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WORKING PAPER

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Time and Sense in Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007)

This paper is entitled “Time and Sense” in *The Gathering*¹, after Julia Kristeva's book *Le Temps Sensible*², in which she questions the experience of time in Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Indeed, in *The Gathering* Anne Enright weaves her imagination in the folds of the past and in turn, in unfolding lost time, the narrative opens out onto the present reality and the possibility of future dreams. In the light of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*³ and Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies*⁴, the aim of this paper is to focus not so much on time and the experience of time in *The Gathering*, but on the ways in which spatiality enables the narrator to shape narrative time, as well as national and personal history. In other words, how does the study of space in *The Gathering* enable us to gain a better insight into the way family and national history can mould personal and national identities?

The narrative voice, a feminine voice narrating a personal and family trauma, enables the reader to construct a portrait of the woman narrator through the chaotic reconstruction of a mostly feminine family tree. In fact, family trees and houses structure the narrative and in turn reveal relationships of power and domination. But the themes of twins, paedophilia, transgression, family secrets, the function and heritage of history, the probing of national identity in post-independence years echo other post-colonial novels, such as for instance *The God of Small Things*, another Booker Prize winner, written by the Indo-English woman writer Arundhati Roy in 1997, ten years before *The Gathering*. What does the comparison with *The*

¹ Anne Enright, *The Gathering*, London : Jonathan Cape, 2007.

² Julia Kristeva, *Le Temps Sensible*, Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

³ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, London, Blackwell, 1991.

⁴ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, London: Verso, 1994.

God of Small Things tell us of Enright's portrait of a contemporary Irish woman author and her response to the contradictions of the past?

Status of the narrator

In *The Gathering*, the narrator undertakes a journey to gather the strings of her life history, family history and tries to gather the complexity of family ties within the boundaries of her narrative. The undertaking is not an easy one, and the difficulty of the task can only be compared to the circumstances of the actual social gathering, which serves as a pretext in the story-line: her almost twin brother's burial. There is therefore a tension in the narrative between the ultimate aim, the social gathering on the day of her brother Liam's funeral and the gathering of facts, clues and memories to find a meaning to his life and hers, to construct an explanation for the trauma they both experienced as children and which has left deep scars in their adult lives. To do this, the narrator delves into family secret drawers and from her own avowal, into her own prolific imagination. The first person narrative voice is thus split between, on the one hand the aim to be factual and objective, and on the other hand, a profound unreliability, from her own account. The first sentence of the novel is a very convincing illustration of this, as it opens with a seemingly self-assured conference-like tone and ends on the narrator's own doubts:

I would like to write down what happened in my grand-mother's house the summer I was eight or nine, but I am not sure if it really did happen⁵.

This first sentence is rich in contradictions. It states the importance given by the narrator to facts: she does not want to write 'about' what happened, but write 'what' happened. But it also emphasizes the unreliability of her perception, as she was a very young child, and is not even able to remember her exact age at the time. She even speaks a little further on of this

⁵ *The Gathering*, 1.

‘thing that may not have taken place’⁶. Chapter 2 also opens on the narrator’s faulty and unreliable memory:

Some days I don’t remember my mother. I look at her photograph and she escapes me. Or I see her on a Sunday, after lunch, and we spend a pleasant afternoon, and when I leave I find she has run through me like water.⁷

The problem is actually deeper than a mere problem of narrative reliability. It is linked to a running theme in the narrative and in the narrator’s own history - the difficulty of bearing witness, of committing oneself in a relationship, be it a love affair, a friendship or family relationship. At the beginning of chapter one, as the novel opens, the narrator writes that her aim is ‘to bear witness’, but in the following chapter, in which she describes her mother, she adds that if her mother committed a crime there would be no witness because ‘she is forgetfulness itself’⁸. Her statements are hypotheses and her novel only the fruit of her imagination, not a statement of truth. As a narrator, she refrains from taking any responsibility for the statements she is making, as is shown in chapter 3 when she minors her assumption by adding, ‘at least that’s what I think’. However, the narrator has moved from ‘I would like to write down what happened’⁹, on to ‘in fact this is the tale I would love to write. History is such a romantic place’¹⁰. She has moved from facts to ‘tale’ and fantasy or pure invention - ‘this is the moment I choose’¹¹. All those gaps in the chain of events impede any reliable perception of time. Added to that, is the somewhat chaotic structure of the chapters, which refer alternately, to the present and to the past, but each to a different period of the past, either the narrator’s childhood, or her grandmother’s youth. The way in which the narrator tells about her genealogy, both ascendant and descendant and the way she deals with chronology

