Beyond the Comfort Zone: Narrating Child Abuse in Joyce, McCabe and Enright

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Child Abuse and the Loss of Moral Credit

A wave of disclosures about sexual child abuse in religious and educational institutions has swept western countries in the past two decades. In Ireland, disclosures and allegations led to the establishment of a "Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse in Ireland" which began its work in 1999 and published its report, known as the Ryan Report, ten years later, in 2009 (cf. Commission to Enquire into Child Abuse). Sexual abuse, it turned out, had been practiced for decades in charitable and educational institutions run by the Irish Catholic Church, and it had been tolerated, if not condoned by Church authorities, who had often tended to protect the abusers rather than the victims. Abuse appeared to have been systemic. So did its toleration which aimed at preventing scandal by silencing the victims rather than by punishing the crimes and seeking to prevent them from continuing.

The reversal of this situation was a phenomenon of the Celtic Tiger years. From the early 1990s, Ireland began to turn away from the moral ascendancy of the Roman Catholic Church in many areas of social and sexual morality, including divorce, contraception, and same-sex relationships. During the same period, the media coverage of these topics, and the extensive media presence of voices critical of the previous social dominance of the Catholic Church contributed to rapid revisions in the established patterns of 'Irishness' (on these changes see, e.g., Smyth; also O'Toole, "Arrogant").

Irish fiction, too, participated in these revisions, as it made its contributions to a narrative reassessment of 'Irish identity' in the Celtic Tiger years. The scope of this reassessment addressed a wide range of aspects of Irish self-definition. Hugo Hamilton's *Sad Bastard* (1998), for instance, engages with the reversal of the traditional Irish self-image as an emigrant nation by focusing on the phenomenon of illegal economic immigration to and immigrants in Ireland. As part of this concern, novelists gave new force to a narrative tradition of critical accounts of Irish society and Irish life among whose prominent early twentieth-century representatives were, for example, James Joyce's *Dubliners* for urban settings, or Brinsley McNamara's *The Valley of Squinting Windows* for provincial (rural and small town) society. In contrast to those predecessors, novelists now embraced the new publicity given to the themes and practices that had long been taboo, and the new explicitness that had become possible. Patrick McCabe for example, adopted in *The Butcher Boy* (1992) as well as in later novels a narrative language and style whose explicitness celebrated the breach with public decorum. Other novels offered explicit treatments of taboo topics such as

same-sex desire and AIDS – as in Colm Tóibín's *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) – or child abuse – as in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007).

Referencing the many narratives told from a child's point of view in contemporary Irish fiction as well as in the Irish literary tradition, Fintan O'Toole has suggested in an article entitled "Why Irish Writers Don't Grow out of Adolescence" (2010) that "youth" might be "the comfort zone of Irish fiction". The novels I have just referred to display a slight, but significant difference in narrative perspective. For one thing, they represent adult characters living in 1990s Ireland who are looking back at the Ireland of their childhood, savouring the contrast or seeking to escape from the suffering which the events and situations of their childhood continued to cause them. In addition, they all describe youth as decidedly a situation of discomfort. This essay will seek to throw some spotlights on the narrative treatment of sexual child abuse in recent Irish fiction by picking two prominent novels which display what might come to be understood as characteristic forms for the representation of child abuse, and above all for the fictional functions which these representations are made to perform. Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992), published at the beginning of the period, is arguably something of an inaugural novel, a narrative pioneering the new and explicit narrative style characteristic for the Celtic Tiger years. Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) appeared – and achieved high literary fame not least as the winner of the *Man Booker Prize* – towards the end of those years of affluence and social re-imagination. For the sake of contrast and comparison, however, I will begin with a brief analysis of the representation of child abuse – or rather of suggestions of child abuse – in one of the classics in the Irish literary tradition, James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914).

Suggestions of Child Abuse in Joyce's *Dubliners*, with a Brief Excursion into the 'Theory' of Child Abuse

"The Sisters" is the opening story of Joyce's *Dubliners*. Its opening paragraph, with its brooding meditation on the word "paralysis", is generally understood to have programmatic significance for the reading of the work as a whole. As applied to the old priest – whose death is the central event with which the youthful narrator has to deal in his own mind, and in the face of a clearly perceived absence of any moral guidance from his adult environment – paralysis suggests a physical incapacity which stands in a vaguely hinted but never explicitly stated connection with the priest's potential past failures in his theological role, and possibly even with the effects of past sexual misconduct (cf. Gifford 29). As applied to the entire set of characters of the story, and by extension of the entire collection, paralysis serves as a metaphor for the condition of Joyce's Dublin and its inhabitants, for the mental limitation and moral vacuity of contemporary Dublin society which Joyce sought to depict.

