TRAUMA AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH FICTION: SEAMUS DEANE'S *READING IN THE DARK* AND ANNE ENRIGHT'S *THE GATHERING*

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Introduction

"Narrating Ireland" is an interesting concept as it raises two rather fundamental questions. What does it mean to narrate, and how do we define "Ireland"? Let us start with the latter question.

According to Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, Ireland makes itself out of metamorphosing attitudes toward "family, religion, and politics, that triple nerve center of so much Irish literature" (133). It is arguable that those three elements are the nerve centre of any culture, but Eóin Flannery specifies: Among the "issues pertaining to the 'Irish nation'" he names "the 'Irish family', Catholic morality, […] repression of sexuality, the Northern 'Troubles', and the disparities and tensions of rural life versus urban living" (6), and he adds "read[ing] Irish fiction since the 1960s" (6) will show lots of "Irish protagonists, who battle daily with the baleful constants of religion, nationalism and the family" (9). Maybe in Ireland the forces of church and state interlock more than elsewhere, or used to, as the 1937 Constitution stipulated, which means that both these forces bore down with even greater oppressive strength on (nuclear) families. Be that as it may, "Irish" is usually connected with a history of catastrophes, with failed revolutions against the coloniser, the Famine, internal conflicts on the pursuit for Home Rule, the War of Independence, the Civil War, the Split with the North, mass emigration, unemployment, state and church abusing citizens. So somehow "Irish" and "trauma" seem to be as chiastically entwined as the institutions of church and state are. And this is not only true for Irish history, but also for contemporary Ireland.

As Carla Power remarks in *Irish Literature since 1990*, "[t]hanks to the boom, Ireland has awoken from its nightmare, and instead of escaping it, the Irish are increasingly willing to explore it" (qtd. in Brewster 25). Indeed there are a great many "Irish trauma novels" since 1990. We could distinguish three groups here. The first and biggest group treats the impact of politics. All of Glenn Patterson's novels deal with the Troubles, especially *The International* (1999), where, like in Deirdre Madden's *One By One in the Darkness* (1997), people mourn a murdered friend or father; Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Man* (1998) brings "a new rawness" into Troubles fiction (Parker 4), while Robert McLiam Wilson contextualises a severe bombing in *Eureka Street* (1996) in ways which mix realism and humour. Other contemporary novelists deal with political violence in pre-republican Ireland, like Eugene McCabe's *Death and Nightingales* (1992), Neil Jordan's *Sunrise With Sea Monster* (1994) and at least

two of Sebastian Barry's novels: *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and *A Long, Long Way* (2005) which focuses on an Irish soldier's experiences of World War I and his bewilderment with the Easter 1916 split. A second group of novels treats sexual abuse, like Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm* (1991), Edna O'Brien's *Down By the River* (1996, inspired by the X case) and Patrick McCabe's *Winterwood* (2006). The latest novel of this kind, Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010), seems to introduce a new kind of nuance; inspired by the Fritzl case, it stresses the resilience of a girl who, imprisoned by her kidnapper, survives years of sexual abuse thanks to her friendly communication with her son. The third and biggest group of "trauma novels" focuses on families which are dysfunctional due to incest, drunken fathers (as in Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* [1992] and Claire Keegan's novella *Foster* [2010]), mothers who oppress their children with their emotionality (*The Butcher Boy*) or with their severity (William Trevor's *Love and Summer* [2009]). Some novels of this category stress the hardships of family life with alcoholism, but in Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and its sequel *Paula Spencer* (2006), it is the protagonist's resilience which is foregrounded, when we see how Paula's narratives (interior monologue but also conversations with her sisters) help her to come to terms with the traumas that have plagued the family over three generations.

Yet since Mary Robinson the concept of "Ireland" and Irishness has opened up considerably, and people like Colum McCann live up to the former president's observation that "Irish communities abroad will show […] the fascinating diversity of culture and choice which looks back at us" (qtd. in Brewster 32). In his (US National Book Award for Fiction winning) novel *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) McCann depicts a kind of Bloomsday in New York, a pre-9/11 world in which Irish and Hispanic, black and white, poor and rich figures try to come to terms with trauma. It is a novel which shows a clash of cultures between New Yorkers, while Irish priests and black prostitutes are linked by Catholicism and Islamic poetry. Another "more global" scene is offered in Roddy Doyle's short stories, *The Deportees* (2007), in which "New Boy" stages an African boy who is traumatised by the violence in his home country, but confronted with another type of violence in Irish schools. In these stories, written for the multicultural paper *Metro Eireann*, published by two Nigerian journalists living in Dublin, Doyle illustrates what Anne Fogarty calls "the enduring relevance of the 'national' as a context that can furnish sites of cultural debate between the local and the global" (Flannery 7).

