunate historical positioning makes him an unwitting central player in this microcosm of the war. Amidst the collected dead in the graveyard, effortlessly representative of the accumulated dead of the war, are the two factions: the Free Staters and the irregulars, the church (represented by the priest), and the collateral damage, in the form of Roseanne and her father. He makes a clumsy attempt to perform his function as gravedigger within the altered setting, the product of a historical shift, which renders his duty an offence. "I think it was that my father embarrassed history", she writes, in an attempt to understand the forces that undid him (49). Her subsequent scepticism of the official account, expressed by her determined efforts to exclude hers from its stream, might be traced back to this moment, and "belligerent history[']s" violent exclusion of her father (94).

In the wake of the messy burial, Fr Gaunt expresses his strong disapproval at having been drawn into the affair, and makes swift and neat retribution by demoting her father from the "titular custodian of the dead" to the village rat catcher (35). It is significant that one man is responsible for the undoing of both Roseanne and her father. This is because Fr Gaunt represents the common force with which they both had to contend, and which in turn overwhelmed them both. When she writes that her father "embarrassed history", what she is describing is the embarrassment he caused Fr Gaunt. The priest is made to symbolise history, or he is at least characterised as one of its most powerful agents. In one of the novel's more heart-rending passages, Joseph Clear attempts to overcome the humiliation of his demotion

¹⁵ The Irish Civil War took place between 28 June 1922 and 24 May 1923. The war resulted in the establishment of an Irish Free State, independent from the British Empire. The factions were two opposed groups of Irish nationalists: the Free Staters and the Republican opposition (labelled in the novel as "the irregulars"). The former group supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which came out of Ireland's war of independence, whereas the latter were against it. The Free Staters won the war. For more on this, see Senia Pašeta's *Modern Ireland: A Very Short Introduction* (2003).

by resolving to look in the library for a “rat catcher’s manual”, which he hopes will acquaint him with the skills his new job requires (53). The unlikelihood of his finding such a document is raised by Roseanne, who even at her young age knows that the job is too menial and insignificant to have been written about (and so too, by extension, are those who perform it). Astoundingly though, he does find such a document (it is written by “a pseudonymous author, Rattus Rattus” [56]), and this is perhaps suggestive of his narrative being diminished, but not yet entirely extinguished by the history he has embarrassed.

Secret Testimony

I turn shortly to Roseanne’s account of the events that do ‘extinguish’ her father, although in order further to articulate the secrecy as well as the chasms and absences in it, I make reference to Jacques Derrida’s *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, a companion lecture to Maurice Blanchot’s short piece of prose, or *recit*, *The Instant of my Death* (2000). Before I turn to Roseanne’s text, I explore Derrida’s notions of secrecy and singularity, and most importantly, secret testimony. Derrida’s lecture is a response to the account of the instant in which a man is “prevented from dying by death itself” in Blanchot’s semi-autobiographical narrative (3). The analysis of this ‘unanalysable’ instant proliferates and what Derrida discusses in his essay, or rather circumnavigates, is a pure singularity, a secret that is an “unexperienced experience”, a *core* of effective silence that cannot be testified to: cannot be “render[ed] public” by any gesture of representation (31).

Derrida ties his conception of “testimony” to an “instant” and to a “secret”. He follows this collation of ideas and asks whether a “secret testimony” is possible (30). In such a case, the one who testifies attests to something to which they alone bear witness. Their perspective is singular, and the possibility of that singularity being confirmed by another in the place of the testifier does not exist. “Testimony is always autobiographical”, writes Derrida, “it tells, in the first person, the shareable and unshareable secret of what happened to me, to me alone, the absolute secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense, feel” (43). The singularity results in the impossibility of a precise replication (no two perspectives can occupy the same viewpoint simultaneously), a condition which, in turn, presents the possibility of a fault, a perjury or a lie. The “truth” of a testimony is thus contingent on an act of faith in order to be believed. In this regard, one may recall Roseanne’s faith in her father’s “ragged gospel”, and the subsequent faith Dr Grene invests in her own ‘secret scripture’.

The “instant” of the experience being testified to has passed and cannot be recreated. Derrida suggests that this possibility of fiction is not simply accidental, but is indeed what allows for the possibility of testimony: “there is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction”. He goes on to say that “if testimony [...] became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature” (29–30).

Further to this, Derrida explores the possibility of a secret testimony, which, as I have suggested, is fundamental to this study of *The Secret Scripture*. He tests the critical possibility of “testifying to a secret, attesting to there being some secret without revealing the heart of the secret [...] that there is here a secret that one cannot not keep: the avowal of a secret having remained secret” (31). In light of this possibility, it is my assertion that Roseanne’s secret scripture – an inseparable blend of fiction, lies, truth and secrets – finds accommodation within a capsule of silence. The “truth” Roseanne aspires to in her testimony is liberated from the constraints and conditions, the judgements and censure, it would face in the realm of society by its capacity to be kept secret. Within this capsule, or core of secrecy, Roseanne seeks to pen a singularity: a narrative in which it will be impossible to prove “that a perjury or lie has taken place”. It is here that she writes her secret testimony, where she “[testifies] to a secret, attesting to there being some secret without revealing the heart of the secret” (31).

Derrida’s argument about the temporal conditions of testimony in *Demeure* provides an especially revealing strategy for exploring the conceptual layers that obscure, silence, hide and even protect Roseanne’s “testimony of herself”:

By tying testimony both to the secret and to the instant, by saying at this very instant *at this very instant*, I would like to announce a singular testimonial alliance of the secret and the instant, namely, that which, in the indivisible unicity of the instant, is temporalized without being temporalized *permanently* [à demeure].

(30–1, original emphasis)

Although her testimony spans a vast deal more than an “instant”, it retains the character of one by being “temporalized without being temporalized *permanently*”. It exists within her elected silence, within a perceptibly “empty space” and therefore has no *present* ties to the social context in which the events it describes initially occurred. Her endeavour to reclaim her story is an act of resistance against the “cruel, dark tricks of time” to which she initially

falls victim. To be cut off from history is what she intends for her narrative to be. Her scripture, the isolated product of her being “the author [of herself]”, must remain secret, and separate from the realm of anything shared and contemporaneous, in order to achieve its defiance. Her life’s plot, told by others before her, and ostensibly complete in the totality of its power to condemn her, lacks what only she can give it. She tells what is, paradoxically, a silent story: the companion-text that the official version lacked before, which was precisely a silence: her unspoken completion of it. Important to note, however, is that her secret testimony is not obliged to be ‘complete’ in the way that historical texts are. She admits:

there are ‘memories’ in my head that are curious even to me. I would not like to have to say this to Dr Grene. Memory, I must suppose, if it is neglected becomes like a box room, or a lumber room in an old house, the contents jumbled about, maybe not only from neglect but also from too much haphazard searching in them, and things to boot thrown in that don’t belong there. I certainly suspect – well, I don’t know what I certainly suspect. It makes me a little dizzy to contemplate the possibility that everything I remember may not be – may not be real, I suppose. There was so much turmoil at that time that – that what? I took refuge in other impossible histories, in dreams, in fantasies? I don’t know.

But if I put my faith in certain memories, perhaps they will serve as stepping stones, and I will cross the torrent of ‘times past’, without being plunged entirely into it.

(165)

The secrecy of her testimony is what sets it at liberty: it is under no obligation to be contextualised, and for its singularity to be eroded by the official generality of contemporaneous narratives, which claim to share the position of perspective and therefore have a claim to her story. The cost of this secrecy however is that she has no way of knowing whether her memory, which she describes as a “lumber room in an old house” with jumbled contents, is populated with things “that don’t belong there”. Her isolation, which is the very thing that enables her to produce a singularity, is also what has cut her off from the outside world, and from the confirmation she might have had were she to compare stories with those who shared her experiences. This isolation, which exists in conjunction with her secrecy, is paradoxically both limiting and enabling. The things “thrown in” to her memory may describe the products of the traumatic experiences she has sustained amidst this isolation, which have of course been kept secret from the public: this illustrates how both seclusion and secrecy have been manners in which she has been victimised. The enabling aspect of her secrecy is illustrated when she describes the writing of her ‘secret scripture’ as *taking* “refuge

in other impossible histories, in dreams, in fantasies”, and therefore finding agency where there conventionally is none.

Her testimony is haunted with the possibility of “impossible histories”, “dreams” and “fantasies”, yet she determines to “put [her] faith” in “certain memories” to which she does testify in order to avoid the oblivion she equates with being plunged into “times past”.

Derrida articulates the act of faith that testimony requires in order to be believed, calling testimony “unbelievable, [...] insofar as all testimony essentially appeals to a certain system of belief, to faith without proof” (49). Testimony is “unbelievable” and relies on an act of faith to be believed because we testify from a singular position that cannot be reproduced. Importantly, Roseanne provides the ‘belief’ necessary to authenticate her account herself.

Having been cut off from the belief, or indeed the possibility of being believed by anyone else, she provides what her testimony needs from within the capsule of her secrecy. Late in the novel Dr Grene pens his regret at not having helped her and having let her continue within the confines of his asylum unjustly, but he does recognise the small triumph of her secret testimony: “[a]ll the time I might have helped her, all those years she was here, I had more or less left her alone”, he writes, although, as he continues, “she has helped herself, she has spoken to, listened to, herself. It is a victory” (238).

I return now to the presence of the possibility of fiction in Roseanne’s testimony, which is, as Derrida argues, the condition of possibility for testimony to begin with. He describes the necessary haunting of testimony by fiction, a haunting that is:

an impossible limit. Untenable. This limit permanently [...] swears testimony to secrecy; it enjoins testimony to remain [...] secret, even where it makes manifest and public. I can only testify, in the strict sense of the word, from the instant when no one can, in my place, testify to what I do. What I testify to is, at that very instant, my secret; it remains reserved for me.

(30)

The purity of the instant Derrida describes, when “no one can, in [her] place, testify to what [she does]”, is a purity that Roseanne attempts to stretch over her entire narrative, by keeping it hidden. Although even when it is read, as it is (both by Dr Grene and the reader), it retains the character of secrecy in that it “remains reserved” for only Roseanne. It is her story, written from her singular perspective, and it will remain thus, regardless of who reads it. This is one of the ways in which her “victory”, as Dr Grene calls it, is preserved, even when it is exposed to the world and hence the more powerful narratives constructing her social context.

An example of the kind of singularity that retains the secrecy of being reserved for only Roseanne is to be found near the beginning of her testimony. She recalls a younger self, now quite separate from the one who remembers, being taken to a tower by her father who, “in a fit of educating enthusiasm”, desires to show his daughter that hammers and feathers fall at the same rate. “All things fall at the same rate”, he says, “in the realm of theory. And I will prove it to you. I will prove it to myself” (21). Such a “realm of theory” requires a vacuum, in which the falling objects encounter no resistance, are acted upon by equal measures of gravity, and are immune to passing whims of wind. Naturally, his experiment is doomed to fail. Directed to view what is to unfold from below, Roseanne, from the limits of her isolated perspective, begins to see what she will continue to see for the remainder of her life:

Standing on the ground I was a child on a precipice, that was the feeling, like that scene in the old play *King Lear* where the king’s friend imagines he is falling down a beetling cliff, where there is no cliff, so that when you read it, you also think there is a cliff, and fall with the king’s friend. But I peered up faithfully, faithfully, lovingly, lovingly. It is no crime to love your father, it is no crime to feel no criticism of him, and especially so when I knew him into my early womanhood or nearly, when a child tends to grow disappointed in her parents. It is no crime to feel your heart beating up to him, or as much of him as I could see, his arm now stuck out the little window, and the bag held suspended in the Irish air.

(22)

This description foreshadows what the novel ultimately reveals, the secret her account contains, which amounts to its perjury: the secret that not even her secret testimony contains (something that, given its traumatic nature, possibly remains secret from even Roseanne herself, and is what Derrida calls an “unexperienced experience” [2000: 31]).¹⁶ As a girl, she stood below the building in which her father’s “curious and protracted death” took place, as a result of his affiliation with the RIC. Roseanne never acknowledges that her father was a part

¹⁶ Much of the work of Cathy Caruth (amongst others) is devoted to an explication of traumatic experience and to an analysis of its presence in works of fiction. While an analysis of Roseanne’s trauma is beyond the scope of this chapter, a great deal of what manifests as ‘secrecy’ in her account is in fact a manifestation of the impossibilities associated with representing such experience within narrative. Her memory of her father’s experiment is a cracked reassembly of the events surrounding her father’s death, which involved his being beaten to death with hammers while his mouth was stuffed with feathers. Feathers and hammers feature throughout her narrative, in a typical expression of the compulsive need to return to and narrativise the site of trauma that a victim commonly exhibits. As Caruth, in her study, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, states, trauma is “an overwhelming experience of sudden catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996:11). Hammers and feathers could be understood to represent these “uncontrolled” and “repetitive” phenomena. Caruth’s work, as well as that of Roger Luckhurst and Judith Butler, inform my analysis of traumatic experience as it features prominently in *The Gathering* in my next chapter.

of this police force, and goes so far as to blatantly deny it when she is directly asked about it by Dr Grene. Her son provides a reproduction of the ‘factual’ account he has found:

His mouth was stuffed with white feathers no doubt to characterise his former work, though God knows I cannot see wherein his cowardice lay, misguided though he may have been in many respects. Then alas he was beaten with hammers, and an effort made to push him out the little window at the top of the tower. Roseanne herself was below looking up. Awful noises no doubt of horror from the small room at the top. And they did get him half way out the window, except his belly was too rounded by the years of beer, and would not admit him out into the night air. The hammers had not really killed him either, and as he roared, the feathers burst from his mouth. In a desperate rage they pulled him back in, and one of the men flung the bloody hammers out the window. And the feathers flew up and the hammers fell down, striking Roseanne as she stood gazing up a blow to the head, knocking her out cold.

(149)

In the first account, it would appear that Roseanne has conflated two separate memories, divested what remains of conclusions, and thereby preserved her version, “suspended in the Irish air”. Interestingly, she pens a self-reflexive delusion. Recall that her father’s stories, in spite of their often outrageous claims, are accommodated and preserved by her narrative, indeed, they are *believed*. The faith she invests in them, however, is complex. She likens what her experience of the precipice this moment of personal history represents to the reading of the fiction of *King Lear*, in which a cliff is written about, “where there is no cliff, so that when you read it, you also think there is a cliff, and fall with the king’s friend”. Her insinuation is that the story her father constructed about hammers and feathers, her memory of the event, and by association her father’s possible denial that he was part of the RIC, is not necessarily true: these stories may themselves be fiction. Although in her *reading* of them, she is willing to (self-reflexively) suspend disbelief so as to “fall with the king’s friend”. It is significant that she chooses as an example a fiction that poses a threat to the believer of that fiction: belief is characterised as ‘falling’.

In spite of the implied concession that what she is writing “may not be real” (167), her testimony contains a very deliberate defence of its fiction: “[i]t is no crime to love your father”, she claims, “it is no crime to feel no criticism of him”. “[F]aithfully, faithfully, lovingly, lovingly” she applies the belief, to be found throughout the text, that serves a dual purpose. Roseanne’s remarkable capacity to forgive her father’s outlandish claims is counterbalanced by her inability to demist her recollections: “[i]t is all love, that not knowing, that not seeing” (23). This “love” both blurs and suspends. It provides the vacuum necessary

for her father's ignorant experiment to work, the soundless capsule in which his shameful end remains in abeyance:

Although there was not a breath of wind, the feathers immediately drifted away, dispersing like a little explosion, even rising greyly against the grey clouds, almost impossible to see. The feathers drifted, drifted away. My father was calling, calling, in enormous excitement in the tower, 'What do you see, what do you see?'
What did I see, what did I know? It is sometimes I think the strain of ridiculousness in a person, a ridiculousness born maybe of desperation [...] that pierces you through with love for that person. [...] I am standing there, eternally, straining to see, a crick in the back of my neck, peering and straining, if for no other reason than for love of him. The feathers are drifting away, drifting, swirling away. My father is calling and calling. My heart is beating back to him. The hammers are falling still.

(23)

What both versions of the event have in common is Roseanne's position: standing beneath, "straining to see". Her position is characterised by helplessness and from out of that helplessness she extends the only gesture within her power: a love that suspends. This corresponds with the powerlessness of the position from which she writes. "I am standing there, eternally", she states, in a determined refusal to leave, and to have the events play out, the inevitability of which is her father's violent death. Conversely, she is also at the mercy of this suspension. Another reading might interpret her isolation from history as the thing that keeps her there, "eternally". Nevertheless, this vacuum in which she forgives her father his foolishness is encased within her secret testimony. Exempt from the judgements of others, his falsehood is suspended in the 'faith', 'love' and 'grace' she exerts on it, like a staying force. The feathers are still drifting and the hammers are still falling, as they will continue to do, without conclusion.

Yet, in spite of her consciously defended fiction, Roseanne expresses a need for what she writes to be true: "[o]h, I must remind myself to be clear, and be sure I know what I am saying to you. There must be accuracy and rightness now" (31). Truth and accuracy are qualities that legitimise an account, at least in its perception. These are inextricably linked to the realm that lies beyond Roseanne's secrecy, in that the account's reception (and judgement) would take place outside of the text, and its 'legitimacy' could determine its place in the historical account she was left out of. That said, the *truth* of her testimony is dependent on its verifiability: on its being arranged in time and on the possibility of another in her place experiencing precisely the same thing, and testifying to the same thing: "[i]n saying: I swear

to tell the truth, where I have been the only one who can attest to it, this is true to the extent that anyone who *in my place*, at that instant, would have seen or heard or touched the same thing and could repeat exemplarily, universally, the truth of my testimony” (Derrida, 2000: 41). Such verifiability is impossible as a result of the secrecy of her account: it is hidden so as to protect its contents from the overwhelming threat of grand narratives, and even when it is read, it still “remains reserved for” Roseanne, given that it is written from her singular perspective. This secrecy holds her testimony in suspension and protects it from judgement.

It is worth pausing to consider the significance of her statement, “I must remind myself to be clear”. After all, the surname that she has legitimate claim to is “Clear”, even though she would appear to have been institutionalised under the name “Roseanne McNulty”, because she is referred to by those who know her there as “Mrs McNulty”. This name contains the mark of her absent husband, whose family had her committed in order to ‘liberate’ him. Drastic steps were therefore taken to erase this identity, or at least the significance it bore: that she was once a Mrs Tom McNulty. Hillis Miller, in an introductory essay to Dickens’ *Bleak House*, writes that “[a]ll proper names [...] alienate the person named from [her] unspeakable individuality [...]. To name someone is to alienate [her] from [her]self by making [her] part of a family” (Miller, 1971: 22). Roseanne would have been ‘alienated’ from herself in having been named “Mrs McNulty”, however this alienation would have been compounded when the name no longer had any social consequence. The family of which she formed a temporary part went to great lengths to sever their association with her, and the significance her name carries has been replaced by insignificance. Elsewhere in the novel, after being referred to as “Mrs McNulty”, she writes “I was then too weary to explain yet again, for the millionth time in sixty years and more, that I wasn’t Mrs McNulty. That I wasn’t anybody, wasn’t in fact anybody’s wife. I was just Roseanne Clear” (197). She equates not being “anyone’s wife” with not being “anybody”, which it would seem is a fair assessment of her treatment by history. That she must “remind [herself] to be clear”, has complex significance. She desires for her testimony to have clarity, but she is also reminding herself to be herself, even if her name “Roseanne Clear” also bears the mark of the transparency, or the insignificance, through which she has been made to suffer.

In a telling incident, John Kane, the institution’s mentally handicapped janitor, and Roseanne’s apparently self-appointed protector, asks her to assert her identity by telling him her name:

'What is your name?' he said.
 'I don't know', I said, in a sudden panic. I have known him for
 decades. Why was he asking me this question?
 'You don't know your own name?'
 'I know it. I forget it.'
 'Why do you sound frightened?'
 'I don't know.'
 'There is no need', he said, and taking the dust into his dustpan neatly,
 began to leave the room. 'Anyhow, I know your name.'
 I started to cry, not like a child, but like the old old woman I am, slow,
 slight tears that no one sees, no one dries.

(32)

The old man's indirect assertion of her identity: "I know your name", implies that he is aware of her almost-erased circumstances. His question, which requires only the simplest assertion of her name in response, confuses a woman unaccustomed to being required to exist. "Mrs McNulty" is now an "old old woman", one who cries "slight tears that no one sees, no one dries". The simple act of stating her name, as I have established, is complex. Her name is not her name, and it is rather the ironic mark of her absence, and of her not being "anyone".

Moreover, her split reply of "I know it. I forget it" is a telling summation of Roseanne's overall response to the world. The symmetry of these two sentences that would appear to contradict one another requires attention. Together, they embody the novel's core paradox, in which revelation and concealment are caught up in an aporetic relation to one another. Their symmetry illustrates their equal status within the alternation, in spite of their meanings gesturing in two apparently opposing directions. Roseanne's interiority is brimming with knowledge that she determinedly hoards and keeps secret, and in these sentences, what she 'knows' assumes equal proportions to what she 'forgets'. I would argue that her 'forgetfulness' corresponds with her secrecy, in that what she "know[s]", she seems to "forget" upon being *required to state* it. Her defiance against those who have taken her freedom, and even her identity, is to cut herself off from those around her, and to conjure a distinction between herself and everything beyond herself, which manifests as a determined silence, even as an apparent forgetfulness. Further, the aporetic alternation between knowing and forgetting cancels out neither of them, and sustains both. For Roseanne to "forget" without the counteraction of 'knowing' would be tantamount to her being lost to the oblivion she fears (her story would be eradicated). By contrast, simply 'knowing' without forgetting (or keeping secret) could make her story available to those from whom she feels the need to protect it. This irresolvable alternation is a fundamental characteristic of her narrative, and it both enables and limits her ability to write her story. Since secrecy is aporetic (something is

only secret to the extent that it can be revealed), that internal threat is the condition of possibility for secrecy.

John Kane's response to her confusion: "[t]here is no need [...] [a]nyhow, I know your name", is cryptic. As the novel reveals, he is a remnant of her life before being sectioned. John Lavelle, the man she is quite possibly falsely accused of having an extramarital affair with, is John Kane's father. Lavelle gave his brain-damaged son instruction to protect Roseanne: an undertaking he tries, in his limited capacity, to fulfil. If nothing else, he 'knows her name', and that she was wronged. It is tragically fitting that the only person who knows that she has no place in a mental asylum is a brain-damaged man who lives outside of it. The world outside no longer cares to know Roseanne, to know who she really is and what her story is. The only outsider who has any inkling is a person society might reject and ignore.

In spite of this, John Kane provides a crucial link between Roseanne and the world beyond her. She completes the story of her life, and unfortunately, her 'agency', or inverted power, ends there. Kane finds the collection of papers under the floorboards (she does not give them to anyone, or tell anyone of their contents, having had the form of her narrative so utterly determined by those who have silenced her). He gives them to Dr Grene, who then reads them, and accommodates them within his own (more official) narrative. As a consequence of Roseanne maintaining her secrecy to the end (again, this is a secrecy that she upholds but that is also imposed on her), an empathetic reading of her secrets is something over which she (inevitably) has no power whatsoever. She does not actively reveal her secrets; it is rather left to others to reveal them. John Kane forms the unlikely channel through which her secrets are conveyed.

Kane provides the link between the outside world (which Roseanne fears) and the inside world she has both been forced into and has come to claim as sanctuary. In that sense, he is like the very walls of the Sligo asylum. As a brain-damaged man who lives outside of a mental asylum, he personifies the porous quality of the walls behind which Roseanne languishes. The secrets kept behind them are, gradually, coming to light, and walls are a dominant (if paradoxical) trope that effectively describes the mutually defining characteristics of secrecy and revelation, absence and presence, inside and outside. Roseanne's secrecy is achieved by layers of insulation that surround her story. The innermost layers are self-imposed. These are formed by her silence, as well as her active concealment of her written account. Beyond her self-imposed seclusion is a layer of externally imposed isolation. The

crumbling walls that house or contain her and her fellow inmates form the outermost boundary between those within and those without: a border behind which those sectioned were expected to disappear: to effectively be rendered invisible. Roseanne inserts a quotation near the beginning of her scrawls: “*Those that feed them do not love them, those that clothe them do not fear for them*” (30). She claims not to remember the source, and, as it happens, it appears to have no source beyond the pages of the novel. The sourceless quotation illustrates the severing from society experienced by the aging populace of the asylum. It is fitting that a description of the conditions within the walls finds expression within Roseanne’s hidden and secret testimony. While it expresses, rather accurately, the fate of those within the walls, it carries only a faint echo of something from outside them that has been broken, stored and reassembled by Roseanne’s grasping memory. This could indicate that those within the walls are broken and less ‘complete’ than their unsectioned counterparts. However, this reading depends on the quotation being a less ‘complete’ version of a more whole and correct version existing outside the asylum. Being, as it is, sourceless, this quotation has a great deal in common with Roseanne’s testimony: it exists in isolation from the grand narrative of history out of which she has been so violently written.