At the same time, confusion appears as a central thematic element of the story. The narrator, indeed, declares that the old priest "had taught [him] a great deal" (6), but clearly a part of this teaching consists in an initiation into the confusion caused by theo-

logical complexities from which the old priest himself evidently suffered. “Sometimes he had amused himself by putting difficult questions to me”, the narrator states, “asking me what one should do in certain circumstances or whether such and such sins were mortal or venial or only imperfections” (6-7). Father Flynn then enjoys and savours the resulting confusion of the boy: “Often […] I could make no answer or only a very foolish and halting one upon which he used to smile and nod his head twice or thrice” (7).

A second source of confusion is the resolute refusal on the part of the other adults in the story ever to speak explicitly and directly about any points at issue: “No I wouldn’t say he was exactly …… but there was something queer ….. there was something uncanny about him. I’ll tell you my opinion. …” (3-4), promises Old Cotter, the character who carries the news of the priest’s death to the boy’s home. Instead of doing so, however, he continues: “I have my own theory about it, he said. I think it was one of those … peculiar cases. … But it’s hard to say. …” (4). In the next sentence the narrator goes on to point out that Old Cotter “began to puff again at his pipe without giving us his theory” (4).

These silences in “The Sisters”, signified as much by the lacunae in the characters’ discourse as by the typographical means of series of dots of various lengths, are among the famous aspects of the story and have been frequently discussed by critics (e.g. Bremen; Wohlpart; Chadwick). In the present context, the aspect which I wish to highlight is their effect of generating a corresponding confusion in the boy. As he lies in bed the same evening, he records that he “puzzled [his] head to extract meaning from [Old Cotter’s] unfinished sentences” (5). Equally confusing to the boy is his own varied emotional response to the priest and his death. The following morning, the boy discovers almost to his surprise, “in [him]self a sensation of freedom as if I had been freed from something by his death” (6). But as he had tried to go to sleep the night before, puzzling over Old Cotter’s unfinished sentences,

> [...] I imagined that I saw again the heavy grey face of the paralytic. […] It murmured and I understood that it desired to confess something. I felt my soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region and there again I found it waiting for me. It began to confess to me in a murmuring voice and I wondered why it smiled continually and why the lips were so moist with spittle. But then I remembered that it had died of paralysis and I felt that I too was smiling feebly […] (5)

The currents of anxiety, desire, and perhaps also of transgression and guilt, which are running between the priest and the boy in this dream passage are hard to untangle. The imperfect memory of the dream, to which the narrative returns a little later, adds further elements of exotic and perhaps erotic suggestiveness (“[...] I had noticed long velvet curtains and a swinging lamp of antique fashion. I felt that I have been very far away, in some land where the customs were strange, in Persia […]” [7]).

But does any of this indicate the presence of sexual overtones to the relationship between Father Flynn and the boy? As one of the dead priest’s sisters points out at the wake with which the story closes, “his life was […] crossed” (11) in consequence of a pivotal event in the past, involving a broken chalice and an altar boy:

> – It was that chalice he broke. … That was what was the beginning of it. Of course, they say it was all right, that it contained nothing, I mean. But still ……. They say it was the boy's fault. But poor James was so nervous, God be merciful to him! (11)

Roundabout descriptions such as these hardly amount to a consistent suggestion of sexual abuse. If anything, the suggestions of the potential sinfulness of the priest's paralysis, his enjoyment of the boy's confusion, and above all the boy's own confused sense of a connection between his "soul receding into some pleasant and vicious region" (5) and "the heavy grey face of the paralytic" (5) which he finds waiting there, might be taken as indirect evidence. Paradoxically, the most clearly suggestive statements might be Old Cotter's declarations that the priest might have been "one of those … peculiar cases" and the characteristically unformulated "idea" he adds to this: "let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age and not be …. Am I right, Jack?" (4) Arguably, it is this unfinished sentence which provides the clearest, though still unspecified insinuation of a potential of abuse.

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A brief excursion into the 'theory' – and more specifically, the 'epistemology' – of child abuse might help put these findings and these difficulties into context. Ian Hacking has pointed out in "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse" (1991) that the term "child abuse" itself has emerged fairly recently and that the notions of what constitutes abuse have shifted considerably over a very short period of time. The term itself attained currency – as well as the status of a formalised medical diagnosis – in the 1960s. Its scope, Hacking points out, shifted from a fairly limited and explicit definition based on physical violence against children, to conceptions that include any conditions which have a tendency to impair a child's development. Sexual abuse was explicitly included in the definition during the 1970s, by which time, as Hacking adds on a highly critical note, medical discourse had taken control of "child abuse", and made sure that all discussion about causes and consequences of child abuse must hence be conducted in medical terms.