However, what is most important in the context of trauma fiction is that the writer empathises with the conflicts he describes. So William Trevor feels "Irish absolutely to the last vein in my body" in that he wants to write about Ireland as it is "the country you feel strongest about, the country that you actually love" (Core 3). Yet his empathy is only his way to get to the human psyche: "What is important is to take Irish provincialism – which is what I happen to know about because it's what I come from – and to make it universal" (Stout 123).

This metamorphosis of deeply felt Irishness into universal experiences leads us to our second question, that of narrative. Narrative is a skill of conjuring up a world with particulars, like the social and emotional aspects of time and space which constitute the protagonists' perception of their world. This is done with lexical choices, grammatical and suprasyntactic means, with omens and flashbacks, symbols and *mise en abyme*, with degrees of focalisation and with a host of other narrative techniques. Here we will focus on how trauma can be narrated – and can only be narrated, never "stated", as trauma is not a delineated fact. It is merely, at best, a catching up, an assimilation of a past. The best definition of trauma is still the one offered by Cathy Caruth in her seminal work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*: "The pathology consists, rather, 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" ("Trauma" 4-5; original emphasis). So essentially trauma has two main aspects: first, the traumatised subject is in an in-between position, between a first moment when the protagonist could not take in the catastrophe that took place and a second moment which triggers the energies which were stored in the person's unconscious since the overwhelming event. Because trauma breaks out only after it is triggered by a second event it has the character of what Robert Eaglestone calls "afterwardness" (in the title of his plenary lecture for the Fourth International BAAHE Conference at University College Brussels in 2011). Second, the traumatised person is possessed, which means that s/he is entirely passive to its negative energy which is repetitive: the trauma repeats itself at will. Therefore we find master narrators at the opposite end of the spectrum: this is the position of persons who hone their skills to form a world of emotions rather than to be formed by them, and in this sense "narrating trauma" seems a contradiction in terms. Freud too considers trauma and narrative as each other's opposite, as trauma is a matter of compulsive repeating while narrating is a kind of playful, explorative remembering: "'repeating' [is] the pathological re-enactment of a repressed trauma that cannot be remembered and so acknowledged" (qtd. in Alexander 281). In trauma, there is no distance, no consciousness. As Marita Sturken observes,

> the traumatic event is not initially remembered or represented but is held at bay by dissociation and reenacted without remembering. It is narrative integration that produces the memory of the traumatic event. It is when they become full-blown narratives that these memories tell stories of blame and guilt. (qtd. in Harte 191)

In other words one could say that the traumatised person only literally re-members, in the body, as the trauma is still like a live wire that sends out charged images which directly affect the members of one's body. Only when the subject can start to word, name, or objectify the emotions can s/he handle them, situate and interiorise them, which leads to figurative remembering.

But narrative does not only allow the traumatised subject to distance himself, to take a stance in relation to the events that affected him, it can also show a way forward by

offering models of empathy. Narrative fiction is a hand outstretched from a human world that is non-threatening: it is a playground on which one can choose to identify, pick up a role, and play, to refuse to do so and just watch, or simply to walk away. Moreover, the fact that good fiction offers simultaneously precision and indirectness corresponds to the needs of the traumatised person. "Philosophical and artistic works are […] capable of furnishing some extra, because *indirect*, insights into the enigma of horror", Richard Kearney observes; the artist and writer can provide a way to face horrifying things "by virtue of style, genre and language", which is absent in "the all-too-naturalistic stance of most entertainment and mass media" (qtd. in Flannery 202). Imagination is a key factor as it feeds the faculty of empathy, said Ian McEwan in a comment on 9/11, which accounts for "the privileged position of writers as respondents to scenes of immense trauma" (Flannery 204). Yet Flannery adds another asset of fiction: "physical and symbolical assaults" are "moments that required not only explanation but redemption, and literature was a cultural medium through which such redemption could, potentially, be found" (Flannery 201).

