
From “dead saint” to “lyreless Orpheus”: Post-traumatic Narrativization of Myths and Fairy Tales in John Banville’s *The Sea* and Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*

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Abstract. In *The Sea* (2005) and *The Gathering* (2007), John Banville and Anne Enright incorporate modernist and postmodernist intertextuality into accounts of bereavement. While the shattered existence of the protagonists is seemingly devoid of religious belief, they mobilize the palimpsestic immemorial past of mythological and fairy-tale intertexts to make sense of broken realities. The narrators’ self-portraits and invocations of lost people and places, oscillating between reminiscence and mythification, underscore postmodernism’s play with canonical stories. Both authors use mythological syncretism to express their characters’ quest for meaning: while Greek, Egyptian and Norse gods invade *The Sea*’s modern-day “Atlantis” (132), *The Gathering* is peopled with subverted Christian and Irish figures. However, rather than restoring coherence, myth and fairy-tale tropes are suffused with desperate irony, and the magic spell woven by mythological counterpoints turns out to be a post-traumatic, grimacing reflection of the characters’ troubled psyches, or an obfuscating screen. By interweaving and debunking seminal myths and tales, Banville and Enright give life to personal myths that bespeak the characters’ deep-seated sense of loss and disenchantment. The reader is thus left wondering if, by filling the gaps of post-traumatic memory with mythological rewritings, these defamiliarizing narratives of bereavement convey potential solace or reinforce their protagonists’ post-traumatic loss of landmarks.

Key Words. Banville, Enright, trauma, postmodernism, modernism, mourning, myth, fairy tale.

Resumen. En *The Sea* (2005) y *The Gathering* (2007), John Banville y Anne Enright incorporan la intertextualidad modernista y posmodernista en los relatos de duelo. Si bien la existencia destrozada de los protagonistas carece aparentemente de creencias religiosas, movilizan el pasado inmemorial palimpsesto de los intertextos mitológicos y de cuentos de hadas para dar sentido a realidades rotas. Los autorretratos de los narradores y las invocaciones de personas y lugares perdidos, que oscilan entre la reminiscencia y la mitificación, subrayan el juego del posmodernismo con las historias canónicas. Ambos autores utilizan el sincretismo

mitológico para expresar la búsqueda de significado de sus personajes: mientras los dioses griegos, egipcios y nórdicos invaden la actual “Atlántida” de *The Sea* (132), *The Gathering* está poblado de figuras cristianas e irlandesas subvertidas. Sin embargo, en lugar de restaurar la coherencia, los mitos y los tropos de los cuentos de hadas están impregnados de una ironía desesperada, y el hechizo mágico tejido por los contrapuntos mitológicos resulta ser un reflejo postraumático y con muecas de las psiques atribuladas de los personajes, o una pantalla que confunde. Al entrelazar y desacreditar mitos y cuentos seminales, Banville y Enright dan vida a mitos personales que revelan el profundo sentido de pérdida y desencanto de los personajes. Por lo tanto, el lector se pregunta si, al llenar los vacíos de la memoria postraumática con reescrituras mitológicas, estas narrativas desfamiliarizadoras de duelo transmiten consuelo potencial o refuerzan la pérdida postraumática de hitos de sus protagonistas.

Palabras clave. Banville, Enright, trauma, posmodernismo, modernismo, duelo, mito, cuentos de hadas.

Introduction¹

In 1981, John Banville claimed in the *Irish University Review*:

Modernism has run its course. So also, for that matter, has post-modernism. I believe, at least I hope, that we are on the threshold of a new *ism*, a new synthesis. But I hope it will be an art which is honest enough to despair and yet go on; rigorous and controlled, cool and yet passionate, without delusions, aware of its own possibilities and its own limits; an art which knows that truth is arbitrary, that reality is multifarious, that language is not a clear lens. Did I say *new*? What I have defined is as old as Homer. (“A Talk”, 13)