We can draw the conclusion from this account that to take early twentieth-century fictions and look for the type of representations of "child abuse" with which we have more recently become familiar would carry a strong risk of being an anachronism. At the same time, we may find corroboration of a point which James R. Kincaid has pursued in several studies of "cultures of child molesting" (*The Erotic Child* [1992] and *Erotic Innocence* [1998]) –, whose historical range spans British and American society from the Victorian age to the present. As Kincaid argues, this culture has produced a paradoxical construction of the child – simultaneously eroticising children and constructing them as "pure" and regarding "an erotic response to children not merely as criminal but as criminally unimaginable" (*Erotic Innocence* 21).

Read against the background of Kincaid's thesis, the various and contradictory features in the narrative representation of the relationship between the priest and the boy, and in the attitudes of their environment may come to be seen as aspects of a paradoxical cultural construction of the pure/erotic child. The choice of a child or

young adolescent as narrator in this context would seem capable of two alternative, even opposite constructions. It could show, on the one hand, the frustration of the child who is inescapably caught up in this paradoxical construction and faced with the fraught attitudes of adults which result from this situation – for Old Cotter's unfinished sentences are just as fraught as the old priest's pointless theological instructions. Both may function as masks to an unformulated "criminal" as well as "criminally unimaginable" desire (*Erotic Innocence* 21). But the child narrator might also have the effect of paradoxically corroborating that very construction, since after all the youthful narrator himself confesses an indistinct and guilty desire which finds expression in his incompletely remembered (or should we read: his partly repressed?) dream.

But across these suggestions, there may very well be a more clear-cut purpose connected to Joyce's decision to build the first story in his collection around this topic. As Ian Hacking has stressed, in spite of all epistemological uncertainty, the issue is capable of the most clear-cut and unequivocal moral construction: "Child abuse, in our current reckoning, is the worst of private evils. We want to put a stop to it. […] we must protect as many children as we can […] Anyone who feels differently is already a monster" (Hacking 253). There is, in other words, hardly a more effective means in order to achieve moral discrediting. A person, an institution, a society that would tolerate child abuse, loses all claim to moral credibility.

In this way, the several features which I have evoked in my initial reading of the story – the theme of paralysis, and the incapacity for clear speech and clear moral thinking – unite the adult characters as seen by the youthful narrator of "The Sisters". Characters as opposed to each other as Father Flynn and Old Cotter add up to form a society incapable of addressing adequately an issue of this magnitude. The suggestion of child abuse functions as a powerful device for destroying the moral credit, or revealing the moral bankruptcy of the society Joyce is describing.

In order to underline this point, it is worth turning briefly to the subsequent story, "An Encounter" before leaving *Dubliners.* Another youthful narrator and his friend set off to the other side of the River Liffey seeking adventure. On a field, they meet with an enigmatic stranger, who sits down with them and begins questioning them and telling them about what he thought boys should be doing with their sweethearts.

> After a long while his monologue paused. He stood up slowly, saying that he had to leave us for a minute or so, a few minutes, and, without changing the direction of my gaze, I saw him walking slowly away from us towards the near end of the field. We remained silent when he had gone. After a silence of a few minutes I heard Mahoney exclaim:
> --I say! Look what he's doing!
> As I neither answered nor raised my eyes Mahoney exclaimed again:
> --I say ..... He's a queer old josser!" (19)

Of course we do not know what precisely the "queer old josser" is doing. The narrator-focaliser does not "raise his eyes". Gifford's *Joyce Annotated* also remains silent on this point. But the fact is that, in repetitive language and a voice of varying expression, "slowly circling round and round in the same orbit" (18), the stranger had been

telling the boys what he thought young boys and their sweethearts should be allowed to do together. When he comes back, he speaks equally obsessively about the necessity of frequent corporal punishment:

> He said that if ever he found a boy talking to girls or having a girl for a sweetheart he would whip him and whip him […]. He said that there was nothing in this world he would like so well as that. He described to me how he would whip such a boy as if he were unfolding some elaborate mystery. (19-20)