The term *redemption* leads us to more moral ground, and here too empathy is an important "tool". In order to try to identify with co-sufferers or even perpetrators, one needs to contextualise and go into particulars, which is exactly what novelists do. "Stories singularize suffering against the anonymity of evil", says Kearney (qtd. in Alexander 280). Many novels describe traumatising events, but others re-enact more specifically the ways in which the protagonist comes to terms with his or her traumas. As we see this form of trauma novel become more popular, we will discuss two of them in this article. In both, the protagonists take recourse to what Suzette Henke calls "scriptotherapy, writing through the traumatic experience which is a therapeutic re-enactment" (qtd. in Harte 190). "Because the body cannot be thought separately from the social formation, symbolic topography and the constitution of the subject" (Harte 192) we will have to look at the speech patterns, the cultural and family patterns that protagonists pick up, and see how their "scriptotherapy" develops, as they use body and thing language, images and words. Thereby we will give special attention to what Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart call "mental constructs": patterns which are part and parcel of the subject's cultural discourse which turn out to help, support, structure, the welter of emotions that are triggered by a trauma. "Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experience, which need to be integrated with *existing mental schemes*, and be transformed into narrative language" (van der Kolk & van der Hart 176, my emphasis).

In this article I want to discuss Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) and Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007). The fact that both novels were (near-)winners of the Booker Prize indicates that their trauma narratives appealed to a wide and demanding audience. Both deal with a trauma in the family caused by the politics of religion, the first in Northern Ireland, the second in the Republic. Both protagonists realise that some members of their family suffer from an "afterwardness" in a conflict that is transgenerational: Deane's story starts in the 1940s but originates in 1922,

Enright's is set in the Tiger years but it goes back to the 1960s and further to the 1930s. Both protagonists are very aware of the subjectivity of their culture's narratives, and sense how traumas have sedimented into invisibility in the Catholic and Protestant patterns of talk and action; and though both are curious and cautious in their reading of the dark passages of their interlocutors, they fall prey to the dangers of an overzealous empathy. In this sense their own subjectivity perfectly illustrates Soshana Felman's observation that the German word for witness, *Zeuge*, does not only mean "witness" but also "creator", the one who begets something through speech (Felman 24). Both Deane's unnamed protagonist and Enright's Veronica state several times that "the birth of knowledge through the testimonial process" is a performative business (Felman 25). A traumatised person can only be cured if she can start to *play* with versions: if she finds her way back to the "capacity to elide or distort" (Caruth, "Recapturing" 153) she can tell a "slightly different story" to different people and so establish a distance between herself and the trauma. This distortion in trauma narrative is strikingly illustrated in the covers of both novels in their original edition: while Enright's shows a flame-singed family snapshot, Deane's sports a photo of the unnamed protagonist-narrator, marred by the frame's broken glass.

Reading in the Dark: Portrait of the Artist as a Traumatised Man

We saw that in Ireland church and state are interlocking more than in many other countries, and indeed in Deane's novel Catholic families are oppressed by the Protestant authorities in Derry. In *Reading in the Dark*, Seamus Deane's strongly autobiographical and sole novel to date, we notice that the author is a Joyce specialist, but it is interesting to see how trauma affects a *Bildungsroman* which focuses solely on the artist's use of language. Like in Joyce's *Portrait*, Deane structures the protagonist's development by inserting symbols with variations (like the moocow who becomes a real dirty cow in Stephen's realist episode, and the cuckoo becomes a hawk when he finds his vocation) only here the symbols of fire, stairs, windows, are never very "realistic" as they always chime in with the flames of hell which haunt the writer's mother. Also Deane's novel focuses more on how language misfires, lies and elides, on darkness rather than on epiphany, and his narrative does not consist of five big chapters but, like the typical trauma narrative, it is split up in small chapters. At the end, Deane's protagonist, like Joyce's Stephen, leaves his mother, but for him this is no liberation: it is his empathy with his mother which made him find out her tragic secret, and this oedipal involvement banishes him from the home. As Deane's "Portrait" is much more tragical than Joyce's, it is no wonder that the conceptual framework of scholasticism with which Stephen wants to invent a new world is replaced by one touching on psychoanalysis. The unnamed child who reads in the dark is confronted with all kinds of authorities who transgress the laws which brings about a chaos that silences whole communities. No wonder then that Joyce's fairy tales about moocows and nicens little boys are replaced with ghost stories here. According to Anne Whitehead, "[t]he ghosts [who] embody or incarnate the traumas of

