

Personal Wounds, National Scars. Reflections on Individual and Cultural Trauma in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

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The Gathering, by the Dublin-born author Anne Enright, was awarded in 2007 the Man Booker Prize for fiction, a recognition that granted the book media exposure on some of the most important newspapers worldwide. The reviews that followed the panel's choice are symptomatic of the kind of strong, extremely personal and often emotional responses the novel has inspired in its readers; some, like Al Kennedy («The Guardian»)¹, have been entirely captivated by the author's spellbinding storytelling and by her insightful and incomplicit approach to her subject matter; some others, such as Michael Upchurch («Seattle Times»)², have despised her deliberately unpleasant imagery and have been baffled by the lack of an explicit coherence in the narration; most seem to have experienced an unsettling combination of pain and involvement, of loathing and admiration, for a book which can be dreadfully beautiful, or beautifully dreadful. In any case, it seems pretty clear that Enright's fourth fictional work, which does not wink at its readers and certainly does nothing to please, is one of those enthralling novels that creep up under one's skin and will not leave the readers' mind and body for a while after they have put it down. However, experiencing the novel is quite another thing from attempting a rational description of such an intense, multifaceted book by trying to answer the most straightforward of questions: what is it about?

If one is to rely on the few sure, factual events the author narrates, he/she would then be most likely to answer that *The Gathering* is about a person's death and the wake that follows. This could also represent a first step in trying to set the novel into a broader framework of an established literary tradition, as an Irish novel that revolves around a wake is bound to be instantly connected with one of the most ambitious works of fiction ever attempted in the English language, by possibly the greatest of Irish writers, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. *The Gathering* could indeed be renamed 'Liam's Wake', as some reviewers have suggested. Yet, I would tend to look at a different part of the Joycean tradition to introduce Enright's novel, going back to his 1914 collection of short stories, *Dubliners*. The reference I would like to make is not to any of the stories in particular (even though *The Dead* would be themati-

cally relevant), but rather to the assertion Joyce based his collection on. In a well-known letter to his publisher Grant Richards, he declared: «My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis»³.

Little less than one hundred years later, the very same statement seems to offer a key to a thorough understanding of the complex subtext of Enright's novel. In fact, if *The Gathering* certainly is about a suicide and the ensuing wake, there is also an underlying network of dense, often little explicit narratives telling a wider story. Between Veronica's obsessive, over-detailed reconstructions of her family's vicissitudes and her uncertain, almost hallucinatory memories of past events that may or may not have happened, there is indeed a chapter of the moral history of contemporary Ireland. This chapter portrays Enright's main character trying to work her way out of what could be termed, to borrow Joyce's terms again, a post-traumatic kind of 'paralysis', which has equally affected her personal life and, on a larger scale, her society. The pretext for her to finally come to terms with the effects and consequences of such trauma is the recollection of the sexual abuse her suicidal brother, Liam, underwent as a child, in a very protected domestic environment. Veronica herself may or may not have undergone the same violence. The exposure of these personal wounds is mirrored by the scars that are disfiguring the entire country, since Ireland's traditional self-image of observant Catholic country, has been violently disrupted in the last two decades by the revelation not only of a great number of domestic sexual abuses, but also of the same kind of practices within the Church institutions themselves. The consequences of such painful discoveries seem to have led to a reconsideration of some of the traditional cornerstones of Irish life, and Veronica's distressing interaction with her reality will here be read both as metonymic of this moment of destabilizing 'cultural trauma' which appears to be affecting her society, and as her own individual response to a specific traumatic experience.

It is clear from the very beginning that Enright's main character, 39-year-old Veronica Hegarty, is pervaded by an urge to give voice to a crucial episode of her childhood, but it is equally clear that the task she is setting out to accomplish will be all but easy. The contours of this remembered event are so blurred she even doubts it actually took place, and yet it is roaring inside her and needs, painfully, to be let out:

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 if it really did happen. I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place. I don't even know what name to put on it. I think you might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flash is long fallen away and I am not sure what hurt may linger in the bones⁴.