Even though he was then sketching the trajectory of literary innovations yet to come, Banville acknowledged the inscription of experiment within an age-old tradition of writing and the constant interplay between the “new” and the “old” in artistic creation. A few decades after Banville’s essay, indeed, modernism and postmodernism still informed the writing of his novel *The Sea* (2005) but both traditions were transposed into the framework of trauma theory, which irrupted on the critical stage in the late 1980s and early 1990s. When Anne Enright published *The Gathering* in 2007, her work also intertwined undercurrents of modernism and postmodernism with new theoretical concerns. “Trauma fiction”, Anne Whitehead argues, did inherit some of its defining features from postmodernist fiction, and “seeks to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event” (82). In Banville’s and Enright’s Man-Booker-Prize-winning novels, the first-person narratives of Max Morden (*The Sea*) and Veronica Hegarty (*The Gathering*) retrace their tortuous itineraries of bereavement. In *The Sea*, the loss of Max’s wife Anna brings back memories of his teenage love Chloe Grace, who drowned herself with her brother years before, while in *The Gathering*, the suicide by drowning of Veronica’s brother Liam forces her to unearth a buried family trauma. Those traumatic narratives and emotional grief journeys are interlaced with an undercurrent of mythical rewriting. According to Robert Garratt, trauma writers “[allow] history to unfold through recollection, as characters strain through memory to construct a sense of the past, ‘fabling’ events in an attempt to understand them” (3). In *The Sea* and *The Gathering*, the narrators rely heavily on an ever-present mythological intertext to try and put words on their grief and recover from it, intertwining memories with fabled versions of an often-irrecoverable past. If for Anne Enright, *The Gathering* probes “the edges between,

certainly, fantasy or imagination and memory, between memory and history, and where we let go of memory” (cited in Bracken and Cahill 30), both narratives conflate the protagonists’ exploration of their own troubled history with a dense intertextual network, blurring distinctions between memory and imagination. The narrators thus mobilize syncretic references from the palimpsestic immemorial past of mythological and fairy-tale intertexts of multiple cultural backgrounds to make sense of their broken realities.

However, the novels’ dense intertextual network at times turns into a chaotic patchwork, a potent symbol of the post-traumatic disorientation that pervades the characters’ existence. By interweaving and debunking myth and fairy-tale tropes, the plots showcase a grimacing version of the intertext, suffused with desperate irony, as a reflection of their characters’ troubled psyches. The narrators’ dialectic project oscillates between healing post-traumatic wounds and falling apart, thus mimicking their world’s implosion. I would argue that the innovative quality of intertextual references in both novels resides in the interplay between modernism, postmodernism and trauma fiction, since the revised myths that arise from the broken fragments of myths and tales aim at representing traumatic dislocation. According to Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, both novels ultimately offer a sense of redemption from the abyss of despair: “previous Irish trauma narratives centre on the role of silence and the individual, communal or societal suffering that traumas induce [but these novels] go beyond just representing trauma; they engage with the material nature of trauma by weaving it into the narrative, and they show how victims can heal through narrative processing” (4), no matter how disjointed this processing might be. Both authors’ treatment of myths thus appears to interlace multiple literary traditions and theoretical currents, as is frequent in contemporary anglophone fiction. Vera and Ansgar Nünning posit that among the prevailing trends perceptible in contemporary literature are the grounding of postmodernist techniques in ethical positions, a renewed focus on realism and a resurgence of modernism (36). Banville’s and Enright’s trauma novels thus complicate the literary heritage of both modernism and postmodernism by synthesizing them. The apparently holistic endeavour of intertextual syncretism is akin to a tapestry that can be repeatedly woven and unwoven. In this constant oscillation between the curative virtues of mythological syncretism and its failures, it will first be argued that the “mythic method” theorized by T.S. Eliot in “Ulysses, Order and Myth” partially proves to be a soothing source of comfort for the bereaved. However, Banville and Enright continually deconstruct mythical and fairy-tale intertexts the better to mirror the impossibility of living in a post-traumatic world. Finally, both novelists use their revised versions of grimacing myths in an attempt at narrativizing trauma in order to foreground their healing process.

The comforting structure of a syncretic “mythic method” (T.S. Eliot)

In a contemporary world where religion is losing its footing, the loss of a loved one becomes a source of painful disorientation, and grief “feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed” (1), as C.S. Lewis hauntingly phrases it in his memoir *A Grief Observed*, published in 1961. The progressive dissolution of institutionalized religious belief precipitated this sense of uncertainty and puzzlement in grief. Indeed, Bridget English argues, the decline of religious narratives brought on a more acute impression of the meaninglessness of death in Western cultures (9). Characteristically, the narrators of both *The Sea* and *The Gathering* balk at acknowledging the existence of the unique and almighty Christian God. In *The Sea*, the narrator, Max Morden, unequivocally dismisses religious creed and refuses to “entertain the possibility of an afterlife, or any deity capable of offering it” (185). The capitalized God is ostensibly absent from his mind, only to be replaced by the vague quantifier “any deity”. Tellingly, in *The Gathering*, where characters are “asleep like dead saint[s]” (133), the crumbling edifice of religious faith is besieged by death, and the evocation of Christian figures is mostly ironical.² Even the