⁶ *The Gathering*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

both point at her profound difficulty in living out the present. An entire chapter deals with the difficulty for the narrator to live in the present time with her husband and daughters and with her incapacity to project anything in the future. She sounds as if she were mired in the past. When she was eight or nine, the narrator thinks she saw her brother Liam being the victim of a paedophile act, which took place in her grandmother Ada's parlour, ironically called 'the good room'. Her brother would have been victim of Lambert Nugent a long-time friend of the family and a friend of Ada's husband. It is highly significant that the reader is told rather late in the novel, in Chapter 22, that the narrator actually saw Lambert Nugent raping her brother Liam. This revelation in fact takes place in the same chapter as the revelation of the way Liam died and how she was told about his death. As her brother's body resurfaces on the shores of Brighton in all its nakedness, so do her memories of how his body was first assaulted by Nugent. That the two should take place at such a late stage in the narrative and at about the same place in the novel points at the pre-eminence of the brother's body and bodies in general in Enright's novel. The narrative criss-crosses and implicitly comes back to the brother's body while at the same time weaving the questioning on the reliability. What in fact captures her imagination is not what happened in her grandmother's house, as she claims in the first line of the novel, but why it took place. This questioning fuels her imagination. The narrative is therefore built in a spiralling movement, which relates the past and the present, actual facts and imagined transgressing scenarios, which she names, her 'little blasphemies'. As the narrative progresses, there is a growing sense of how the narrator self-consciously arranges memory and facts to please herself. There are more than hints of metafiction, as the narrative displays its own mode of construction: 'he must be reassembled; click clack (...) so I imagine it'¹². The narrator is obviously thoroughly enjoying describing Lambert Nugent in the most negative possible way and playing with her potential reader, when concluding on her

¹² *The Gathering*, 14.

grandmother's final marital choice: 'she did not marry Nugent, you will be relieved to hear'¹³. All along the narrative time twists and turns in a spiralling movement. The zoom on 1925 and the imaginary meetings between Ada, Lambert and Charlie first envisioned in chapter 3, is taken up again and zeroed on in chapter 5, but it is once again the object of chapter 16 in the middle of the book. Meanwhile, the narrator's perception is constantly blurred by childish memories and perception. There is a constant tension in the narrative between imaginary flashbacks and factual prolepsis:

She knows because of all the things that have happened since. She knows because she is my Granny¹⁴.

The narrator plays with the fantasy of origins, the actual, plausible and imaginary details of her grandparents' first meeting in the well-named Belvedere Hotel in Dublin, as if from there she could hope to get a better view of her family's history. There is a fondness for details and coincidences, nearly merging in a form of stream of consciousness at times, and over all there are almost echoes of Mrs Dalloway in the way the narrative voice progresses in a space that is both familiar and strange and refers to times long-by gone, while in the meantime keeps on returning in the narrative, as memories ebb and flow.

What emerges from this hectic, spiralling flow of the narrative, bouncing from house to house and from generation to generation is a blurred portrait of the narrator as a young person, through the portrait she herself sketches of her mother and grandmother. More precisely, on the one hand the narrative depicts herself as very close and intimately linked to her deceased brother Liam, both for reasons of age and because of what the narrative is trying to name and reconstruct, and on the other hand, it insists on placing her within a female genealogy, linking her to her mother and her grandmother, but also to her two daughters. Her relationship to her two daughters is depicted very early on, and the narrative specifies that she

¹³ *The Gathering* 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

has had no son, while making her reflect on what she is transmitting to her daughters from her exclusive relationship with Liam when children. As early as page 1, the narrator writes with precision of her place in the family tree:

I have no sons myself, so when I pass any small skull or skeleton I hesitate and think of him, how he admired their intricacies¹⁵.