recent history and represent a form of collective or cultural haunting" are a frequent phenomenon in trauma fiction (7). This haunting atmosphere is present from the opening sentence onward, where the protagonist is electrified by the fact that his mother senses undigested conflict in the air of the family home. However, his keenness to empathise with his mother will lead to an oedipal conflict, as the mother will feel invaded by the narrator's knowledge of her past which will be much more intimate than his father's. This casts the narrator from his home and sends him into survival trauma: it will take Deane years to digest the events and ten to write the novel, thus illustrating how "survival itself […] can be a crisis" (Caruth, "Trauma" 9).

We will now look at the "scriptotherapy" used by the protagonist, who steers his course between the distorting discourse of his mother and grandfather on the one hand, and the mental schemes offered by his father on the other. Steering his way between the literal re-membering of his mother (whose body language will be symptoms of what she cannot articulate) and the cultural remembering of his father who transfers the horrors of the past into symbols and stories, *Reading in the Dark* is a story of reading different "genres": adventure books, spiritual exercises, classical works, oral (local) history, songs, etc., all of which the protagonist devours, looking for clues to understand the relations into which his parents are locked. In our analysis we will focus on all traumatised characters and the different ways in which they deal with their trauma: first we will look at the narrator's grandfather, then at his mother, next at his father and finally at his own development.

The narrator's grandfather, Mr. Doherty, is a schoolbook example of narcissistic, impulsive behaviour. It is his retaliation for the murder of a friend of his that starts off the whole tragedy. As he revenges himself by killing a policeman without leaving evidence, the police will take it out on the members of his family and on the next generation. Although he is a leader of the local IRA he has no respect for "the Symbolic order", the (Lacanian) set of rules of the local culture and the authorities. Instead, he only goes by his own judgement. This turns out to be disastrous: when the police indirectly conveys the message that it was Eddie Deane[1] who betrayed Doherty's IRA unit, he immediately has Eddie executed. Later, Mr Doherty's daughter, Frances, finds out that the actual informer was Tony McIlhenny, her former lover who jilted her to marry her sister Katie instead, so she betrays him and he flees the country, leaving Katie without any explanation. Around the same time Mr. Doherty allows Frances to marry Frank, Eddie's brother. This marriage seals a link between victims (Frank) and perpetrators (Doherty father and daughter) which the narrator calls "worse than the breaking of the laws of consanguinity in Christian doctrine class" (134). While the narrator finds out about this, he cannot inform his father, as this may break up the family. So all mouths are sealed by an unspeakable set of traumas.

1 The figures are never given a surname, I only do so to clarify an extremely complicated story that needs condensation here.

In his narrative exploration of this traumatic kernel, the protagonist comes across three different ways to react to the catastrophe, each of which represents a school-book example of the three Lacanian categories of perception. Mr Doherty illustrates the Imaginary one, Frances the Real one, Frank the Symbolic.

Mr Doherty is the one who believes he can control his image of himself. He purports to be a leader of the Catholic group and main fighter of the Protestants, but in reality he is the marionette of their actions. First when he orders Eddie Deane's execution, second when, instead of accepting the offer to be shriven by a Catholic priest on his deathbed, Mr Doherty prefers to pervert the ritual by unburdening his mind of his past directly to his grandson and his daughter, which reinjects all the negative traumatic energy into the future generation. Another detail which highlights Mr Doherty's blindness to his own weaknesses is that it is the Protestant Orange marching music which triggers his fatal confession to his grandson, showing that the so-called Catholic leader is so obsessed with the local Protestant (sub)culture that it dictates him and destroys his own family from within.