mobilization of Irish mythology at the heart of *The Gathering* appears disillusioned and traumatic, since the Hegarty children all attended a school named St Dymphna, “patron saint of the insane [...] an ancient Irish princess who refused to marry her father” (128). Instead of offering comfort, cultural and religious beliefs bear the scars of terrible abuse and inappropriate relationships in Enright’s novel. The reference is fitting in the Irish society at the turn of the twenty-first century, when child abuse scandals were gradually unveiled by newspapers. As a result, Ralf Haekel reminds us that *The Gathering* “mistrusts the mechanisms of collective identity by questioning the pillars typical of Irish national identity, the church and the family [...], represented as the very source of violence and abuse – and therefore as the cause for the disintegration of identity” (170). The crumbling of religious belief seeps through every minute detail of the story, as Veronica, who is indiscriminately “los[ing] faith” (133), asserts that her grandmother “Ada believed in very little. She believed in a clean house” (89). By ironically downgrading faith to a purely material status, Veronica ostensibly strips it of any spiritual or transcendent quality.

Consequently, both narrators strive to reinvest the depleted space of religion by peopling their narratives with figures of the sacred from various mythologies and eras. The reassuring structure and universality of myth, which is meant to “present a model or charter for human behaviour” (*Britannica*), thus appears to bring solace in a world deserted by religious belief. In *The Sea*, Max Morden thinks of himself as “compiling an [Egyptian] Book of the Dead” (237), and a Christian “vulgate of the dead” (260) at once, writing his own grief memoir through the prism of mythological syncretism. Romain Nguyen Van argues that this intertwining of mythical tutelages bestows a “quasi-mystical dimension” to the narrative (491). As for Veronica’s confessional endeavour and half-imagined retracing of her family’s history in *The Gathering*, Schneider mentions that it draws on Christian and non-Christian myths, for example the Biblical figure of Veronica who wiped the face of Jesus clean while he was carrying his cross on Golgotha, but also the Egyptian goddess Isis, who gathered the remains of her brother-husband Osiris (Schneider 15). Gerardine Meaney also perceives a Greek mythical undercurrent in Veronica’s story, since “like Antigone, she observes rituals at her mother’s behest, resenting her sister’s preoccupation with what Daddy would have wanted” (cited in Bracken and Cahill 157). By conflating Egyptian, Greek and Christian references, both narrators aim at becoming immemorial mystical recorders of the past, as if they had been invested with a cross-temporal sacred mission.

Indeed, since religious belief has waned, other narrative sources of comfort are sought to relieve emotional turmoil. The notion of myth as a key to the understanding of present distress or disorientation, a modernist tenet, was theorized by British critic and poet T.S. Eliot in his essay “Ulysses, Order and Myth” in 1923. Eliot posits that “using the myth, in manipulating a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity [...] is a way of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (480). In *The Sea*, in his desire to “escape from an intolerable present in the only tense possible, the past, that is, the faraway past” (100), Max Morden is fittingly entranced by what he calls “the golden dust of Greece” (74), as if it had the power to bring magic into his life and re-enchant the ruins of the past. The fairy-tale terminology of the “golden dust” seems to equate Greek mythology with magic and supernatural powers. The past is depicted through a mythological prism, as a time of long-gone “divinities” (107, 109), or “Olympian heights” (207), peopled with characters who borrow their features from divinities. For instance, the departed Mr Grace strongly resembles the god Pan, as he is often compared to an “old grinning goat god” (125), or a “satyr” (233). Likewise, Max yearns for a “genie and lamp” (in the shape of a fleetingly-transfigured “steel kettle”) to “grant [him] a wish, just the one” (21), as an attempt to transfigure his desolate present by draping it in the fabric of Oriental legends. Indeed, as Richard Chase argues, “myth is more akin to the naïve assumptions and techniques of magic

than to religion” (cited in Vickery 70). Furthermore, the mythical intertext of both novels dramatizes the protagonists’ bereavement by turning the dead into immortal creatures. In *The Gathering*, following her grandfather Charlie’s death, Veronica remembers that she was urged by her grandmother to “view, or witness, or maybe even touch, this briefly sacred thing, our dead grandfather” (62), turning the dead into a mystical, sacred object. In *The Sea*, the late Anna is also both aggrandized and reified by Max’s memory: “I always admired her Attic profile, the nose a line of carven ivory” (18). She simultaneously becomes a figure of Greek mythology (with her “Attic profile”) and a work of art (a piece of “carven ivory”). In order to redeem their sense of loss, the narrators cast a narrative spell on their late relatives, foiling the oblivion of death by turning the deceased into mystical relics and mythical figures.