This is therefore the playful narrative of Veronica Hegarty, aged 39, stuck between a mother with no memory, or rather a memory blunted by her reproduction rate which has given her nine children for a total of 16 pregnancies, and a grandmother Ada Merriman whose name paradoxically did not predispose her to a life of fun and joy. One of the narrator's aims is to explain this ill-working genealogy and her assumption is that the event that took place in Ada's house when the narrator was eight or nine is only a consequence of a tragic chain of events, which started out long before that event, at the time when Ada met Lambert Nugent and Charlie Spillane and that the trauma imposed to her brother Liam, and to her as a silent witness, was only a symptom in an already ill family body. In Chapter 3, the sexual innuendo is also an encoding of the nature of the crime that the narrator is implicitly alluding to. The Hegarty family is a family out of sorts. One of the paradoxes of the narrative is that, while emphasizing the genealogical structure of the family, the vertical representation of its body, its also stresses its agelessness.

The narrative voice in this novel is the faulty, troubled voice of a narrator searching for her roots. The narrative itself is hectically drawn in multiple directions, whether an imaginary past or blurred unreliable childhood, memories, whether factual life experiences with her oblivious mother or her rigid grandmother, or her chaotic and unhappy present with her husband and two daughters. The problematic question of genealogy as it is sketched out in the narrative, is particularly well shown in all the houses depicted in the novel. Houses seem to

¹⁵ *The Gathering*, 1.

reflect the ways in which characters and members of this large family relate to one another and ultimately to themselves. The happy ending of the novel in the mother's house is in fact the result of a shift from the house seen as the representation of an ill-functioning private reproductive space from which Liam had excluded himself, to a social space capable of opening up to others. My contention is ultimately to show that the progression from the grandmother's house to the mother's house and eventually to the narrator's contemporary house can also be read as a metaphor of Irish history.

Houses as structures

Houses represent the intimate space which Bachelard and Heidegger refer to very emotionally as the place of nesting. Houses are a dwelling place as well as a haven for nostalgia. But funnily enough, there is no hint of nostalgia in this novel, rather the anguished need to shake off what remains of the past and at last to build one's present.

Houses structure the narrative

Very symptomatically, the first chapter begins with the grandmother's house: 'I would like to write about what happened in my grandmother's house'¹⁶. And it ends with a reference to the narrator's present house, described in vertical terms as a family tree:

I wait for the kind of sense that dawn makes, when you have not slept. I stay downstairs while the family breathes above me and I write it down¹⁷.

In this novel, houses structure the family tree, but a very feminine family tree, in which men occupy a second role. The narrator also dwells for quite a number of pages on her mother's house. With all its extensions, the mother's house stands as a straightforward symbol of the mother's high fecundity rate and the way her nine children and seven miscarriages, which

¹⁶ *The Gathering*, 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

shock the narrator so much, have moulded her life and her relationship to space. The mother's house is extensively described as early as chapter 2:

I am not a visitor. This is my house too. I was inside it, as it grew; as the dining room was knocked into the kitchen, as the kitchen swallowed the back garden. It is the place where my dreams still happen.

Not that I would ever live here again. The place is all extension and no house. Even the cubby-hole beside the kitchen door has another door at the back of it, so you have to battle your way through coats and hoovers to get into the downstairs loo. You could not sell the place, I sometimes think, except as a site. Level it and start again.¹⁸

This description of her mother's home and childhood home requires at least two comments. First, for all its peculiarities and uncomfortable amenities, this house brings a womb-like comfort to the narrator, who defends her right to belong to it in short, definitive sentences. This subjective defence of the house is followed by a more objective description of the changes that were brought to the house over time. The lexical field used to describe those changes is violent and nightmarish: 'knocked into', 'swallowed', 'you have to battle your way', 'level it and start again'. The description of the childhood house is therefore a reflection of the narrator's relationship to the house in which she grew, but also of her relationship to her mother and more widely to her family - a visceral need to huddle herself inside it and the recurrent struggle to find a proper space to be and exist in. In chapter 25, in the last part of the book, her brother Liam's room is described in interesting terms, as the space he occupied in the house was a space both inside the house and outside the house, both connected and disconnected, called 'the garden passage', 'this space...outside the door'¹⁹. The childhood house is filled with memories of violence. In this house filled with life, children and shouts,

¹⁸ *The Gathering*, 4-5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

violence and death were never far. The kitchen, heart and hearth of a house, was the staging of a near murder when Liam nearly stabbed the mother once²⁰.