Frances Doherty is more stuck in the "Real" perception, which means that she is so traumatised by both her father's and her own crimes (having betrayed Tony, thus leaving her sister without a husband) that she loses the ability to perceive and speak normally; instead, she hallucinates, seeing the flames of hell everywhere, and is reduced to body language. One of her symptoms is that at some stage her personality splits in two different voices, that of the friendly and that of the stern mother, and she develops a form of schizophrenia. The narrator tries to read his mother's body language: as she keeps shifting "the gold ring [....] back and forth on her finger […] she's switching me on and off" (129). Thus, he illustrates Gabriele Schwab's observation that "Children of a traumatized parental generation […] become avid readers of silences and memory traces hidden in a face […] or chronic depression. Like photography, traumatized bodies reveal their own optical unconscious" (Schwab 14).

Frank, the narrator's father, shows how a Symbolic perception is the only way out of trauma. Although he is actually the one who suffered more traumas than anyone else, he is the most reconciliatory figure of all. Not only did he suffer injustice from many people in authority, but all the main rituals of his life (funerals, marriage) were either denied him or perverted. More precisely, Frank suffered three "sets" of traumas. When he was fourteen his parents died suddenly from a fever. This meant that the children were not allowed to wake the parents as the fear of contamination forbade this, but on top of that the family members used the occasion to plunder the house. Next, when Eddie was executed, the truth of the mistake was never revealed, and as a result Frank's siblings were maltreated and never had any future chances in their Catholic community. And thirdly, the Protestant state added insult to injury when the police raided the house of Frank's young family; later, he is denied his full pension when a major illness incapacitates him, only days away from normal retirement. Yet Frank counteracts this abuse with narrative and ritual to ease his children into

their past through “indirect insights into the enigma of horror”, as Kearney put it (qtd. in Flannery 202). So he tells his young sons the legend of the “Field of the Disappeared”, using the popular culture that is available to convey the idea that people who have disappeared physically can still be present in the emotions that play between people. He also devises rituals of reconciliation, like when he takes his sons all the way across the local river to the church of his childhood, a place carefully chosen to confess his deepest shame to them, that his brother was an informer. Thus, Frank tries to actively (re-)construct the Symbolic order, i.e. the link between the individual with the community, in order to fight his family’s traumatic history. Frank is the complete opposite of the narrator’s grandfather in that he does not drink to be able to work better; he obeys the rules of both the Catholic community and the Protestant state; and in contrast with Doherty, who insists on learning Irish only, Frank encourages the children to learn as many languages as possible. Last but not least, Frank is exemplary in dealing with his traumas in that he mentalises,[2] that is, he is aware of the fact that his wife is gravely disturbed by her past, yet he is very careful with his empathy. Unlike his son, the narrator, he senses that Frances badly needs a certain privacy and respects this.

But as the title indicates, *Reading in the Dark* is about the narrator’s gradual learning skills in “reading” traumatised people. This means that, unlike Joyce’s protagonist, Deane’s young artist does not only learn to write better, but he hones the sensitivity which allows him to read the unsaid, as he learns to chart inklings, vibes, atmospheric changes:

> My father knowing something about Eddie, not saying it, not talking but sometimes nearly talking, signalling. I felt we lived in an empty space with a long cry from him ramifying through it. At other times, it appeared to be as cunning and articulate as a labyrinth, closely designed, with someone sobbing at the heart of it. (43)

Yet before the protagonist becomes so well-read he starts off being imitative like his grandfather and immersed in body language (i.e. literal remembering) like his mother. This becomes especially clear in the passage where he refers for the first time explicitly to Uncle Eddie. At some point the narrator is set up by his enemies in the local gang as an informer. This of course galls his father especially: “Is it a curse? What have we done to deserve this?” (101) “No, I told him, there’s something amiss with the family. The police were on top of us long before I was born” (103). Thereupon he is hit by his father and sent to bed. However, he will have his revenge by destroying the roses his father always clips whenever Eddie is being mentioned. More specifically, he destroys them by uprooting them and then pouring cement over them. In this action he lets himself unwittingly be dictated by the Protestant soldiers who had raided the house and poured cement over everything. So he repeats his grandfather’s impulse to be dictated by the Protestant authorities (when their marching

2 Mentalisation means that one has the imaginative faculty to conceive of possible mental states of someone else, in extreme cases the victim can put himself in the place of the perpetrator. See e.g. Fonagy and Luyten.