This quotation is not the only one that does not have an equivalent beyond the bounds of the institution. Barthus’s ‘Pathology of Secrecy’, which Dr Grene means to consult to aid his evaluation of Roseanne, also does not exist beyond the pages of the novel. It constitutes a darkened fold in the fabric of the narrative that defies revelation. Its title gestures, potentially, towards a mental illness from which Roseanne might indeed suffer. Such a ‘pathology’, with secrecy as its primary symptom, might legitimate her presence in a mental asylum. This diagnosis, and the text that might provide it, is inaccessible though. It exists only within *The Secret Scripture*, and only as an absence of which Dr Grene, and the reader too, is faintly aware. Within the walls of the asylum there is the possibility of this official textbook that could validate the extraordinary secrecy of the woman he will come to find is his mother. But outside of those walls, and outside the text, her secrecy has no official classification. And therefore, it need never be taken into account – unless, of course, one reads Roseanne as Dr Grene does, with compassion and without recourse to fact and delimitation.

From within the asylum, Roseanne ironically writes that “this is a decent place, if not home. If this were home I would go mad!” (30). These sentences are a feeble attempt to separate herself from the asylum, a building where its inhabitants are defined by their presence within it. Dr Grene describes the phenomenon of those patients, mentally sound at the time of their

institutionalisation, who have “learned a sort of viral-madness”, merely by their extended presence there (18). “[C]reatures so long kennelled and confined” assume the identity the space they inhabit expects of them, sectioned off by walls that mark the space as the domain of the mentally unsound. There are even those, he speculates, who have become part of those walls, those whose “very DNA has probably melded with the mortar of the building [...] bedridden and encrusted with sores that to move them would be a sort of violation”, those whose definition by the walls that enclose them is complete (17). Yet the irony is that they do not really belong there. They were not properly mad when they were institutionalised and were often as sane as those who put them there. Fr Gaunt and those like him, whose need to keep female sexuality hidden resulted in their institutionalising many people unjustly, would to our eyes appear to have suffered from a kind of ‘madness’. The porous boundary between madness and sanity is illustrated here. Those classified as ‘mad’ were often sane when they were sectioned within the walls of the asylum, and those classified as sane were ‘mad’ to perpetrate this kind of violence.

And then there is Roseanne, who has avoided the “viral madness” embraced by those around her, and has retreated into a world of silence. In her case, we see the figurative value of the wall, or boundary, reflected in her reticence to use the ‘language’ of the institution. “[I]n here, among the shadows and the distant cries, the greatest virtue is silence” and she wonders if, “[e]ven gibberish is dangerous, silence is better” (30). Gibberish could be understood to be the language of madness,¹⁷ and the vernacular of the institution within which Roseanne is trapped. Words without meaning, are “dangerous”, presumably, because of the meaning that can be imposed on them. A person whose words are offered up to imposed interpretation (a diagnosis of madness, for example) is too vulnerable: “silence is better”. Her electing of “silence” over the language of the place she refuses to call “home” emphasises the fact that she does not belong there. She has been deemed not to belong in the world beyond the walls, and her refusal to belong within them finds expression in her silence, and her secrecy. Recall that when asked to assert her identity by saying her name within the walls, she responds with “I know it. I forget it” (32). She suspends what she knows, and indeed who she is, within a capsule of silence, a layer of insulation.

¹⁷ It is not my contention that certain forms of madness do not find expression as silence. However, within the novel, the allusion to “Pathologies of Secrecy” by Barthus, an authoritative reference Dr Grene might have used to diagnose a madness of Roseanne’s, does not exist. This suggests that within the novel, Roseanne’s silence and secrecy cannot be read as a mental pathology.

An Appeal to the Grace of the Reader

I turn now to the text's conclusion, and to its appeal to the reader. By cutting her testimony off from the realm in which it would be judged, categorised as either true or untrue and perhaps even utterly ignored, Roseanne circumscribes its parameters, and within those parameters creates her own addressee: "I must remind myself to be clear, and be sure I know what I am saying to *you*" (31, emphasis mine). This enclosure ensures that her testimony will be perceived as true, and believed, because the addressee is a product of her fiction and her mind, who shares her mind, and her convictions. Derrida, in his discussion of the impossibility of a secret testimony, "a contradiction in terms", states that "the experience of the secret itself implies some inner witness, some third party in oneself that one calls to witness" (31). There is a schism in the phrase: "I must remind myself". She undergoes a split between "I" and "myself", and there is an inner appeal from the one for a provision, or at the very least an understanding, from the other. This other, a creation of her fancy, can take on several forms at the whim of her imagination: it shifts from being unnamed to being herself, a "reader", Dr Grene, and ultimately to being a god, replete with the power to forgive. "Now, dear reader", she writes, "I am calling you God for a moment, and God, dear dear God, I am trying to remember. Forgive me, forgive me if I am not remembering right" (179). Her appeal is aimed at a reader, one infinitely capable of forgiveness, a divine reader, and Roseanne hereby blurs the boundary between her secrets and the realm from which they are kept secret. Worth considering is another instant in which she invokes her reader, and thereby obscures the distinction between secrecy and revelation:

Dear reader! Dear reader, if you are gentle and good, I wish I could clasp your hand. I wish – all manner of impossible things. Although I do not have you, I have other things. There are moments when I am pierced through by an inexplicable joy, as if, in having nothing, I have the world. As if, in reaching this room, I have found the anteroom to paradise, and soon will find it opening, and walk forward like a woman rewarded for my pains, into those green fields, and folded farms. So green the grass is burning!

(24)

The religious imagery employed here, and indeed throughout the novel, is curious, given Roseanne's justifiable aversion to "the religious" because "they are so certain about things" (153). Certainty is not a feature of her narrative, as illustrated here by her qualifications: "*if* you are gentle and good", "*as if*, in having nothing, I have the world" and "*[a]s if*, in reaching this room I have found the anteroom to paradise". This "anteroom to paradise" is, most ironically, the room she has been imprisoned within. Its proximity to paradise seems

contingent on it being the precise inversion of such a place (an *ante*-paradise). Her “pains”, to which she has been subjected on the basis of her failure to be ‘godly’ in the way it was decided Irish people (and more specifically Irish women) were obliged to be, are what she feels she will be “rewarded” for in her *ante*-life. This conviction, accompanied by an “inexplicable joy”, is dependent on the knowledge that she was treated unjustly in this life, by those who masqueraded as the moral conscience of Ireland (those she calls “the authors of [her] fortune or misfortune” [7]), and who dispensed ‘justice’ that took the form of its reverse. Indeed, they were those who considered themselves the gatekeepers to the paradise that Roseanne predicts she will enter, regardless of their condemnation. She here anticipates the ‘grace’ that will grant her entry to paradise, which she never received during her lifetime. Her secret scripture contains her own religion.

Ironically, amidst this triumph of imagination, this, too, is where her imagination falters. Her desire to clasp the hand of her reader, to reach out beyond her text, is one of the “all manner of impossible things” that lies beyond her grasp. What she desires is tantamount to an opening up of the singular secrecy that her narrative has managed to achieve, so that it can be ‘read’ by someone “gentle and good”. What Roseanne does not know (what is secret from her) is that Dr Grene performs the reading for which she pleads. This, too, involves a grace. Contrary to Roseanne’s fears, her name on the family tree she describes early in the novel is followed by a branch, and not only a question mark. Recall her fear of being “utterly lost not only to history but the family following [her]” (13). Barry’s criticised conclusion positions Dr Grene (whose name, it should be noted, has a great deal in common with the “*green* fields” and burning *green* grass she envisions) as the “family following” Roseanne, who will ensure that her memory is not relegated to the oblivion of being “utterly lost”. He is no longer reading the memoirs of his patient, he is reading a text of which he himself is a part: he is “that tiny person vanished from the space he should have occupied”, and he now occupies that space (213). As the “family following” Roseanne, Dr Grene is implicated in her story to the extent that it becomes his story. In an interview, Barry said “[i]t gave me an enormous sense of appeasement that there’s a cable between you and your mother that’s buried so deep no bulldozer of ordinary life can trouble it. I felt it was a *graceful* thing. It fed into the book – the whole idea of mother and son, the enormous distance, coming stormingly together” (Naughtie, 2011, my emphasis).

Peaceful, retrospective narration and the imagery of vulnerability are contrasting yet balanced forces within the text. Throughout the book, Roseanne is depicted as a feather in the wind at

the mercy of small decisions and slight shifts, orchestrated by others, the results of which are catastrophic for her. The novel, while recounting these gusts, as well as their effects, does so from the position of the quiet end of her life. Despite the chaos to which a young Roseanne is exposed, her older voice narrates this from the confines of her no longer threatened existence, and it is from this vantage point, with its proximity to death and oblivion, that the novel attempts a gesture of religious proportions. Dr Grene writes of Roseanne that “she has suffered enormously. You can see it in her eyes as plain as day. It is actually what gives her her strange grace, if I may say that” (127). This term, tentatively used by Dr Grene in an attempt to convey a quality his aged patient possesses, is the one I have chosen to engage with the novel’s appeal to the reader.

Fintan O’Toole, who has remarked that Barry’s characters tend to be “history’s leftovers”, notes that in spite of their pitiable circumstances, they all seem to possess “an amazing grace” (1997: vii). Liam Harte observes a similar quality in another of the author’s novels, *A Long Long Way*, in which the much-forgotten Irish soldiers who fought in the British Army in the first World War are narratively elevated, much like Roseanne, and “despite being stripped of all emotional and spiritual comforts, a strange kind of *grace* inheres in these pitiable pawns of history, a quasi-metaphysical quality” (2012: 114, my emphasis).

The term ‘grace’, which features with regularity throughout *The Secret Scripture*,¹⁸ requires some definition. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the noun as “[f]avour, favourable or benignant regard or its manifestation (now only on the part of a superior); favour or goodwill, in contradistinction to right or obligation, as the ground of a concession” (“Grace”, 1989). Further, grace is “a matter of favour and not of right”, as well as “[a] mark of divine favour, a mercy”. The formal definition, which has a great deal to do with the word’s religious significance, casts it as a “concession” “on the part of a superior”. This seems to be at odds with its use by O’Toole, Harte (and Dr Grene, for that matter). To them, it is a quality possessed by characters who have typically had barely any ‘concessions’ or what Harte terms “emotional and spiritual comforts” from those positioned as ‘superior’ to them. Roseanne identifies the “scarcity of mercy” that typifies the time in which she finds herself as a young woman (200). The grace that inheres in Barry’s characters exists in opposition, then, to the traditional religious notion of grace which the Oxford English Dictionary goes on to define as the “free and unmerited favour of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the

¹⁸ The words “grace” and “graced” appear twenty five times in the novel.

bestowing of blessings”, because such grace, in the experience of Barry’s characters within society, is anything but “free”. Roseanne, who is perceived to be a “sinner”, is treated entirely without conventional, religious grace.

Another character who is deprived of conventional grace is Roseanne’s father. She proudly states that “a man who can make himself merry in the face of those coming disasters that assailed him, as disasters do so many, without grace or favour, is a true hero” (15). Her father is elevated in her account from being the village rat catcher to being held in heroic suspension, in spite of what she herself terms his “ridiculousness”. Recall her observation when recounting his hammers and feathers experiment, that “[i]t is sometimes I think the strain of ridiculousness in a person, a ridiculousness born maybe of desperation [...] that pierces you through with love for that person” (23). As she continues, “[i]t is all love, that not knowing, that not seeing” (23). This love, which finds expression as “not knowing” and “not seeing”, is equivalent to grace, and with the gesture the novel attempts. Wilfully not knowing and not seeing, and choosing instead to “love”, much like grace, are choices which exist in “contradistinction to right or obligation” and are “free and unmerited”. Grace is forgiveness or “mercy” bestowed on someone who has no entitlement or “right” to it, and it is given without “obligation”. Roseanne’s choice to “love” rather than to see or know is an act of grace. What her preservation of her father amounts to is a *forgiveness* of his “ridiculousness”, in recognition of the fact that it is born “of desperation”, and she accommodates his account within her own.

An example of this accommodation is to be found in her narration of her father’s ill-fated experiment to prove that both hammers and feathers “fall at the same rate”, which they do not, unless they are dropped within a vacuum. Roseanne tries to simulate the necessary vacuum in her determination not to know and not to see. This portion of her testimony presents one of her most outrageous (or perhaps even “ridiculous”) claims. Dr Grene, who is privy to a more official account of the events of that day, is presumably obliged to hold the two contradictory versions up to one another, and to judge which of them carries more weight. Yet Roseanne’s final remarks indicate that such a comparison will be without grace. Her concluding statements concern what she calls a “gift of life” which is “something immense [...] something difficult but oddly bright, that makes equal in their fall the hammers and the feathers” (215). What her testimony asks for when she writes “I am trying to remember. Forgive me, forgive me if I am not remembering right” is a forgiveness akin to the one with which she graces her father (179). In her account the hammers do not reach the

ground, and she holds them in her mind, “suspended in the Irish air”, along with the feathers (22). They are given equal weight. Dr Grene, tasked with an official judgement of his patient, ultimately decides to exert a similar suspension. “Roseanne had instructed me in the mystery of human silence and the efficacy of a withdrawal from the task of questioning”, he asserts (238). A “withdrawal from the task of questioning” is very like Roseanne’s “love”, “that not knowing, that not seeing” (23). In his concluding remarks, he states, “it wasn’t so much a question of whether she had written the truth about herself, or told the truth, or believed what she wrote and said was true, or even whether they were true things in themselves. The important thing seemed to me that the person who wrote and spoke was admirable, living, and complete” (238). He suspends judgement, and chooses instead to be what he calls “a responsible witness to the miracle of the ordinary soul” (225). He allows both the official historical account and Roseanne’s personal account to stand alongside one another, and he forgives the latter its gaps and inconsistencies.

Derrida’s notion of “pure” forgiveness has much in common with *The Secret Scripture*’s depiction of grace. In *On Forgiveness*, Derrida critiques performative and public acts of forgiveness and reconciliation, describing what robs the concept of ‘forgiveness’ of its purity:

I shall risk this proposition: each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then ‘forgiveness’ is not pure – nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality.

(Derrida, 2001: 32)

Elsewhere in the same essay, Derrida establishes that forgiveness is intrinsically impossible, in that “there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable” (Derrida, 2001: 32). The condition of possibility for forgiveness is its condition of impossibility: the presence of the unforgivable. Inevitably, then, “exceptional and extraordinary” forgiveness belongs to “the order of the miraculous”.¹⁹ The ambitious scope of this concept, in its purest form, has the power to “[interrupt] the ordinary course of historical temporality”. This

¹⁹ In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Derrida uses the phrase in relation to testimoniality, and his statement bares insertion here. He writes that testimoniality “belongs *a priori* to the order of the miraculous. This is why reflection on testimony has always historically privileged the example of miracles. The miracle is the essential line of union between testimony and fiction” (2001: 75). Dr Grene’s choice to “bear witness to the miracle of the ordinary soul” of Roseanne is, an “essential line of union” that accepts her fictions and her indeterminacies as an honest-minded testimony (225).

“ordinary course”, which has “social, national, political [and] psychological” *normality* as its primary concern, corresponds to the history that would omit the stories of Joseph and Roseanne Clear. Further, this normality may provide a standard by which to judge the ending of the novel, in which Dr Grene discovers that his patient is in fact his mother, as too “ridiculous” to be plausible. Holding feathers and hammers in suspension, not knowing, not seeing, and withdrawing “from the task of questioning” does not belong to the order of what Derrida terms “normality” (they are, as the novel suggests, exceptional forms of behaviour). What he puts forward as pure forgiveness “is not” and “*should not be*, normal normative [or] normalising”. It is this pure forgiveness which, I would contend, is the grace that Roseanne’s scripture requests. Her testimony exists in opposition to the normalising account, which in Ireland’s case “closed off internal challenges and contradictions” and “represented society as pure and untainted” (Smith, 2007a: 432). The ‘purity’ society imposed exists in sheer opposition to the ‘purity’ of Derrida’s impossible forgiveness. This forgiveness, he maintains, needs to take place “in the face of the impossible”, perhaps within an impossible realm like the one in which hammers and feathers fall at the same rate, which would indeed interrupt “the ordinary course of historical temporality”. He critiques the forgiveness that takes place “at the service of a finality”, because such forgiveness lacks purity: it exists in an economy of exchange whose ultimate agenda is the kind of “normality” that official historical discourse would favour. It is for this reason that the secrecy of Roseanne’s account is so paramount. Her testimony is caught up in an irresolvable alternation between secrecy and revelation, which one might argue is ‘impossible’, but which provides the necessary conditions for a unique kind of grace to occur. In another meditation on forgiveness, Derrida writes that “it should exceed the order of presence [...] and happen in the night. The night is its element” (Derrida, 2002: 53). An absence, which is what Roseanne’s text may be considered to be, exceeds “the order of presence”.

In the climactic final exchange between Dr Grene and his mother, a forgiveness that is possibly of the order Derrida describes takes place. Dr Grene begins:

'Blameless. Wrongly committed. I apologise. I apologise on behalf of my profession. I apologise on behalf of myself, as someone who did not bestir himself, and look into everything earlier. That it took the demolition of the hospital to do it. And now my apology is useless and disgusting to you. [...] You are a free woman.'

'I was not always a free woman. I thank you for my freedom.'

'It is my privilege to pronounce it', I said, suddenly very odd and formal, but she took it in her stride.

'Can you step back to the bed?' she said.

I did so. I didn't know what she intended. But she just lifted my hand, and shook it.

'I wonder will you allow me to forgive you?' she said.

'My God, yes', I said.

There was a short silence then, just enough of a silence for the breath of a dozen thoughts to blow through my brain.

'Well, I do', she said.

(233)

Greene assumes a "formal" position, communicating to her the words that have the official weight of her legal release, given that he is an affiliate of the system that wronged her, who has the authority to produce documents that have the kind of weight necessary to bestow "freedom". Her understated response of "I was not always a free woman. I thank you for my freedom" reminds us that this concession is virtually ineffectual, given that Roseanne speaks these words from what is in all likelihood her death bed.

In light of this, the novel attempts something that may have significance beyond its pages. This real-world significance is, ironically, contingent on the malleability of what may be contained within fiction: that fiction can accommodate unlikely stories and the "ridiculous". Fiction can simulate the vacuum necessary for feathers and hammers to fall at the same rate. "Blameless" is the religiously charged word Dr Greene chooses to sum up Roseanne, and it resonates with the kind of purity to which Derrida has alluded, which, of course, is unlikely to find real-world expression. When Dr Greene utters the words, "I apologise on behalf of my profession", he takes on the culpability for all who have failed Roseanne. It is important that he performs this rather ambitious function in private, and further, within a fiction of Barry's construction. This exchange, between Dr Greene who momentarily becomes a broadly representative perpetrator of violence against Roseanne, and herself in her "blameless" state, needs the privacy or secrecy (or indeed vacuum) that it is encased in, in order to achieve its grace. Between them, they simulate the impossible: she is entirely blameless (a state which, beyond the suspension this moment achieves thanks to the power of the fiction that forges it,

is not plausible) and he takes on all the blame²⁰ for what has happened to her, which is also a state that requires some fiction to achieve. The forgiveness that they enact could not take place within the “normality” of what Derrida calls “the ordinary course of historical temporality” (2001: 32). It is therefore not the kind of public act of forgiveness that Derrida critiques, which is enacted “at the service of a finality” (32). It is “exceptional and extraordinary”, and most importantly, takes place “in the face of the impossible” (32). However, its secrecy and separation from official history is bound up, we must recall, in an irresolvable alternation with revelation, given that the novel exists to be read. Rather than destroying its achievement, I would contend that this gives the novel’s grace a chance of resonating beyond its pages.

To conclude, I think it necessary to look at the destruction of the walls that have held Roseanne for so long when the building is demolished at the end of the novel, as described by Dr Grene:

The huge edifice immediately headed earthward, leaving only a hanging memory of its old position against the sky line. Behind it was an angel, a great man of fire the height of the asylum, with wings spread from east to west. It was evidently John Kane. I looked about me at my companions and asked them if they saw what I saw. They looked at me as if I was mad, and I suppose, having lost my asylum and now being only the superintendent of an enormous absence, filled by an unlikely angel, I suppose I was.

(237)

A destruction of the walls, which can be understood to be a metaphor for the secrecy that has *both* been imposed on Roseanne *and* that she has wielded, is an appropriate ending for the novel, given that that text’s goal has been to tell the story of someone trapped behind walls of this kind, and to penetrate the secrets they guard. Dr Grene witnesses this demolition, just as he has been a “witness to the miracle of the ordinary soul” of Roseanne (225). His reading of her testimony is paralleled with his beholding of the destruction of the asylum, since both involve an incursion into what has been cut off from the realm outside (a realm in which historical texts reign). The “angel” he sees is one he (not without irony) states is “evidently John Kane” who is, you will recall, the unlikely bridge between the two realms. Dr Grene’s belief in what he sees corresponds with his acceptance of Roseanne’s account of her life,

²⁰ While a characterisation of Dr Grene as a Christ-like sacrificial lamb might be a little *too* ambitious, Barry does insert the gesture of naming the institution to which he was taken as a baby “Nazareth House” (129).

which requires a suspension of disbelief and a grace.²¹ As a ‘believer’, however, Dr Grene now appeals to his “companions” for a similar belief, and their response, which is to “look at [him] as if [he] was mad” is much like the world’s response to Roseanne. ‘Madness’ may be understood to be a form assumed by the “ridiculousness” that only finds accommodation in stories told with an appeal for grace. Whether they will be received with grace is left beyond the scope of the text. The novel generates an excess that the reader is obliged to engage with.

Dr Grene has discovered that he is the grandson of one whom Roseanne called “a king of absences” (35). Fittingly, he is now “the superintendent of an enormous absence”, and if the lineage of absence of which he forms a part can be understood to form a lineage of those who *read* the stories of those they follow, the reader is the next in line. Interestingly, the appeal Dr Grene makes to those around him to be believed is met with suspicious looks, however the implied appeal for grace made by the novel to the reader (who is absent in this scene, and the next in line to inherit the absence of the kind contained in the novel) has Dr Grene cast as Roseanne, or as “mad”, and the reader as the “witness” to her secrets. Whether we accommodate them or not must remain beyond the scope of a text that does not concern itself with ‘certainty’.



²¹ A discussion about a novel which has history as its primary concern, and which ends with the image of an angel, can not overlook the resonances of Walter Benjamin’s “Angel of History” in that text (2009: x). I would argue however that Barry’s angel differs from Benjamin’s. Barry’s angel is a product of the explosion that destroys the walls of the asylum which has imprisoned people and cut them off from history. The Angel of History is bound to witness the past, which appears to him to be “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage”. Rather than exerting helpless compassion on a past that the storm of “progress” perpetually propels him away from, into the future, Barry’s angel is the product of a ‘wreckage’ that is in the best interests of those who have been victimised by history. Further, Barry’s angel is an excess that is outside of history, and possibly capable of not being subject to the storm of progress.

CHAPTER 2: TRAUMA THAT RESISTS REPRESENTATION IN ANNE ENRIGHT'S *THE GATHERING*

Anne Enright's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Gathering*, comprises a blend of the confession, memoir, and crisis diary of its narrator, Veronica Hegarty, who is tasked with assembling her family for a wake after the suicide of her closest brother Liam. What his death unleashes in Veronica is a compulsion to write down an "uncertain event", which may or "may not have happened" in her grandmother's front room when she and Liam were children (Enright, 2008: 8). It transpires that Liam was (most likely) sexually abused by their grandparents' landlord and friend, Lambert Nugent. Furthermore, the narrative suggests that Veronica witnessed this "event"¹ and, in line with the aporetic nature of traumatic experience, did not register it as such. A further complication is that she, too, may have been victimised, and may be traumatised in the same way that Liam was. The "event" would account for Liam's initially unexplained history, which concludes with his walking into the sea to his death. In order to complete Liam's story (and possibly her own), Veronica attempts to narrate that "event", but she discovers – as I hope to show – that it does not yield to complete and unambiguous narration. The central concern of this chapter is to explore, by way of a close reading of the novel, the difficulties inherent in recuperating a traumatic past within narrative. In what is arguably a discernible trend among some writers of contemporary Irish fiction, Enright constructs a story of individual suffering, and tethers it to a broader, national context. Like Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, *The Gathering* is firmly situated within a contemporary Ireland and draws on an array of recently revealed national wounds that came about as a result of the country's post-independence nationalist project. The first section of this chapter analyses the ways in which Liam and Veronica's personal trauma is strategically linked to these broader, 'national wounds'.

Subsequently, I analyse the structures and techniques I have isolated in the novel that hinge on my primary concern, which is the attempt to narrate that which resists complete narration. The aporetic condition of traumatic experience, as I show, gives rise to a pervasive structural trend of aporias throughout the novel. Before I continue, I think it necessary to discuss in greater detail the concept of an aporia, which proves so central to this study. In his distillation of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism, Jonathan Culler has described an aporia

¹ Throughout this chapter, I place the word "event" between quotation marks. This is because Veronica herself refers to the traumatic experience as an "event" on the first page of the novel. This also serves to place the term under erasure, given that such an "event" is not registered as an event.

as an “irresolvable alternation” (Culler, 1983: 96). This perpetual oscillation occurs between two concepts which are constructed as opposed to one another, but which are rather implicated in one another in an endless play of difference and deferral. As Carolyn D’Cruz puts it in her writings on deconstruction, “[a]t the point of an aporia, the logic of for or against arguments, or yes or no position taking, reaches a point of exhaustion. A new kind of logic is called for” (D’Cruz, 2008: 6). The movement between terms of the aporia can be seen to occur in Veronica’s indeterminate configuring as both witness and victim. In her case, she is both witness and victim, and neither, simultaneously. Culler states that within an aporia, “each perspective shows the error of the other” (96). An illustration of his point would be that Veronica is constructed in the novel as a witness to her brother’s victimisation, but her experience of what she sees establishes her as a victim herself. As victim, she is no mere witness; as witness, she is limited because she shows an inability to see and therefore to narrate her own victimisation. In his book *Aporias*, Derrida traces the word back to its use in Aristotle’s *Physics IV*. Aristotle’s term “*Diaporeō*” is translated by Derrida as follows: “I’m stuck [...], I cannot get out, I’m helpless” (1993:13). Such statements rather accurately describe Veronica’s impossible role(s) within the novel.