If she was to put a name on it, she would call it a «crime of the flesh», but the actual revelation of what sort of crime she refers to is withheld until

very late in the novel. In the meantime, the reader is led through a maze of speculations and ambiguity, interspersed with few certain facts: it is certain that Liam, one of her too many siblings, the one she was more deeply connected with, committed suicide by drowning in Brighton, and that she travels to England to bring his body back to Dublin; it is certain that the family's idiosyncrasies, that she evokes throughout the novel by revealing some glimpses of the Hegartys' past, are encapsulated and synthesized in the crucial moment of «the gathering», the coming together of the «Hegarty clan» for Liam's wake; it is also certain that Liam, her little sister Kitty and herself spent one summer at their grandmother's (Ada) in Broadstone, and that, apart from her husband, there was another man in Ada's daily life, Lambert Nugent, who was her landlord and, in a rather controversial manner, her friend too. The rest is made of disturbing thoughts and associations, and intricate, tentative stories tirelessly reworked and enriched with new details; through this element of vagueness and the lack of an authoritative narrative throughout the novel, Enright exploits the possibilities of what Wayne C. Booth, in his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, has called «unreliable narration»⁵; indeed, the readers never truly know whether they can trust the narrator, as they are not given any reliable instructions and are at the mercy of the protagonist's dreamlike conjectures.

This stylistic feature, widely explored in literary history with very different outcomes, from Joyce himself to, for instance, Henry James, is well exemplified in *The Gathering* by the stories of Ada's encounter with Lambert Nugent. Veronica chooses to set their first meeting in 1925, when her grandmother, Ada Merriman, was nineteen, and he was twenty-three, in a hotel foyer in Dublin at seven o'clock in the evening. Every single movement of the two, from the instant when their eyes first met, to the way they occupied the space around them, is played and replayed, and collocated into different emotional frameworks. The shifting moods of the two characters seem to settle on a more stable note of unspoken resentment on Nugent's side, as history tells Veronica that Ada, despite their (imagined) flirtation, did not end up marrying him. Ada chooses Charlie, Nugent's friend, and Veronica pictures in her head several scenes of their fulfilling marital life and sexual enjoyment⁶. However, Veronica believes Ada never really stopped flirting with Nugent, who had been calling in to her grandma's house regularly throughout the years; she even imagines the two having sex one day, which might have been sweet, rough, or might in fact never have happened. Her lovely grandma becomes a 'whore', almost someone to blame for some primordial disgrace that has brought destruction to their lives. The reader realises that Veronica's 'unreliable' narration, far from being a mere formal device, and equally far from being simplistically identifiable with the ravings of madness⁷ or with those of an alcoholic⁸, has in fact extremely deep implications in the economy of the novel. Why is she so perversely interested in piecing together a story which is

clearly just a fantasy? Why does she need to play these scenes over and over in her head until they find the most plausible, or terrible, of shapes? Because it is back in those days she knows nothing about that the seeds of her brother's death were sown⁹, when Ada's existence stumbled upon Lambert Nugent's, her life-long «friend», her «Nolly-May»¹⁰. This is her grandmother's biggest fault: having met, under imprecise circumstances, the man who will abuse Liam one summer in Broadstone, when Veronica was eight and he was nearly nine. And now that Liam, with stones in his pocket, a fluorescent jacket, no socks, no pants, has entrusted his unspoken hurt to the oblivion of the sea, she tries for a moment to «put an end to the shifting stories and the waking dreams»¹¹ and tell what «Nolly-May» did to him:

I know, as I write about these three things: the jacket, the stones, and my brother's nakedness underneath his clothes, that they require me to deal in facts. [...] It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year I was eight and Liam was barely nine¹².