The encounter with the stranger resembles the situation we have found in "The Sisters" in several ways. Firstly, there is the boy narrator's confused participation, his sense of being more vulnerable than other, more active and sportive boys. Secondly, the adults' contradictory attitude reoccurs. They eroticise, assert and enforce "purity" and, in addition, eroticise the violence ostensibly intended to enforce "purity". Thirdly, the boys' experience is not contextualised. It has no meaningful unambiguous place in the universe of explicit social meanings of Dublin. Nothing in his experience has prepared the boy of Joyce's second story in *Dubliners* for this encounter with the "queer old josser". But this very fact functions as an effective condemnation of Dublin society. The picture which thus emerges is essentially similar to "The Sisters" where, as I have suggested, an effect of moral condemnation of adult Dublin society was linked to the adults' inability to address the confusions attending the priest's role and the boy's attitude.

In both stories, then, the Dubliners' evident inability to offer any adequate cognitive or moral response to the cognitively and morally blurred suggestions of child abuse with which the stories confront their youthful narrator-protagonists, takes on a condemnatory force with respect to Dublin society. The submerged but pervasive existence of these varieties of child abuse, and the patent discursive and practical inability to address the issue in any meaningful manner, serve as indications of a wider social malaise and are strong interpretive cues in Joyce's desperate narrative portrayal of paralysed Dublin and Dubliners.

Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*: Pronouncing the Open Secret

Francie Brady, the narrator-protagonist of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, has killed the mother of his former schoolfellow Philip Nugent with a "pig bolt machine" (195). Across the imperfectly defined distance of "twenty or thirty or forty years" (1, 214) spent in a mental hospital, where he was confined after this act, he narrates the long and complex sequence of events which prompted him to commit this action. Waiving for the moment the vast difference in the narrative tone chosen, a number of the experiences Francie reports from the reformatory school to which he is sent as an adolescent delinquent after his first, less serious intrusions on the Nugents' household, sound quite like they might have been taken more or less straight from the Ryan Report, the Report for the Committee for Inquiring into Child Abuse in Ireland which was published in 2009.

The Ryan Report offers a pragmatic solution to the difficulty of defining abuse (pointed out by Ian Hacking) by distinguishing between and defining four types of abuse, “physical, sexual, emotional, neglect” (cf. 7.07, 7.109, 7.146 and 7.213) – which may occur singly or in combination – and by quoting from the statements of witnesses / victims for the purpose of illustration. Chapter 7 of the report presents the “Record of Abuse (Male Witnesses)”. For each type of abuse, and for all possible combinations, statistical tables describing the frequency and the categories of perpetrators are offered, and in each case, the types of abuse are subdivided into a range of concrete forms. Sexual abuse, which is defined as: “The use of the child by a person for sexual arousal or sexual gratification of that person or another person” (7.109), is subdivided into its forms and varieties in “Table 23: Forms and Frequency of Sexual Abuse Reported – Male Industrial and Reformatory Schools” (7.117).

As has already been pointed out, in its substance, the experience of sexual abuse which Francie Brady describes in *The Butcher Boy* could be taken straight from that table. There is “inappropriate fondling and contact”, “masturbation of abuser”, “kissing”, and all of this couched in a context of “Grooming and inducements” (7.130). At the same time, there is the presence of the Irish literary tradition. Again, waiving the difference in narrative modes, the preparatory characterisation of Father Sullivan, the abuser, bears a certain similarity to that given of Father Flynn in “The Sisters”.

> They said [Father Sullivan] wasn’t right since he was on the missions. I don’t know what happened some Balubas put him in a pot or something and ever since he’d been walking round with a face on him the colour of stirabout never slept a wink romancing round the corridors at night in his soft shoes all you’d see at the window was this yellow face looking out. (78)

Father Sullivan adopts Francie as an altar boy and begins to spend significant amounts of time with him. In contrast to “The Sisters”, however, in *The Butcher Boy* it is Francie who is feeding the priest theological yarn he is making up as he goes along. “I told [Father Sullivan] I thought Our Lady was talking to me. I read that in a book about this holy Italian boy. […] he said I had unlocked something very precious” (78). Out of these stories the incidence of abuse develops, and Francie records it with the detachment of a character whose true pain and suffering lie elsewhere:

> […] if there was one thing Father Sull loved to hear it was my stories of the saints in the low field. […] I was in the middle of one of these stories when I look up and what’s old Sull doing only smoothing my hair back from my eyes and stroking away at my forehead with his pale cold hand. Look at you, he said, my serving boy. Introibo ad altare dei I said I don’t know why and the next thing what does Sull do only plant this big slobbery wet kiss right on my lips. Then he said please, tell me the story of St Teresa of the Roses again. […] sweatbeads as big as berries popped out on his forehead [...] It wasn’t until the third or fourth time I told this story about the roses that he began the Tiddly Show. I thought it was a great laugh with all the prizes you could win out of it. Are you all right Francis he’d say. Oh I’m grand Father and dropped my eyelids shyly like Our Lady did. Sit up here he said and slapped his knees. So up I went. What does Tiddly do then only take out his mickey and start rubbing it up and down and jogging me on his knee. Then his whole body vibrates and he bends away over I thought he was going to break off in two halves. I’d be in a right fix if that happened. […] But it didn’t happen like that lucky

> enough. Tiddly just crumpled up like a paper bag and lay there hiding his eyes and saying no. I told him not to be worrying his head but he wouldn't come out from behind those hands. Sob sob that was old Sull I mean Tiddly. I read a book while I was waiting for him to come out. […] I was chortling away […] when Tiddly says dear God I'm sorry Francis. I said it was all right have you any fags? […]
> You're my best little girl says Tiddly and went away off spluttering at his desk. (78-80)

Francie manages and manipulates Father Sullivan, treating what he calls "the Tiddly Show" as "a great laugh with all the prizes you could win out of it" (89). He clearly appreciates the benefits that come with the "grooming and inducements" which the inadequate priest has to offer. "I was doing alright in that old school for pigs", he records. Nevertheless, he adds, "Tiddly had to go and fucking spoil it didn't he" (89).

Francie's real pain lies elsewhere. While neither Father Sullivan's pitiable sexual practices nor the role play and cross dressing which he expects Francie to do, are explicitly experienced as abuse or as injury by Francie, the priest's insistent questions about Francie's family and home lead to an escalation in which he suffers grievous bodily harm at the hands of the boy. Francie, it turns out, would do anything to repress the memory of the total inadequacy of his parents – the violence and alcoholism of his father, and above all the neglect and abandonment he suffered from his mother in consequence of her frequent and mostly untreated attacks of mental illness and her ultimate suicide:

> [Father Sullivan] puts his arms around me you've no idea how much I love you Francis he says in the nights I even dream about you. I want to know everything about you. Ten Rolos, says I. Tell me all about yourself. I told him a heap of lies and true stuff mixed in. (90)

The mixture "of lies and true stuff" gets out of control, however, and Francie soon feels he is betraying his own mother by describing to Father Sullivan the nice and friendly house of the Nugents rather than the poor squalor of his own home. As he imagines hearing the cruel taunts Mrs. Nugent is directing at his mother on account of this wish-fulfilling fantasy, Francie loses control and starts beating Father Sullivan relentlessly until he is restrained by four members of staff. Francie's real pain, as it appears, is the consequence of the violence and neglect which characterise his dysfunctional home, and the sense of guilt and betrayal associated with his unfulfillable wish for a caring and loving home.

The effect of the representation of the 'abuse' of Francie Brady in the reformatory school is to give it the status of an open secret. Francie is not in the least surprised that physical violence and involvement with a sexual pervert are the customary features of the institution to which he is sent. His narrative perspective suggests no sense of any violation of religious or moral norms. If anything, the sexual abuser comes to be seen as a both ridiculous and pitiful person. As the quotations have shown, Francie quickly learns to manage Father Sullivan and draws what profit he can from the situation.

This might be construed into the suggestion that *The Butcher Boy* has a tendency to represent the abuse inflicted in church-run institutions as rather harmless. Such a

conclusion, however, can only be drawn at the cost of ignoring the novel's narrative structure. After all, and unmistakeably so, Francie is an unreliable narrator. In addition to his occasional losses of consciousness and his persistent and frequently attested inability to distinguish between events he imagines or hallucinates, and events that are 'real', Francie has a thoroughly "problematic value scheme", another typical characteristic of unreliable narrators (Rimmon-Kenan 100). To cite only the most prominent instance of this, Francie's moral outlook allows him to describe his 'butchering' of Mrs. Nugent, the mother of his old schoolfellow Philip, as the natural and logical consequence of provocations and slights received from her. If Francie therefore is not capable of assessing adequately the scandalous cruelty and injustice of the conditions in the reformatory institution, this does not detract from the severity of the condemnation conveyed by the text. It does, however, raise the question about the factors which were responsible for giving Francie this moral vision.