A sequence of aporias can be found throughout *The Gathering*. These are at play between elements of the narrative and they frustrate attempts on the part of the reader to extract *singular* truths about the traumatic past. Related to these pervasive aporetic structures is the theme of the impossibility of aligning the ‘truth’ and its telling, and the way in which Veronica’s experience is made to be indistinguishable from that of her brother. Having considered the ways in which this tension between truth and its telling is traced in the novel, I then explore the text’s persistent conjuring of the body (which it does in order to attempt to narrate a traumatic past which itself centres around the body) by way of a sustained discussion of the use of skin and touch as they appear throughout the novel. What Veronica attempts to narrate is further complicated by it being “a crime of the flesh”, when “the flesh is long fallen away” (8). Both Liam and Lambert Nugent, the victim and the perpetrator of this “crime of the flesh”, are dead. Consequently, I then analyse Veronica’s possession by, conjuring of, and attempts to exorcise ghosts. Jean-Francois Lyotard writes of traumatic experience which has been suppressed or forgotten as something that “would signal itself even in the present as a spectre” (1990: 11). A spectre, something that exists between life and death (in that it is too dead to be alive, and too alive to be dead) is a structural metaphor for the aporetic. Lastly, I explore the ways in which the novel suggests a healing which can be

neither contained, nor enacted within the confines of narrative. Unlike *The Secret Scripture*, which concerned itself with the capabilities of narrative, *The Gathering* is therefore more concerned with its strictures and limitations (although, importantly, it does make a gesture beyond its bounds, as I will ultimately explore).

Before I begin an analysis of the novel, I think it appropriate to establish a clear definition of my use of the term ‘traumatic experience’. In conjunction with significant passages from the novel, I use this definition to illustrate that Veronica is herself traumatised, even though the incident that she attempts to narrate has her brother Liam positioned as the primary sufferer. A selection of the work of Cathy Caruth, Judith Butler and Roger Luckhurst form (for the purposes of this chapter) a useful meditation on the nature of traumatic experience, providing the theoretical framework that buttresses my discussion. These scholars’ use of the term “trauma” usefully corresponds with Veronica’s experience. In Caruth’s introduction to her 1995 collection entitled *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, she argues:

most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event [...]. [...] The pathology consists [...] solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.

(Caruth, 1995: 4–5, original emphasis)

Veronica’s belated and overpowering compulsion, as an adult, to revisit an “event” that occurred during her childhood is her “delayed” and “overwhelming” response. The “event” that “may not have taken place” (Enright, 2008: 8) was clearly “not assimilated or experienced fully at the time” (Caruth, 1995: 5). Nevertheless, Veronica’s endeavour involves the attempt to capture the “event” within a narrative, and therefore to relocate it within her conception of her personal history. In accordance with the “structure of [the event’s] experience or reception”, which Caruth maintains would “[take] the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event”, the telling proves to be an undertaking with a depth and breadth that reach far beyond the contents of the event itself. Most of Veronica’s narrative circumvents the central trauma altogether, and only a relatively short passage is devoted to its description (125). In her attempt to narrate the event, an endeavour which would require her to trace its beginning, she obsessively and conjecturally attempts to recuperate the moment her grandmother Ada met

Lambert Nugent in the Belvedere Hotel in 1925, and brought him into the Hegartys' lives. "[M]ostly", Veronica admits, "I write about Ada and Nugent in the Belvedere, endlessly, over and again" (39). This compulsion, to which she yields "over and again" correlates with what Caruth has isolated as a symptom of traumatic experience, namely "repeated [...] behaviours stemming from the event". In line with what Caruth terms the "possession" of the traumatised person, Veronica confesses that "[t]here are long stretches of time when I don't know what I am doing, or what I have done – nothing mostly, but sometimes it would be nice to know what kind of nothing that was" (39). Something other than Veronica assumes control of her actions. The term "nothing" here seems to denote that which has neither presence nor form – a ghost-like control in line with Caruth's notion of "possession".

According to Caruth, "[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event". One form that this possession assumes is of particular interest here. "Late at night, I hear voices in bursts and snatches", Veronica writes, "[a]nd once, my brother's voice saying, 'Now. Now.' I listened for him again, but he was gone" (39). The repeated utterance of the word "[n]ow" by the disembodied voice or ghost of her brother illustrates his persistence (or, at least, the persistence of Veronica's trauma, which is inextricably linked to Liam) in the present, or the "now". That she listens for him "again" indicates that she has (rather helplessly) assigned him a place in her present. His repeated word occupies two full sentences, "[n]ow", full stop "[n]ow" full stop. These full sentences (which are, of course, not full sentences) thus leave room for nothing else, aptly illustrating her repeated possession, both within her present and her words.

An unmistakable characteristic of the novel is that it is narrated, primarily, in the present tense.² The utterance of Liam's spectre, "Now. Now." serves as a reminder of this. What is most striking about the form that the narrative assumes is that the predominant present tense problematises it as writing in contemplative retrospect. The reader is obliged to navigate the impossibility of Veronica (literally) "hear[ing] voices in bursts and snatches", and writing about hearing those voices, simultaneously. To write in the present tense involves either recasting the remembered past as present, and thus dislodging it from the time in which it occurred, or constructing something imaginary. The disjuncture between her lived experience

² Much scholarly attention has been paid to the pervasive trend of present tense narration in contemporary fiction. While an extensive explication of its effects is beyond the scope of this study, two excellent sources for more information are Anne Waldron Neumann's 1990 article "Escaping the 'Time of History'? Present Tense and the Occasion of Narration in J. M. Coetzee's 'Waiting for the Barbarians'", as well as Kazunari Miyahara's more recent "Why Now, Why Then?: Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary British and Commonwealth Novels" (2009).

and her narration thereof is negated in a way which is uncomfortably impossible, and this discomfort corresponds with her fitful state in the present. Ironically, what her *writing* in the moment illustrates is, precisely, her inability to *live*, fully and healthily, in the present.

Her present is characterised by a compulsion to write in it, and not to occupy it. This is neatly illustrated by the word “now” filling up two full sentences, and leaving room for nothing else. Shortly, I discuss her avoidance of the present (and of its cumbersome obligation to participate) by sleeping during the day and waking, and writing, at night. Another of the symptoms of her state is her refusal to sleep with her husband. “[M]y husband is waiting for me to sleep with him again, and I am waiting for something else. I am waiting for things to become clear”, she admits (38). While others might ‘wait’ for her to occupy the present in a conventional way (a wife would, conventionally, sleep with her husband), Veronica is “waiting for something else”. “Waiting” constitutes, in this case anyway, an anxious anticipation within the present for something that, by definition, exists beyond it. As a reading of the novel reveals, the present simulated by Veronica by way of her narration is one in which “things” never become entirely “clear”. Therefore, the reader of the novel is implicated in this “waiting”, and while Veronica manages to set down an approximation of what happened, the clarity she hopes for, that we hope for, remains beyond what can be simulated within the present of her narrative.

Enright’s avoidance of the past tense may have further significance. It may have to do with her wish to avoid the finality implied by something cast as the historic past. To publish something in the past tense is to imply that it is complete, finished, and at an end. The nature of Veronica’s trauma is that it is perpetually re-experienced as evidenced by her incessant compulsion to write it down. Linked to this is the unfortunate fact that Veronica’s narrative can never be *complete* in that it can never render what happened in a precise and whole fashion. The polysemic utterance “Now. Now.” provides a metaphor for this. As a phrase uninterrupted by intrusive punctuation, it is commonly used to offer comfort; though a slight shift in tone can render it a reproach. The tone with which it is uttered belongs to a present that the narrative cannot encapsulate.³ Accessing a present in which Liam and Veronica were abused, which eludes both her memory and ability to narrate, is precisely what plagues her attempt.

³ Here, I believe, the reader’s role comes into play. The difference between the two meanings is that the former constitutes healing, the latter, harm. Presence is simulated when the novel is read, and I believe that ultimately, whether Veronica’s narrative involves healing or its reverse, is left to be discerned by the individual reader and the tone that they insert, presently, into the text.

We should not forget that Liam's utterance, and thus his possession of Veronica, is not so much a sign of his presence, but rather of his aporetic absence/presence, which is one of the consequences of *her* trauma. Therefore, the novel allows for a close analysis of Veronica's trauma, and less for an analysis of Liam's. Only her thoughts, actions and memories are offered up for scrutiny. Nevertheless, given the nature of the "event", the sexual abuse of Liam, there is evidently a central trauma to which the reader has no direct access. Relevant to this inaccessible trauma is the discussion of the traumatic nature of incest that Judith Butler provides in *Undoing Gender*. Strictly speaking, the "event" does not constitute incest because Liam and Lambert Nugent are not related; however the hierarchical and domestic relations between them closely mimic those of family. What Butler's insight further illuminates is the way in which Veronica shares Liam's trauma, to the extent that the very *structure* of her attempt to narrate the event assumes (by no choice of her own) the "traumatic form" Butler describes here:

insofar as incest takes traumatic form, it is not recoverable as an event; as trauma, it cannot take the form of a remembered or narratable event. Thus, the claim on veracity is not secured through establishing the event-structure of incest. On the contrary, when and where incest is *not* figurable as an event, is where its very unfigurability testifies to its traumatic character.

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(2004: 154)

Butler uses the term "remembered or narratable event" to describe the form that the traumatic experience cannot take. Veronica refers repeatedly to the experience as an "event", however, in line with what Butler points out here, she barely remembers it, and any attempt she makes to narrate it is punctured with uncertainty, and given to fictionalisation. She constructs herself in a defamiliarised fashion, referring to herself in the third person, as "the girl who stands in the light of the hall", who "does not hold or remember what she saw", and later, "I think I had forgotten it entirely" (148). This non-identification with her own self further illustrates that what "the girl" experienced is not recuperable for the grown woman who refers to herself as "I".

Further, what she attempts to narrate is depicted as uncertain, destabilised or indeed "not figurable as an event" by the blurring of the distinction between her experience and Liam's. Towards the end of the novel, Veronica makes an attempt to write a truth, or something with a "claim on veracity": "[t]hese are the things I do, actually know. I know that my brother Liam was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent". Nevertheless, Veronica promptly

destabilises her apparent certitude: “[o]r was probably sexually abused by Lambert Nugent” (188); “These are the things I don’t know”, she follows up: “that I was touched by Lambert Nugent” (188). What Butler terms “the event-structure of incest” is “not recoverable” and Liam and Veronica interchangeably assume the role of victim. Butler contends that where “[the experience] is *not* figurable as an event, is where its very unfigurability testifies to its traumatic character”. The “traumatic character” of the “event” is therefore all that can be satisfactorily deduced from Veronica’s shifting and perpetually uncertain narrative. She herself is traumatised, as evidenced by the difficulty of narrating what she is attempting to narrate.

A National Trauma

Having established that Veronica is traumatised, it is important to note that individual trauma is not the novel’s only concern. The apparent aporia between witness and victim, between truth and silence, and between Veronica and Liam themselves, has broader significance when read in light of Ireland’s national trauma. Throughout *The Gathering*, as I show, repeated reference is made to this broader condition, and this situates Liam and Veronica’s experience as an index of Ireland’s national trauma. Veronica’s role of traumatised witness mimics the nation’s shared, or communal trauma as a result of what happened to its children incarcerated in church and state-run institutions between the years 1914 and 2000. These dates refer to the span of years that it was established would be investigated by the “Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Act 2000” also known as the “Ryan Commission” which began its work on 23 May 2000 under the authority of Justice Seán Ryan, and published its findings on 20 May 2009 (“Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse”, 2009).

Late in the novel, while rummaging through “soiled” schoolbooks (a neat metaphor for a smudged history or a lost, forgotten archive of children), Veronica finds the Irish words “Tá Tír na nÓg ar chúl an tí / Tír álainn trína chéile” (167). The extract, from a poem by Seán Ó Ríordáin entitled “Cúl an Tí” translates, loosely, as “The land of eternal youth is just behind the house / A beautiful, confused country” (Ó Ríordáin, 1952: 61, translation mine). “Tír na nÓg” or “the land of eternal youth” is obviously mythical, and it is juxtaposed with the real-world, limited “tí” or “house” that it is “just behind”, emphasising the stark difference between the two realms. “Tír na nÓg” seems a fitting place for innocence to be relegated to; a place where, fictionally at least, “youth” and innocence are “eternal”. There is no place for youth in the house, which exists in the limited, ‘real’, realm, and that it is “just behind the

house” implies that in a domestic setting, it is hidden, even placeless, given that it forms another realm entirely. A third realm, which broadly encompasses the whole “beautiful, confused country” (“trína chéile” can also be translated as “messed up” or “upside down”) is introduced in the second line. It seems reasonable to assume that the “[t]ír álainn” or “beautiful country” is Ireland, given the language in which the poem is written, and its confusion or state of disarray seems contingent on the uncomfortable juxtaposition set up in the first line of the extract. The careful selection of this fragment subtly underpins the novel’s engagement with a national trauma, which has at its core a loss of innocence. Enright does not engage with the extract though, and rather leaves it to speak for itself. Most readers would need to translate it, and even when it is translated, its meaning is unclear, and open to multiple interpretations. Its inclusion, then, I would argue, illustrates the novel’s primary struggle: the difficulty of encapsulating trauma in narrative, as trauma can never be ‘translated’ into the language of unambiguous meaning.

In a strongly worded article entitled “A Century of Looking the Other Way”, John Banville calls what occurred in church and state-run institutions over the last hundred years the “systematic cruelty visited upon hundreds of thousands of children” (Banville, 2009). He dispels the erroneous notion upon which contemporary nation-wide incredulity is based, that what happened “would have been prevented if enough right-thinking people had been aware of what was going on”, by stating “[w]ell, no. Because everyone knew”. Throughout the novel, Veronica is wracked with guilt for forgetting and not telling anyone what she saw happen to Liam. She describes a look she remembers in her brother’s eye as “the look of someone who knows they are alone. Because the world will never know what has happened to you, and what you carry around as a result of it. Even your sister [...] does not hold or remember the thing she saw” (148). Her inaction replicates, on a smaller scale, that of the nation.

Banville isolates another significant aporia within recent Irish history, which exists between ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing:’ “We knew”, he asserts, “and did not know. That is our shame today”. Veronica’s small-scale attempt to recuperate a traumatic past is complicated by her being a traumatised witness, trapped between roles of witness and victim, whose subject matter is something that she both knows and does not know: an “event” that “may not have happened” (8). The project of recuperating this kind of past resonates with national significance. What Banville calls “our shame today” is directly linked to what Ireland “knew, and did not know” and is now left with a compulsion to tell, as evidenced by many of its

contemporary writers (Barry, Enright, John McGahern, Frank McCourt, and Roddy Doyle, amongst others) attempting to narrate this broader trauma. It is my contention that what Liam and Veronica suffer, and more pertinently what Veronica experiences when attempting to recuperate that suffering with narrative, is linked to, though not directly representative of, Ireland's broader experience. Midway through the novel, Veronica writes:

Over the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr Nugent. But I never would have made that shift on my own – if I hadn't been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too.

(148)

Here, Enright draws an overt link between the individual trauma at the centre of her fiction and that of the nation. In the novel, Veronica's memory of what Lambert Nugent did to Liam is triggered by the public revelation of analogous crimes that occurred country-wide. Veronica, too, "knew, and did not know" what "went on slap-bang in front of [her]". While there is a slight conflation of the individual and national trauma in Veronica's mind, in that the revelation of the one leads to the remembrance of the other (due of course to the equivalent nature of the [individual] crimes), she (and Enright, through her) separates them in the final sentence, and refers to what took place on a national scale when she professes "[a]nd for *this*, I am very sorry *too*" (emphasis mine). Veronica is voiced, here, with an apology that reaches beyond what happened to Liam, and which has significance within the context of Ireland's recent traumatic past. Veronica, Liam, Lambert Nugent and their chorus of peripheral characters conduct between them a small-scale fictional drama that at least partially performs what may have happened in an incalculable number of Irish homes, churches and institutions over the last century.

My use of the term "national trauma" requires some clarification, given that trauma is, by definition, singular. The forms of abuse against children that took place in institutions, while sadly general in their occurrence, remain (just as sadly) singular in their experience. As Liam Harte notes of the novel:

What distinguishes *The Gathering* [...] is the subtlety and complexity of its depiction of the trauma of child abuse as a collective as much as a personal experience [...] and its scrupulous refusal to redeem history by suggesting that the far-reaching effects of traumatic memory can be completely erased or transcended.

(2010: 188)

The distinction that Harte draws here between “collective” and “personal experience” is one that I agree Enright has negotiated well in her novel. While trauma, particularly the kind Enright deals with in *The Gathering*, is singular and individual, it always has a context, in this case, Ireland’s recent shameful past. The relationship between singular and national trauma is complex. What happened to Liam happened to many others, however his story is naturally an *inexact* replication of what happened to other individuals and is therefore incompletely representative. A singular novel, limited to telling only *one* story, which attempts to engage with the nation’s trauma in a way that is *complete* would itself be responsible for yet another violence by simplifying and closing off the nation’s trauma. Instead, Enright performs a “scrupulous refusal to redeem history” by refusing to conceal the aporetic⁴ and unknowable nature of traumatic experience in her novel, and thus acknowledges that “the far reaching effects of traumatic memory can [*not*] be completely erased or transcended” (Harte, 2010: 188) or even fully narrated. According to Desmond Taynor in an article entitled “Fictionalising Ireland”:

it is in the interplay between self and society, consciousness and context, how they shift and affect each other, that art emerges. And, no matter where you start from as a writer, whether it is being preoccupied by the prevailing culture or by the nuances of how individuals feel, if you’re any good you’ll eventually end up finding one through the other. The general is in the particular, and vice versa, of course.

(2002: 131)

Enright’s novel does engage with tension between the “general” and the “particular”. While Liam and Veronica’s trauma is not precisely representative of the larger context, given that it is limited by its individual nature, it is certainly informed by that larger context. The figure of Lambert Nugent, the violator of Liam (and perhaps Veronica) takes on a more general, disseminated form in the passage below:

I know he could be the explanation for all of our lives, and I know something more frightening still – that we did not have to be damaged by him in order to be damaged.

It was the air he breathed that did it for us. It was the way we were obliged to breathe his second-hand air.

(189)

⁴ Traumatic experience is aporetic in that it is characterised by a compulsion to remember that which is always already troubled by a compulsion to forget.

The “air he breathed” is evocative of the broader national environment of which Nugent slyly becomes representative. His “second-hand air” forms a fitting metaphor for the very atmosphere of Ireland’s national context, which was generally tainted, having been breathed out, specifically, by the *likes* of him. The specificity of being “damaged by *him*” (emphasis mine) no longer proves a necessary predetermining factor for “[being] damaged”. Liam, Veronica and others who had to breathe the Irish air, partook in a national trauma as a result of forming a part of Ireland’s history. As Caruth notes in her close reading of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud’s central insight is that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (Caruth, 1996: 24).

A Singular Experience

Ethically, we must be wary of treating individual trauma as if it were simply, easily indicative of a national one. For this reason, I return to a discussion of the singular, fundamentally aporetic nature of traumatic experience, which always complicates its representation. To refer once again to Caruth, traumatic experience “suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (Caruth, 1996: 91–2). This irresolvable paradox or aporia forms a structure which is replicated throughout the novel. The opening sequence of *The Gathering* foreshadows this structural device when Veronica states “I would like to write down what happened in my grandmother’s house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event” (8). Immediately, an uncomfortably persistent alternation between the possibility and the impossibility of the “event”, as well as between its memory and its forgetting, is established. Add to this the impossible task of bearing witness to a truth that may or may not exist. Veronica’s testimony is rendered problematic, as two opposed possibilities: that the event occurred, and that it did not occur, are held in anxious suspension. Caruth, in her introduction to *Unclaimed Experience*, under a subsection entitled “A Double Wound”, argues that “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (1996: 4). What she describes here is the unknowability (or, for my purposes, limited narratability) of an event that, “in the first instance” or at its origin is “*not known*”. The “double wound” of both the catastrophic experience as well as its haunting persistence gives rise to an impasse that is replicated, structurally, throughout the novel. This structure assumes the form of a series of

polarities or doubles, in which elements of the narrative are split in two, or inexactly replicated, frustrating attempts to extract absolute and unambiguous truths about the traumatic past. As I show, these doubles generate aporias of their own which, accumulatively, provide a constant structural reminder of the difficulty of replicating traumatic experience with narrative.

Caruth describes a narrative that aims to capture a traumatic event as “a double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (Caruth, 1996: 7, original emphasis). She alludes here to another irresolvable alternation which arises, it would seem, from an attempt to narrate an experience that brings death into life, and dooms the sufferer to resonate at their uncomfortably joined frequency (hence, the “oscillation” of which Caruth speaks). Such an event suspends a victim within an aporetic movement between a polarity: death is on the one side, and the other side is not ‘life’, but rather ‘survival’: its tainted equivalent. Recall Culler’s observations on the structural character of an aporia, in which “each perspective shows the error of the other” (1983: 96). Survival is life in which death is implicated.

“This is how I live my life since Liam died”, Veronica writes of her oscillation between death and survival, “I stay up all night. I write, or I don’t write. I walk the house. Nothing settles here. Not even the dust” (37). Her brother’s suicide unleashes a feverish restlessness that results in her “stay[ing] up all night”. In a metaphor for bringing death into life, Enright’s narrator conducts a ghostly existence of waking when everyone else is asleep. Her life takes on the structure of a narrative attempting to recuperate traumatic experience, in that she conducts that life *between* night and day, or metaphorically between death and survival. The frequency generated by her existing within an irresolvable alternation or exhaustive oscillation is illustrated when she notes that, in her life, and by association in her narrative, “[n]othing settles here. Not even the dust”.

Another form of this restlessness to be found in *The Gathering* is Veronica’s compulsive writing of a story that grasps for a hinge and purpose, given that it exists between what she does and does not know. By her own admission, “I do not know the truth, or I do not know how to tell the truth. All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns” (9). Ultimately, the toing and froing that she alludes to here is between the event and its telling. She differentiates between knowing “the truth” and knowing “how to

tell the truth". This is one of the core paradoxes in the novel. The "event" or "truth" and the telling of that truth ought to be (at least somewhat) aligned; indeed ideally they should be identical. However, in Veronica's case, they have been traumatically separated. We should recall that Caruth states that an "event" that was "*not known* in the first instance", does not yield to replication in narrative (1996: 4). Liam Harte observes that Veronica's narrative is "the story of a self formed under the burden of a trauma that has remained cognitively unprocessed" (2010: 189). Therefore, the reason that the novel presents Veronica's existence as aporetic in nature is that she becomes trapped between a polarity of impossibilities: on the one hand there is an "event" that she did not experience as an event, and on the other is the fraught attempt to replicate the "event" with narrative.

Harte claims that "[Veronica's] brother Liam's suicide causes her to evaluate the origins and extent of her shattered subjectivity" (189). Liam's suicide marks the onset of Veronica's unravelling. What this implies is that his presence somehow masked her share of the psychological wounding they both sustained as a result of the "event". It is as though he absorbed what she (temporarily) repressed. She did not escape, however. The two of them were so inextricably linked that she retains Liam's woundedness even amidst his irreversible absence. The narrative structure that this gives rise to is articulated by Margaret Mills Harper, who in her article on the novel, argues that it "forms a double trajectory that is also a double helix, circling around a central event that the narrator gradually comes to realize she can't know and that may not even exist" (2011: 78). Harper's image of a double helix is a fitting metaphor for two strands of life (Veronica's and Liam's) that are twisted around one another, but, in Veronica's narration, its strands conflate and are sometimes indistinguishable from one another.

Tellingly, Veronica closely associates her beginning with her brother's. "There were eleven months between me and Liam", she maintains, "[w]e came out of her on each other's tails; one after the other [...]. Sometimes I think we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside" (17). The "overlapping" extends to more than just their beginning and has persisted throughout their lives. Veronica even muses that "[t]here is the hint of my brother's smile in my own mirror, a tone of voice I sometimes hit. I do not think we remember our family in any real sense. We live in them, instead" (62). Harper argues that "[h]e and she have circled around each other since birth, with a closeness that suggests a *Doppelgänger*-like relationship" (78). The contemporary use of the term, which implies that they are merely doubles of one another, raises the question of origins, and indeed who is a double of whom.