Very symptomatically, there is a genealogy of houses in this novel. Grandmother Ada's house is described as the opposite of the Hegartys' house, 'the quiet of a house with no children and full of things'²¹. It is a British house and in this house, things are 'separate', with the 'good room' (where the narrator chooses to have the criminal act committed) and the garage, separate from the house, where the criminal act in actual facts probably did take place. This aspect of Ada's house is repeatedly described:

Here is Ada's good front room in Broadstone. The door is painted a white gloss, going yellow. Inside, the room is papered a dusty pink. (...) The room is slap up against this street, so there is a beige roller blind as well as lace curtains, and from ceiling to floor there are drapes of theatrical red. The window is the first thing you see as you walk in, it makes everything else seem dim, except for the mirror over the mantel piece which reflects a bright slice of room.²²

The fact that Ada's hall door was 'flat against the street'²³ is repeatedly mentioned and was part of the excitement of her grandmother's house for the narrator as 'there was no garden or path up to it so people passed by, very close, without ever coming in'²⁴. Her grandmother was always 'at cross-purposes to the world'²⁵ and 'believed in very little. She believed in a clean house'²⁶, and Ada found the fact of imagining or remembering things 'slightly distasteful'²⁷. The narrative repeatedly opposes cleanliness and tidiness to its unclean and untidy opposites, and this gradually merges with the opposition between what is proper and what is un-proper.

²⁰ *The Gathering* 166.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

²² *Ibid.*, 142-143.

²³ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

But the narrator's imagining skills are at her best when she pictures Ada at her sink in her Broadstone house, facing out the back of the house, protected from the street by three layers of curtains in a proper way. The notions of cleanliness and propriety trigger the flow of creative imagination.

On the other hand, the narrator's house is typical of women's home and garden magazines today. It has a distinctly contemporary feel. As opposed to her grandmother and mother's house, it is repeatedly described as a house in which circulation is easy with 'a single flow of space round the stairs'. The list of colours used to paint the walls is repeated like a sort of gimmicks whenever the narrator refers to her house, as evocating style and serenity and sounding like the caption under a photograph of a contemporary home magazine: 'oatmeal, cream, sandstone, slate'. This reflects the narrator's desire to have a normal life, normal family and sexual life, to feel serene and contented. The theme of conventional decoration and psychological comfort was already ironically broached upon, albeit in a different manner, in Enright's short story 'Yesterday's Weather' in the eponymous collection of short stories. As to the narrator of *The Gathering*, the distant tone she uses to describe her own house is striking. The reader learns that the narrator bought her house in 1990, at the beginning of the boom when Ireland was becoming economically rich and going global. There is an implicit estate agent's discourse in the narrative, which, mingled with the women's magazine tone, creates a de-familiarization process:

We bought it eight years ago, in 1990; a new five-bedroom detached. It's all a bit Tudor-red-brick-with-Queen-Anne overtones, though there is, thank God no portico and inside I have done it in oatmeal, cream, sandstone, slate.²⁸

The way the narrator circulates in her free-space house is startling. 'I walk the house'²⁹, she writes, as if she made one with the house, as if her whole body was contained within the space

²⁸ *The Gathering*, 36.

of the house. This description is all the more astonishing, as she explicitly describes the house as a place in which she does not bloom. Her house is repeatedly described as a sexually empty house, as ‘nothing settles here. Not even dust’³⁰.

Intimate links between houses and self identity.