Francie is in denial of abuse: all circumstances suggest that, whatever mental illness he may be suffering from, he has been subjected to emotional abuse and neglect, which leads him to develop fantasies about having a caring family and loving mother, for which he punishes himself – and any other persons who may be involved in the fantasy.

Even if he himself does not conceptualise the treatment he receives in this church-run educational institution as abusive, the novel makes it evident that Francie suffers multiple types of abuse, which are moreover contingent upon one another. What emerges above all is a tradition of systemic abuse that has created the enabling conditions not only for the abuse in Francie's reformatory school, but in the first place for the breakdown of Francie's family. Before Francie becomes a direct victim of institutional abuse, he has been its victim *once removed*, as it were. Francie's father whose drinking and violence contributed to the depression which led to his mother's suicide, suffers even as an adult from the treatment he received growing up in a Catholic orphanage in Belfast. This becomes apparent, for example, when Francie's father pays an unwelcome surprise visit to the reformatory school:

> Da arrived one day […]. […] the sight of the place put the fear of God in him it reminded him of the Belfast school for pigs. […] His eyes wouldn't settle in his head, they kept darting about. I knew it was the priests looking down at him. They were saying to him: Well, Mr Pig, are *you* back again? […]
> That was […] why he lowered his eyes and reached in his pocket to get a grip of the whiskey bottle he pulled it out helplessly like a child's rattle. (82-83)

As Francie recognises the symptoms of his father's resurging trauma, the reader comes to recognise the conditions which lead Francie's father to behave abusively in his family ("may the curse of Christ light on you this night you bitch the day I took you out of the hole of that shop in Derry was a bitter one for me" [85], Francie quotes his father addressing his mother at one point, for example). Francie and his family suffered, too, by extension, from the oppressive, small-minded and snobbish atmosphere of small-town Ireland in the 1960s – an atmosphere of immense curiosity but devoid of support for a family and a child obviously unable to cope.

Still it would be premature to conclude that Francie suffers greater and more fundamental abuse and neglect in his family – and by extension in the context of the oppressive atmosphere of his small town – and that the subsequent institutional abuse is little more than an incidental addition. The story of Francie's father points to the opposite conclusion: the pervasiveness of institutional abuse has produced the individuals who, like Francie's father, subsequently act out their traumas and traumatise their own family and environment. Rather than mitigating the utterly condemnatory view of these church-run institutions, this realisation compounds their moral discredit by disclosing the degree to which abusive social structures are the correlative, if not the product of these Catholic institutions.

The narrative dynamic in *The Butcher Boy* therefore resembles the phenomenon described by Ian Hacking: the shifting reference of the concept of child abuse and the expansion of the forms and conditions included. In terms of the categories used in the Ryan Report, Francie is subjected not only to sexual abuse but also to physical and emotional abuse as well as to abuse through neglect. And while the novel suggests that the incidence of such abuse in the institutions run by the Catholic Church is no more than what is to be expected, it extends the scope to include all other areas and institutions of provincial Irish society with which Francie is confronted.

At the same time, I suggest that there is a reason why the novel has chosen an unreliable narrator instead of one who might spell out explicitly the conclusion which I have suggested. By allowing Francie to narrate the events as they appeared to him, and as he would wish them to appear, and by constructing Francie as an entertaining and at times highly observant narrator-focaliser, the novel uses the medium of narrative in order to valorise the perspective of the individual, flawed and fraught as it may be, in contradistinction also to the authority which, as Hacking has shown, medical discourse has attained over the topic of abused children. The novel is clearly in sympathy not only with its protagonist, but also with attempts to contest the medical monopoly on the subject, and to remove the topic of abused children from the authority of medical discourse. The novel does not turn Francie's story into a case history. If Francie is an abuse victim who is desperately trying to ignore this reality, the novel asserts his right to do so. The fact that the narration in the novel is consistently tied to Francie gives him the opportunity to establish his alternative truth – a truth not contingent on the socio-medical diagnosis of various types of abuse, but on Francie's needs and desires. After all, Francie was committed to psychiatric care after murdering Mrs. Nugent, and whether he spent "twenty or thirty or forty years" there, the time does not seem to have made any difference to his outlook on himself and his past. At the end of his story, on the final pages of the novel, while we see Francie treating the doctor quite like he formerly treated the priests, he seems to find (or to hallucinate) a friend with whom he can continue to live his own version of his identity – one that cannot be translated into the terms of institutions, be they religious, legal or medical. As Francie walks away, with his friend, into an unspecified alternative version of himself, "him with his bony

arse clicking and me with the tears streaming down my face" (215), he even defies the benevolently concerned and comprehending reader to follow him.