This mimics the structure of traumatic experience, which itself has an unknowable origin. It is perhaps more interesting to use the archaic understanding of the word, with its supernatural connotations. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a “double-ganger” as “[t]he apparition of a living person; a double, a wraith” (“Double-ganger”, 1989). The latter definition has haunting significance now that Veronica’s double in life, her brother, remains present in death, performing a similar function to the one he performed in life. He is her double, hence his smile is seen in her reflection. Equally significant, his now ephemeral, transient presence lacks the ability to mask or absorb Veronica’s trauma. His role has shifted, and he is now a haunting, or constant reminder.

Possessed by an Image

Their relationship (even during the narrative present, when he is dead) gives rise to one of the novel’s central paradoxes. The witness and the victim, roles Veronica and Liam fill respectively, become confused when Veronica betrays her inability to separate her experience from that of her brother. Ultimately, there is some confusion as to whether she, too, sustained the abuse. Late in the novel, she pens the following:

I remembered a picture, I don’t know what else to call it. It is a picture in my head of Ada standing at the door of the good room in Broadstone.

I am eight.

Ada’s eyes are crawling down my shoulder and my back. Her gaze is livid down one side of me; it is like a light: my skin hardens under it and crinkles like a burn. And on the other side of me is the welcoming darkness of Lambert Nugent. I am facing into that darkness and falling. I am holding his old penis in my hand.

But it is a strange picture. It is made up of the words that say it. I think of the ‘eye’ of his penis, and it is pressing against my own eye. I ‘pull’ him and he keels towards me. I ‘suck’ him and from his mouth there protrudes a narrow, lemon sweet.

This comes from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled. It comes from the very beginning of things, and I can not tell if it is true. Or I can not tell if it is real.

(186)

Remember that according to Caruth, “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, 1995: 5). Unlike the “event” Veronica frames at the beginning of the novel, with the temporally indeterminate placing of “the summer I was eight or nine”, this image or “picture” is frozen in time, as an image would be (8). “I am eight”, she states,

unequivocally.⁵ Being “possessed by an image” is a fitting explanation of what occurs in this passage. The image or “picture” is not removed or separate from the viewer (Veronica) in the customary fashion of a person observing an image. It is rather integral to her, “a picture in [her] head” into which she herself is placed, to the extent that Ada’s livid gaze burns her skin, and Lambert Nugent generates a darkness into which she falls.

This image, which according to Caruth would be undeniable proof of Veronica’s trauma, is consequentially indicative of the conflation of Veronica and Liam’s experience. Based on the novel’s central aporia, the indeterminate alternation between the siblings’ roles of victim and witness, this passage gives rise to several other such alternations. Again, it is clear that Veronica is trapped between what she has termed “the truth” and its telling. “[T]he words that say it” now form the substance of the “picture” she remembers.⁶ A picture is traditionally a static thing, however with the narrative force of words she can now “pull” and “suck” and alter that picture accordingly. The nature of the memory itself is rendered inconveniently fluid when it is forced to shift under the weight of its very description. Further still, the uncertainty (or unknowability) splits her body in two in line with the binary of light and dark, each enveloping a side of her. The “picture” she remembers, theoretically a visual record, is also thus split into light and darkness. The “light” of her grandmother’s seeing eye forms a threat and her exposed skin burns beneath it. The “welcoming darkness of Lambert Nugent”, on the other hand, is an indeterminate place into which she is “falling”, “holding his old penis”.

In turn, the picture yields yet another polarity between which Veronica oscillates indeterminately. She has, on the one hand, Ada, who is arguably responsible for bringing Lambert Nugent into the lives of Veronica and her family, and is as a result the point of origin, or the one to blame, for what occurred. On the other hand is the victimiser himself, Lambert Nugent, also an arguable ‘source’ or indeed ‘origin’ of the trauma. She feels compelled to locate its origin, and writes obsessively about Ada and about the moment she and Lambert Nugent met. Veronica is symbolically caught between them due to the nature of the “event”, which was, at its source or origin, “*not known*” (Caruth, 1996: 4). The traumatic

⁵ The indeterminacy of “the summer I was eight or nine” has much to do with the conflation of Veronica and Liam’s roles in the novel. Recall that they are born eleven months apart, and that when he was nine, she would have been eight. Her inability to pinpoint her own age at the time parallels with the conflation of the roles of witness and victim.

⁶ Like Roseanne in *The Secret Scripture*, who is haunted by the image of feathers and hammers, an imprecise picture with only elements of the original trauma, Veronica too is haunted by a picture – and in both cases, these images suggest the respective narrators’ inability to completely express their traumatic experience with the limited tools of narrative.

origin is inherently irrecoverable, and Veronica (and her narrative) is fated to inhabit the traumatised space between the polarity of these two potential origins of her trauma. This picture illustrates that her very narrative thwarts any attempt on the part of the reader to extract a definitive account of what happened.

To return again to the picture, the darkness on its one side is impenetrable by sight and quite easily representative of the unknowable. Ironically, it is this side that she faces into while she falls, penis in hand, blending the image of that act with the abyss of darkened not-knowing, and inevitable obscuring. To compound this irony, the eyes of her grandmother, which, had they witnessed the event, could have prevented this traumatic split, burn her skin with their light. Much like a ruined photograph, both the darkened corner as well as the section that is bright, burnt and over-exposed to light, obscure the intended image. Little can be seen, and nothing can be definitively known. While the image possesses her, it is obviously the product of an “event” that, at its origin, was not known. Veronica herself problematises the very notion of “the truth” by writing of her failed attempt to access an origin, or point before language formed the shifting picture in her mind, when she confesses “[t]his comes from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled” (186). The origin, or ‘moment’ of the event is not recuperable by any means other than language, the very thing that continually obscures it. The “picture”, too, is trapped within a system of representation that is always already removed from the origin it attempts to replicate. Veronica’s attempt to narrate her traumatic experience is hindered by the very medium of language, which itself obscures what she is attempting to reveal.

Within this blurred picture (the only resource Veronica has in her pursuit of some delineated “truth” or understanding) the clearest line would be the one that separates the “light” from the “dark”. Language generates meaning as a result of a system of difference,⁷ and in this picture, amidst searing bright and unknowable dark, a border has appeared, by virtue of the contrast between what it separates. It is along this line that Veronica situates her body, in an attempt to read, or decipher its contents. The orientation of her body is of interest: she is looking away from the painful light of her grandmother (itself a product of sight) and towards the “welcoming darkness” of Lambert Nugent. In the picture there is a flow of energy, from Ada, to Veronica to Nugent. The direction of its movement forms a fitting metaphor for the novel, in which the narrator stares compulsively into an abyss of not knowing, yet nevertheless feels

⁷ In an interview with Julia Kristeva, Derrida asserts we should consider “every process of signification as a formal play of differences” (Derrida, 1981: 26).

the very physical burn of what was inflicted on a body. Subsequently, she evokes turning around: “[w]hen I try to remember, or imagine that I remember, looking into Ada’s face with Lamb Nugent’s come spreading over my hand, I can only conjure a blank, or her face as a blank. At most, there’s a word written on Ada’s face, and that word is, ‘Nothing’” (187). Perhaps it is no coincidence that “Ada” is a near-spelling of that ultimate of language-based origins “Adam”, incompletely spelt, thwarting any language-based attempt to recuperate the origin she is made to represent. Even the image of her face is inscribed with the double abyss of the word “nothing”: both the word, as well as the emptiness it designates, do not provide something definitive or ‘true’.⁸

The trope of possession by an image is sustained by the fact that Veronica’s name, which she shares with Saint Veronica,⁹ is derived from the Greek term “vera icon” which means “true image” (Knights of Columbus, 1913: 362). She recollects:

I confused Veronica with the bleeding woman of the gospels, the one of whom Christ said, ‘Someone has touched me’, and confused her again with the woman to whom He said, ‘*Noli me Tangere*’, which happened after the resurrection. ‘Do not touch me.’¹⁰

(113)

Veronica traces the meaning of her name back to a story that was once told to her about the apocryphal saint of the same name. “St Veronica”, according to the stories she was told as a child, “wiped the face of Christ on the road to Calvary and He left His face on her tea towel. Or the picture of His face. It was the first-ever photograph” (113). The “vera icon” or ‘true image’ of Christ’s face, or “the first-ever photograph” which comprises an imprint of his blood on the cloth Saint Veronica handed him, is a relic which has come to be known as the “vernicle” (“St Veronica”, 1987). The saint’s story, and indeed her very existence, was written into the apocryphal Christian history in order to authenticate the relic.¹¹ If the vernicle or “vera icon” were authentic, it would come remarkably close to being a ‘true image’ or

⁸ The word “nothing” serves as a placeholder for what language cannot encapsulate, and this is something that I analyse John Banville’s use of in my chapter on *The Sea*.

⁹ It is certainly significant that St. Veronica is the patron saint of photographers: capturers of pictures and images. She is also, interestingly, the patron saint of laundry workers. The Magdalen Laundries, on which I have elaborated in my introduction as well as in the chapter on *The Secret Scripture*, were certainly implicated in the nation-wide abuse of Irish children.

¹⁰ The passage also begins to illustrate another of this chapter’s concerns, namely touch. Veronica’s allusions to the ‘touch’ both experienced and avoided by Christ form an integral part of my discussion on ‘touch’ later in this chapter.

¹¹ In an entry on Saint Veronica in *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, David Hugh Farmer writes “In sum, it seems likely that the story of Veronica is a delightful legend without any solid historical basis; that Veronica is a purely fictitious, not a historical character, and that the story was invented to explain the relic. It aroused great interest in the later Middle Ages in the general devotional context of increased concern with the humanity of Christ, especially the Holy Face, and the physical elements of his Passion” (“St Veronica”, 1987).

exact representation of Christ's own trauma. The image of his face amidst his crucifixion made of his own blood would constitute the pinnacle of what tools of representation could achieve, given that the 'ink' or 'paint' that the image comprises would come directly from Christ's body, so that his body is literally incorporated in its representation. The image in this case would be pure, in the tradition of the purity that Christ's blood has come to signify. However, the belated (and fictional) generation of Saint Veronica's story resembles the structure of the relationship between the "picture in [Veronica's] head" and her original trauma from which it is always already removed. It remains that tools of representation fall short when tasked with recuperating a traumatic past.¹²

In another passage in the novel, Veronica struggles yet again with the boundary between 'witness' and 'victim', which has been persistently represented as porous, to the extent that the roles themselves are interchangeable. Given the siblings' irreversible separation after Liam's death, Veronica lists a sequence of symbolic binary oppositions that emphasise that separation:

I look out at the wide, shifting sea, and, just for a moment, I think I have a smaller life, alive as I am in this sunlight, than my brother, walking out in the darkness; blood and whiskey into salt sea. Liam, pissed, just the skin that separated himself from his yearning self. Just for a moment, I think that it is more heroic not to be.

(72)

In this passage, light and dark represent life and death respectively. Veronica's aporetic existence between the two is something I have looked at twice before in this chapter: both her compulsion to wake while it is dark and sleep when it is light, as well as her position within the "picture in [her] head", between the light and the dark, draw on this symbolic binary (186). Veronica processes the division, or separation that exists between herself and Liam, given that in contrast to her being "alive", he is dead, by drawing on the opposition between a sequence of binaries, the primary one being light and dark: she is "in this sunlight" while her brother is "in the darkness". The "smaller life" she now leads is thus due to her limited, fleshly existence, still confined within "skin". Liam, in contrast, is liberated to blend fluidly as "blood and whiskey", elements of him that are indistinguishable from one another within

¹² It is interesting too that Veronica writes that she "confused [St] Veronica with the bleeding woman of the gospels". The "bleeding woman" has come to be known as "Berenike" or Berenice, a Greek variation of the name "Veronica" (The Oxford Dictionary of Saints). The confusion is a common one, due to the bleeding woman's story being the nearest canonical equivalent to Veronica's apocryphal story. The relationship between the two women, in which they are inexact replicas of one another, also alludes to the structural aporia the novel constantly gives rise to between an original trauma, and its thwarted narrative representation.

“the wide, shifting sea”, no longer restricted by binaries, and boundaries like “skin”.

However, amidst her attempt to process their separation and opposition, by speaking of her own ‘yearning’ “not to be” or indeed to be where he is, she aligns herself with his “yearning self” which is the self he is at liberty to be now that he is not withheld by constrictive skin. She is, it would seem, fundamentally indistinct from Liam, and by association her life is not distinct from his death. Veronica is fated, to draw again on Caruth’s phrase, to “[oscillate] between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (Caruth, 1996: 7).

Her yearning “not to be” can also be interpreted as a yearning to know the ‘truth’ that has died with Liam. The “darkness” that now envelops him is something she yearns for, and this echoes the orientation of her body in the “picture in [her] head” in which she faces the darkness of Lambert Nugent. It is also significant that it is during the night, or the dark, that she chooses to conduct her life after Liam’s death. “Darkness”, again, can symbolise the unknowable, because it defeats light’s ability to create contrast, that is, it obliterates differentiation, and therefore obliterates the system of difference that is language according to Derrida (1981: 26). It follows that someone in Veronica’s position would be unable to extract meaning or definitive truths from something shrouded in black. Interestingly, it is at night that she writes, and she describes the result of this writing as “ravings”, “stories, night thoughts”, and “the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns” (9). These fleeting and transient moments of perception are placed within her confused position between night and day, death and life. Despite its inscrutability, she is drawn to darkness, because it is a symbol of the ways in which the origin of her trauma is concealed, and resists being absolutely, unequivocally narratable. She goes on to write, “I wait for the kind of sense that dawn makes, when you have not slept” (9). The “kind of sense” that dawn would make, “when you have not slept”, can be interpreted as shining illuminating light on what one has managed to extract from the dark by waking in it, and not sleeping, and writing out “night thoughts”.

Unfortunately, illumination is not what Veronica’s sleepless dawn results in. Dawn after a sleepless night is, rather, a sadly fitting metaphor for her perpetual alternation *between* light and dark, life and death, knowing and not knowing.

To return briefly to the short passage in which Veronica describes binaries, Liam’s corporeal presence is represented in it by his “skin”, which has now fallen away, yet, interestingly, in the “picture” in Veronica’s head, it is particularly significant that the shape of Liam – in other words, his corporeal body – does not feature. The conflation of their experience, in this instance, cancels him out entirely.

Veronica's "picture" constitutes a replication of what she once witnessed but the "picture" is all that remains, and the reality it doubles (inexactly, of course) is not recuperable. At the beginning of the novel, in reference to the "event", she confesses, "I don't even know what *name* to put on it" (8, emphasis mine). Any system of representation, or naming, falls short. "I think you might *call it* a crime of the flesh", she continues, "but the flesh is long fallen away and I am not sure what hurt may linger in the bones" (8). The very site of the injury, or trauma (the flesh or "skin" of Liam) that she needs to capture in words, no longer exists. Her brother, who put stones in his pockets and walked into the sea at Brighton, liberated himself from the "skin" that tied him to the reality in which he was abused. Even at the originary moment, the trauma inflicted on Liam's flesh was inaccessible to her, both because it was inflicted on his body *and* because the traumatic event is never experienced in its temporal presence but only as a recurring, or doubled, possession. The fictional doubling is a result of her trying to replicate and represent an irrecoverable event, or at the very least, find its reflection somewhere, now that her customary reflection, Liam, is no longer there.

Touch

I have alluded in this discussion to the importance of touch in the novel, and it is to this aspect that I would like to direct my attention now. Touch, an act that can join the skin of two bodies in a tentative and necessarily immediate, temporary and *present* connection, is one of Enright's distinct preoccupations in *The Gathering*. The central "event" in the novel, a touch, has troubled claim to the realm of the real because the fleshes it occurred between no longer exist. Simply put, Lambert Nugent *touched*¹³ Liam, and it is due to the painful resonances of that touch that Veronica feels the compulsion to narrate what happened. I return now briefly to the passage above which incorporates phrases attributed to Christ, "Someone has touched me" and "*Noli me Tangere*". These phrases are used with some persistence throughout the novel. "Someone has touched me" are the somewhat accusatory words Christ uttered to the crowd assembled when he felt power flow from his body as Berenice, touching him secretly and without his permission, received healing from her bleeding disorder. The passage above also contained a reference to Saint Veronica wiping Christ's face during his crucifixion, before it includes his words "*Noli me Tangere*", translated most often as "do not touch me", which he used to assuage Mary Magdalene's enthusiasm to touch him after his resurrection.

¹³ Significantly, the touch that caused these painful resonances left no remnant, or physical trace. In contrast to a 'wounding' (which is of course the original basis for the term "trauma") which can be read as a sign. Any attempt to 'read' Liam's wound is thwarted by its tracelessness, and consequent unreadability.

The three instances (a veritable trinity) of Christ responding to touch trace a progression. They occur before, during and after his crucifixion, respectively. In the first instance, he is touched without his knowledge or consent and something is taken from him. The second, amidst his violent death at the hands of his persecutors, is a futilely kind gesture of wiping the blood from his face. The third, post-resurrection instance, occurs when he has been given a glorified immortal body, and he is (rather understandably) reticent about being touched at all. The progression of touch in Jesus' life, read according to *this* sequence, is one of incrementally increasing violation, which seems a fitting backdrop to a story set in a "Post-Catholic Ireland", in which testimonies of inappropriate clerical touching are now commonplace (Hogan, 139).

Christ's significance is inextricably linked to his body. As the blemish-free physical manifestation of God, it was his untarnished innocence that needed to be mortified in exchange for Christian salvation.¹⁴ Later in this chapter, I conduct a discussion of ghosts in the novel, but it is worth noting here that Derrida's notion of the spectral, specifically, has significance to the spectrality that the figure of Christ has assumed since his death. Again, it must be emphasised that his significance since his death is bound to his body, and the wounding or trauma of that body. Liam, too, in his spectral form is constantly referred to in terms of his corporeality.

To refer to another of the instances in the novel when Christ's words haunt the text:

Ada called him Nolly, though we all knew what you called him was Mr Nugent, if you called him anything at all, which we didn't. Sometimes she called him Nolly May, she'd say it after he was gone, 'Oh, Nolly May', pushing the chair he'd sat in back up against the wall. He didn't do much except sit there getting insulted by the wallpaper, but there was always a slight sweat on him, and he cleared his throat a lot, and you could tell how much he wanted Gran.

(90)

The cadence of the nickname "Nolly May" is, unmistakably, the same as that of Christ's "*Noli me Tangere*". Later in the novel, the connection is cemented by the narrator comically completing the phrase with "Nolly May Tangerine" (209). The disincentive ironically contained within Ada's fond pet name for the man who may not touch her, unsettlingly destabilises the ostensibly civil exchange of tea, sweet biscuits and rent money, all of which

¹⁴ It is an irony of the most brutal kind that a secret consumption of the similar innocence of young children has occurred behind the screen of a Church whose foundations are already built on the ultimate sacrifice of innocence.

took place within the neat pink of Ada's "good room" (186). This is a passage in which 'touch' is decidedly absent, however it haunts the scene. Veronica attributes Ada's unwillingness to be touched by Lambert as the indirect cause for Liam's abuse. The absence of touch in this scene is particularly ironic, given that the abuse of Liam by Lambert Nugent, the "touch" that that constituted, which Veronica witnessed, took place (according to her account) in the "good room".

To emphasise the ironic absence of touch in this scene, the symbolic distance between Nugent and the child (or children) that he touched, is hinted at by the suggestion that they didn't "[call] him anything at all". Recall Veronica's memory of the "event", in which she refers to him markedly, and repeatedly, as "Mr Nugent", and thereby establishes, with the distinct levels of naming, the distinction between Nugent and the lesser, powerless children (125). There is also a distance established here between Nugent himself and the room he inhabited so frequently. Ada is sure to "[push] the chair he'd sat in back up against the wall", chanting her almost ritualistic phrase "Oh, Nolly May". The room is rearranged after he leaves, and any trace of his visit is thus erased. This material erasure, which is representative of Veronica's psychological one, will haunt her all her life.

Further, Veronica's version of her childhood is regularly punctuated with her memory of things she and her siblings were not to touch. "There were things on mantelpieces and little things on tables, that you may not touch", she recollects (45). Another instance: "Here's me, at the age of three, with my ear pressed against the beige tin cliff of her washing machine [...] Ada pushing stuff through the mangle (*Don't touch the mangle!*)" (87). Even years later, at her brother's wake, she remembers the chastisement, and writes "I walk through the dimness of our childhood rooms and I touch nothing" (26). Ada's "good room", which is the site of Liam's ordeal, is a place in which nothing can be touched or moved, and which is ritualistically returned to its original state after people have been in it. It is significant that, again, no physical trace of the "event" remains, and Ada dutifully cleans up after Nugent. The "touch" that constitutes the "event" would have left no trace other than the haunting alluded to here. Veronica's narrative attempts futilely to recuperate touch, specifically, in her attempt to narrate the "event".

Touch functions according to a system of signification that is not fully recuperable by language. It mimics the illusion of 'truth', in that a touch can never be recreated, or fully and accurately represented. This imposes sustained limitations on Veronica's attempt to narrate

the “event”. In order to circumvent these limitations, and perhaps mimic the immediacy of touch, she creates a second skin with which to revisit the “event”. She calls up the memory of it “being very cold. You remember the cold on some imaginary skin that does not quite coincide with your own and this is where I shiver, as I remember the dankness of the air that day in Ada’s front room” (127). Stephen Connor, in an analysis of another novel with the sexual abuse of a child at its core, Joanna Briscoe’s *Skin*, argues:

To lose the place and time of experience is to lose the skin, to disclose the skin, not as a scene, but as the absence of a scene. The obscenity of the skin under assault, by contrast, gives us back the scene of suffering and pleasure, gives it somewhere to happen, and someone to happen to, a time and a place for there to be a time and a place.

(2001: 50)

The “skin” that formed the original site of violation forms “the absence of a scene” and the “event” is thus placeless and outside of time, and is consequently virtually impossible to narrate. Narration requires the setting of a scene, after all. While what Enright does diverges slightly from what Briscoe does (Briscoe wounds the flesh narratively, and thus makes it *present* in her narrative, giving “suffering and pleasure [...] somewhere to happen, and someone to happen to”), I would argue that Enright achieves, or rather attempts to achieve, a similar effect. A second skin, or “imaginary skin” which, as a product of the narrative, can mimic *presence* in that narrative and be drawn on symbolically in a way that the original skin (the skin this imaginary one “does not quite coincide with” [Enright, 2008: 127]) cannot, since it has “fallen away”. The “imaginary skin” can give the occurrence “somewhere to happen, and someone to happen to, a time and a place for there to be a time and a place”.¹⁵ However, the narration that this imaginary skin might enable is hindered by that skin being an inexact replication of the original. Veronica’s skin was already an approximation of the skin that sustained the abuse (Liam’s) at the originary moment of the trauma. It remains that an older Veronica, whose consciousness is furnished with the catastrophic after-effects of the “event” returns to the scene (imaginatively of course, with imaginary skin) in order to experience it as “cold” (as ‘really’ cold, *as if* the cold were not imaginary). Of the imaginary skin, she writes, “*this* is where I shiver, as I remember the dankness of the air that day in Ada’s front room” (emphasis mine). Again, the narrative tools she has at her disposal (creating a fictional second skin, for instance) cannot recuperate the trauma completely, as

¹⁵ Veronica’s insertion of an imaginary second skin may be what results in her uncertain awareness that she too may have sustained abuse. Her sympathetic reimagining of her brother’s ordeal may result in its transference to her.

any narrative-based attempt to do so is subject to always being removed from the original, and consequently being imprecise. Roger Luckhurst, in his book *The Trauma Question*, locates another aporia in what Caruth calls the “peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness of trauma” since, according to her, “the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (Caruth in Luckhurst, 2008: 5). Veronica’s imaginary skin, which it must again be made clear is a product of her narrative, which in turn is a product of her trauma, generates “a time and a place for there to be a time and a place” but is therefore necessarily subject to always already being removed from the original, and having its existence hinge on “*another* place, and in *another* time” (emphasis mine).

Veronica’s narrative, which obsessively centres around the body, specifically the skin (aporetically the scene of the original trauma, as well as the “absence of a scene”, now that Liam is dead) is, as I have begun to show, constantly encumbered by the chasm of the passage of time that exists between the original “event”, and her present traumatic repetitive re-experience of it. To continue with this line of argument, when her narrative *finally* turns to the “event”, she constructs a hallucinogenic passage in which the picture represented, the memory of a child without the frame of reference to understand and assimilate what she saw, is now scrutinised by an older consciousness. As a result, the passage has two experiencing selves, and is pulled between the original “strangeness” of the eight year old’s memory, and the qualifications and attempts to understand of the adult Veronica:

What struck me was the strangeness of what I saw, when I opened the door. It was as if Mr Nugent’s penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was not an extension of the man’s member, set down mysteriously in the ground in front of him, but a shocked (of course he was shocked, I had opened the door) boy of nine, and the member not even that, but the boy’s bare forearm, that made a bridge of flesh between himself and Mr Nugent. His hand was buried in the cloth, his fist clutched around something hidden there. They were not one thing, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew, Mr Nugent and Liam.