Despite the fact that some details will continue to change throughout the book, and that her recollection will never be crystal-clear («even though it is *true* that this happened, I do not know if I have the true picture in my mind's eye»¹³), this is what Veronica discloses about that summer of many years before:

On this particular day I was variously bored on the stairs, or at the dining-room table, or in the hall, before I got bored again and decided to go into the good room.

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 on 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 Nugent¹⁴.

This is where everything began, or ended in fact. That distant moment in 1967 suddenly seems to clarify the most obscure aspects of Veronica's existence, from her almost psychotic search for meaning, to the raw, disturbing imagery that pervades her sexual life, to her failure to find truth and comfort in either the domestic and the religious sphere. But before I delve into these observations in further detail, I would like to take a step back and concentrate on the triggering factor of Veronica's sudden recollection.

As it is well known, a traumatic incident experienced personally (this option is never clearly ruled out in the novel) or, it may be said, «osmotically» (Veronica and Liam are, «quasi twins»¹⁵, they almost «overlapped» in

their mother's womb, and, as a consequence, she feels that she knows him «in her bones»¹⁶) usually results in a moment, life-long sometimes, of what I have previously called «paralysis». By paralysis I mean the traumatized subject's incapability to consciously and productively react to the psychological consequences of the harm he/she has undergone; the intricate mechanisms that traumatic events such as sexual abuse can set in motion in the mind of the victim, especially when he/she is just a child, include the actual impossibility for the subject to remember what has happened to him/her. In this case, memory is somehow paralyzed, be it for the creation of an actual blank space, or for the person's more or less conscious will or necessity to leave out information which is too painful to process. This is clearly a means of defence, an inhibitory process which, however, does not prevent the appearance of different sorts of intrusive phenomena in the victim's personality, which can be broadly referred to as post-traumatic stress disorders¹⁷. In its more general definition, Cathy Caruth underlines: «[T]rauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena»¹⁸. Even though the etymology of the word, meaning «wound» in Greek, takes us back to the original definition of trauma as «injury inflicted on a body», the term is more widely employed to refer to psychological wounds, which can nonetheless be a direct consequence of physical harm.

The Greek trauma, or “wound”, originally referred to an injury inflicted on a body. [...] But the breach in the mind's experience of the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor¹⁹.

The person may recognize some traits of his/her personality as disturbed, but this does not mean that he/she will be able to go back to the primal cause. However, an event, or a series of events can ‘unblock’ this situation and make repressed memories resurface. In Veronica's case, the memory of Lambert Nugent and of that summer in Broadstone comes as a consequence of a progressing awakening of Irish society to a shocking reality of widespread abuse:

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 people's homes²⁰.

The novel is set in 1998, and the end of the twentieth century has been crucial for the rising number of inquiries that led to a terrible chain of revelations, precisely what Veronica has been reading and hearing about. The

general disconcert and the initial disbelief were particularly high, because such horrors, inexcusable under any circumstances, were disclosed in the bosom of the Irish Catholic church, involving many ranks of the ecclesiastic hierarchy in different types of church-run institutions:

At the turn of the century, Irish people were shaken by revelations of clerical sexual abuse. It has been very difficult for us to accept that Roman Catholic priests and religious were responsible for harming thousands of children across the country. It has been even more difficult to accept that church authorities had in many cases known of the abuse, and had acted to protect the institutional church rather than vulnerable children²¹.

The gravity of child sexual abuse is in itself unbearable, but the situation has been made even more upsetting by the attitude of denial and covering-up which the church authorities have substituted at times to a more honest and humble self-analysis, as Maeve Lewis has pointed out. The combination of these two facts has undoubtedly played a major role in undermining, in the last two decades, the credibility of the clergy and of the ecclesiastic apparatus as a whole, reflected in what Tom Humbley has referred to as the «flight from the pews»²². It is impossible to deny that Catholicism in Ireland is undergoing a «severe crisis of faith», having been increasingly challenged by «the twin forces of secularization and modernization»²³, and now having to deal with this devastating staggering blow.