Gathering the Evidence, Gathering Oneself: Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

Veronica, the narrator-protagonist in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007), may be said to set up her own one-person commission to enquire into child abuse. In contrast to the Ryan commission, however, she does not hear any witnesses. In fact, she herself is – most likely – a witness rather than the immediate victim of the abuse. All the evidence she has to review, apart from her own unreliable memory, is "rent books" covering the period from 1937 to 1975 in which her grandmother recorded the payments and correspondence relating to her landlord, Lambert Nugent (217).

At 39, Veronica is deeply disturbed by the situation in her family, both her own new family and her original family. She feels unable to answer to the responsibilities demanded by her husband Tom and her two children. She is troubled by the self-effacing absence of her mother, the idiosyncrasies and lack of communication with her numerous brothers and sisters, the secrets. Above all, she is deeply troubled by the recent suicide – well prepared and planned, as it turns out – of her brother Liam who drowned himself in the sea at Brighton at the age of 40. While Liam spent most of his adult life in England and returned to Dublin only for rare visits, he was her closest ally during their childhood and adolescence.

In spite of this long youthful closeness, however, they never referred to the issue to which Veronica now gives decisive significance as the cause of Liam's suicide and which she seems unable to address directly until well into the second half of the novel. What precisely happened between Liam and a regular family visitor at her grandmother Ada's house where they were staying for a lengthy period when they were aged eight and nine years respectively?

Up to this point in the novel, Veronica has been attending to the practical business of bringing Liam's body home and making arrangements for the funeral and wake – the "gathering" of her large family which is described in chapters 30 and 31. After the wake, as the reader already knows because the narration is not chronological, Veronica is wholly preoccupied with trying to remember, reconstruct or imagine the vital events in the family past, and wholly unable to fulfil either her role as a mother or continue to answer Tom's sexual needs. Instead, she sleeps during the day and stays up at night, drinking, writing, sometimes wandering through the house or driving around the streets.

Veronica goes about her self-set task in a rather roundabout fashion. Her earliest effort in reconstruction is in fact characterised by herself as an elaborate "romantic" fantasy (13). Her goal is to "tell Liam's story" by constructing the relationship between her grandmother Ada Spillane, and Lambert Nugent, who Veronica thinks had been a friend of her grandfather's and had been drawn to her grandmother by a deep and unfulfilled love which continued over decades. It takes Veronica until chapter 22 to realise that romantic reconstruction is not leading anywhere, and to remember, or at

least to write down, the situation she witnessed: "It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was eight and Liam was barely nine", she declares, and proceeds to narrate as follows:

> There was a terrible boredom about the house […] 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 Nugent. […] They were not one thing, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew, Mr Nugent and Liam. (143-144)

Methodically, Veronica goes on to consider what she can gather about the subjectivities of both participants. She does remain highly distrustful of the accuracy of her own memory:

> […] Mr Nugent is leaning back slightly, his hands are set square on either knee. I think it may be a false memory, because there is a terrible tangle of things that I have to fight through to get to it, in my head. And also because it is unbearable. […]
> I don't know why his pleasure should be the most terrible thing in the room for me. […] It is the struggle on Lamb Nugent's face that is unbearable, between the man who does not approve of this pleasure, and the one who is weak to it. (144)

Liam's subjectivity remains even more inaccessible, although Veronica tries:

> There is also the pleasure of the boy to consider. There is also the question of who he hated, or who he loved. […]
> He was terrified.
> And before the scene became clear to me, I remember thinking, *So that's what the secret is*. The thing in a man's trousers – this is what it does when he is angry; it grows into the shape of a miserable child. (145-146)

It is only after these musings that Veronica's own presence registers:

> I think, often, of Nugent looking at me when he realises I am at the door. The boy's hand (surely it was moving) has stopped, and Nugent, leaning back from his difficult pleasure, takes a moment to notice this. […]
> 'Would you ever get out of that,' he says, and when Liam takes his poor hand out of the man's flies I feel that I have spoiled it for all concerned. (146)

With this realisation comes also a reversion to Veronica's own perspective – "I closed the door and ran […] upstairs" (146) – which is, remarkably, referred and mediated instantly through the perspective of her daughters: "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" (147). At first sight then, the representation of sexual abuse in *The Gathering* has a tantalising aspect. The revelation which has been long anticipated and long deferred turns out to be unreliable, and is taken back in all essential aspects almost as soon as it is made.