The link between the structure of the houses and family structures is obvious in many instances:

I don’t think we remember our family in any real sense. We live in them instead³¹. Families are like houses or bodies: they are lived in and viewed by the narrator as living structures. As the narrator goes up the stairs to see her dead grand-father, she ascends as she would a family tree: rising up tediously to the second floor, kneelers cluttering the second flight, realising that she ‘did not want to go in her grandparents’ room’³². And as early as the first paragraph of the novel there is an obvious transfer between what happened in the grandmother’s house 31 years earlier and what is happening inside the narrator’s body in the present time, as she writes:

What happened in my grandmother’s house (...) I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place. I don’t even know what name to put on it³³

Reconstructing the family and minding the wounds is symbolized in the redesigning of the houses, the rebuilding of the various houses even more than the scenarios themselves. In the same vein, in chapter 4 the narrator toys with the idea of undoing all the sheds and extensions of her mother’s house. This might be read as a metaphor of the family, or of the work she is doing writing the novel, trying to undo the visible connections and finding out the hidden

²⁹ *The Gathering*, 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³² *Ibid.*, 60.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1.

links - 'I wonder how you might undo'³⁴. In chapter 6, she tells about herself through her descriptions of the house using a very conventional feminine discourse on home decoration. But this discourse also emphasizes her problematic relationship to her body and to space in general. There is a link in the narrative between the absence of desire and sexuality in her house and the fact that she chooses to turn to virtual space: 'some nights I go online'. Very symptomatically, the transition between chapter 10 and 11 is the notion of happiness. The narrator is unhappy and encumbered by her husband and herself as if she had not left her childhood home and the objects scattered on the steps everywhere in her mother's house, and kept stumbling on objects as soon as she started moving. Although space is cleared in her house, and not even dust settles, she is unhappy and tries to escape. But even outside there is no perspective left to her, except stuck in the traffic or squashed in the subway. Those complex architectonics of houses and narrative reveal how strongly both houses and family are structured around the notions of ownership and domination.

Domination within the house

House structures represent structures of domination in the way space is distributed, according to the portion of space attributed to each function or each person. But houses also represent domination because they are the locus of submission to whoever owns the place on the one hand, and to domesticity on the other hand.

At the end of the novel, the narrative tells of yet another way in which the narrator imagines that Lamb Nugent had exerted his power of domination over Ada and Charlie. One entire chapter is spent reproducing the letters in which the owner-renter relationship between Ada and Lamb Nugent is developed. This short but crucial chapter enlightens relationships of power between the characters, as sexual domination extends to ownership domination and

³⁴ *The Gathering*, 24.

therefore sheds a new light on the obsessive sexual theme in this novel. There are also hints here and there in the novel of women's submission to conventions, but these hints are directed to herself more than to her ascendants. She recalls how her brother criticized her home caring conventional choices, as her brother blamed her 'for 20 years or more for the nice white paint'³⁵. She herself turns to ridicule the repetitive things domesticity has you do:

Most of the stuff you do is just stupid, really stupid, most of the things you do is just nagging and whining and picking up for people who are too lazy even to love you³⁶.

Even the repetitive gimmicks 'cream oatmeal sandstone and slate' ironically stands as self-criticism for her lack of imagination and creativity. Houses are shown as a place of promiscuity in which sex and death are associated more often and more surely than love and sex, as for example when the narrator's imagination once again overflows and she remembers her visit to her grandfather's deathbed. Chapter 21 is in this respect central at least as far as the structure of the narrative is concerned. There the narrator dwells blissfully on the possibility of adultery, rebuilding the history of Lamb Nugent and Ada. Quite a number of times in her narrative, the narrator has recourse to hyperrealist descriptions. Just as she sketches a very hyper-realist picture of herself ('I feel like a chicken when it is quartered'), she writes of the blatant violence of domesticity on the woman self. But fiction works as a mirror. As she writes about her family, she gradually tends to understand herself better using self-reflexive irony. 'Let the poor chicken wait a while'³⁷ she writes, while the comparison with the chicken links her directly to her grandmother and the comparison of her pubis to an underfed chicken on her wedding night.³⁸

If hyperrealist descriptions enable the narrator to make the reader experience the crudeness and shock of what reality is and 'what the flesh can do when there is no love', through fiction,

³⁵ *The Gathering*, 168.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

the narrator in turn definitely dominates all the characters in her novel, playing with the limits of fiction, relishing her metafictional jokes. When she describes the fantasized adulterous scene between Ada and Lamb Nugent in chapter 21, she asks ‘and where is Charlie during all this? He is off seeing a man about a dog’³⁹, playing with all the possibilities that imagination affords her: ‘and then...’, ‘or...’.