The «flight from the pews» represents a moment of drastic change in Irish society, where Catholicism has for a long time occupied a privileged position. Indeed, as it is well-known, the Irish traditionally like to think of themselves as belonging to an observant Catholic country, the most observant Catholic country in Europe in fact. The origins of Catholicism in Ireland date back to the fifth century, but it is from the years that followed Catholic emancipation by the British Parliament in 1829 that the cult truly began to secure a tight hold on Irish society. Little more than a century later, the development of Roman Catholicism as an institution in the country was ratified by an overt will to govern «in accordance to Vatican teachings»²⁴, promoted by Eamon de Valera in the 44th article of the Constitution he introduced in 1937. Ireland therefore consecrated itself as an overtly Christian state, and the rapid acceptance of the Constitution reflected the homogeneous nature of the people's belief:

The constitution was criticized at the time only by a minority. Most people welcomed it as an enlightened combination of the liberal values of parliamentary democracy and Catholic moral teaching. At the time there was a common wisdom in the Catholic world that Catholic social principles could be applied to secular life to create an overtly Christian state. This was what de Valera had set out to do, establishing on the one hand the separation of Church and State and on the other the primacy of

Catholic moral teaching and the State's obligation to abide by it. [...] Right into the 1960s Catholic Irish congregations were full (a feature of the Irish Church revived by Pope John Paul II's visit to the country in 1979) and genuine attention was paid to ecclesiastical pronouncements²⁵.

The empty pews of some of today's churches, and the decreasing number of young Irish willing to take holy orders, prove the entity of the change that is taking place within such an important sphere of Ireland's cultural legacy. However, the sex scandals connected with the church soon turned out to be just the top of the iceberg, a mere glimmer into a much wider reality of abuse, which corroded another foundational element of Irish self-image: the family, or, more generally, the domestic sphere, as Maeve Lewis points out in a recent article for of «The Irish Times»:

Five per cent of all Irish children who are sexually abused are harmed by clerics. However, 75 per cent of children who are sexually abused are violated by members of their own family, or by trusted adults known to them in their daily lives²⁶.

The figures presented in 2002 by the SAVI (Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland) report, conducted on a significant sample of the Irish population, are frighteningly high, as they talk of one in five women (20.4 per cent) having experienced «contact sexual abuse in childhood with a further one in ten (10.0 per cent) reporting non-contact sexual abuse»; as far as men are concerned, the statistics show that «one in six men (16.2 per cent) reported experiencing contact sexual abuse in childhood with a further one in fourteen (7.4 per cent) reporting non-contact sexual abuse»²⁷. This is almost to say that most people are likely to know someone who was interfered with as a child, and, as previously noticed, about three fourth of these events normally take place within one's own four walls. It becomes clear, thus, that in the past few decades in Ireland there have been many Liams and many Veronicas, and the overwhelming impact of such consciousness-raising certainly had a traumatic effect on Irish society. In this sense I think it is appropriate to borrow Ron Eyerman's definition and talk of «cultural trauma»:

There is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process. As a cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory. As opposed to psychological trauma or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion²⁸.

In the light of these considerations, it is now possible to interpret Veronica's attitude both as a manifestation of her personal distress and as a response to a more general loss of credibility of the world around her. Despite

the predominant presence of the family unit as one of the novel's pivotal element, there are very few occasions in which it is perceived and described by Veronica as a safe, warm haven. In *The Gathering*, family is a crowded place, an uncomfortable environment populated not by the fruits of two people's love, but by the thoughtless consequences of too much inconsiderate sex:

My mother had twelve children and – she told me one hard day – seven miscarriages. The holes in her head are not her fault. Even so, I have never forgiven her any of it. I just can't. [...]

I don't forgive her the endless hand-me-downs, and few toys, and Midge walloping us because my mother was too gentle, or busy, or absent, or pregnant to bother. [...] No, when it comes down to it, I do not forgive her the sex. The stupidity of so much humping. Open and blind. Consequences, Mammy. *Consequences*²⁹.