music infuriated him to confess his secret that would destroy his own family). But the boy will learn to see the dangers of this naivety, becoming aware of the layeredness of signs and symbols. So the roses develop into a symbol of nationalism, Dark Rosaleen, Yeats's Rose Tree. Like his father, the narrator learns to cope with trauma by distancing himself from the events through the layer of narrative fiction. "Fiction, to perform its necessary function, must have broken its traditional affiliations with history", he writes (Deane, *Celtic Revivals* 93). "It involves, first, *a replacement of the political by the aesthetic* […]. The onus of distribution has been altered" (Deane, "Production" 133; original emphasis). This is what happens in *Reading in the Dark*, a beautiful testimony that writing can be therapeutic, and that trauma can even become productive, and sublimated.

Trauma and Catholic Subtexts in *The Gathering*

The heroine of *The Gathering*, ironically called Veronica, is also a "reader in the dark", though the writing exercise is more prominent in this protagonist's endeavours to come to terms with trauma. Again, family and state structures are interwoven, which generates intergenerational trauma. Here it is not the uncle but the narrator's "twin" brother,[3] who has just committed suicide, who is the scapegoat of society. In his excellent article on this novel Liam Harte stresses the opacity of trauma experiences and observes that "the interconnections between personal and national trauma are central to the moral force and finesse of the novel" (Harte 187), but this "moral finesse" needs to be elaborated. So in this analysis I will focus on how religion can both cause a trauma and help to assimilate it. More specifically, I hope to show how Veronica picks up mental constructs from the Catholic discourse of her community, first using these religious schemes to come to terms with her traumas, then criticising them as she gains distance from Liam and her childhood traumas.[4] In what follows I want to concentrate on how the concepts of original sin, forgiving and redemption work in therapeutic ways in a trauma context.

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3 "Sometimes I think we overlapped in [the womb], he just left early, to wait outside" (11).

4 Like Harte, Carol Dell'Amico focuses on *The Gathering* as "a parable of a nation with the choice either to face or ignore a disturbing past" (73) and "the probing of national identity" (59); she also points out that it is a characteristic of "the testimonial mode" to be "providing a simultaneous assertion and undermining of certainty" (60). While Dell'Amico concentrates on the malpractices in religious institutions, especially the Magdalen Laundries which are clear instances of "Irish cultural misogyny" (67), I want to concentrate here on the "therapeutic" element which the narrative offers the narrator. Sarah Gardam, in contrast, only focuses on the Lacanian structure of Veronica's trauma. Gardam warns the reader not to "dismiss the novel as a mere therapeutic narrative" (99), and stresses the complexity of the entanglements of desire, language and the unconscious, but it is all the more surprising to find how her analysis ends somewhat abruptly in a celebration of motherhood, the love of which seems to "heal" Veronica. It is worth noting that the narrator first becomes aware of that love in church, during the funeral. In my own article, "Relationships with 'the Real' in the Work of Anne Enright", I focus on Enright's feminist agenda more in detail.

The communal problem, according to Veronica and to Enright in her non-fiction book *Making Babies*, is that Irish families suffer from too much oppression by the Catholic Church, and like the Protestant police in the previous story, this authority infiltrates in the family in unseemly ways. "Growing up in Ireland, we didn't need aliens – we already had a race of higher beings to gaze deep into our eyes and force us to have babies against our will: we called them priests" (5). Indeed Veronica's mother, Mrs Hegarty, had twelve children and seven miscarriages. In Mrs Hegarty's days, the 1960s, the church rules came down to: premarital sex is not allowed, sex in marriage is fine as long as it was "functional" (producing Catholic souls), and if you could not cope with the number of children or the husband that was just life, of which suffering was an essential factor. This mentality, uncritically passed on by the mother, infuriates Veronica, who at the beginning of the novel strongly identifies with her angry brother. On the one hand, the narrator sees an almost straight, causal line between the mother's endless pregnancies which made her fail to protect Liam and Veronica against "evil", on the other hand Veronica's scriptotherapy opens with a focus on her own unreliability, her own quality as *Zeuge* – witness but also fabulator:

> 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 flesh is long fallen away. (1; emphases added)

Later it turns out that "the crime of the flesh" refers to a vague but strong memory of either her brother or she herself having been sexually abused by Lamb Nugent, their grandmother's landlord. As the narrator was only a child at that time, she did not realise what was going on, but now that she is in her thirties she knows, and actually explains the time lag between knowing and realising in a perfect definition of "afterwardness":