The experience of child abuse, and the memory of it, are ultimately unavailable. The 'abuse' of Liam is never narrated or reflected from Liam's perspective. The link between Liam's recent suicide and the childhood incidence of abuse is entirely of the narrator's construction. No other facts about the frequency or circumstances of this sexual contact become known, no causality or connection is established or suggested.

Instead, what happens is that the clearly stated memories of Veronica are becoming doubtful and partly displaced by others, whose claim to factual accuracy is equally tenuous (cf. Schwall 595-596). "I remembered a picture", Veronica records ten chapters later:

> It is a picture in my head of Ada standing at the door of the good room […]
> I am eight.
> […] 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 very 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. […]
> 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. (221-222)

Seen purely in terms of writing and rewriting, Veronica is rewriting the abuse scene, this time with herself as the victim and her grandmother as the – none too sympathetic – witness. And a further rewriting shifts the setting from the "good room" of her grandmother's house to the garage:

> Whatever happened to Liam did not take place in Ada's good room – no matter what picture I have in my head. Nugent would not have been so stupid. The abuse happened in the garage, among the cars and bits of engine that Liam loved. And Nugent was horrible to my brother in ordinary ways, too, out there. (223)

Of course, in the fictional world narrated by Veronica, these scenes are intended to be more than rewritings. They are meant to be accurate representations of scenes, events and actions remembered. But the more Veronica tries to reassure herself by stating what is certain and what is doubtful, the less she is able to hold the two categories apart. This becomes clear when she tries to state "the things that I do, actually know" and finds that certainty gives way to probability: "I know that my brother Liam was sexually abused by Lambert Nugent. Or was probably sexually abused by Lambert Nugent" (224). It becomes clear, too, when she reviews "the things I don't know", which list includes the possibility "that I was touched by Lambert Nugent" and leads to a striking realisation:

> In short, I know nothing else about Lambert Nugent; who he was and how Ada met him; what he did, or did not do.
> I know he could be the explanation for all of our lives, and I know something more frightening still – that we did not need to be damaged by him in order to be damaged. (224)

With this final realisation – "that we did not need to be damaged by him in order to be damaged" – the novel offers a 'symptomatic' perspective on child abuse. As in *The Butcher Boy* it is the overall conditions under which these children are growing up,

which are damaging to them. It may not then be possible to reconstruct the detailed facts of the abuse that occurred, or indeed the forms and channels through which traditions of abuse are handed on and continued in families, but the damaging effect of having grown up under such conditions is unmistakeable. This declaration of her ultimate ignorance of matters to whose recovery she had before attributed maximum explanatory power allows Veronica to let go of her self-chosen project of recovering the lost or repressed memory of Liam's sexual abuse. While it still seemed that this information was irrecoverable but all important, she had decided to leave her old life behind, she had flown to Gatwick with the intention of travelling on to Paris or Spain. In the last chapter – whose number, 39, matches her age – she realises that there is nothing to run away from: "I do not want a different destiny from the one that has brought me here", she decides, "I do not want a different life. I just want to be able to live it, that's all" (260).

What are we to make of Veronica's decision to abandon the project which has occupied her for so much of the book, and for so many months, and to return to the life, the husband and the family, which she had declared she could no longer bear?

Perhaps the best way to understand this move is by way of looking at the motives which lead Veronica to undertake her project in the first place. There appears to be a twofold, and not entirely congruent, motivation behind Veronica's intense preoccupation with what happened to Liam. On the one hand, there is her sense of guilt for abandoning her favourite brother. But on the other hand, and equally decisive, there is the public and media attention which the topic of child abuse has received in the 1990s.

> […] the look in Liam's eye was the look of someone who knows they are alone. Because the world will never know what has happened to you, and what you carry round as a result of it. Even your sister – your saviour in a way, the girl who stands in the light of the hall – even she does not hold or remember the thing she saw. Because, by that stage, I think I had forgotten entirely.
> 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. (172-173)

In relation to *The Butcher Boy*, *The Gathering* thus corresponds to a later phase of the discursive history of child abuse in Ireland. While McCabe's novel anticipates – one might almost say: inaugurates – the new and open public debate about the pervasiveness of sexual abuse in Catholic institutions, by treating the issue as self-evident, as 'only to be expected', *The Gathering* is set against the background of a pervasive media presence of the topic. This media presence combines with the protagonist's belated sense of guilt for leaving her brother alone with his painful experience. At the same time, however, Veronica's effort to recover the memory of the abuse that happened proves ultimately ineffectual. The protagonist saves herself in the end not by remembering clearly, speaking out loudly and putting things right, but