The novel challenges the idea of families as safe cocoons where no harm can ever be possible, as the places to run to when searching for comfort and sympathy. Veronica's is extraordinarily large (and family size in Ireland is traditionally relatively big, even though Veronica's is much beyond the average) and there is no time to truly look after every child as an individual, Enright seems to suggest; there are several passages in the novel where it is clear that her mother cannot even remember her name³⁰, she does not seem to be fully aware of which of her children she is talking to. She has «holes in her head», and it might not be her fault, but how can she be forgiven for being so absent? It seems too easy for each of the Hegartys to go down different paths of destruction with no one paying particular attention, no one being in the condition to truly care. The Catholic notion of the sacredness of family has for Veronica no value at all, it is a cheat, a misconception, as there can be just as much hurt within the supposedly love-filled space of domesticity as there can be in less protected (or supposedly so) situations. The household is a place of wounds, from those left by the disappearance of the one you loved the most (but still failed to protect, to save), to those left by the paradoxical loneliness within shared time and space. Being part of a family, says Veronica when walking down the aisle at Liam's funeral, is the «most excruciating possible way to be alive»:

My head twists away from whichever side of the church is more interested in my grief, only to show it to the other side. Here it is. The slow march of the remaining Hegartys. I don't know what wound we are showing to them all, apart from the wound of family. Because, just at this moment, I find that being part of a family is the most excruciating possible way to be alive³¹.

Hurt and failure are not confined to unusually large families only, as the same conditions perpetrate themselves even in contexts where the parents are not «just helpless to it» breeding «as naturally as they might shit»³². Each

family has its own ways of playing the «unhappiness game», and Veronica's frustrating interaction with her husband Tom, the father of her two little girls, is no exception. Between the lines of plain conversations there is unfulfillment, dissatisfaction, the shared existence of the couple being perceived as almost unnatural, constrained and constrictive:

[...] all those nights were the same.

'Do you want the light on?'

'No thanks'

'Are you coming to bed?'

Here we go, again. Always after a few drinks, but sometimes even sober, we play the unhappiness game; endlessly round and round. Ding dong. Tighter and tighter. On and on.

'No, I'll just sit up a while.'

'It's up to you.'

'Yes.'

Push me pull you. Come here and I'll tell you how much I hate you. Hang on a minute while I leave you.

[...] We rarely shout, myself and Tom, we just hate³³.

Even the thought of her two children seems unable at times to bring Veronica's reasoning back to a more positive note. If in her mother's case the act of childbirth was seen as the mere consequence of blind stupidity, in her own situation it comes to be perceived as a pointless act of selfishness: why should anyone bring into the world another existence if it will eventually just end up buried in the ground like the rest of them?

I look at my hands on the railings, and they are old, and my child-battered body, that I was proud of, in a way, for the new people that came out of it, just feeding the grave, *just feeding the grave!* I want to shout at these strangers, as they pass. I want to call for an end to procreation with a sandwich board and a megaphone³⁴.

However, Veronica's attitude should not be mistaken for cold, emotionless nihilism; her bleak, cynical reflections are the bitter consequences of defeat and disillusionment and therefore should not be regarded as the considerations of somebody who is incapable of loving, but as those of someone who has loved too much and yet has failed to save the object of so much affection. Indeed, Veronica cared for Liam immensely, he probably represented the most precious, purest bond she had in her entire life, and now not only has she lost him, but she also cannot help but think that it is, at least partially, her fault. She has, just like the rest of the Hegartys, watched him being slowly devoured by his alcohol abuse, just like she has silently observed his obsession for personal hygiene, legacy of a never-confronted need to wash away some residual 'dirt' that kept lingering on his body. What sense is there in loving someone so profoundly if you still fail to save him? Isn't love almost a waste

of energy after all, if your beloved ones just end up feeding the grave while your love will outlive their physical absence?