> You know everything at eight, but it is hidden from you [...] (147)
>
> Over the next twenty years [...] I never would have made that shift on my own – if I hadn't been listening to the radio, […] 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)

So this novel's protagonist seems aware of the essences of trauma: it is not a fact but an energy that possesses and repeats itself. Strangely enough, Veronica's car always drives her to her grandmother's house. Her anger is not only at her mother, but also pointing at her grandmother Ada: "it was Ada's fault all along [...] – to bring so much death into the world." (223) It sounds here as if the whole line of Eve was responsible for engendering human – read corrupted – life. More specifically, Veronica refers to the Catholic concept of original sin which symbolizes an ever-present narcissism which brings evil in the world: "As if the whole world was built on a lie and that lie was very secret and very dirty" (168). Veronica does not refer to only one, but to all three basic elements of Catholic theology: original sin, the blindness inherent to every individual; forgiveness, which lifts the blindness as it connects all

people, even victim and perpetrator; and grace, which is the opposite of trauma in the sense that this positive energy buoys the liberated subjects up in a new impetus of life. A fourth Catholic element is Veronica's repeated reference to the "Noli me tangere" passage in John (20, 1-18), where Mary Magdalene meets Jesus after his resurrection, but is told by him not to touch him, as he has to ascend to his Father. We will now see how these four Catholic concepts form the "mental constructs" which allow Veronica to develop from being an angry young woman to someone who finds a "healthy distance" to those who are dearest to her, both alive and dead.

As the concept of original sin indicates that human imperfection is passed on from one generation to the next, it implies that even children are not innocent. This is pointed out by Veronica when she seems to remember some ambiguity that was involved when her grandmother's landlord abused her nine-year-old brother sexually, in a way we would find shocking: "I could also say that Liam must have wanted him too. Or wanted *something*" (223). Liam is actually almost explicitly represented as an anti-Christ, especially in the inverted "Ecce homo" scene. After Mr Hegarty gets his son back home from custody by the police the young man stands bleeding and accused in the kitchen. Veronica asks has he interfered with a very young girl (repeating the old trauma in inverted form), but he does not answer. Also, instead of loving and forgiving his enemies he hates and blames his friends: "My brother […] was unkind to every single person who tried to love him; mostly, and [...] still, after a lifetime of spreading the hurt around, he managed to blame me" (168), and instead of focusing on the good in people he tries to find fault – thus actually counteracting people's narcissism:

> This was Liam's great talent – exposing the lie. Drink made him vicious, but even sober he could smell what was going on in a room […]. Liam could be a completely shocking human being, but it was hard to say what exactly he had done to make you feel so off-key. (125)

As Veronica starts off her scriptotherapy strongly identifying with her brother, she is downright angry with her mother. And as Liam was the one who undercut stereotypes, the narrator too does not see their mother in the traditional exemplary way, as a virgin mother like Mary who educates her children for eternity, but rather as a sex machine which produces madness and death: "The holes in her head are not her fault. Even so, I have never forgiven her any of it. I just can't" (7). Yet Veronica's refusal to forgive will mellow as she starts to see that everyone shares in the blind spots that come with humanity (original sin). In her own case, the fault she focuses on is that of "afterwardness", more specifically her own inability to relate to Liam's trauma. This unawareness of what happened makes the narrator feel that she, too, needs to be forgiven for her failure to understand the problems of her brother: "It went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it. And for this, I am very sorry too." (173) Yet Veronica is not alone in this condition, it is the whole nation which cannot cope with its own human structures: "This is the anatomy and mechanism of a family – a whole fucking country – drowning in shame" (169).