But the “golden dust of myth” does not only transfigure the deceased, as it gradually extends to every death-related character. In both novels, the symbolic value of death falls on secondary characters who bear highly evocative names: Azrael the undertaker in *The Gathering*, and Mr Todd, the doctor who brings the news of Anna’s illness in *The Sea*. In Enright’s novel, the undertaker is aptly named after the “Angel of Death” (Noegel and Wheeler 47) who transports the souls of the deceased in the Qur’an. The name Azrael appears in various religious backgrounds (both in Hebrew and Islamic traditions), which places religious syncretism at the heart of the novel’s characterization of the undertaker. Enright’s playful onomastics elevate this seemingly minor character to a spiritual status as Veronica describes him in an aggrandizing light and claims to “love the undertaker. [...] This trendy ease he has is almost spiritual. [...] How do you have sex with a guy like that. Does he have moods?” (79). In Veronica’s playful imagination, Azrael is entirely depersonalized and turned into a mystical creature, a soothing presence. At the other end of the spectrum, in *The Sea*, Mr Todd is imagined by Max as a synthesis of morbid figures; his last name means death in German, but it could also be an allusion to the legendary evil barber of Fleet Street who slit his victims’ throats, Sweeney Todd, since his rooms have “the air of a sinisterly superior barber’s shop” (93). The doctor is also consistently likened to the god of the Underworld, as he works in an office that resembles “Pluto’s realm” (23). Indeed, when Max and his wife Anna learn the news of the latter’s soon-to-be-fatal illness, they figuratively enter the Underworld: “the pit opened under our feet that day in Mr Todd’s rooms” (93). In Max’s Manichean world, the heroes (himself and his wife) are pitted against the villainous doctor, who personifies death. Mr Todd is also turned into a dark wizard by Max’s fanciful imagination. Always “promising new treatments”, he seems to be “speaking of magic potions, the alchemist’s physic” (17). The doctor is never really seen as a scientist, but more as a malevolent, irrational force of destruction. In *The Sea* and *The Gathering*, the doctor and the undertaker would thus fall within two categories of Propp’s typology of fairy-tale characters: the villain and the helper. The villain’s role is “to disturb the peace of a happy family, to cause some misfortune” (27), a fitting description of Mr. Todd’s disruptive apparition in the Mordens’ existence, while “guidance is a function of the helper” (81) and the undertaker’s name Azrael in *The Gathering* indeed means “Help from God” or “Whom God helps” (Davidson 64). As per Eliot’s mythic method, those functional secondary characters seem to have been created by Banville and Enright to impose “shape and significance” onto the chaos of death and mourning as experienced in a post-secular world. If the figure of the helper brings much-needed relief to Veronica’s shattering grief and “emotional free-fall” (Harte 190) in *The Gathering*, the nefarious figure of Mr Todd also introduces a threat at the heart of *The Sea*’s mythical edifice.

The mythic curse: from “golden dust” to ashes

Although the narrator of *The Sea* hopes that the mythological intertext will restore meaning in his disoriented world, “the disenchanted, disenchanting eye” (174) of grief infiltrates the narrative and robs mythical figures and stories of their comforting quality as “master narratives” (Hutcheon 6). In *The Gathering*, this world is not so much disenchanted as full of black magic, blighted by “a curse” (11). The invocation of higher powers and rituals as protection against the curse of meaninglessness turns out to be an empty shell. If in *The Sea*, optical illusions can cruelly turn a character into “the felled effigy of some goddess no longer worshipped by the tribe” (119), when Veronica sees her brother’s corpse in *The Gathering*, she distances herself from the terrible scene by turning the visual confrontation into an aesthetic vision, but her ironic perspective immediately short-circuits her own emotion: “if you ask me what my brother looked like after he was dead, I can tell you that he looked like Mantegna’s foreshortened Christ, in paisley” (63).³ The incongruous detail added to the mention of Mantegna’s work of art turns a mystical aesthetic experience into a grotesque traumatic vision and partakes of the subversive quality of postmodernist rewriting and its “ironic re-reading of the art of the past” (Hutcheon 23).