We each love someone, even though they will die. And we keep loving them, even when they are not there to love any more. And there is no logic or use to any of this, that I can see³⁵.

If family is not the place to turn to when searching for meaning and safety in an unstable world of chaos, neither is faith. Even though the cultural legacy of Catholicism is still evident in Veronica's daily life, heritage of a substratum of solid, shared knowledge that marked the upbringing of most Irish people, it is nonetheless deprived of its essential moral components. It survives in the form of spontaneous, almost subconscious associations, often uniting the sacred with the profane and, to some extent, proving that the 'aesthetics' of Catholicism can today still be perceived as the most accessible, perhaps better known, pool of images to draw from. For instance, when Veronica is first confronted with the sight of Liam's dead body, she instantly associates it with that of Mantegna's dead Christ: «If you ask me what my brother looked like after he was dead, I can tell you that he looked like Mantegna's foreshortened Christ, in paisley pajamas»³⁶.

Her own name, which she is not particularly fond of, is associated with that of the saint, and Veronica's memory goes back to her story in contexts which are almost blasphemous:

St Veronica 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, she said. I became quite fond of her; a figure leaning out of the crowd, both supplicatory and tender. I still think of her wherever wet towels are offered in Chinese restaurants and the old-fashioned airlines³⁷.

This has clearly nothing to do with faith. To Veronica, religion has fallen from grace, she no longer goes to church and has decided not to educate her children according to Catholic beliefs, even though her daughter Rebecca, at eight, is going through a pious phase, «probably to thwart me», Veronica says³⁸. She seems to have especially harsh views when it comes to the *men* who are called to embody the highest Catholic principles, and her utter distrust is most meaningfully exemplified by this statement, which also summarizes some of the most delicate issues here discussed: «I have never trusted men who pray. Women have no option, of course – but what do men think about when they are on their knees?»³⁹.

And when it comes to Veronica's most precious man, it is clear that for him, too, religion is emptied of all spiritual consistency. His sister's memories of his religiosity underline how the Catholic tradition only offers him a gallery of merely sketched figures. Among them, he has his own personal

preferences, and seems to favour some over others for reasons that would be more appropriate for cartoon characters, or comic strips:

Liam liked St Catherine of Siena, the sore-licker. He also liked three Roman saints with funny names who were turned upside down and had milk and mustard put up their noses, which killed them, apparently⁴⁰.

If there once was an order in the world, an order which was founded on two solid institutions called 'family' and 'church', today it is disrupted and, to Veronica's eyes, all is left at the mercy of destructive and uncontrolled sexual impulses. There is indeed a predominance of sexual imagery throughout the book, mostly negatively connoted and usually associated with dirt, sickness and perversion. One of the many examples of Veronica's obsessive insistence on sex, which she seems to see everywhere, is her train journey to Brighton, in which she appears incapable to think of anything but the erection of the man sitting beside her:

The man beside me on the train to Brighton lifts his pelvis slightly, and settles it back down. He is dozing in the flickering, sexual sunlight, lulled and unsettled by the movement of the train. I can sense the blood pooling in his lap; the thick oblong of his penis moving down the leg of his suit. [...] Such small things to have such large consequences⁴¹.

Another example could be the way she describes her sexual intercourse with her husband: «I lay there with one leg on either side of his dancing, country-boy hips and I did not feel alive. I felt like a chicken when it is quartered»⁴², or these considerations which precede Veronica's imagined passion between Ada and Lambert:

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 sadism: they are a way of fighting our way out of all this meat [...] 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 tight⁴³.