(125)

The strange description bears the marks of the two perspectives producing it. The eight year old child refers to “Mr Nugent”, which is what she would have been required to call him as a child, while the older Veronica has no qualms about naming him “Lambert”. The image that now possesses her has confused Liam’s arm with Nugent’s penis, which has “flowered at the

tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy”. The image, with its strange conflation of two bodies, produced by the mind of a child unaccustomed to seeing two separate people joined so intimately, is dissected by the older self, who extracts the shape of her “shocked” brother Liam from the flesh of Mr Nugent. The older self who “finally saw” belatedly furnishes the image with a layer of adult understanding (albeit imperfect) when she states, parenthetically, “of course he was shocked, I had opened the door”. This layer of adult understanding must, by definition, be an interpretation after the fact. Moreover, ‘the fact’ is ironically not a fact that can be understood, for at its core, lies the trauma that the child could not competently or comprehensively experience.

Narratively, Veronica is obliged, *repeatedly*, to split the image of one body with a “bridge of flesh” into the “two people that [she] knew, Mr Nugent and Liam”, and this repetitive splitting testifies to the image’s stubborn possession of her. Caruth, describing what Sigmund Freud calls a “latency” inherent in traumatic experience itself, remarks that “[t]he historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (Caruth, 1996: 17). The dominant image that an older Veronica attempts to re-appropriate and use to narrate the “event” betrays signs of this “latency” or “inherent forgetting”. The “something hidden” that is “buried in the cloth” is not contained in this memory, but is the cause of the misunderstood joining of two bodies. Physically, it is of course Lambert Nugent’s penis, however what it symbolises, which is the invasive and abusive nature of what Veronica witnessed, is beyond her eight-year-old comprehension. Joint bodies are what the memory comprises, and the cause, or rationalisation is inherently forgotten due to the fact that “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (Caruth, 1996: 91–2). Veronica’s more astute adult understanding is burdened with the task of deciphering the “direct seeing”, and resultant not knowing, with which her eight year old consciousness was assaulted.

Luckhurst attributes trauma’s “unusual memory registration” to the fact that “it somehow is seared directly onto the psyche, almost like a piece of shrapnel” (Luckhurst, 2008: 4). The parallel he draws here between a psychological wound and a physical one leads us back to one of my primary concerns: the symbolic use of the body to narrate a trauma. After the passage quoted above, Veronica writes, “I look at my own children and I think you know everything at eight. But maybe I am wrong. You know everything at eight, but it is hidden from you, sealed up, in a way you have to cut yourself open to find” (128). The core of the traumatic

experience, appositely represented by Luckhurst as “a piece of shrapnel”, becomes, if Veronica’s line of musing is followed, lodged inside the victim, such that “you have to cut yourself open” to retrieve it. The body is central to Veronica’s project, and from this extract it seems that she believes that what she is looking for (the elements of the “event” that remain unnarratable) can be found within the body. Her narrative’s constant reference to “skin” is thus indicative of her preoccupation with narrating *through* the body.

She recalls trying to “cut [herself] open” one night, “hacking away at my inner leg, with a biro of all things, and then later, running through the ineffectual blue lines with [a] kitchen knife. And I remember the coolness of the cut” (114). Her first attempt to penetrate the surface of her own skin with an “ineffectual” writing implement perhaps serves as a metaphorical marker of what she feels is her narrative’s failure. A “biro” is inadequate when tasked with dislodging the kind of shrapnel Veronica feels the near-physical effect of. She later compares the violence she was prepared to express herself with in her youth with the more subdued state of the older woman she has become, and this is represented by the “[o]atmeal, cream, sandstone, slate” with which her home is decorated:

There is no blood here. There is no blood in this house. But I am residually interested, you might say. I am residually interested, in the bleeding face of Christ, and the woman who may have existed, but who was certainly not called Veronica, who wiped the blood away and with it some of the hurt.

(114)

Veronica is “residually interested” in blood, or the *residue* that a wound would conventionally leave behind. The nature of such a wound is that it is a physical manifestation of the hurt inflicted, rather unlike the effects of the psychological harm she has sustained. Her youthful inclination to translate the harm into the form of a physical, tangible and observable cut might well have been the most appropriate expression of her hurt. Writing, represented by the biro, leaves only “ineffectual blue lines” which are inherently inadequate. Writing is what she has resorted to now however, in her less impassioned older state. The austere cleanliness of the colouring she has chosen to live amidst bears no trace of her insidious preoccupation. The hurt has become internal, as indeed it always was. Her residual interest turns now to the gesture her namesake paid Christ before he died. The apocryphal Saint Veronica is replaced in this version though with “the woman who may have existed”. The ‘official version’ of the story strikes Veronica as inauthentic, but she yearns for the untraceable truth that may have inspired it. The true “vernicle” would not have been so called, if it had been true, given that

the story was entered into the annals of Christianity, as I earlier stated, in order to authenticate the relic (of which many copies were and continue to be sold). The irrecuperable original moment in which Christ's hurt was expressed into the cloth of an unknown woman is what Veronica desires to replicate here. The vernicle, or what she calls the "first-ever photograph" (113) was, at its originary moment, an act of kindness that "wiped the blood away and with it some of the hurt". It then became a mere representation however, after the hurt had moved beyond being eased, because Christ had died. Veronica, being unable to ease Liam's hurt because he too has died, is left with only representations, too removed from their original to lessen the hurt. She bears the cross of her namesake, in that replications and "ineffectual blue marks", ever more removed from their original, are all she can offer.

She busies herself with her limited offering however. Aware as she (painfully) is that "a crime of the flesh" has taken on a ghostly quality, given that "the flesh is long fallen away", she now concerns herself with the "hurt [that] may linger in the bones" (8). Since Liam's death, she is obliged to resort to "bones" which would be the vestiges or remains left once "the flesh is [...] fallen away". Metaphorically, the "bones" of the truth, the feeble scraps and remnants left behind by Liam's body, determine her narrative's structure. Of her project she writes, "I stay downstairs while the family breathes above me and I write it down, I lay them out in nice sentences, all my clean, white bones" (9). The chaos of what ensues in her narrative counters the cleanliness of her "white" bones, and the very physical, fleshly designation of "hurt" proves most appropriate. I refer here once again to her propensity to wake and write at night, in the lifeless dark. It is fitting that her subject matter, which she refers to as "night thoughts", is described by Veronica as "bones". Bones are recalcitrant remnants of what once lived, and they are an unmistakable signifier of death. However, unfortunately, according to Veronica, "the word we use about bones" is "clean" (8). Left, similarly, with only the remnants of her brother's death, and not the details, or flesh of what caused it, she must nevertheless write this "thing" she feels "roaring inside [her]" (8).¹⁶

Ghosts

To diverge slightly (though not far) from the body, and yet to expand a little on Veronica's helpless resort to recalcitrant remnants, to what remains in remaining inaccessible, it seems appropriate to focus for a while on ghosts, who appear with unsettling regularity in the novel.

¹⁶ There is an interesting repetition of the words "roar" and "rage" in the text, expressing a kind of inarticulable physical affect.

Veronica, who is doomed to oscillate between “a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*”, and to be trapped between death and survival, is well positioned to observe the spectral (Caruth, 1996: 7). Late in the novel, she says of Liam’s ghost:

He does not know who I am, or what the sea is, or what sort of a place Broadstone might be. He is full of his own death. His death fills him as a plum fills its own skin. Even his eyes are full. It is a serious business, being dead. He would like to do it well. He turns from the confusing lights of the car, and sets his face towards the sea. (201)

Liam’s ghost corresponds with Derrida’s “specter”, which he defines as follows in *Specters of Marx*:

the specter is a paradoxical incorporation, the becoming-body, a certain phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit. It becomes, rather, some “thing” that remains difficult to name: neither soul nor body, and both one and the other. For it is flesh and phenomenality that give to the spirit its spectral apparition, but which disappear right away in the apparition, in the very coming of the *revenant* or the return of the specter.

(Derrida, 1994: 5)

According to Derrida, the apparition exists aporetically between the “phenomenal” and “carnal”, being “neither soul nor body, and both one and the other”. Liam’s ghost is described as decidedly spectral, in the Derridean sense of the word. Having died as a result of walking into the sea, it is fitting that allusions to the physical nature of his death inform Veronica’s description of his spectral presence, which again is both “carnal” with descriptions of his “skin” and “eyes”, as well as “phenomenal” with both his skin and his eyes being “full of his own death”. Veronica’s traumatic memory of Liam is quite literally (if indeed one could still refer to the literal in the space of the spectral) *haunted* by Liam’s body. Therefore, even when she refers to his death, it is the spectral presence of his body that ‘possesses’ her. Notably, Liam’s ghost is decidedly placeless. Veronica positions him between “Broadstone”, the site of his childhood, and “the sea”, the site of his death. He does not recognise either of them. His placelessness is of course inextricably linked with her own; her inability to *place* his pain (and indeed her own) is suggested by his inability to recognise either the place of his childhood (the time of his trauma) or the place of his death. Liam’s aporetic absence/presence is replicated several times throughout Veronica’s narrative with the appearance of several other ghosts, including Ada, Nugent himself and those who died in Irish institutions along

with her occasionally mentioned Uncle Brendon.¹⁷ The pervasive “presence” of ghosts in Veronica’s narrative is an appropriate metaphor for the simultaneous presence and absence of her traumatic experience. The ghosts’ aporetic existence between presence and absence structurally mimics the aporetic nature of the “event”, which was never experienced as such. Her narrative, which attempts to come to terms with and narrate her trauma, is necessarily thwarted by trauma’s inherently ghostly nature.

While rummaging through old papers (bills, report cards, “documents of the most arbitrary kind” [180]) that record, imprecisely and selectively of course, the history of Veronica’s family, she notes:

But I have disturbed the ghosts. They are outside the door of the room, now, as the ghosts of my childhood once were; they are behind the same door. Their story is there, out on the landing of Griffith Way, waiting for me one more time.

Who are they?

Ada first, pragmatically dead. A thin old thing, she is the kind of ghost who is always turning away. Ada just gets on with being dead. [...] I turn the handle of the door and Nugent is a slick of horror on the landing. He moves like smell through the house.

(180–1)

While searching for the story that eludes her among family documents, Veronica “[disturbs] the ghosts”. The ghosts in this passage represent the story to which she has no access, and to which she refers unambiguously as “[t]heir story”. While searching the family documents and written remnants of their shared history, Veronica realises that the “story” she is in search of has assumed spectral form, as something she cannot access, and of which she simultaneously feels the presence. Ada and Nugent’s ghosts hold the position of “the ghosts of [her] childhood” and they by implication represent the part of her story that was hidden from her, even then. It is significant that they retreat, incrementally, from “outside the door of the room” to “out on the landing of Griffith Way”, reinforcing the notion that the unequivocal ‘truth’ is deferred almost to the point of inaccessibility.

“Possession”, as I have established, is an apt description of the ghosts’ appearance in Veronica’s life, and in her narrative. What this implies is that their presence is something that she is at the mercy of: something that is beyond her will. Indeed, the form that the ghosts of

¹⁷ Veronica’s Uncle Brendan’s “bones are mixed with other people’s bones; so there is a turmoil of souls muttering and whining under his clothes”, and his “ears leak the mad and the inconvenient dead” (181). This image mirrors the idea of Veronica’s “bones” – her narrative – being caught up with the bones of the dead that she describes. The specter of Veronica’s near-forgotten uncle, who lived and died in one of Ireland’s notorious mental asylums, literally comprises the masses that he represents, which results in their unsettling presence in the novel. Again, this reinforces the link Enright forges between individual and national trauma.

Ada and Nugent take mimics the form they had in life. Ada is “the kind of ghost who is always turning away”, much like the woman who in life did not see, nor protect the children. Nugent is “a slick of horror” who “moves like a smell through the house”¹⁸ and who retains what made him threatening in life. His spectral presence in Veronica’s life has the ability to oppress and frighten her. His presence (and that of the other ghosts) has the same effect as the spectre of the elusive “event” that she feels “roaring” inside her (8).

Ada and Nugent assume another form in Veronica’s narrative for which she herself is responsible, contrary to their spectral form that she is subjected to beyond her will. As I have already observed, she writes “endlessly, over and again” of the time that they met in 1925 in the foyer of the Belvedere Hotel (39). Given that the form they assume within her narrative beyond her will is spectral, it can be argued that her deliberate inclusion of their forms is a type of conjuring. Derrida asserts that “‘conjunction’ means, [...] ‘conjurement’ [...] namely, the magical exorcism that [...] tends to expulse the evil spirit which would have been called up or convoked” (Derrida, 1994: 58). The “slick of horror” that Nugent’s ghost represents coincides with what Derrida refers to as “a malignant, demonized, diabolized force, most often an evil-doing spirit, a specter, a kind of ghost who comes back or who still risks coming back *postmortem*” (59).

To exorcise or destroy Nugent’s malignant presence would arguably be a result of Veronica’s conjuration, for, as Derrida maintains, “to conjure means *also* to exorcise: to attempt both to destroy and to disavow” (59). To “disavow” can also mean to ‘recant’, or indeed to tell a different story. Veronica’s compulsive writing and rewriting of the moment that Ada and Nugent met is her attempt to narrate Liam’s trauma, as well as her own, from the very beginning. “The seeds of my brother’s death were sown many years ago”, she notes, “[t]he person who planted them is long dead – at least that’s what I think. So if I want to tell Liam’s story, then I have to start long before he was born” (18). The fact that Nugent and Ada (she is also culpable in Veronica’s view) are “long dead” has twofold significance: firstly, the “story” that they represent is inaccessible, now that they are dead. Although secondly, Veronica’s conjuring of them puts *them* at *her* mercy. They are a product of her fiction, and of her imagination, which can make their forms yield to her whims:

Lambert Nugent watched. Or he did not watch so much as let it enter into him
– the world, in all its nuance of who owed what to whom.

¹⁸ He is quite like Derrida’s description of the “phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit” (1994: 5).

Which is what he saw, presumably, when my grandmother walked in through the door. His baby eyes. His two black pupils, into which the double image of Ada Merriman walked, and sat. She was wearing blue, or so I imagine it. Her blue self settled in the grey folds of his brain, and it stayed there for the rest of his life.

(19)

Veronica here begins the “story” in a necessarily fictional fashion, given that a chasm of time and death separates her from access to what really happened. Interestingly, Nugent is depicted as a passive observer in this fiction (he must simply “let [the scene] enter into him”), when it is his *action* that the novel fitfully circles. Ada, too, is subject to subjection, that is, to being made subject to Veronica’s will. “She is wearing blue” because that is how Veronica imagines the scene. It is merely their respective forms, and not their wills or autonomy, which Veronica conjures. Further still, this ‘scene’ is significant because, according to Veronica, it is Nugent’s frustrated desire for Ada, who marries his friend, which, when weighed according to his perverse measure of “who owed what to whom”, justifies what he ultimately takes from Liam, Ada’s grandson. However even this justification, or the notion that Ada’s “blue self settled in the grey folds of [Nugent’s] brain, and [...] stayed there for the rest of his life” is a fiction of Veronica’s construction. This scene would constitute a beginning because this is where they meet, and unwittingly predetermine the course that their lives, and those of their descendants, take. After many rewrites, Veronica settles on this version: “Lamb Nugent looks at Ada Merriman across the carpet of the Belvedere Hotel, and she looks right back at him, and the rest, as they say, is history” (77). One of the forms that the “history” which Veronica cannot deny assumes is that of the “event” she cannot narrate. Complete narration, which prefers linearity, would require an origin on which to hinge its beginning, and this history’s origin is untraceable. In this, her attempt to narrate “Liam’s story” by tracing its point of inception, or origin, she necessarily turns to fiction.¹⁹

“Here is another scene”, Veronica writes later in the novel, “[i]t is a scene where Ada wants to comfort Nugent because Nugent’s life is not going well. Nugent’s life is going very badly, and though nothing is said, Ada knows this because of the odour that hangs about him” (118). Veronica’s conjuration of Ada and Nugent’s ghosts for the purposes of her narrative retain a trace of their spectral form (the spectral is always a carnal form too, we should recall). Nugent’s propensity to move “like smell through the house” (180) remains now as “the odour that hangs about him”. Her attempt to exorcise the ghosts manifests as an attempt to write a

¹⁹ Here we should recall that according to Derrida the condition of possibility for testifying to the truth of an event is fiction, the possibility that the testimony may be fictionalised. See my previous chapter where I explore this idea in more detail as it relates to *The Secret Scripture*.

different story, to recant, to conjure away, now that Ada and Nugent are within her narrative control.²⁰ Altering the outcome of the story would have manifold effects. The haunting that the ghosts represent, of a story that is not within Veronica's reach to adequately narrate, would of course be exorcised if that story had taken a different course. During Ada's fictionalised attempt to comfort Nugent, Veronica has them collapse into one another amidst the conventional exchange of biscuits and tea. In this, probably the most visceral passage of the novel, which lest we forget is and will always be a passage describing ghosts (the "sensuous-non-sensuous" which Derrida uses to describe the ghost or *revenant* in *Specters of Marx* [1994: 125]), she wrestles with the limits of narrative:

The bookie fucks the whore (I had forgotten she was a whore), and we are near to the truth of it here, we are getting to the *truth* of it – of a man's essential bookieness and woman's essential whoreishness – we are pushing for it now as Nugent pushes into Ada, the fact of her baseness, the fact that *she wants it too*. Or is this enough? Would he not, to prove his point, need to do more?

(122)

In this passage, Veronica casts "truth" as though it were a physical thing that she can be "near to" or "[get] to" or even, perhaps, touch. Of course, this fiction is the product of her conjuration of spectres, who themselves are only ever "becoming-[bodies]" alternating irrevocably between "a certain phenomenal and carnal form" and who are thus, by definition, impossible to touch (Derrida, 1994: 5). Again, the "truth" is as elusive as the spectres themselves, and her attempt to narrate the truth is undermined by an outlandish fiction of her own construction into which she inserts the *word* "truth" (one could argue the word penetrates this passage and her text at the exact moment that Nugent is *imagined* to have penetrated Ada) which has as much claim to verity as the words that surround it (which is to say no claim whatsoever). The non-essential relationship between words and what they attempt to denote makes its presence felt, in ghostly fashion, early on in Veronica's fictionalisation of Nugent and Ada. Already, her attempt to steer the narrative is unravelling due to the limited nature of language, the only tool at that narrative's disposal. Further to this, there is a tension between the very physical description the passage contains, and the limits of what narrative can achieve, namely, actual, truthful access to the physical body when the "flesh [has] fallen away".

²⁰ It should be established that Veronica has been fictionalising Ada and Nugent for much of her life. "When I was in college", she writes, "I decided that Ada had been a prostitute – the way you do" (76). Of Nugent, too, she later notes "I couldn't tell you what Nugent did, though it has stuck somewhere in my head that he was a bookie, or a bookie's clerk, that he put on a grey cashmere coat from time to time, and got into a black car, and was driven to a racecourse" (92).

It remains, however, that even within the confines of language Veronica can still enact a kind of violence. Lambert Nugent's "bookieness" as well as Ada's "whoreishness" (see footnote 19) are products of Veronica's fiction, and of the small imaginative violence she inflicts on them, now merely conjurations, or *characters* in her *story*. In trying to get to "a man's *essential* bookieness and a woman's *essential* whoreishness" she is diving into the rabbit hole of what she has, essentially, made up (emphasis mine). However to counteract this limitation, Veronica aligns the aim of her narrative with the act she describes, and achieves the force of a double narration, in which the action of the language mimics that of the body, with "we are pushing for it now as Nugent pushes into Ada". Ada's "baseness", like her "whoreishness" is a quality applied to the character in the narrative, which makes her a willing participant in this interaction. It is worth noting that Veronica now constructs a victim who "*wants it too*", rather unlike Nugent's actual victim(s). Through this fiction, Veronica attempts again to steer the story and exorcise the ghosts, by expunging, or by conjuring away the "event" that gave rise to their presence.²¹

Nugent's spectre retains some unknowability and autonomy however, and his reach still extends beyond the scope of Veronica's text. Her sentences attempt to forcefully close off what he may achieve within the narrative, with clear, unambiguous descriptions of his action: "[t]he bookie fucks the whore", for instance. Her writing yields however to his residual autonomy (the 'residual' is, again, what remains, haunts and therefore resists being fully determined, hence my use of the word 'autonomy') with the open-ended questions of "is this enough? Would he not, to prove his point, need to do more?" The "slick of horror" himself refuses to be closed off by Veronica's narrative (181). Her writing is haunted by what she cannot narrate, or close off and limit with comprehensive description. The ghosts retain a will of their own that transcends her narrative, much like the origin or unnarratable core of the "event" that also transcends (and yet paradoxically determines) the scope of her narration. She continues:

I can twist them as far as you like, here on the page; make them endure all kinds of protraction, bliss, mindlessness, abjection, release. I can bend and reconfigure them in the rudest possible ways, but my heart fails me, there is something so banal about things that happen *behind closed doors*, these terrible transgressions that are just sex, after all.

²¹ Veronica's distaste for sex, evident throughout the book, is interesting. It seems related to her own personal trauma of growing up within such a large family in which the children's identities are prone to disappear. Within such an environment, the catastrophic effects of one of those children being abused are easily overlooked. "Consequences, Mammy. *Consequences*" she chides her mother for "the stupidity of so much humping" (14).

Just sex.

(122, original emphasis)

Veronica attempts to assert her power here, which (supposedly), within the confines of “the page”, is limitless. “[M]indlessness” and “abjection” are within the range of things she can inflict with words on Ada and Nugent, who are themselves (we can never let ourselves forget this) merely words. Interestingly, she writes what she *could* do, without actually doing it, and what prevents her is that her “heart fails” her. Ironically, she is drawn back by something quite physical, and of her body. Yet, in this case, the use of the word connotes, at least primarily, a metaphysical “heart”, which brings her conscience into play. This adds a liminal dimension which hovers between the warring elements of narrative and body. Veronica is restrained by a conscience determining what ought and ought not to be inflicted on a body, which extends to an analogous restriction of her narrative. This restraint has particular significance when one is experimenting with what narrative can do to a body, and, reciprocally, what a body can do to narrative.

But this conscience of both body and narrative places Veronica in an untenable aporia, as it leaves her lost in the liminal space between the actual body and its inscription in language and fiction. Thus, her next move is calculated to remove the implications of “things that happen *behind closed doors*”. “Just sex”, which, by penning it thus, she reduces to a mere act of the body drained (narratively) of conscience and of implication. Along this line, in which she liberates her narrative of “heart”, she admits:

I would love to leave my body. Maybe this is what they are about, these questions of which or whose hole, the right fluids in the wrong places, these infantile confusions and small sadisms: they are a way of fighting our way out of all this meat (I would like to just swim out, you know? – shoot like a word out of my own mouth and disappear with a flick of my tail) because there is a limit to what you can fuck and with what, Nugent opening Ada’s belly with his wicked, square fingers, delving into her cavities, taking with careful desire the beautiful lobes of her lungs and caressing – ‘Oh’, gasps Ada, as the air rushes out of her – squeezing her pink lungs tight.
‘Oh.’

(122)

Veronica expresses her longing to be where Liam is, but she inhabits her body, and her skin inhibits her from “just [swimming] out” into the fluid realm into which he has been liberated now that he is dead, free of distinctions. The distinctions and differences between, for example, “which or whose hole”, characterise the corporeal realm to which Veronica is bound. These distinctions dictate that, in terms of the body, it is possible for “the right fluids” to be “in the wrong places”, though notably the difference between right and wrong is not

“fluid”, at least not in terms of the fluid world Liam swam out into (both literally and metaphorically), it belongs solely to the corporeal world that limits Veronica. Consequently, “there is a *limit* to what you can fuck and with what” (emphasis mine). To “[fight one’s] way out of all this meat” would be to liberate oneself from those limits and distinctions. In spite of Veronica’s conjuring of ghosts, who have themselves left their bodies and (partially) transcended these limitations, she has not set her narrative at liberty. The ghosts/characters remain beyond the scope of her page, and she remains haunted in a corporeal realm in which the “limit[s] to what you can fuck” have been violated both in the physical penetration of Liam by Nugent, and ethically, since the abuse of children is sexual violation *par excellence*, giving rise to a trauma that she experiences now as a haunting.

Nevertheless, Veronica uses her words to inflict as much as she can on the body. Perhaps she is trying to find a way in which, at least narratively, she can utterly expend Nugent’s desire. Having taken that desire to the ultimate point, beyond which a body (quite literally) cannot go, she is telling a story in which, theoretically at least, his desire would have reached an endpoint, and would not have had to shift to Liam. It is important to note here that conjuration is aporetic in nature. Veronica conjures what she desires to destroy: “to conjure means *also* to exorcise: to attempt both to destroy and to disavow” (Derrida, 1994: 59). Veronica writes of Nugent’s desire, she conjures it, precisely, in order to conjure it *away*.

Unfortunately, she encounters the abrupt limit of what her narrative can achieve. The story that has already taken place (though it has not been told), which ended with Liam walking into the sea, did not expend Nugent’s desire on Ada. Veronica is drawn back, to tell a more likely story:

I reach the end of what they might do, what they might have done, and it all shrivels back to this:

Ada reaches her hand to Nugent’s shoulder and he, in the manner of a person who knows her these many years, looks up and lifts his hand to her hip. They stay like that for a moment, and then Ada dips to lift the tray, and turns to leave the room.

(122)

As she notes a little before this extract, “there is nothing fateful about a coupling, when it is too late. What lies ahead is not so much a fork in the road as a small lay-by. They might do this, and it would not matter. Nothing would be changed by it; neither the future nor the past” (121). Herein lies her limitation, that any attempt she may make therein to steer the action, is “too late”, and contains “nothing fateful”. She is not capable of forging a “fork in the road”, with a prong which has enough reach to result in an alternative ending, and an exorcism.