The memorial edifice of *The Sea* mobilizes a different web of cultural references, and its orphic subtext casts Max as Orpheus, Anna as Eurydice and Mr Todd as Pluto. However, in the novel, the myth is reversed: since Orpheus is unable to locate his Eurydice in the Underworld, it is the mourner, rather than the deceased, who is condemned to ramble eternally in the “twilit netherworld” (96) of limbo, “in Pluto’s realm, amidst the trackless wastes of which I wander lost, a lyreless Orpheus” (23). For Hedda Friberg, the novel recounts the failure of Max’s endeavour to “[descend] into the Hades of his past” and retrieve his own Beatrice (119).⁴ This new version of the hell-bound Orpheus has therefore lost both his Eurydice and his magical talent, since Orpheus’s music is above all seen as “a *carmen*, an incantation with magical powers” (Dekens in Bergeron 100, my translation). The loss of the poet’s instrument, a symbol of harmony, is a symptom of the world’s disenchantment, as the Underworld atmosphere of death infects the world of the living. In the Grace family’s former house, “The Cedars”, now transformed into a “lodging house” (39), most rooms seem to have collapsed into the underground land of the dead to become “a cheerless, ill-lit chamber which has a subterranean atmosphere, and is always dank and cold. The furnishings have an underground look to them” (194). The former summer house of the now long-gone Grace family becomes a buried enclave of death and Banville distils this mood by disseminating evocative adjectives throughout the passage (“cheerless”, “subterranean”, “cold”, “underground”). In another suggestive excerpt, Banville strengthens his mythological syncretism by superimposing the Norse “Valhalla” onto the Greek Underworld in his description of seascapes: “in the midst of that spectacular display of Valhallan petulance” (185). In Norse mythology, the Valhalla is the place where dead warriors are brought. Both the Norse and the Greek lands of the dead thus encroach onto the world of the living in the novel. Enright also defamiliarizes the experience of mourning in *The Gathering* by bringing the mythical Underworld into the post-traumatic world: “it is like Christmas in Hades. It is like we are all dead” (209). The Underworld is traditionally sealed from the world of the living, but in both novels, the land of the living is contaminated by death, and the myth is reversed in these mourning narratives.

There is a distinctly postmodernist aesthetic at work in these mythical displacements, which brings the grief narrative to the forefront of the plot. According to Jack Zipes, “postmodern revisions [...] do not reassemble the fairy tales that they break down into fragments into a new whole. Instead, they expose the artifice of the fairy tale” (157). Fairy tales are thus stripped of their happy endings, in which heroes are reunited to “live happily ever after”.⁵ Since on the contrary, grief stories separate their protagonists, the superimposition of this disjunction onto the patterns of fairy tales radically alters their meaning. *The Sea* thus monitors the progress of Max’s self-image from triumphant to tragic hero in the tale of Anna’s

illness. Upon learning about Anna's cancer, Max begins his story with this virile fantasy: "I had an urge to rush forward and snatch her up in my arms, fireman-fashion, and carry her bodily out of there" (16). But the heroic plot quickly turns to a tragedy when "the harrowed hero staggers on stage with the heroine's corpse in his arms" (203). The evolution from pre-bereavement heroism to tragic defeat is potently expressed by the shift in vocabulary from "rush forward" to "stagger", but also by the sudden congealing of "body" into "corpse". The intertext thus deviates from the original happy-ending fairy-tale trope and the medieval heroism of gallant knights to the darker world of Shakespearian tragedies. Banville also crushes any hope of a happy ending in another fairy-tale rewriting: "Chloe, her cruelty. The beach. The midnight swim. Her lost sandal, that night in the doorway of the dancehall, Cinderella's shoe. All gone. All lost. It is no matter. Tired, tired and drunk" (184). In this allusion to the canonical tale of Cinderella, the prince's ball is replaced with a "dancehall" and the lost shoe does not ultimately lead to a reunion between the heroes. Max is both the protagonist and the narrator of those scraps of memories, but his grief has caused the loss of his powers in both capacities: the magical objects and figures of his fairy-tale world have vanished, and he is drunk, unable to form a coherent speech, as expressed by his paratactic, fragmented narrative of the lost past. This rewriting exposes "the effects of the inherent latency of trauma, [which] can be discerned in the broken or fragmented quality of testimonial narratives" (Whitehead 7).⁶ Enright also savagely debunks her fairy-tale imagery in the "crisis diary" (Dell' Amico 59) of *The Gathering*, leaving only a bitterly disenchanting universe: "Tom [Veronica's husband] tried to resurrect me by lying the length of my body and kissing and rubbing and all the rest. But I was over that – I had forgotten it" (132). Veronica, a mock-version of lethargic princesses such as Sleeping Beauty or Snow White, can no longer be revived by Prince Charming's magical kiss. Instead of identifying with a typical fairy-tale heroine, Veronica then goes on to describe herself as an uprooted supernatural creature: "Rebecca takes my hand in hers and walks me to the kitchen, like a mislaid giant she has found in the hall" (196). Enright uses a displaced bestiary of fairy-tales to convey her character's disorientation and sense of being out-of-place. Similarly, in *The Sea*, another creature is subverted by Banville, when Max pictures himself as "a thing of air, a drifting spirit, Ariel set free and at a loss" (247).⁷ While Ariel's liberation is a joyous occasion in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in Max's grief story, this bleak rewriting of the original play's exhilarating freedom "speaks to his sense of disconnect in the wake of that immediate, reality-altering horror" (Costello-Sullivan 345). What emerges from the creature's liberation is a sense of disorientation ("at a loss"), suggesting that freedom and solitude are tragic rather than positive attributes of the character's condition.