Houses help tie up severed links and relationships between the narrator, her past and her relatives. They play a key role in synthesizing time and space. But ultimately, what does this novel say of the contradictions and complexities of life for contemporary Irish women? What does it tell of a woman author’s way of putting her personal and national past behind her?

Heritage

Kristeva’s book entitled *Time and Sense* begins thus: ‘Love is space and time made perceptible to the heart’⁴⁰. This echoes the sort of catharsis at work in *The Gathering*. Houses are metaphors of love and the place where space and time are made perceptible to the heart. In the novel the narrator has been trying to gather the strings of time and space and make them perceptible to her heart, so that when the day of her brother’s funeral is finally there, and the narrative reaches its end, she has reconciled herself with the meaning of love in her life. The funeral ends in her mother’s house, which opens out for the occasion and gathers both the intimate members of the family, but also embraces a wider social sphere and greets Liam’s former girlfriend and their three-year old son. Just as the mother’s house is full of extensions and able to stretch even more to welcome the next generation, the narrator herself contemplates the possibility of a third baby and appears at last reconciled with her past and present life. But this happy ending is not the most essential element in the novel.

³⁹ *The Gathering*, 167.

⁴⁰ Julia Kristeva: *Le Temps Sensible (Time and Sense)*, quoting Proust in *La Prisonnière*, RTP, III, 887. (‘Love is space and time made perceptible to the heart’ *The Captive*, Marcel Proust)

There are a number of striking common points with Arundhaty Roy's Booker Prize winning novel *The God of Small Things*⁴¹ published in 1997. Roy's novel takes place in post independence India. Her main characters are English-speaking Christian dizygotic twins, one of whom, Estha, a little boy, is also the victim of a paedophile at the age of 7. Roy was trained as an architect and she admitted building her novel as a house, with a very definite structure. And indeed the construction of her narrative is also built in a spiralling manner, with repetitions, echoes and gimmicks which remind very much of Enright's narrative. But the common points between the two do not only come down to structure. More deeply, the question of power and domination, of family ties, of convention and transgression, even more acute in a society such as India, built on castes, is done in very similar ways in both novels. Firstly, how is the paedophile crime referred to in both narratives and what is the impact on the general meaning of the novels? Secondly, Liam and the narrator of Enright's novel being 11 months apart seemed to consider each other like twins (the paronomasia between 'I am' and 'Liam' might also be read as a link), how do the two pairs of twins, build up a language of their own and what meaning does this language have in the general economy of the novel? In *The God of Small Things* also, we find the same overwhelmingly feminine family structure with Baby Kochamma the great aunt, Mammachi the grandmother, Ammu the mother. In *The God of Small Things* the history House across the river is the symbol of a domination and oppression, of the injustice of the cast system but also of colonial history. The shutting down of the history house and the construction of a brand new luxury hotel for tourists just across on the other side, is a variation of the colonial process but applied to capitalism. *The God of Small Things* draws more clearly than *The Gathering*, the link between sexual domination of an adult over a child, between sexual domination within the household and colonial domination of a nation over another. But this theme is also present in Enright's narrative.

⁴¹ Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, London : HarperCollins, 1998.

When the narrator makes up the adulterous scene in chapter 21, when Lamb Nugent makes loves to Ada on the floor in what the narrator repeatedly calls her ‘good front room’, the narrative links the event to history in a style very close to Arundhati Roy in *The God of Small Things*:

Things:

They pulled the house down around their ears: God smashed-in the grate, History, in tatters, festooned like Ada’s tights on the fire irons⁴².