Anything that Ada and Nugent may or may not have done is “a small lay-by” that “[does] not matter”. Her lament that “[n]othing would be changed by it; neither the future nor the past” is interestingly double-pronged. Veronica’s vantage point is from this “future” and their fictional liaison occurs in a shifting and unknowable past. However malleable this unknowable past is in the space of her narrative, the “future” it results in is fixed and decidedly unchangeable.

A Healing which Exceeds Narrative

Veronica writes soon thereafter of the “event” that her narrative both failed to prevent, and failed to narrate definitively. Herein lies the ultimate outcome that her narrative has managed to achieve:

I add it to my life, as an event, and I think, well yes, that might explain some things. I add it to my brother’s life and it is crucial; it is the place where all cause meets all effect, the crux of the X. In a way, it explains too much.

(189)

She “[adds]” the “event” to both her life, and her brother’s, which emphasises the divergence of their actual, true “[lives]” from her narration of what happened. That the “event” forms an ‘addition’ implies that it is superficial and not integral, which seems to contradict what follows. The “event”, when added to her life, “might explain some things” (again, the use of the word “might” leads to a deferral) and yet when added to Liam’s, “it is crucial”.

Veronica’s tentative knowledge of the abuse that her brother endured is paradoxically both ancillary and “crucial”. It is, to use Derrida’s language, an “exterior, irrational, accidental and therefore effaceable addition” (1997: 294–5). Yet, her supplementary knowledge is also the primary preoccupation of her narrative, and the origin of the hurt she feels. This can be explained by the aporetic nature of supplementarity itself. According to Derrida:

the supplement, supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void [...]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the possibility of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness. Somewhere, something can be filled up *of itself*, can accomplish itself, only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy.

(Derrida, 1997: 145)

Veronica’s experience of the trauma is very like what Derrida here refers to as “void” in form. It was experienced as a non-experience, as her compulsion to “add” it to her life, post-fact, as an “event” signifies. This supplementary awareness will never allow her to access the hurt directly, because even her adult understanding of what occurred is yet another replication

(an “effaceable addition”) of that non-experience. At the origin of her trauma, there is the supplement. That is one of the tragedies of her life.

Veronica states, hyperbolically, that “it is the place where all cause meets all effect, the crux of the X”. It remains however that Veronica has ‘added’ something “as an event” that “cannot take the form of a remembered or narratable event” (Butler, 2004: 154). Paradoxically, the structure of traumatic experience is maintained through the image of “the crux of the X”. While the “X” may be understood to be the place where the ‘truth’ and its telling meet (in an irresolvable alternation, of course), the opposed arms of “the X” ‘meet’, aporetically, at the “crux”, thus preventing the ‘addition’ from “[explaining] too much”.

Veronica attempts to conclude the portion of her life structured by such aporias, in which she wakes at night and sleeps during the day, with a spontaneous trip to England. It is here that she concludes, “I know what I have to do – even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth” (217). In a very post-Catholic flourish, Veronica determines to ‘confess’ the ‘truth’ to her brother Ernest, who is, in her words, a “lying hypocrite bastard of a lapsed-priest atheist” (175). This confession, and the resolution she obviously hopes it entails, does not take place within the limits of the novel, which has failed to lay “the truth” completely bare. The two concluding paragraphs place her in a fittingly liminal space between Ireland and England in Gatwick airport:

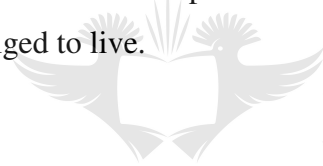
I stand in the queue in Gatwick airport with my eyes closed: a woman with no luggage, no sharp objects, and nothing I haven’t packed myself. I just want to be less afraid. That’s all. Because it is fear that I feel as I wait to go up to the lip of the counter for a flight out today or, if the price is too extortionate, first thing tomorrow. I do not know if I can get up those tin steps and on to the plane.

Gatwick airport is not the best place to be gripped by a fear of flying. But it seems that this is what is happening to me now; because you are up so high, in those things, and there is such a long way to fall. Then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now.

(218)

Veronica waits within the non-place of an airport for a flight back into the place where her life is to continue. Notably, she has no baggage to check in, at least, none that will take up any more space than she herself already does. Enright judiciously leaves the ‘conclusion’ of Veronica’s ordeal outside, or beyond, the confines of her narrative. Having pressed against the limits of what narration can achieve, things like “truth” and the result of Veronica’s “[fall] into [her] own life” are gestured toward, but not narrated.

Recall that the use of present tense narration pervades the novel, and the reader is once again reminded of this with the final word in it, “now”. The two sentences that precede the last one are rendered in uncharacteristic past tense and they refer, it is to be presumed, to the work her narrative *has* constituted. The present it was rendered to simulate is now past. Despite her text’s tentative beginning of “I would *like* to write down what happened in my grandmother’s house the summer I was eight or nine”, these final sentences mark that her writing is at an end, whether it contains what she would “*like*” it to or not (8, emphasis mine). She has managed to generate a cohesive-enough rendition for the reader to infer what happened in Ada’s good room, however the real business of such writing is to enable its writer to inhabit the present in a way that Veronica’s use of present tense has ironically shown she is unable to do. The “falling” that she implies her narrative involved *now* faces its end. Falling bestows upon the present moment a significance and an urgency by virtue of the immanence of the end of that fall. Veronica is now going to “hit” her “life”, and with it the pain expressed by the metaphor. Becoming present within her life, which a cessation of her compulsion to write would result in, is what she is “about to” do. For now, at Gatwick airport, she is suspended liminally, within the last narrative present tense that the word “now” can generate. Thereafter, however, she is obliged to live.



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CHAPTER 3: A FOOL'S ERRAND: REINHABITING THE PAST IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *THE SEA*

Spurred by the loss of his wife, Max Morden, the narrating protagonist of John Banville's novel *The Sea*, retreats to the site of his boyhood holidays, where his friends, Chloe and Myles Grace, walked into the sea one day, to their joined deaths. Max rents a room in the house that the Graces occupied in the Irish seaside town of Ballyless, and from this attempt to return to the past, he proceeds to write.

Before I continue, I must make clear that there are two distinct levels of writing in the novel. I refer to the product of the protagonist's writing as Max's work¹ in order to make clear the distinction between the writing of Banville's character, and the writing of the author himself. The purpose of drawing attention to this distinction is to clarify the distinct achievements of the two respective writing efforts.² What inspires Max's work, namely the past and the (now) dead who occupied it, is what must always elude it. While Banville is of course no more capable of capturing and representing what exceeds language than Max is, it should be noted that the failure of his protagonist is not necessarily Banville's failure. Banville's work contains the inadequacy of Max's within it, and further, it conscientiously draws attention to this inadequacy. By doing so, Banville's work gestures beyond this failure. While the unrepresentable cannot feature directly in the novel, it remains the central preoccupation of the novel. *The Sea* traces its central character's fitful and obsessive engagement with what will always remain beyond his reach. I return to this important distinction in my concluding remarks.

In this chapter, I analyse the novel's preoccupation with what lies beyond its scope. To this end, I refer to Maurice Blanchot's reading of the Orpheus myth, in which Orpheus orchestrates a marginally more successful pursuit of his wife in the realm of the dead than does Max. As I show, Blanchot has harnessed the myth, and the concept of an Orphic descent to describe the movement of all art, which is inspired by something beyond the realm of what he calls "the day" (Blanchot, 1982: 177). It is within the realm of "the day" that the play of difference yields the systems of signification upon which all art (not only narrative) relies. I then look at Max's fraught engagement with his (limited) memory, after which I consider the presence of the uncanny, or more specifically the 'un-home' in the novel. This examination

¹ My use of the term anticipates my reliance on Maurice Blanchot's understanding of it, of which I make extensive use in this chapter.

² The distinction, of course, applies to all three works studied in this dissertation.

focuses on the ways in which Max is systematically un-homed both spatially and temporally: within spaces that have the potential to constitute a home, and which come to represent the *present* within which he is also un-homed. In conclusion, I discuss the achievements of such a text, which is inspired precisely by that which constitutes its limitation.

Given the parameters of this dissertation – that it is a study of a selection of contemporary *Irish* fiction – it may be important to preface this discussion with a look at the novel’s setting in order to situate *The Sea* and determine what (if any) commentary it offers with regard to that setting. John Banville is an Irish writer, although in one of his interviews, he stated, memorably, “I never really thought about Irish literature as such. I don’t really think that specifically ‘national’ literatures are of terribly great significance” (Banville in Kearney, 1979: 76). Banville seems critical here not of Irish literature per se, but rather of the notion of ‘nation’ delineating and limiting what a literature is. Richard Kearney, who conducted this interview, has stated elsewhere that he believes Banville’s work is part of “the critical counter-tradition of Irish writing” (Kearney, 1987: 91). He traces the movement that he considers Banville’s work to form a part of back to the seminal innovations of Joyce and Beckett, and states that it is characterised by an “obsession with the possibility/impossibility of writing, and more particularly with the problematic rapport between narrative and history” (91). *The Sea* treads this difficult line by having as its central preoccupation the (necessarily limited) representation of a past through narrative. The very “possibility/impossibility” of such representation is the inspiration/limitation with which the text grapples, and which this chapter explores. A fictional past is *The Sea*’s substitute for the historical one with which a more “national” literature may concern itself. The “possibility/impossibility” is present whether the narrative fuel is a fictional past or a historical one. However, to force a national boundary on a literary work, and to attempt to generate something of specifically *Irish* import, for example, could be understood to be imposing a limitation on that project. Banville’s preoccupation with the limits of what narrative can accomplish and his attempts to make these visible in order to gesture beyond them would make him resistant to placing any more constraints on his work than their form prescribes that there should be.

The strong sentiments that Banville expressed in the 1979 interview would appear to have softened over the years, and critic Joseph McMinn, in his *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* notes that “[i]n the last few years [...] this mask of indifference has been exchanged for a more generous and tolerant regard for the Irish presence in his work (McMinn, 1999: 166). *The Sea* presents no exception to Banville’s professed disregard for national literatures,

although it does make sidelong references to its Irish staging, giving, for example, the name of the town near the seaside village where most of its events (or, more precisely, most of its *recounted* events) take place, namely Ballymore. An excavation of the name leads to its Irish equivalent, or indeed source, “baile mór”, which literally means “big town” (“Baile”, 2012). This is the name of five real Irish towns, and so the setting of the novel, while Irish in name, is denied the real-world equivalence of a precise location.³ When situating his narrative, Max writes of the place: “I *shall call* it Ballymore. The town is Ballymore, this village is Ballyless, ridiculously, perhaps, but I do not care” (Banville, 2008: 13, emphasis mine). The word “shall” is jarring here as he *names* (also strange) the location of a significant portion of his past. By placing the creative responsibility for naming the place on himself, Banville makes clear the fiction of Max’s narrative (that it is *generated* and not merely relayed). The narrative, which Max takes pains to place, to *home*, and make real, is thus from the onset decidedly *placeless*, *un-homed*,⁴ and *unreal*.

The novel’s setting is rendered placeless by the naming of the village, Ballyless, which is *not* the name of any real-world equivalent, and is therefore a fictional construction. The word ‘baile’, while most often translated as ‘town’, can also mean ‘home’ or, by way of a slight extrapolation, ‘place’. The interplay between the suffixes of Ballymore and Ballyless, “more” or “less” mimics the saying which implies approximation, and complicates the extraction of any pin-point accuracy. Finally, Ballyless or *Baileless* can simply be interpreted to mean *placeless*.⁵

This carefully cultivated placelessness would seem to exclude the novel from the burgeoning miasma of “‘national’ literatures”, two of which I have analysed, which tether their contents to an unequivocally Irish reality. However, although it avoids making an overt link between

³ Banville also makes a cursory reference to the “Big Houses” of Ireland’s Protestant gentry (58) and to a virtually negated instance of a young Max’s exploitation at the hands of the village doctor. “I have only fond memories of that day”, he writes, “I can still recall the aroma of after-lunch coffee on the doctor’s breath and the fishy swivel of his housekeeper’s eye as she saw me to the front door” (33). When his daughter Claire asks about the emotional effects of the event, he scoffs that “[i]t was not Capri [...] and Doctor French was not Tiberius”. The more historicised instance of child abuse that he cites here casts his own in a rather irrelevant light. Overlooked child abuse would appear to be a standard characteristic of much contemporary Irish narrative.

⁴ My use of the term is a nod to Freud’s concept of the “Unheimlich”, which I’ll draw on later in this chapter. Max is persistently un-homed within the present, as opposed to being homed. Characteristics associated with home, (familiarity, safety and belonging) elude Max within the present, and this manifests as an uncanniness, or the impression of being un-homed.

⁵ This placelessness is echoed in both *The Secret Scripture* as well as *The Gathering*. The place where writing takes place is, in all three novels, something of a non-place. Roseanne’s institutionalisation has rendered her a non-person, of whom there is virtually no record. Her story is written on forgotten and “unwanted paper – surplus to requirements” and from within a place that is not considered by those beyond its walls to exist (Barry, 2008: 1). Veronica writes from the liminal space, or indeed placelessness of “[staying] up all night” and writing while everyone else is asleep (Enright, 2007: 37).

its content and Ireland's history, I believe *The Sea* has at its centre a similar concern to the other novels I have discussed, and that its movement beyond the limits of an Irish staging does not disqualify from this study what a close reading of the novel reveals. To reiterate, Ballyless literally means placeless, and what occurs there is, by implication, liberated from only one place, and capable of being situated anywhere. This aporetically placeless placing, therefore, does not exclude the novel's events from an Irish context. However, significantly, it also precludes them from being *only* Irish. Making the novel emphatically Irish is clearly not one of Banville's concerns. To nationalise and thus 'place' 'house' or 'home' and so circumscribe the narrative would in turn limit it in its primary concern, which is to explore both the capabilities as well as the lacunae of representation when attempting to encapsulate a past (any past, and not only an Irish one) in narrative.

My previous chapters have explored the ways in which *The Secret Scripture* and *The Gathering* seek to preserve a certain irrecoverable dimension to the suffering with which they respectively deal. They take pains to demarcate (with language) something that intrinsically resists language. Roseanne's *secret* testimony, in spite of it being available to be read, has at its core elements that remain unknowable, just as Veronica's attempt to write what happened when she was a child circumnavigates what that "event" retains, which is an irrecoverable origin. The necessity of the preservation of these irrecoverable elements stems, rather obviously, from an awareness of the pitfalls of *fictional* narratives that root themselves in (national) traumas which took place in an unavoidably phenomenal reality. While both of these novels engage with a (recently updated) Irish history, they conscientiously go about writing avowedly *individual* stories, in order, it is to be presumed, both to proffer the necessary respect due to the individual instances of suffering that the general comprises, and to avoid violent generalisation. To turn to something similar in *The Sea*, the irrecoverable dimension sustained amidst the novel's engagement with Max's losses, which I explore more conscientiously in due course, is the something at the heart of death that he is incapable of experiencing. He is left instead with what he calls "the delicate business of being the survivor" (84). He does not experience death as dying, but rather as surviving. A "survival", in the traditional sense of the word, is merely a brush with death, and not an experience of it.⁶ Max's choice of the term implies that although his losses constitute a brush with death, or put him in the vicinity of death (while he does not face the prospect of dying himself, he,

⁶ Recall Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* (2000), which I draw on in my chapter on *The Secret Scripture*, in which the author's (not) dying is resonant of Max's survival.

however, loses those close to him), there is something unrepresentable at the core of death that remains beyond the reach of his experience, of his understanding and certainly of his narrative. This is illustrated metaphorically by his absence from both sites of death in the novel: that of the twins (he is on the shore while they drown in the sea) and that of his wife (he has stepped out of the nursing home for a breath of air when she takes the last of hers).

No Longer Present

A reinsertion of the negative connotation of the English suffix “less” in “Ballyless” into the medium of Irish can produce the phrase “as baile” (“as” having roughly the same effect as the meaning of “without” that is connoted by the suffix “less”) (“Baile”, 2012). This phrase can be translated as “no longer present” or “away from home”.⁷ Such a designation for the ‘place’ to which Max returns proves most fitting. The phrase “no longer present” encapsulates what Max desires to be, given that his return to the Cedars constitutes an attempt to, as he writes, “live in the past” (44). This attempt registers on two levels: he both physically relocates to a site of his past, and he writes. Writing, which by virtue of its non-essential relationship with what it represents, is able to refer to what is not present, but further, to attempt to revive or evoke what is not present, or indeed, what is past. Max’s narrative proves to be not only an attempt to write *about* the past, but an attempt to absent himself from his present, and to return to the past in order to re-inhabit it.⁸ The entire novel, as I show, is preoccupied with the potentialities and limits of language with regard to capturing a past, but further, to *inhabiting* it. Of course, the sheer impracticality of what he is attempting is not beyond the scope of Banville’s narrator’s understanding. In one of his more honest moments, Max reflects “[a]nd yet, what existence, really, does it have, the past? After all, it is only what the present was, once, the present that is gone, no more than that. And yet” (40). That the past no longer exists in any present and inhabitable sense is abundantly clear to him. However, the elliptical repetition of “[a]nd yet”, which wilfully appends a fool’s hope to the end of his thought, betrays Max’s compulsion to attempt the impossible nevertheless.

‘Placelessness’, with its useful indeterminacy, signals, for my purposes, the indeterminable place (and time) to which Max desires to go. What triggers his desire to inhabit the past is the irreversible absence of his wife from the present. The past, or “what the present was, once, the present that is gone” can also represent that place, or indeed placelessness, to which those

⁷ I explore the associative connection between the meaning “away from home” and un-home in due course.

⁸ The palpability with which he experiences the past is expressed when he writes that “the past beats inside me like a second heart” (16).

who *were* present have gone. Reinhabiting the past therefore serves as an index for going to where the dead have gone. In her overview of Banville's recent fiction, Laura P. Z. Izarra writes:

Banville's focus has moved gradually but especially in recent years, beyond the existence of time, space, or any materiality of the plot; the writer is much more concerned with how thought frees itself from these concepts, raising the mind above corporeal things to express ideas that derive from a specific 'state' of mind [...].

(2006: 184)

Max's compulsion to live in the past can be traced to the "'state' of mind" brought about by the loss of his wife, and the rupture with the present that he experiences as a result. Given that its primary preoccupation is death, *The Sea* systematically attempts to liberate itself from the conceptual constraints of "time" and "space". Yet, as I show, Max's narrative is of course ineluctably bound by time and space.

To this end, I find it useful to look at how Max's project resonates with that of Orpheus. Maurice Blanchot performs a rich reading of the myth in his essay "Orpheus' Gaze", which I draw on here (1982). Aside from Max's self-imposed title of "lyreless Orpheus", the correlations between the two fictional characters are fairly clear (20). They have both recently lost a wife, and they both attempt to retrieve what has been lost by way of their respective art forms, or, to anticipate Blanchot's term, their 'works'. Max's attempt registers in the form of a narrative that seeks to re-present a past, while Orpheus produces poetry with the musical accompaniment of his iconic lyre. The latter succeeds insofar as he is granted access to the underworld by the gods on the strength of his art: that is, he wins the gods' permission to retrieve Eurydice, his bride, by enchanting them with his music (on condition that he does not look at her amidst the shades). Here, the two stories diverge. Orpheus is able to descend beyond the realm of the living to the 'place' (or placelessness) where Eurydice is. Max, on the other hand, in spite of his manifold attempts to render himself 'placeless' is inescapably situated in the realm of the living, and lacks the art that would grant him access to where Anna, or the past, might be found. He is, as he aptly puts it, "lyreless".

Blanchot chooses the myth to serve as an analogue for what art, or what he calls "the work" can do (1982: 177). His essay's opening sentence, fittingly, states that "art is the power by which night opens" (177). This refers to Orpheus' persuasion of the gods to 'open' "the night", or the underworld, by the "power" of his art. Here, Blanchot sets up the distinction between the realms of the living and the dead by applying to them the opposed terms of

“day” and “night”. This binary proves inadequate when tasked with *placing* Eurydice however, and he resorts to characterising her as “the instant when the essence of night approaches as the *other* night” (177).⁹ This *other* night or *other* dark is Blanchot’s gesture towards Eurydice in her shaded and “profoundly obscure” state, and an attempt to move beyond the binaries that form part of the systems of order within “the day” or the realm of the living, of which she no longer forms a part. Max’s attempt to enter the past, and to write of something beyond the limits of the present, of life and indeed of the “day” corresponds with that of Orpheus, whose “work”, Blanchot writes, “is to bring [Eurydice] back to the light of day and to give [her] form, shape, and reality in the day” (177).¹⁰ Orpheus, like Max, is present, and of the “day”, and yet the object of his desire is entirely without “form, shape, and reality in the day” (178).

An Orphic descent, which Blanchot would argue characterises all art, is the designation coined to describe the attempt to capture and represent Eurydice, who, metaphorically, is “the profoundly obscure point towards which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend” (177). All art betrays a desire for something like this instant, which is beyond its reach. Art is therefore, rather aporetically, inspired by what constitutes its own limitation. Orpheus has the “power” to descend towards the profound obscurity that inspires him and urges him onward, but “only by turning away from it” (177). If he looks upon it, as he eventually does in the myth, his work will be destroyed. Art, like narrative, inspired by the absolute alterity of something like this “other night”, can be “the power by which night opens”. It can trace its movement towards its inspiration (as Max does when he circles the past, death, his wife and the twins in his narrative). However, to render this unrepresentable thing in “the light of day” proves impossible. Orpheus “wants to see her not when she is visible, but when she is invisible”, which is equivalent to representing the unrepresentable (178).

Orpheus is fated to disobey the gods’ orders, and look, and “by turning towards Eurydice, he ruins the work, which is immediately undone, and Eurydice returns among the shades” (178). “When he looks back”, Blanchot writes, “the essence of night is revealed as inessential”

⁹ In my discussion of the correlation between Max and Orpheus, and the ways in which Blanchot’s essay sheds light on this correlation, I am indebted to Mike Marais and his distillations of Blanchot’s theory. Although Marais focuses on the formless shaded Eurydice as an index for absolute alterity implied by Immanuel Levinas’s phrase, “the *il y a*”, as manifest (or indeed hidden) in the work of J. M. Coetzee, I believe that the ‘absolute exteriority’ of the past and of death as (hidden) in *The Sea* similarly inspires and constrains Max’s work. For more, see Marais’ articles “The possibility of ethical action: JM Coetzee’s Disgrace” (2000) and “‘The rest should be silence’: Blanchot, the impossibility of silence, and prosopopeial form” (2001).

¹⁰ To refer back to Izarra, the constraints of “time”, “space” and the requirement of “any materiality of the plot” can be understood to correspond with those of “day”.

(178). Orpheus “betrays the work, and Eurydice, and the night” (178). However, not to look, Blanchot asserts, would (paradoxically) be “no less untrue. Not to look would be infidelity to the measureless, imprudent force of his movement” (178). Orpheus’ desire (and Max’s, for that matter) is for Eurydice, not “in her daytime truth and her everyday appeal, but [...] in her nocturnal obscurity”. He wants “not to make her live, but to have living in her the plenitude of her death” (178). In other words, art (be it that of Max or Orpheus or any other) is inspired by excess, that is to say, by that which exceeds its grasp. It desires to move beyond itself and in effect wills its own failure as a condition of possibility.

When addressing *his* wife in her analogous obscurity, Max writes “[w]hy have you not come back to haunt me? [...] Send back your ghost. Torment me, if you like. Rattle your chains, drag your cerements across the floor, keen like a Banshee, anything. I would have a ghost” (137). Max’s desire is for the past, which he states “is only what the present was, once, the present that is gone, no more than that” (40). His desire is for what he himself describes as inessential, or ghostly.¹¹ When he addresses his wife, he requests a visitation from her revenant, which is the embodiment of death in life. Blanchot might say that Max wants her “not as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the foreignness of what excludes all intimacy” (178). Intimacy requires presence, and it is Max’s most profound desire not to be present.

In another reference to the Orphic myth in his book *Faux Pas*, Blanchot asserts that when a writer attempts to represent (render in the form of “the day”) that which is of “the night”, what is required of that writer is “fidelity to the norms of clarity”, which, ironically, is “for the sake of what is without form and without law” (2002: 14). To return to Izarra’s observation, while I agree that Banville is concerned with how thought frees itself from the constraints of time and space, I would add to her statement the qualification that he nevertheless exhibits a “fidelity to the norms of clarity” and draws attention to the fact that his work, which is a thing in the world whose fitful concern is that which exists beyond the world, must remain incomplete. To illustrate this, as though hindered by the same constraints as Orpheus’ work, Max’s narrative makes one final mention of Anna at the end of the novel. “Anna died before dawn”, he states, simply (145). The final use of her name places her, permanently, “before dawn”, and therefore bound to the shades of night. His work, given its inspiration, will remain incomplete. It begins with Anna’s death (Max goes to Ballyless, and

¹¹ The irony, of course, is that just saying this means that he *is* haunted. He wants to be haunted differently, though.

begins to write after Anna has died) and circles back to end with it. That the work ends where it begins is a testament to its (obligatory) state of incompleteness.