Mythical and fairy-tale universes are thus used as syncretic palimpsests in both novels but, instead of restoring stability and coherence into a chaotic world, they are often reworked and thoroughly questioned. The "golden dust" of mythical enchantment turns to ashes ("the misty grey air of evening had the feel of dampened ash", as Banville poetically phrases it in *The Sea* 136) in the post-apocalyptic world, deserted by transcendence in *The Sea*: "they departed, the gods, on the day of the strange tide" (3). The faraway past, a bygone golden age, leaves survivors confronted with tragic figures and the invasion of death into the land of the living.

Narrativizing trauma through myth

However, the implosion of the reassuring structure of myth and fairy-tale tropes does not entail the dissolution of the protagonists' narrative powers altogether: the disenchanting mythological background becomes part and parcel of the narrators' poetics of trauma as they use it to compose a mimetic portrayal of their grief. Even though some traumatic experiences remain out of the reach of representation, like the exact moment of Anna's death in *The Sea* – which

Max eludes by momentarily stepping out of her room –, the oblique use of bleaker or fragmented myths also expresses the first-person narrators' attempt at narrativizing trauma. Indeed, according to Anne Whitehead, since converting traumatic memory into narrative memory is a crucial step in the process of recovery (87), narrative processing is endowed with healing virtues. Nevertheless, the narrators' use of mythology to relate their tales of trauma remains highly ambivalent, as “narrativization is closest to fictionalization in the sense of a dubious departure from, or distortion of, historical reality” (LaCapra 15). In the absence of a direct access to traumatic memories characterized by their latency and unassimilated nature, the recourse to mythical narrativization, an indirect means of recovering the past experience (thus also recovering from it) could entail a re-covering of it, preventing the traumatized subject from accessing a buried traumatic truth.⁸ As Hedda Friberg, Nordin and Pedersen explain in their introduction of *Recovering Memory*,

In its intransitive form the verb “recover” relates to the idea of returning to a “normal” condition after a period of trouble or difficulty, or of getting better after an illness, shock or accident. In its transitive form the verb “recover” means to get back something that was taken from one, something that was lost or almost destroyed – the idea of regaining an ability, a sense of control over one’s feelings, movements, after a period of absence or loss. If the word is hyphenated as “re-covering”, the prefix makes the verb mean to “cover again”, or to bring back to the former state of being covered. (ix)

Are these new versions of post-traumatic mythical narratives a way of gradually uncovering the truth and healing from a problematic past, or instead, of covering it up with a fabled version of the past? The narrators model their own traumatic history on the frame of grimacing myths (be they new or old), which poetically express the characters' disorientation, turning a raw traumatic experience into a narrative (re)construction.

In both novels (and unsurprisingly more so in *The Sea*), the contagion of death and the overwhelming nature of the traumatic experience are expressed by extended metaphorical references to and rewritings of flood myths. Northrop Frye argues that “in the tragic world the *unformed* world becomes the sea, as the narrative myth of dissolution is often a flood myth” (cited in Vickery 97). In *The Sea*, where a “siren’s song” (132) resonates throughout, a lethal waterscape permeates the narrator’s imagination and, in the wake of the Grace twins’ drowning, water and death are closely connected. The shock of Anna’s cancer diagnosis leads to an invasion of the sea imagery in Max’s defamiliarized perspective: “we walked into the deserted car park, all those machines ranked neatly there, sleek as porpoises” (247). When Max is told of Anna’s death, the water isotopy returns and he imagines he is “walking into the sea” (264). Characters and objects alike are turned into sea creatures, as if Max were narrating, not exactly from the Underworld, but from the submerged world of his post-traumatic experience. In this rewritten version of the Underworld which borrows from the myth of the Atlantis (“the little waves speak with an animate voice, whispering eagerly of some ancient catastrophe, [perhaps] the sinking of Atlantis”, 132), the land of the living becomes a submerged enclave of death. Atlantis is the apt metaphor of a novel entitled *The Sea*, in which memory is very much submerged: “it was said there was a church, submerged in the sandy seabed down there, intact, with bell tower and bell, that once had stood on a headland that was gone too, brought toppling into the roiling waves one immemorial night of tempest and awful flood” (12). Here, the submerged element is a church, which fittingly bespeaks the disappearance of religious belief. The whole landscape is built around the notions of loss and ruin (“gone”, “brought toppling”, “submerged”), as if to accentuate the sense of deprivation. This lost Atlantis, with its aura of dissolution and absence, becomes an accurate metaphor for the character’s overwhelming grief. The ubiquitous sea imagery also appears in *The Gathering*, in which it transfigures the scenery:

“I should start at the place where Liam walked into the sea [...] I am imagining this place in the darkness, and the lapping around my waist of black salt water” (75). The image of Liam’s entering the sea haunts Veronica and forces her to recreate the sensorial experience of his death, as if she were gradually turning into a drowned person herself. While a young Liam tellingly owned a copy of Maupassant’s short-story “La Mer”, “in which [...] a sailor stores his severed arm in a barrel of salt in order to bring it home” (196),⁹ Veronica longs to become a sea creature, “swim out [...] and disappear with a flick of my tail” (140). In novels where characters commit suicide by drowning, submersion offers a dense metaphorical network and a sense of coherent narrative: myths of dissolution appear to be the only way of expressing the overwhelming nature of traumatic bereavement and turning it into a poetic experience.

Out of the ashes of degraded tales, new fables also arise to monitor the disorientation of bereavement and the overwhelming nature of buried traumas. The cracks of memory leave room for peopling the narrator’s imagination with monsters and nightmarish creatures, thereby creating new legends. In *The Sea*, Max and his wife Anna make up the story of a malignant pregnancy in order to try and wrap their minds around the enormity and brutality of Anna’s illness: “there it was, squatting in her lap, the bulge that was big baby De’Ath, burgeoning inside her, biding its time” (18). The tumour that suddenly disrupted their lives thus becomes a malevolent baby, as its lethal growth is equated with the developing of a monstrous child within the womb. In *The Gathering*, Veronica desperately attempts to narrate Liam’s sexual assault by the family’s landlord, a traumatizing event she may have witnessed as a child without understanding it at first: “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” (143). The child’s consciousness is unable to fully comprehend the magnitude of the traumatic experience, since “central to the immediacy of the experience [...] is a gap that carries the force of the event” (Caruth 7), so she creates a tale out of it, hiding the distressing violence of the scene beneath the veneer of an oneiric tone (“strangely”, “flowered”). The child’s creative depiction of this monstrous shape (the boy-shaped penis) acknowledges the impossibility of direct representation all the while lifting the veil on the traumatic experience. The creative depiction of this monstrous shape puts words on the terrible trauma of child molestation, but it fails to provide an explanation, acknowledging the collapse of meaning in traumatic experience.¹⁰ The creative speech of myth thus foils the “silence and oblivion of eternal mystery” (Vickery 21). Even though Veronica is unable to tell the whole story without mediation, this oblique poetic narrative constitutes an antidote to paralyzing silence.¹¹ The monstrous imagery enables her to verbalize her nightmarish experience and finally unravel the truth: “they were not one thing, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew, Mr Nugent and Liam” (144). Only once Veronica has revealed her foundational traumatic experience can she envision potentially recovering from it, even though such a fabled version of memory might also lead to covering up the past instead of elucidating it. For Robert Garratt, “to tell the story of a traumatic past becomes both a task and ‘a cure’, since only with the ability to tell the event does it become true memory, relegated to the past, and therefore over” (8). Myth becomes a privileged entry into narrativizing the trauma, in an effort to heal from it.

However, the mythical quality of Veronica’s writing also stems from its self-proclaimed uncertain grasp of truth, turning her account of the past into a potential “fabled” story (Garratt 3): “I would like to write down what happened [...] but I am not sure if it really did happen [...] All I have are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns” (1; 2). By going back to the roots of trauma, Veronica compiles the story of a time that predates her birth: a story that she does not know much about, but which she decides to reinvent in order to fill in the gaps of her knowledge and understanding. By doing so, she intertwines both meaning of the word “myth”: “a story which provides an explanation” and “a misrepresentation of the

truth". If the story helps represent traumatic experience, doubts are nonetheless cast on the veracity of its claims, which is characteristic of both trauma and myth. As Ruth Leys argues, "if narration cures, it does so not because it infallibly gives the patient access to a primordially personal truth but because it makes possible a form of self-understanding even in the absence of empirical verification" (117). If no absolute truth of the characters' traumatic experience can ever be unearthed, mythical subtexts help frame it, in an attempt to make sense of it.