In both novels, transgression is the temptation and transgression is also the explanation. In both novels too the couple brother/sister, dizygotic twins or almost twins, are inseparable: they embody the fantasized image of the other, another self who is close to oneself. They question the construction of oneself in relation with a sibling, or even a twin sibling, someone who is at the same time very close and yet separate. And this of course can be read as a reflection on the links that tie a colonial state and the nation it has colonized. In *The Gathering*, the narrator is looking for a path of her own in life and she tells how she is leaving Liam each time he arrives (chap 19). Interestingly enough, this sentence concludes a page in which she explains that Liam had a hard time connecting. And she tells an anecdote when he was living in Britain and she in Ireland and he would always steal some of her things. He once stole a telephone ‘even though, and this is the stupidest thing, Irish phones did not plug into British Telecom’⁴³. This anecdote emphasizes the symbolic link between the siblings Britain and Ireland, a sort of allegory of colonial history: ‘So I left him and he left me. What else are siblings supposed to do?’⁴⁴

The comparison with *The God of Small Things* can be followed up with the plays with language. Estha and Rahel are famous for playing with the English language, which they do not quite understand and make up new words that sound English and make sense for them. Or

⁴² *The Gathering*, 139.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

they coin new words, for example ‘they stoppited’⁴⁵. With a boyfriend she had, once Liam and her had parted, and who replaced symbolically the close friend and brother Liam was, the narrator in *The Gathering* makes up a game that also recalls the linguistic games of Estha and Rahel in *The God of Small Things*: ‘Michael and me developed a way of speaking English as if it is actually Irish’⁴⁶. Further on in the novel, the narrator explains that words come from a place that cannot be objective as they come from a place that seems unreal: ‘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.’⁴⁷ The fundamental difference between the two novels though, is the treatment of the contemporary period. Arundhati Roy’s narrator (and Roy in her own life) criticizes Marxism and capitalism, as well as any trace of Americanism as a contemporary version of colonialism, and promotes transgression from one caste to the other. Her aim is overtly to reverse the course of history and escape the trauma of submission. Meanwhile, Enright seems to be questioning conformism and another kind of submission to the global order of the world or what Edward Soja calls post-historicism⁴⁸ or ‘Late-Capitalism’⁴⁹, in his book *Postmodern Geographies*. This is illustrated by the narrator’s house in which partitions have been pulled away to create a single space with interchangeable functions, depending on the time of day. ‘Capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the ‘world of commodities’, its ‘logic’ and its worldwide strategies, as well as the power of money’⁵⁰, Lefebvre wrote. Enright questions what it means to be a modern woman nowadays in Ireland and the need but also the difficulties of dealing with the past.

⁴⁵ *The God of Small Things*, 135.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁷ *The Gathering*, 221-222.

⁴⁸ Edward Soja, 162.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁰ Lefebvre, 53.

Conclusion:

The gathering which takes place on the occasion of Liam's funeral, is the funeral of a certain relationship to Irish history. Symbolically, the traumatizing rape of young Liam, which took place in his grandmother's Ada's 'good room' some 30 years before by the owner of the house, can be read as a representation of both social and colonial domination in a house, which was architecturally speaking, the perfect image of a British terraced house, with a conventional air of moral propriety, as it kept what went on inside from the outsiders' view behind three layers of curtains. Then the extravagant house of the narrator's mother with all its extensions is the image of Ireland growing independent, with a high maternity rate, oblivious of its past, the mother being 'forgetfulness itself', not knowing where she is going, not even remembering her children's names. In order to make a happy life for herself, eventually, in the house she bought during the years of the Celtic Tiger, the narrator needs to gather the threads of her past as an Irish woman. Liam's funeral is also the funeral of many struggles. It is the funeral of traditions, old conventions and a certain way of being a conventional woman. It is also the funeral of the postcolonial debate. As opposed to Arundhati Roy, who claims that transgression is the only way out, Enright seems to be questioning the place of contemporary Irish women. Implicitly, she seems to be suggesting that post-colonialism and feminism are struggles that belong for their most part to the past and that neo-capitalism and global economy might be new oppressive dangers for women, dictating to them what normality is in all aspects of their lives.

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