Max is keenly aware of his Orphic state. He writes:

I have just noticed today's date. It is a year exactly since that first visit Anna and I were forced to pay to Mr Todd in his rooms. What a coincidence. Or not, perhaps; are there coincidences in Pluto's realm, amidst the trackless wastes of which I wander lost, a lyreless Orpheus? Twelve months, though! I should have kept a diary. My journal of the plague year.

(20)

Banville draws attention to the circular course his plot must take with this mention of the anniversary of the day Max and Anna discovered that she was going to die. The cyclical repetition of a date accomplishes two (apparently contradictory) things. First, this "coincidence" or co-occurrence marks the second occurrence of that fateful date since it became fateful, and is therefore a kind of re-occurrence. After all, the day in question is marked by the same date, or name, as its predecessor: the recurrence of the date resembles (at least in name) the one that it succeeds. Max's entire project seems to be hinged on the hope of a re-occurrence (inhabiting a past), and yet, of course, the second thing an anniversary marks is the passage of a year, and thus a year's *removal* from the fateful day. This perennial bind, in which a date refers to that which it is ever more removed from, is precisely what renders Max's attempt impossible. He is bound to the world of "the day", and to its signs and systems of signification – indeed, its "norms of clarity". "Pluto's realm", wherein his desired is now shaded, is one of "trackless wastes", where tracks, or signs and "coincidences" no longer have any presence, let alone ability to signify, or show him the way. Max is thus appropriately "lost", and decidedly "lyreless", in that the form of art that he would use to penetrate the realm is ineffectual.

However, if the plot's circularity marks Max's work's state of incompleteness, it also marks its perpetuity. Circular narrative is a sign of both Max's limitation, as well as his determination to attempt the impossible, regardless of this. He regrets not having written a diary over the past year, or a "journal of the plague year", as though having written such a thing would have rendered him less bereft than he is now. Max here shows a rather determined faith in narrative. Having written over the course of the year would, symbolically at least, have captured the year and the last of Anna that it contained. It is as though he believes that the

journal would have retained more of her presence were she present for at least some of its construction. He is now left with only the inessential as inspiration.

Elsewhere in the novel, Max muses over a similar exercise that the artist Pierre Bonnard¹² undertook when *his* wife Marthe died:

In the *Nude in the bath, with dog*, begun in 1941, a year before Marthe's death and not completed until 1946, she lies there, pink and mauve and gold, a goddess of the floating world, attenuated, ageless, as much dead as alive [...]. Her right hand rests on her thigh, stilled in the act of supination, and I think of Anna's hands on the table that first day when we came back from seeing Mr Todd, her helpless hands with palms upturned as if to beg something from someone opposite her who was not there.

(87)

This painting, begun when Marthe was alive and completed after she died, is the artistic equivalent of Max's hypothesised "journal of the plague year". What Bonnard achieved, in Max's opinion, was a vivid representation of Marthe in which she is "as much dead as alive". He believes that what Bonnard managed was to somehow pause her deterioration, to suspend her and render her "ageless", and further to transform her into "a goddess of the floating world". Max admires Bonnard because of what he believes is the painter's superior ability to "[catch] texture exactly" (30) and by implication capture reality with great accuracy – greater than Max for example, who refers to his own representations, or writing efforts, as those of a "second-rater" (59) or "middling [man]" (29). Bonnard's "goddess" and her resting hands stand in stark contrast to Anna and her "helpless hands with palms upturned as if to beg from someone opposite her who was not there". Orpheus, Bonnard and Max are all bereft of a wife. Max alludes to the other two because of what he believes are their superior powers of representation. While Orpheus' art grants him an interview with the gods, and Bonnard's elevates and suspends his "ageless" "goddess", Max's is reduced to recording his wife's bootless appeal to "someone opposite her who was not there", which needless to say mirrors his own inability to access the divine due to his station of "lyreless Orpheus".

Max later qualifies his admiration of Bonnard, whose story has not yet achieved mythic proportions, and writes:

[a]nyway, where are the paragons of authenticity against whom my concocted self might be measured? In those final bathroom paintings that Bonnard did of the

¹² Max is an art writer, and he is compiling a monograph on Pierre Bonnard. He writes that Bonnard is "[a] very great painter, in my estimation, about whom, as I long ago came to realise, I have nothing of any originality to say" (29). Rather symbolically, he can access no more of the presence of the painter than anyone else who has scanned his various representations.

septuagenarian Marthe he was still depicting her as the teenager he had thought she was when he first met her. Why should I demand more veracity of vision of myself than of a great and tragic artist?

(121)

Marthe, it is now known, lied to Bonnard about her age when they first met. The “teenager he had thought she was when he met her” was in fact “in her middle twenties” (86). The ‘agelessness’ of Bonnard’s goddess suddenly assumes an irony, given that the ‘original’ it attempts to depict, which by the power of *his* art is frozen in time, was never the true Marthe. Bonnard never in fact knew the “teenager”, because that teenager had receded into the past (had become inessential) to be replaced by an older, less-than-honest Marthe. To render her ageless, at an age at which he did not know her, illustrates Bonnard’s own ‘Maxian’, or indeed Orphic grasping for what was always already beyond his art’s reach.

As Max perspicaciously observes, there are no “paragons of authenticity”, and even the “self”¹³ with which he experiences the present, or illusion of *original* experience, is itself, according to him, a concoction. This suspicion of the present (for my purposes, the ‘origin’ of the past, or the originary moment) pervades the novel, and I revisit this shortly. For now, it is important to note that, despite his determination to write (an act which must trace an Orphic descent towards what exists beyond the terms of “the day”), Max’s work evinces an awareness that the essence of night is inessential. He grasps for the past, the original of which he distrusts, *and yet*.

A Return to the Past

Upon his arrival at the Cedars, Max imagines the original inhabitant of the house, which was built, Miss Vavasour approximates, in “the century before last”. His constructed character is “an old seafarer dozing by the fire” (11). The physical idiosyncrasies of the setting – “[t]he pitchpine floors” and the “spindle-backed swivel chair” which “sound a nautical note” – imply that such a person would belong in the seaside house in a way that Max does not. More specifically, the seafarer would belong in the *past* that the house comes to *represent* in a way that Max cannot.

This section of the novel inevitably puts one in mind of Max’s state of being un-homed.

However, it is his curious yearning with regard to the character of the seafarer which draws

¹³ The inauthentic ‘self’ that Max constitutes is of interest, but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this chapter. For more on this, see “‘The Old Illusion of Belonging’: Distinctive Style, Bad Faith and John Banville’s *The Sea*” by Monica Facchinello (2010).

my attention here. Expressed over two symmetrically four-syllabled sentences,¹⁴ the desires “Oh, to be him. To have been him”, sum up Max’s project to occupy a past by way of narrative (11). They both express his wish to inhabit (to belong within) someone else’s life, specifically that of someone who inhabited the past (and who, symbolically, would have *belonged* in the Cedars). Both sentences are phrased as desires that gesture longingly at what they convey a desire for. They are thus perfectly within the range of language to express. However the tense shifts and temporal gymnastics they perform, with the verb that famously preoccupied Hamlet, demand careful analysis. Max’s narrative implies a present within which it is being written, and within which his desire for an alternative present, an alternative “to be” is being expressed.¹⁵ When the lasso of the present continuous “to be” tethers Max (who is [arguably] present and continuing) to “him” (the old seafarer, an inhabitant of an imagined past), there is an uncomfortable disjuncture. The impassable chasm that separates a present continuous verb, along with Max, its inescapably present subject, from the “him” that he would rather be, is the very chasm that Max and his narrative attempt to traverse. The second sentence, with the past perfect version of “[t]o have been” acknowledges the impossibility of Max’s desire to insert himself into the past, which would require an obliteration of his present, and of the footing from which he writes.

“To *have been* him”, (emphasis mine) uses the past perfect form of “to be”, which describes a completed action with an end, or more specifically a lived life with the completion to that life (that “to be”) that a death entails. For Max to insert himself into the past to the extent that he would “have been” the seafarer requires a dissolution of his present, or even further, for this, his present, to *never* “have been”. He encounters here, rather abruptly, the limit of his reach as a writer, and as a creature of Blanchot’s “day”. If he were able to achieve his desire to traverse the divide of past time and of death, and to “have been”, it would destroy his ability “to be”, which is the condition of possibility for him *to write* at all. Here we see the laws of “the light of day” (Blanchot, 1982: 177), of presence and of the realm of the living, prescribing that what is of “the night” cannot be rendered in “the day” in its inessential state.

It is important to note that Max’s desire “to have been” the seafarer is imbued with an additional somewhat absurd dimension by the fact that the seafarer is a fictional character in

¹⁴ The symmetry sets up a precarious balance, or seesaw (“see” corresponding with the present continuous “to be” and “saw” with the past perfect “to have been”). Banville has often admitted to his poetic ambitions in interviews. He has expressed a desire to “make prose have the weight of, and be as demanding as poetry” (Banville, September 2000). For more on Banville’s “poetic prose”, again, see Monica Facchinello (2010).

¹⁵ Writing, at its inception, requires the presence of the writer.

an imagined past of Max's own construction. Banville takes pains to draw attention to the unsettlingly blurred distinction between recollection and fiction. He does this, in my view, to alert us to there being effectively little difference between them, since both recollection and fiction attempt to construct what is not present. Further to this, in the medium of narrative, there is no perceptible difference between the forms they assume. It is this very lack of distinction that Max makes use of to write his long tracts of memory in the form of narrative featuring the twins, his wife Anna, and several younger (but unfortunately irrecoverable) versions of himself. Many of these tracts are linear and apparently complete in their depiction of the past and its impermanent inhabitants, but it is my contention that this sense of linearity and completion is dependent on memory being supplemented by fiction. At one stage he marvels at this apparent completion of one of his memories: "[r]emarkable the clarity with which, when I concentrate, I can see us there. Really, one might almost live one's life over, if only one could make a sufficient effort of recollection" (91). Were this indeed within the range of what his "recollection" could accomplish, Max's attempt to reinhabit the past would be perfectly achievable. He encounters evidence of his project's impossibility, however, when his memory begins to falter. He retorts, "[r]eally, Madam Memory, I take back all my praise, if it is Memory herself who is at work here and not some other, more fanciful muse" (92). Mnemosyne, who in Greek mythology is the mother of the nine muses, is also the personification of memory (Hard, 2004: 78). The function of the muses is to inspire artistic creativity in writing, among other art forms. The traditionally close relationship between Memory and "more fanciful muse[s]" or indeed between recollection and fiction, can make for an even narrative, with little or no indication of its distinct inspirations. However, Max's project requires accuracy to the point of creating the possibility to "live one's life over". He finds that when recollection fails him, his ability to fictionalise does not step in to maintain the narrative equilibrium that the lack of distinction between memory and fiction traditionally holds in place. Of his memory of Anna, he laments:

I was thinking of Anna. I make myself think of her, I do it as an exercise. She is lodged in me like a knife and yet I am beginning to forget her. Already the image of her that I hold in my head is fraying, bits of pigments, flakes of gold leaf, are chipping off. Will the entire canvas be empty one day?

(120)

Max's unavoidably real loss of his wife wedges a palpable distinction between recollection and fiction, and this in turn inhibits his ability to carry her through his narrative as he would a mere character. (In her narrative form, before her image undergoes the flaking and the

chipping noted above, she is indistinguishable from a character, in that she assumes the same imaginative form as the seafarer.) He feels the loss of Anna's presence, and is obliged to write that she is "lodged in [him] like a knife" to characterise the physicality and the phenomenal reality of the pain he feels as a result of her *material* absence. However, with only the tools of narrative at his disposal, he is limited to conventional forms of expression and to metaphor, in that his pain is only *like* that caused by a lodged knife. Metaphor, unfortunately, repels origin. Just as Max's pain has the limited narrative expression of being *like* a lodged knife, any representation Max may write of Anna can only aspire, at the very most, to be *like* her.

Recollection, as characterised above, is itself little more than a creation, however: a construction or a flaking painting on a "[fraying] canvas", prone, as any construction is, to being dismantled, or forgotten. What remains of Anna is Max's concept of her, or his construction of who she was. The accumulation of what he experienced of her presence has been internalised by him and it has resulted in an "image of her", independent of her presence, and present in her absence. That it can be present in her absence shows that it is not her exact equivalent and that it does not, and never did, correspond with her in any precise and complete way. Max can represent Anna, but he can never re-*present* her, not if narrative is the only hold he has on her.

It is precisely at this point, where it begins to falter, that it becomes apparent that narrative is also indispensable. Max's singular representation of his wife (singular in that it is his individual memory of her that he "hold[s] in [his] head", forged by his isolated consciousness) is beginning to fade, and is in danger of being lost. He therefore faces a second loss, now that Anna's presence is no longer accessible to him and available to fuel his mind's representation of her. She is beyond representation, in that she has gone where representation cannot follow. Max is faced with an unbearable choice: represent Anna, in which case he must be aware that what he is representing is not her, the real her; or cease to represent her and thus lose even that version of her.

The twins' mother, Mrs Grace, a further removed and significantly less painful loss, provides the material for a brutally honest excavation of the potential of representation. Max muses over which version of her "is more real, the woman reclining on the grassy bank of [his] recollections, or the strew of dust and dried marrow that is all the earth any longer retains of her" (70). Narrating her beyond her death, from within the constraints of what he later refers

to as “the crassly complacent real”, Max is limited to either a description of what he remembers, or of physical decay (89). Of course, neither of these is “real” in that neither of them captures the singularity of a present Mrs Grace. However, with that present and “real” Mrs Grace being forever beyond his reach, he is restricted to tapping only into either memory or decomposition as narrative fuel. His desire to access the “real” Mrs Grace, Anna, Chloe and Myles is what propels his narrative to begin with, and narrative’s innate inability to represent the “real” will forever thwart his attempt. The “real” being thus thoroughly beyond his reach, he must turn to what is most *like* the real, namely memory, and its narrative companion, metaphor. His access to Mrs Grace would never have amounted to a pure unmediated comprehension of her real self in any case. What constituted his version of her when she was alive is much the same as what makes up his version of her now that she is dead, since he is not only now for the first time ‘writing’ her. Memory, then, as opposed to a description of decay, grants Max what is most like an actual Mrs Grace.

In a piece of nonfiction entitled “Pictures, Pain and Perception”, Banville quotes Susan Sontag, who in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, writes “Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead” (2004: 37). Her use of the word “achingly” echoes Max’s metaphorical knife, and they are both tributes to the pain of loss, and to the ‘reality’ of absence. Sontag’s use of “relation” is also interesting, given that death ends the possibility of reciprocity, and of *relationship*. If Sontag’s simple sentence is understood to represent a closed system between the one who remembers and the remembered, the memory of what was once there generates enough of what is *like* reciprocity in that it is enough to sustain aches and lodged knives. Her sentence also plainly illustrates why Max revisits his memories compulsively, and, in addition, why his desire for a continued *relation* with the dead would have him attempt to take this further, and indeed to “live [his] life over”.

Much like the indistinct distinction between memory and fiction, that between memory and decay proves to be just as vague. The decay of memories, while perhaps slower than that of the body, is something with which Max must grapple. Aware of the transience of his recollections, he muses as follows: “[n]o doubt for others elsewhere [Mrs Grace] persists, a moving figure in the waxworks of memory, but their version will be different from mine, and from each other’s” (70). The malleability of the “waxworks of memory”, as well as the variety of isolated consciousnesses in which they operate, make it undeniable that any representation of the dead is necessarily supplemented by fiction. Further, the shifting and chipping forms that do manage to linger are subject to their own form of decay. As Max

encapsulates in an ambitiously broad sentence, “I remember Anna, our daughter Claire will remember Anna and remember me, then Claire will be gone and there will be those who remember her but not us, and that will be our final dissolution” (70). A “final dissolution”, more final than the one Anna has already undergone, will be her fate when no one remembers her.

A Book of the Dead

Max’s writing, as I have established, necessitates a present from which it proceeds. However, he, and consequently his writing, is preoccupied with capturing a past. His writing is obliged to straddle the divide between the present and the past, or the living and the dead. Of course, language’s non-essential relationship with what it represents makes writing *about* the past perfectly within the scope of its ability. The subject matter of his narrative is able to take the form of tracts of memory of the now dead and profoundly not-present Chloe, Myles and Anna. Yet, as I have already observed, his attempt is significantly more ambitious than a mere representation.

Reliving the past is the thing he is compelled to do, and this proves to be beyond the limit of what his writing can achieve. At one stage he calls what he is “compiling” a “Book of the Dead” (131). The “Book of the Dead” is the accumulation of Egyptian funerary texts with spells to assist the deceased’s journey to the next life (Assman, 2005: xi). Such a text, were its effects verifiable, would narrate from beyond the threshold of death. To return to Max’s phrase “Oh, to be him”, the existence of the sentence proves that the expression of the desire (much like the transcription of memory) is within the range of what language and narrative can accomplish. “To have been him”, however, comes up against its own impossibility. “To have been him”, and to narrate from beyond death, which is what the phrase implies, requires that Max write a “Book of the Dead” from beyond the threshold of death. Only such a text, were it possible, would accommodate such ambitious phrasing without drawing attention to its unfeasibility.

To further illustrate this, early in the novel he writes, “last night in a dream, it has just come back to me, I was trying to write my will on a [typewriter] that was lacking the word *I*. The letter *I*, that is, small and large” (45). Max is in the business of recording the absent with writing, and his pages are thus appropriately filled with the content of his memories, and his dreams, which are removed from the realm of the present and the phenomenal reality of the novel. In this dream, he is writing his will, a document which purports to contain the voice

and the agency of its writer even after that writer is dead, and absent in the most profound sense. While all writing can continue to exist in the absence of its writer, the will is a form of writing in which the presence of the writer supposedly retains its potency, even when he is no longer alive. The writer's wishes are voiced from beyond the grave, and the will's executors are legally obliged to carry those wishes out with the respect they would afford its writer were he in fact present. This form of writing, then, allows its writer to traverse the divide between the living and the dead.¹⁶ Interestingly, however, Max's typewriter lacks the letter and the word "I", and therefore inhibits Max's ability as an "I" or a present self to express that presence, and assert its implied agency, even at the moment of writing. His compulsion to insert himself into the past and absent himself from the present is precisely what inhibits him from inserting the mark of his presence into this document. The "I" that he is looking for is not the "I" that signals present presence ("to be"), but rather the "I" that signals past presence ("to have been"), the "I" from the will of a dead man, which is simply not available to him, given his cumbersome continuance in the present and his obligation "to be".¹⁷ This 'obligation' or even inertia is referred to when he later writes "I too could go and be as though I had not been, except that the long habit of living indisposeth me for dying, as Doctor Browne has it" (80).

Max's attempt to reinhabit the past is detailed elsewhere. When he recalls the family Grace driving away in their car, he writes "Where am I, lurking in what place of vantage? I do not see myself" (13). Max's inability to reinsert himself into the past, and, symbolically, to type the key "I" that would achieve a past presence, is illustrated here. The present tense used to phrase the question "[w]here am I?" suggests the disjuncture between the narrating "I" and the experiencing "I", the latter of which would have been present at the time that the Graces were driving away. Max is unable to locate the latter "I", which signals past presence. The formulation of "I do not see myself", which is written from the present, includes both versions of Max, the present "I" and the past "myself". His narrative does not (because Max cannot) allow any present connection between the two. This disconnection is due to the

¹⁶ Unsurprisingly, Derrida has much to say on this subject. While an explication of these thoughts is beyond the scope of this chapter, for more see his engagement with Austin, in the essay "Signature event context", which appears in *Margins of Philosophy*, published in 1982.

¹⁷ Hamlet's similar obligation "to be", and to carry out the wishes of his father's ghost (who, strangely, has the ability to speak from beyond the threshold of death) ties him, too, to the present, and prevents him from acting on his desire "not to be". The allusion is surely not coincidental. In fact, Max's frozen state of perpetual inaction (which stems from a desire to absent himself from the present, and so acting within the present would contradict his aim) mimics that of Hamlet. Late in the novel, when he is given the opportunity to ask the children's governess, who was the last to speak to them before they walked into the sea, what happened, he is unable to act, and unable to close that traumatic chapter.

chasm of time that separates the two versions of Max. However, it is also caused by the fact that memory is necessarily perspectival, in that it is generated in the consciousness of a unique ‘seer’. Max cannot “see” himself because *his* eyes were the ones that registered the memory. All Max has, presently, is the picture captured by the static lens of his own perspective on that day, and the entirety of that day has undergone a reduction, and has become what his singular perspective retained, and this is further reduced to what his limited understanding could comprehend. ‘The past’, then, as remembered by Max, undergoes a drastic qualification. He constantly comes up against the limitations of his memory, which as he writes “dislikes motion, preferring to hold things still” (123). This pictorial metaphor for memory (which recurs throughout the novel) implies that the reduction memory undergoes renders it two-dimensional, and therefore representable. However, Max’s ambition to “live in the past” requires significantly more than the mere two-dimensionality that his writing (or representation) of that past requires. The fact that he cannot see himself, and that his perspective limits him to what is much like a series of photographs of the day, serves as a metaphor for the ultimate limitation he faces. His use of the word “lurking” makes clear that his present self, his “I” at the moment of writing, is not welcome, and certainly not accommodated, in the past.

“Away from Home”



To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted, to burrow down into a place of wombly warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky’s indifferent gaze and the harsh air’s damagings. That is why the past is just such a retreat for me, I go there eagerly, rubbing my hands and shaking off the cold present and the colder future. And yet, what existence, really, does it have, the past? After all, it is only what the present was, once, the present that is gone, no more than that. And yet.

(40)

Max’s desire to be ‘accommodated’ or homed in the past is taken to the extreme in the quotation above. His need is characterised in the language of that familiar compulsion to return to the womb. Twice in the novel, Max writes, suddenly and without apposite context, “[s]omeone has just walked over my grave. Someone” (10).¹⁸ This, together with the passage quoted above, cannot but put the reader in mind of one of Freud’s more famous essays, “The ‘Uncanny’”, and the connection he draws between the fear of being buried alive and the

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that this sentence, written by Max, contains within it its own impossibility, much like “[t]o have been him”. The impossibility is of course, to reiterate, Max’s writing from beyond the grave; from beyond death.

desire to return to the womb. Freud, rather terrifyingly, links the fantasy of “intra-uterine existence” with what an actual return to the womb would constitute, namely a live burial (Freud, 1955: 244). Nicholas Royle, in his book-length study on the uncanny, states that “the feeling of the uncanny may be bound up with the most extreme nostalgia or ‘homesickness’: in other words, a compulsion to return to an inorganic state, a desire (perhaps unconscious) to die, a death drive” (Royle, 2003: 2). Max’s desire to absent himself from “the cold present and the colder future” and to return to the “womby warmth” of the past, when taken to its logical conclusion, is indistinguishable from a death drive. The uncanny relation between the womb and the grave, between “extreme nostalgia” and “a death drive” is harnessed in Banville’s novel to great effect.

A yearning for the womb could be effortlessly equated with a yearning for an origin which has moved beyond the scope of “the day”. An origin becomes synonymous with death, but only because they are both beyond the scope of language. The infinite circularity generated by an origin which is synonymous with the ‘end’ that a death constitutes provides a useful structural metaphor for Banville’s project, and indeed (some would argue) for the project of fiction-writing in general. It is inspired by what it cannot reveal, and is thus engaged in an infinite movement or engagement with what it is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by. Thus, as I have discussed, Max’s writing project, which begins with what constitutes its inspiration, or birth (the loss of his wife), must also end with it. The origin, ironically then, is shown to be the end, and both remain beyond the reach of the text.

Nostalgia, which connotes a futile longing for an unrealistic return of a past, is an apt word to describe Max’s state throughout the novel. Further to this, as intimated by Royle, nostalgia can be understood to be a kind of “homesickness” or painful longing for home (the Greek root of the word is *nostos*, which means home, and *algos*, which means pain) (“Nostalgia”, 1989). Interestingly, what this epistemological excavation of nostalgia reveals is its underpinning conflation of the concepts of ‘home’ and ‘the past’. What the nostalgic individual longs for is a return of the past as represented by home. Max, who cannot inhabit this past, or indeed this home, is as a result un-homed throughout the novel. It is for this reason that, although the uncanny features with some prominence and in several forms throughout Banville’s text, I have chosen to focus on the concept of the “un-homely”, which

is a direct translation of Freud's original title, "Das Unheimliche".¹⁹ This section of my analysis begins by exploring the ways in which Max is decidedly un-homed, in a very literal sense, throughout the novel. This is best illustrated by systematically examining the instances in which he is un-homed within his physical spaces of dwelling. His home, the place he is traditionally familiar with, is rendered eerily unfamiliar, and unwelcoming. This un-homing suggests that Max is un-homed within the present that he is obliged to inhabit. Even his dramatic attempt to return to the past by way of his relocation to the Cedars in Ballyless, the 'home' around which the recounted events of his childhood took place, stages an ironic un-homing (contrary, it is to be presumed, to his intention). Firstly, the Cedars was not a home Max himself inhabited. He was always already a guest within its walls, which implies that he did not belong in the way that he would within his own home. Further, the Cedars is not a home. It has always been a guesthouse for rent, and has thus never been anyone's home. Secondly, the Cedars' locale, as I have established, connotes placelessness, and engenders quite the reverse of familiarity, safety, welcome, and other qualities that define a home as more than a mere physical space. In another of Max's honest moments, he writes "[b]eing here is just a way of not being anywhere" (108).