Conclusion

To conclude, if both in *The Sea* and in *The Gathering*, it initially appears that the narrators have the ambition of becoming new bards, they also end up acknowledging their status as traumatized characters in their mythical rewritings. Consequently, the reassuring stability and overarching structure of immemorial myths and tales is compromised by the uncertain status of Max and Veronica as wounded narrators and protagonists of their own stories. New myths of destruction or displacement arise out of the ruins of the old ones to capture the narrators' post-traumatic condition. The mythical intertext remains crucial to the grieving protagonists' healing process in those trauma novels: instead of imposing coherence and casting a spell on the post-traumatic world, those warped revisions of myths and tales offer the promise of gradual healing through the mimetic representation of suffering and disorientation. According to Richard Chase, "myth performs the cathartic function of dramatizing the clashes and harmonies of life in a social and natural environment" (cited in Vickery 72). The cathartic use of collective memory aims at enabling bereaved characters to recover from traumatic experience or the prostration of grief. Mythological syncretism allows the narrators to re-member the past by merging memories and imaginary stories, all the while creating a space for the disjointed account of post-traumatic reality and regaining narrative control over their traumatic experience. For Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, "the narrator in *The Sea* wrestles with the omissions and uncertainty of memory [and] Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) foregrounds Veronica Hegarty's processing of trauma and loss through narrative (re)construction to attain a degree of closure" (4). Modernist and postmodernist perspectives are thus intertwined in these complex mourning and trauma narratives, thus turning those "master narratives" (Hutcheon 6) into uncertain and paradoxical agents of consolation in an age of post-secular mourning. The fragmentation and subversion of myths breaks the mould of the modernist "mythic method", making this distorted mirror the perfect mimesis of contemporary traumatic experience. Even though the interweaving of traumatic myths dismantles narrative coherence, it helps construct the novels' psychic characterization. In the modernized and personalized versions of myths that are thus created out of the old ones, it appears that the ability to adapt mythical and fairy-tale tropes to accurately represent one's situation, rather than perfect remembrance of the past, offers a tentative and yet ambivalent means of recovery.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Claire Bracken for her judicious and helpful observations on this article.

² Even though Enright dramatizes a generalized loss of faith, *The Gathering* is pervaded with "mental constructs from the Catholic discourse" (Schwall 53). Schwall identifies four major Catholic concepts, which inform the novel's imagery: original sin, forgiving, redemption and the "Noli me tangere" episode.

³ In other excerpts of the novel, Liam's complex character is also depicted as an anti-Christ, according to Schwall (54).

⁴ Here, Friberg alludes to Dante's *Inferno*, which is itself a variation on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

⁵ The "consolation of the Happy Ending, [which] almost all complete fairy-stories must have", Tolkien argues, is one of fairy tales' most artificial distinguishing features (Tolkien 13).

⁶ “The novelist re-creates the sense of disorientation inherent to trauma that thwarts knowledge and comprehension, so that as readers we partake of the protagonist’s grueling struggle to make sense” (Harte 192).

⁷ The reference to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* does have a mythical potential in Western culture, since Shakespeare’s canonical plays are “dense with realistic understanding of secular man, [so they] operate on the mythical plane” (Cox 391).

⁸ In *The Gathering*, Carol Dell’Amico argues, “testimonies involving traumatic events are often fraught with distortions and riddled with gaps – a fact that Enright emphasizes through the character of Veronica, a deeply suspect witness and narrator” (60).

⁹ The exact French title of the short story Enright is alluding to in this passing reference is “En Mer”, which was first published by Maupassant in February 1883.

¹⁰ Enright has remarked that “there is often a gathering sense of dread, there’s a gap sometimes in the text from which all kinds of monsters can emerge” (cited in Gardam 101). Monstrous shapes and figures do appear in both *The Sea* and *The Gathering*.

¹¹ For Liam Harte, Veronica Hegarty is “in search of a discourse through which to make sense of her difficult relationship to a traumatic past [...] it is this concealed narrative that Veronica is seeking to reconstruct and communicate as part of an arduous process of recovery, which is overlaid by searing grief and anger” (189).

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