However, according to Catholic theology, shame can be overcome as contrition offers a way out of narcissism, which can be metamorphosed into grace. This metamorphosis can be helped by confession, and this is a possibility Veronica touches upon. When she is ashamed of her smug, judgmental reaction to Liam in the "Ecce Homo scene" in the kitchen she wants to be absolved of this memory, now that she sees it was a mistake: "If I believed in such a thing as confession I would go there and say that, not only did I laugh at my brother, but I let my brother laugh at himself, all his life." (167) However, for Veronica forgiving and foregoing is understood more in terms of recognising the Other in the other. She has to let go of Liam, and this loosening of the link turns out to be essentially what Dominic LaCapra calls an exercise of empathetic unsettlement, "a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (78). This is central to the "Ecce homo scene", which, in Veronica's writing, means that one has to empathise not with what/who one recognises, but with the Other, the unknown, the scapegoat. Whether that is Christ or a kind of anti-Christ like Liam is not relevant, the basic message is to have respect, i.e. to take distance, to profess "empathetic unsettlement".

This attitude seems to grow on Veronica especially from the wake onwards. The very idea of this Irish ritual, of course, is a "letting go" of the dead, something which in the Bible was represented as "ascension" – a very "metaphysical" and plastic way of representing the psychological fact that the living cannot keep the dead with them on earth; they "transcend" our understanding of their being. This is what the "Noli me tangere" is all about. In this gospel passage, a leading motif throughout the novel, the resurrected Jesus tells Mary Magdalene who is traumatised by his death that she should not cling to him; instead, she is urged to narrate her experiences, so as to come to terms with the human aspect of Jesus that she will never understand, the Other in him.[5]

This is exactly what happens to Veronica, and there are four passages in the novel which refer to elements of the *Noli me tangere* episode of St John. First, at the wake, the narrator suddenly lets go of the fixed idea that her mother is a lump of worry with "holes in her head", and notices how she positively blesses Veronica's daughters, who gracefully accept the ritual. Later, she feels a warm touch filling her with positive energy. Yet when she looks behind her there is no one, but she interprets this as being "in touch" with Liam again, only now that she does not cling to him anymore he seems to have turned into a benevolent power. Thirdly, Liam's funeral yields a kind of resurrection as it turns out he has a son who looks like his dead spit: Rowan. "Everyone wants to touch him" (246) and Veronica says "My skin wants him" (244) but Rowan "shies away": like in the *Noli me tangere*, the family has to practise "em-

5 "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers, and *tell* them that I am now ascending to […] my God and your God" (*The New English Bible*, John 20, 17; emphasis added).

pathetic unsettlement" and take a healthy distance to the person they lost through traumatic experiences. Fourthly and lastly, Veronica lifts the *Noli me tangere* ban on her husband, which leads to conception. When she realises this later, she finds herself at an airport: "Gatwick airport is not the best place to be gripped by a fear of flying. […] 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." (261) Clearly, the ascension is turned into its opposite, but it is a fortunate fall, one which accepts and celebrates life that is passed on generation after generation.

So it looks like both the mental constructs of the scriptotherapy and the rituals of the Catholic system worked, as they allowed Veronica to work through her traumas. But that same system is also criticised and renewed: the ascension has become a fortunate fall into an acceptance of togetherness, and the priesthood is something that is interesting because it is a triple paradox, as we see presently in the way Ernest, Veronica's brother, incarnates his priesthood:

> I know what I have to do – even though it is too late for the truth, I will tell the truth. I will get hold of Ernest and tell him what happened to Liam in Broadstone, and I will ask him to break this very old news to the rest of the family […] because I can not do it myself, I do not have the arguments for it. (259)

Ernest is simultaneously a priest and no priest, as he does not believe in the institution any more but keeps functioning in it; the physical and metaphysical are at one in him: "My brother has a trained heart; compassion is a muscle for him; he inclines his head when you speak" (195); and he cares while leaving people their freedom: "We were just the right distance apart" (195).

"We were just the right distance apart" – this is what the unnamed protagonist in *Reading in the Dark* missed, as his mother could not cope with his knowing presence. This oedipal situation, where mother and son shared secrets the father could not be let in on, became unbearable for Frances Doherty, so her son left the home to allow her to live the family trauma "without having your eyes on me" (224). The rest of the author's life was one big exercise of survival, through psychoanalytic study, academic writing and creative narration.

In this article I have dealt with a very autobiographical and a totally fictional trauma novel, in which both protagonists use scriptotherapy to find "the right distance" to their past. Both books map the resilience of two writing protagonists who try out different kinds of discourse which may help them to retrace the contexts in which their trauma originated, thus mending the fabric of their life, thanks to literature, to narrative. This seems a great way for people to heal – in Irish families, as in all others.

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