Max never writes from within the space of his home, and his home only features in his memories, where it assumes a spectral quality. The "now" presented in the novel takes place within the placelessness of Ballyless. To return to the inspiration for Max's work: he recalls arriving home with his wife Anna after the news of her terminal cancer, and impending death. "[W]e sat outside the house in the car for a long time", he recollects, "loath of venturing in upon the known, saying nothing, strangers to ourselves and each other as we suddenly were" (17). It is the intrusion of death into life that shakes the foundations of their home, and makes the familiar strange. Even the form her death assumes is uncanny. "Her belly was swollen, a round hard lump pressing against the waistband of her skirt. She had said people would think she was pregnant", he writes (17). The burgeoning growth that spells her death closely resembles a pregnancy, and the beginning, or origin of life. Once again, the form assumed by death is indistinguishable from that of an origin. That the origin coincides with the end, or a

¹⁹ My use of the term "un-home" has significance with regard to the uncanny beyond it being the most direct translation of Freud's title. As Royle states, "[t]he uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper (from the Latin *proprius*, 'own'), a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property" (Royle, 2001: 1). It is telling that the terms "proper" and "property" share a root. The word "proper" can tie in with what is acceptable or 'familiar', and a disturbance of what is familiar will always be connected to a disturbance of what we associate with 'property' or home, with 'un-home'.

birth with a death, is uncanny. This is due to the apparently familiar beginning of a life so closely resembling its unfamiliar end.

Of the house which they were both frightened to enter, Max writes (from memory):

Our house, or my house, as supposedly it was now, had still not been sold, I had not yet had the heart to put it on the market, but I could not have stayed there a moment longer. After Anna's death it went hollow, became a vast echo-chamber. There was something hostile in the air, too, the growling surliness of an old hound unable to understand where its beloved mistress has gone and resentful of the master who remains.

(83–4)

Although ghosts do not make an overt appearance in the novel, an element of the spectral features prominently.²⁰ The spectral straddles the space between the present and the past, and it belongs to both the present and the past (a binary which, as I note in my chapter on *The Gathering*, structurally mimics that of life and death). In this passage, Anna's absence accrues a palpability, or presence. The "vast echo-chamber" that the house becomes retains the reverberation of what was once there, although the initial sound, or source (Anna), is no longer present in its original form. Space which has been vacated by her, which from Max's perspective is their shared life, symbolised in this case by their shared home, assumes an uncomfortable longing for her perpetually deferred return. Their house's homeliness was obviously contingent on their *co*-habitation of it. The "growling surliness of an old hound" that Max conjures to describe the very "air" of their once shared living space suggests the (other-worldly) way in which his home has been rendered *un*-homely. As Royle writes, the uncanny "can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something un-homely at the heart of hearth and home" (2). Due to the paradox of his home being un-homely, Max becomes trapped between owning it ("I had not yet had the heart to put it on the market"), which implies a bond with the place, a tie and an obligation to live there, and simply being unable to live there: "I could not have stayed there a moment longer", he writes. Being unable to inhabit his house is suggestive of Max being unable to inhabit his life, or even himself. He is trapped, between being homed and being un-homed within what is now the memory of his shared life with his wife. Very simply, he is homed because he formed a half of that life, and un-homed because the other half has vacated her space. The displacement of their shared life from the realm of the real (corresponding with the very solid

²⁰ Ghosts, much like the sea, are one of Banville's repeated preoccupations, as can be seen in his 1993 novel, *Ghosts*.

and tangible house in which they lived) to the ephemeral and intangible realm of memory renders the real-world remnants (his half-vacant home, and his half-vacant life) uncannily haunted.

Max's state of being un-homed is a product of his being out of joint with the present, and his inability to inhabit his home with the comfort conventionally associated with such a space symbolises his incapacity to inhabit himself comfortably. "These days I must take the world in small and carefully measured doses", he writes, "it is a sort of homeopathic cure I am undergoing [...]. Perhaps I am learning to live amongst the living again. Practising, I mean" (2005: 108). To "live amongst the living" is something Max is "practising" or rehearsing. To (simply) be requires that he play a role, that he be a "concocted self" as he elsewhere labels himself (121). This, again, is due to the disjuncture he feels with the living, or the present, as a result of his intimate brush with death. "Among the more or less harrowing consequences of bereavement", he notes, "is the sheepish sense I have of being an imposter" (113). He writes here of the sense he has of not being present to himself, of not being authentic, and of playing a role. Anna's death, and his subsequent bereavement, would appear to have dislodged him from an authentic (or apparently authentic) continuation in the present, and this in turn leads to a suspicion of the present, and of its veracity. This suspicion is turned both on his surrounds and on himself. He writes of Anna's funeral, "I detected a speculative something in the warmth with which certain of the women embraced me [...] that melting stoniness of expression that old-style tragic actresses would put on in the closing scene when the harrowed hero staggered on stage with the heroine's corpse in his arms" (114). He continues:

With what tenderness they gazed at me across the grave-mouth, and how gently yet firmly they took my arm when the ceremony was done [...]. I felt I should stop and hold up a hand and tell these people that really, I did not deserve their reverence [...] that I had been merely a bystander, a bit-player, while Anna did the dying.

(114)

Max compares what he has referred to previously as his "survival" with Anna's dying, and he apportions all the authenticity to the role she played. He was, by comparison, "merely a bystander, a bit-player". As I mention in my chapter on *The Gathering*, 'survival' is not life, but rather its tainted equivalent (the result of being un-homed in the present). This passage, in which Max and his co-inhabitants of that present are cast in an inauthentic light, occur astride the grave. It is his brush with death that makes Max feel like a concoction, a construction, an "imposter", a "bystander" and a "bit-player". He feels like he is simply playing a role.

In an interview with Laura P. Z. Izarra, Banville stated “I don’t believe there is a kind of private self that we call soul [...] that we have any single coherence [...] There’s never a point of rest [...] until the last moment arrives” (2003: 244). He repeats this sentiment in his novel, when Max writes “[b]ut then, at what moment, of all our moments, is life not utterly, utterly changed, until the final, most momentous change of all?” (25). Banville undercuts the very notion of an authentic self, a “soul”, a “single coherence” or a “point of rest”. Life’s very ‘changefulness’ or indeed inauthenticity makes imposters (those who change regularly) of us all. Anna and the twins have died and thus undergone “the final, most momentous change of all”. They are not impostors, or inauthentic. This is not to say that they have the “single coherence” or “soul” of which Banville speaks. Such terms are how the living make sense of life and its inauthenticity. But after the “last moment arrives” inauthenticity is not replaced with authenticity. Rather, the binary itself ceases to signify.

A Fluid, Indifferent Medium

As with many of Banville’s preoccupations, the sea as a trope features in several of his novels. In *Eclipse*, published in 2000, he writes the following meditation on drowning:

[a]nd drowning, of course, drowning is strange, I mean for those on shore. It all seems done so discreetly. The onlooker, attention caught by a distant feathery cry, peers out intently but sees nothing of the struggle, the helpless silencing, the awful slow motion thrashing, the last, long fall into the bottomless and ever blackening blue. No. All that is to be seen is a moment of white water, and a hand, languidly sinking.²¹

(68)

The “strange[ness]” of drowning is preserved by its remoteness. It is an experience that Max, who has never drowned, is incapable of knowing, since his position in relation to the ones drowning mimics that of this “onlooker” in *Eclipse*. Instead of being able to write or narrate the twins’ end, he is reduced to being a reader of signs diluted by distance. In the passage quoted above, the signs available to the distant reader of “a moment of white water” and “a hand, languidly sinking” do not accurately portray the event, in that they do not impress upon that reader or “the onlooker” the severity of “the struggle” and “the helpless silencing”. I would argue that, in the novel of the same name, the sea (or rather the surface of the sea) comes to mark the point at which signification loses its ability to channel meaning

²¹ The hand, “languidly sinking”, can put us in mind of Stevie Smith’s poem “Not Waving but Drowning” (Smith, 1957). Although the poem voices the “dead man” who drowns, its evocative lines, “I was much further out than you thought” and “I was much too far out all my life” echo Max’s symbolic distance from what he would know, and encapsulate in narrative.

adequately. It is also suggestive of the juncture between life and death. Very simply, the person who is able to break the surface of the sea with even the weakening signification of a bit of white water and a sinking hand is not yet dead, and a person relegated to “the bottomless and ever blackening blue” beyond the surface is dead. It is possible to live above the surface, and it is not possible to live beneath it. A person who sinks beneath the surface is also beyond signification – he or she is beyond both the ability to signify his or her existence, and beyond the capability of someone else to represent him or her with absolute accuracy. As I have established, Max’s narrative cannot trace the dead beyond the moment of their death. Language has no capacity to signify beyond death, and so ‘drowning’ or dying must remain “strange”.

Chloe and Myles’s drowning is described from a similarly distanced perspective. Max recalls that “it was all over very quickly, I mean what we could see of it. A splash, a little white water, whiter than that all around, then nothing, the indifferent world closing” (135). The notion of an “indifferent world” features again at the end of the novel, when Max remembers being carried along by an unusual “rolling swell” of the sea as a child. He recalls being “set down on [his] feet as before, as if nothing had happened. And indeed nothing had happened”, he continues, “a momentous nothing, just another of the great world’s shrugs of indifference” (145). The “indifference” Max describes is double-edged. Of course, the relentless continuation of the world, which feels to Max as though it is utterly imperceptive of his loss, forms an unmistakable part of this “indifference”.²² However “indifference”, with its prefix of negation “in-”, can also mean ‘no difference’. Difference is the condition of possibility for signification because meaning is generated by the play of difference.²³ A place of ‘no difference’ would be one impenetrable to signification, one of “trackless wastes” (20). Such a place, where Max’s difference-dependent narrative cannot follow, is of the kind to which the twins have been relegated. The phrase “the indifferent world closing”, which is Max’s description of the surface of the sea returning to a state unperturbed by the drowning children, can refer to what is both above and beneath that surface. The indifferent world that Max is obliged to continue within closes to the children; they are lost to it. Conversely, the world beneath the surface, the world of ‘no difference’ also closes, and leaves Max outside. As the survivor, he cannot follow, and neither can his narrative. What lies beneath the surface is that

²² Max develops a preoccupation with “the processes of [his] body”. He writes “my hair and fingernails insistently keep growing, no matter what state I am in, what anguish I may be undergoing. It seems so inconsiderate, so heedless of circumstance, this relentless generation of matter that is already dead” (45).

²³ Recall Derrida’s assertion that we should consider “every process of signification as a formal play of differences” (Derrida, 1981: 26).

“momentous nothing” he felt the swell of as a child. “[N]othing”, which he refers to again when describing the twins drowning, is the only word he has to signify imperfectly what is beyond signification. The word “nothing” contains within it an implicit acknowledgement that it does not designate anything absolutely, but rather performs the relatively unique function of standing in as something of a ‘placeholder’ for what exists beyond signification. At the surface, just before the children sink into “nothing”, they manage “a splash, a little white water, whiter than that all around”. The last bit of difference that enables the last bit of narrative that describes them alive is between “a little white water” and that which surrounds it, which is not as white. Already, difference has faded to the faint alteration of hue between water that is disturbed and water that is not.

Anna, once she is dead, belongs to this indifferent world. But even before that, as she is dying, she seems more ‘at home’ where Max cannot follow. She acts pre-emptively when dying. Max recollects her final days as follows: “[m]ostly [...] she kept herself quiet [...] half in a doze, half in a daze, indifferent equally, it seemed, to the prospect of survival or extinction” (60). Her own retreat from the indifferent world and entry into that of ‘no difference’ is marked by her refusal to use language and her preference for silence (although her silence is certainly not to be equated with the absence of signification – not yet anyway). He describes her as “half in a doze, half in a daze”. The two words “doze” and “daze”, with only the ‘difference’ of one letter between them, signify much the same thing, regardless of this difference. Anna’s last splash on the surface is thus marked by fading difference, and Max’s ability to generate a description of her is therefore fading too. While it is not yet gone, as is apparent in the traces of her that remain in his narrative, it is fading.

He is faced with the last of his wife’s subjection to the play of difference just before her “final, most momentous change” when the word “Anna” no longer refers to her as present, but rather draws painful attention to the fact that she is about to be no longer present. He recalls her final days as follows: “I spoke her name but she only closed her eyes briefly, dismissively, as if I should know that she was no longer Anna, that she was no longer anyone” (132). Derrida might argue that her name is “destined to survive [her]” and that her name “announces [her] death” (Derrida, 1992: 432). Anna’s name announces that it will remain, unchanged, even once she no longer has any phenomenal claim to the realm of the real. It will mark her absence when she has relinquished her entitlement to the piece of metaphysical real-estate that *her* name once constituted. By dismissing Max’s utterance of her name, Anna is pre-emptively absenting herself, as though she is aware of the inherent

betrayal by language. Towards the beginning of his narrative, Max bitterly remarks that “[t]here is a name De’Ath, with that fancy medial capital and apotropaic apostrophe which fool no one” (15). The *name* “De’Ath” issues its announcement with the negligible camouflage of a “medial capital” ‘A’ and an “apotropaic apostrophe” which, according to Max, “fool no one”. Stripped of these textual ruses, the plain spelling of “Death” states its intention plainly, in a way that other names, Anna for example (which rather deceptively connotes “grace” and “favour”), do not. Max later characterises the cancerous bulge in Anna’s abdomen as “big baby De’Ath, burgeoning inside her, biding its time” (17). Once again, the grave and the womb are positioned astride one another, uncannily interchangeable.

And yet.

How might one end a work that cannot ever be completed? In the final sentence of the novel, Max recalls being outside the place where his wife dies, and writes “[a] nurse came out then to fetch me, and I turned and followed her inside, and *it was as if I were* walking into the sea” (145, emphasis mine). This final sentence marks the work’s inevitable and necessary limitation. It is no coincidence that the novel ends with the two words that also title and thus begin it. This repetitive gesture is again present in the plot structure, since, as mentioned before, Banville both begins and ends his novel with the death of Anna. A narrative, like Max’s, which is inspired by what is beyond its scope, while capable of gesturing towards it, is bound to the realm of “the day” and is thus bound, in turn, to an end that mimics its beginning. The beginning inevitably has much to do with the work’s inspiration (an inspiration leads to a beginning, after all) and the end marks the point beyond which the work cannot go, or in other words, a limitation. Banville’s repetitive gesture (it is ultimately Banville’s, after all) appears to perform a bracketing function, which encapsulates both his protagonist’s attempt, as well as his failure. By encapsulating this failure, Banville illustrates an awareness of what *his* work can only mark an absence of. A circular plot line, as opposed to a linear one, virtually draws a line around that to which it cannot adequately correspond. At the centre of Banville’s ‘circle’ is death.

In the novel, the closest that language comes to filling this void is with Banville’s use of the metaphor of *The Sea*. A large, fluid, shifting and seemingly unknowable entity provides as accurate an approximation as possible from within the world for something that lies decidedly beyond it. Banville’s use of the term to both begin and end his novel, and thus frame it, is yet another indicator though that metaphor, which is the most powerful tool at his

disposal, is unable to 'fill' the void, however fluid it might be. There is, however, the compulsion to try, nevertheless, to fitfully restlessly circle that which is beyond narrative with narrative. (A circle is a movement without end and therefore without respite.) Recall the fool's hope Banville infuses Max with when the protagonist writes "[a]nd yet, what existence, really, does it have, the past? After all, it is only what the present was, once, the present that is gone, no more than that. And yet" (40). Once again, Banville frames what has no "existence" or what is beyond his ability to represent, with a repetitive gesture. The first "and yet" signifies his limitation (the inspiration and the limitation are essentially interchangeable and it therefore matters little that, in this case, the limitation comes first). He goes on to explicate why "the past" is beyond what he can experience and consequently replicate in his narrative. The final "and yet" signifies his obstinate resolution (or compulsion) to try nevertheless.

To return one last time to "Orpheus' Gaze": one of Blanchot's many designations for the absolute alterity which is beyond signification is "the deep" (1982: 177), which corresponds with what I believe Banville intends for the sea to signify. "The deep does not reveal itself directly; it is only disclosed hidden in the work", Blanchot writes (177). Now, inescapably, the designation of "the deep" generates its meaning in opposition to our understanding of 'shallow'. However, it has the connotation of having an unknown limit, of being "bottomless" like Banville's "ever blackening blue". "The deep", like "nothing", is a term that reaches out, blindly, in the dark. 'Shallow' implies something that is easily within our grasp. Within the context of *The Sea*, the shallow parts are the safe ones, whereas the deep parts are those from which we may not return. Indeed, they are those which may accommodate our death. When Max walks with the nurse towards his dead wife, he feels "*as if* [he] were walking into the sea" (emphasis mine). The "as if" inserts the mark of distance (or of metaphor) between what he is describing, and an actual approach of Anna. The actual depths into which she has descended are beyond the reach of metaphor. They are too deep, and not shallow enough. *And yet*.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions generally require clarity and the kind of certainty that can rest on the definitiveness of the previous hundred pages' findings. A conclusion of a study such as this one, which engages with novels which in turn are preoccupied with things that "alas!" are "away", as Gerard Manley Hopkins might say, does not have the luxury of such certainty (2010: 51). I may attempt to perform something like the bracketing function Banville executes with panache in *The Sea*, and end off where I begin. Such a gesture would illustrate my awareness that my study cannot be linear in the traditional sense: it cannot start somewhere, and end somewhere else, having drawn a line between two points that signals progress, and teleology. I began by stating that I would explore three novels that demonstrate a fixation with excess (that is, with what exceeds their grasp). What I ultimately isolated in each of them is a significant gesture beyond their bounds. The most a gesture can hope to be, I would imagine, is 'significant', after all. Of course, I have no more access to these absolute alterities, to these Eurydices lost to the other world, to the excruciating deaths, secrets and inexperienced experiences than do the texts I explore. I hope here to put forward what I contend is the 'significance' of each of the novels' gestures.

Barry's *The Secret Scripture* shows a profound awareness of the parameters within which it is obliged to function. Although positioned firmly in the context of what Barry terms 'holes' and 'gaps' in the last century of Ireland's history, it is lodged there as no more than a work of fiction. The holes and gaps in question are, to reiterate, the untold stories of uncounted individuals who were institutionalised for presenting unwanted contradictions to the fledgling nation's sanctioned moral code. In spite of the novel's status as an imaginative construction, it employs its fictional form's capabilities in order to signal that which it cannot contain. In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Derrida states that a "work of literary fiction [...] can say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything" (2000: 29). I would qualify this remark by adding that a work of fiction can say, accept, receive and suffer "anything", as long as the "everything" implied by this list is a simulation. Barry uses this licence, and its range of "anything" to create a secret testimony. The aporia he sustains between secrecy and revelation is accommodated within his fictional construction. Such a precarious alternation, in which revelation is always poised to obliterate secrecy (and, by implication, history is always poised to obliterate Roseanne), needs the allowances of fiction in order to be sustained. While Roseanne's secrets themselves, we cannot forget, are a fiction of Barry's construction, their contents retain the character of secrecy even when they are

revealed, as they ultimately are (recall that they “[remain] reserved” for Roseanne, as Derrida would have it [2000: 30]). The retention of the character of secrecy is an exquisite achievement, and it sustains Roseanne’s testimony’s paradoxical victory. That is, the testimony is complete, and voiced by someone history silenced; however it is secret (and indeed fictional), and therefore never to form part of the official historical account. Its very secrecy is what makes it impenetrable to the violent forces of history though: it exists on a separate plane, and is in its form the antithesis of that history. It occupies the space in Barry’s ‘holes’ and ‘gaps’. However, it does not fill them. As far as historical accounts are concerned, these secrets are anti-matter, although what is felt as an absence is in fact a profound presence. Imaginative rehabilitations of the country’s many such secrets can never be anything more than gestures. Barry’s novel pays significant, self-reflexive and graceful tribute to this.

What I term Roseanne’s ‘lineage of absence’ is another of Barry’s gestures. The Clear family, who have undergone an erasure (signalled by their name), have nevertheless produced a descendent whose surname, Grene, has more colour to it (and indeed more perceptible presence) than that of his transparent ancestors. Many people living in Ireland today, presumably, are descended from those that history rendered invisible (Tom Kettle’s daughter Betty, for example). Their forebears’ transparency has much to do with their stories receding into the oblivion of Ireland’s forgotten history, which is tantamount to an excess that can never be unequivocally captured.

Because of history’s erasures, the version of Dr Grene’s family’s history that reaches him is itself riddled with indeterminacy. His accommodation of that story (that testimony, the condition of possibility of which is fiction) requires grace. It requires forgiveness of the contradictions and indeterminacies, a suspension of disbelief, and what he calls a “withdrawal from the task of questioning” (238). The reading of fiction involves a similar suspension of disbelief, which as I explore is quite akin to the quality of “grace” that the novel incorporates. What Barry’s text ultimately requests from the reader, the next in line along the lineage of absence, is a grace which accommodates the kind of testimony contained in its pages, that is, a marginalised narrative which history cannot abide.

Enright makes excellent use of fiction’s extensive arsenal in *The Gathering*. Its masterful stroke of irony is the present tense narration it employs, which is a narration of the present from within the present, and might be understood to be the closest narrative can come to

replicating the reality from which it draws. Yet it is this very device that marks the disjuncture between the novel and any lived reality it may be considered to represent. To reiterate: what Veronica Hegarty's habit of *writing* in the present (and in the present tense) illustrates is her inability to *live* healthily and coherently in the present beyond the confines of her narrative. The disjuncture between phenomenal reality and Enright's fictional construction is paradoxically emphasised by the latter 'simulating' the former as faithfully as she is able.

The novel also judiciously sustains a "scrupulous refusal to redeem history by suggesting that the far-reaching effects of traumatic memory can be completely erased or transcended", as Liam Harte notes (2010: 188). This refusal results in a significantly less optimistic novel than Barry's, and a systematic exploration of the insurmountable difficulties associated with 'erasing' or 'transcending' traumatic experience. The body on which the harm Veronica witnessed was inflicted, Liam's, has passed away, and has receded into the forgotten portion of the history Enright refuses to "redeem". Resurrecting that body for the purposes of narration is something Enright's protagonist abruptly encounters the limits of (recall her conjuring of Ada and Lambert's ghosts in order to expend the latter's desire so as to divert it from Liam). What she illustrates a desire to access is something that will remain beyond her reach. This is carefully illustrated by way of the difficult presence of a sequence of aporias throughout the text, which thwart any attempt on the part of the reader to extract definitive truths about what "may not have happened" (8). While she sets down an approximation of what happened, the clarity that we may hope for eludes us. This is a part of her scrupulousness: to interrupt the fitful state of the aporias in her novel, and to set down something definitive, unified and uncomplicated, would be to offer something simple enough for history to absorb. Her refusal to lay an inexperienced experience bare results in it retaining the character of historical anti-matter.

While erasure and transcendence are not part of this writer's agenda, she is not so pessimistic as to prevent her protagonist from experiencing an epiphanic moment towards the end of the novel, and the chance, at least, of healing. This is the extent of her gesture: she delineates the *potential* for healing, and leaves the matter of such healing beyond the bounds of her text. Again, to include healing would be counter to her aim. Enright writes a fiction that draws on an Irish reality. Her self-reflexivity prevents her from writing a fiction with a conclusive ending, given that the reality it draws from still contains too many instances in which healing has not occurred.

While Banville's *The Sea* does not have the historical resonances of the other novels I analyse, he concerns himself with much the same thing as the other authors, namely, the limitations of fictional narrative when trying to capture a past, and its potential, in spite of those limitations. He ambitiously tasks his narrating protagonist with the objective of re-presenting the past and the (now) dead that occupy it. Of course, Max's inspiration is also his limitation, as signalled by the novel's circular plot line. I found Blanchot's reading of the Orpheus myth most useful when attempting to articulate the movement of an art which descends towards that upon which it cannot look. To look upon the absolute alterity it desires to represent would be to destroy the work. Banville's novel must always turn its back towards death and the past, because they exist in those "trackless wastes" and in that placelessness where language cannot follow (Banville, 2008: 20).

Importantly, Max's 'failure'¹ is housed within Banville's novel, and I argue that the unsuccessful attempt to re-present the past that the author orchestrates, which wrestles with and comes second against the inadequacy of the codes and conventions of representation, is quite ironically harnessed by the writer, who thereby asserts control over that over which he conventionally has no control.

Here is Banville's gesture (and indeed Enright's and Barry's): to write about a writer who cannot go on and yet must go on. Once again, it is excess which inspires the contemporary Irish fiction with which this study engages. All three novels exhibit a fixation with that to which they cannot adequately correspond. To ignore their shortcomings would be disingenuous, however quite paradoxically, to incorporate an awareness of these constraints gives them a chance, at least, of gesturing beyond them. "[N]o more than that", mind you, "[a]nd yet" (Banville, 2008: 40). Such work, which is "rigorous and controlled, cool and yet passionate, without delusions, aware of its own possibilities and its own limits" is, I would argue, "an art which is honest enough".

¹I place this under erasure due to the fact that a failure cannot be a failure if success was never a possibility. The *telos* of Max's narrative is ateleological.

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