It is undeniable that a book like *The Gathering* is displeasing and extremely bleak, but there were no other colours for Enright to choose from to frame a particular moment of personal and social collapse, or, as Veronica puts it, of «drowning». The weight under which things are drowning is that of shame («This is what shame does. This is the anatomy and mechanism of a family – a whole fucking country – drowning in shame»⁴⁴), but if it is true that the elaboration of trauma necessarily entails the reworking of identity, it is also true that the first step towards it resides in the act of narration. This is where

the healing process begins, in the act of storytelling, in coming to terms with the overwhelming burden of the shame Veronica is referring to. She has done so by finally telling her own family's story, however partial and fragmented it may be; the same process has begun on a larger scale, since in the last few years the most disturbing aspects of a wider story have been publicly exposed. The path on which to start this new journey may not be clearly traced yet, but the open discussion that is possible today on this uncomfortable subject proves that the spell of paralysis has nonetheless been broken. As readers and 'spectators', we can only wait and see which new chapter of the moral history of Ireland will be written by 'tomorrow's Veronicas'.

Endnotes

¹ A. Kennedy, *The Din Within*, «The Guardian», April 2007, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr/28/featuresreviews.guardianreview17>> (04/2010).

² M. Upchurch, *Whew – This Gathering Gets Ugly Fast*, «Seattle Times», February 2008, <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/books/2004169757_enright10.html> (04/2010).

³ R. Welch (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, Oxford UP, Oxford 1996, p. 159.

⁴ A. Enright, *The Gathering*, Jonathan Cape, London 2007, p. 1.

⁵ W.C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1961.

⁶ A. Enright, *The Gathering*, cit., pp. 135-140.

⁷ This is an option that the reader might indeed take into consideration, since there is a vein of madness in the Hegarty family, evoked through the references to Uncle Brendan.

⁸ All the Hegartys do drink (just never together), Liam was indeed an alcoholic and Veronica is undergoing a phase of inconsiderate drinking herself.

⁹ A. Enright, *The Gathering*, cit., p. 13.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 101.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 142.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Ivi, p. 144.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ «There were eleven months between me and Liam. We came out of her on each other's tails; one after the other, as fast as a gang-bang, as fast as an infidelity. Sometimes I think we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside». Ivi, p. 11.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 53.

¹⁷ D.L. Schacter, *Alla ricerca della memoria. Il cervello, la mente, e il passato*, trad. it. di C. Mennella, Einaudi, Torino 2001, p. 25 (or. ed. D.L. Schacter, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind and the Past*, Basic Books, New York 1996).

¹⁸ C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience – Trauma, Narrative, and History*, The Johns Hopkins UP, Baltimore 1996, p. 1.

¹⁹ Ivi, pp. 3-4.

²⁰ A. Enright, *The Gathering*, cit., pp. 172-173.

²¹ M. Lewis, *Time to face up to facts of sexual abuse of children*, «The Irish Times», September 9th 2008, p. 14, <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2008/0917/1221599424035.html>> (09/2010).

²² T. Hundley, *How Catholicism fell from grace in Ireland*, «Chicago Tribune», July 2006, p. 1, <www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-0607090342jul09,0,3397459.story> (04/2010).

²³ *Ibidem.*

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ J. Ranelagh O'Beirne, *A Short History of Ireland*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 1983, pp. 229-230.

²⁶ M. Lewis, cit., <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/opinion/2008/0917/1221599424035.html>> (10/2010).

²⁷ H.M. McGee *et al.*, *The SAVI Report. Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland*, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Dublin 2002, <http://www.drcc.ie/about/SAVI_Report.pdf> (04/2010).

²⁸ R. Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma - Slavery and the formation of African American Identity*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2001, pp. 1-2.

²⁹ A. Enright, *The Gathering*, cit., pp. 7-8.

³⁰ For instance, see p. 5.

³¹ Ivi, p. 243.

³² Ivi, p. 25.

³³ Ivi, pp. 179-180.

³⁴ Ivi, p. 79.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 28.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 64.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 128.

³⁸ Ivi, p. 130.

³⁹ Ivi, pp. 65-66.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 131.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 52.

⁴² Ivi, p. 40.

⁴³ Ivi, p. 140.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 168.

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