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"Default[ing] to the Oldest Scar": A Psychoanalytic Investigation of Subjectivity in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*

Sarah C. Gardam

...though it hurt, I found that I was able to draw
on more ancient hurts than that – and that is how
I survived.
This is how we all survive. We default to the
oldest scar.
(*The Gathering* 97)

- 1 An initial reading of Anne Enright's *The Gathering* may lead readers to dismiss the novel as a mere therapeutic narrative – Veronica Hegarty's struggle to confront the unacceptable reality of the sexual trauma that set her brother Liam on his tragic path toward suicide. According to this reading, Veronica's narrative reconstruction of events constitutes an attempt to neutralize the traumatic memories, incorporating them as just another part of her past, and thereby "modify [ing her] fear structure," to borrow the language of trauma theory ¹. I would like to argue that Enright's text merits closer psychoanalytic study because it provocatively engages theoretical explanations of subjectivity put forward by Jacques Lacan and his psychoanalytic antecedents. Dana Craciun notes that Enright's previous books "enact the postmodernist concern for the 'radically undetermined and unstable nature of textuality and subjectivity,'" while Jeanett Shumaker discusses how Enright's use of uncanny doubles "demythologizes Western traditions about the stability of identity"; however, scholars have not yet examined the sophistication and depth of Enright's psychoanalytic leanings (Craciun 211; Shumaker 118). Her latest novel, *The Gathering*, lends itself to such study because the text's exploration of sexual trauma is simultaneously an investigation of the inevitable human trauma of the split subject – what Slavoj Žižek calls "the traumatic kernel" of the subject's being – and which is, in Lacanian terms, "the 'truth' of the

unconscious [...] the moment of fundamental division through which the subject entered into language and sexuality, and the constant failing of position within both" (*Metastases* 178; Rose 53). As Jacqueline Rose explains in her introduction to *On Feminine Sexuality*:

Lacan's statements on language need to be taken in two directions – towards the fixing of meaning itself (that which is enjoined on the subject), and away from that very fixing to the point of its constant slippage, the risk or vanishing-point which it always contains (the unconscious). Sexuality is placed on both these dimensions at once. The difficulty is to hold these two emphases together – sexuality in the symbolic (an ordering) and sexuality as that which constantly fails (43).

- 2 Veronica struggles between these two dimensions, using language to order her sexual experience, while also sensing that both language and sexuality fail to capture the 'truth' of her unconscious, which, according to Lacan, is organized around a fundamental lack. In other words, although Veronica's therapeutic employment of language could potentially help her to reestablish a more stable and healthy sense of self, she also seems aware that the possibility of coherent identity and wholeness that language seems to extend (via ideology) is actually the "ultimate fantasy" of human experience (Rose 32). Veronica, like all human subjects, "can only operate within language by constantly repeating that moment of fundamental and irreducible division" (Rose 31). I focus here on Veronica's increasing awareness of identity-as-illusion, resulting from her reliving of the original trauma of split subjectivity, brought on by the traumatic loss of her brother, and from Veronica's consequent interrogation of the excessive nature of sexuality.
- 3 A brief introduction to Lacanian theories of infantile trauma will help to clarify the terms of this discussion. Lacan builds on Freud's ideas about infantile oedipal trauma, but for Lacan the trauma occurs through the subject's introduction into language, the law of the father, which establishes the difference between the sexes and hence divides the subject as she identifies a (distorted) image of her "self" through the perceptions of those around her. The subject becomes a mere signifier, existing only within language (*Seminar XX* 36). The ideological world enables the traumatized infant to construct the illusion of a secure identity to cover over the essential split; however, the subject's unconscious mind, constituted around the original loss or lack created at the moment of the subject's divisive introduction to language and sexuality, continues to undermine her sense of stability by hinting at the subject's fundamentally split nature. This lack lies at the core of sexuality as well, proscribing the possibility of satisfaction by giving rise to the desire for what has been irretrievably lost. Language shares sexuality's inevitable failure; it can only function through symbolization – by designating an object in its absence ².
- 4 Lacan's ideas help to explain the inseparability of language and sex in Enright's text, thereby illuminating the depth and complexity of narrator Veronica Hegarty's struggles against and within language and sexuality in the wake of her brother's death. Liam's death throws Veronica into an identity crisis because it triggers the original traumatic loss that she and all other human beings experience as they enter into sexuality and language. Gaps begin to appear in her conscious psychic life as her unconscious mind yields up repressed memories, fears, and wishes that disrupt the falsely stable subjectivity she has constructed through interaction with the ideological world. This threatening of her ability to continue existing in her own life invests

Veronica's investigation of Liam's death with a special urgency: it is simultaneously an investigation of the traumatic way she came into being.

- 5 Liam's death dredges up material from Veronica's *unconscious mind*, which, according to Lacan, bears witness to the original splitting of the subject and therefore "undermines the subject from any position of certainty, from any relation of knowledge to his or her psychic processes and history, and simultaneously reveals the fictional nature of the sexual category to which every human subject is nonetheless assigned" (Rose 29). Veronica is suffering from exactly this lack of certainty about her psychic history as she becomes increasingly aware of that history's fictional nature; this is why she feels the "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" (11). The uncertainty "roaring" inside her is both the event of her brother's abuse as well as the original traumatic splitting of her subjectivity, which she can hardly "name" because that split occurred just as she was introduced to language.
- 6 The gap of the sexual abuse in the text is reflected in the cracks that begin to appear in Veronica's stable identity as Veronica's unconscious mind reveals a core-emptiness, lack, or "nothing [ness] that exists beneath Veronica's constructed identity. Enright, a strong believer in the power of the unconscious, has noted 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..." (Tonkin Interview, para. 10). Veronica becomes increasingly aware of such monstrous gaps between the sudden emptiness revealed by her brother's death and the supposedly full life she has been leading. She experiences feelings that her house and her family have "nothing to do with me" (36); that they are just "a residue" (36); that she is in danger of dying of "irrelevance," of "fad [ing] away" (38). She cannot remember the "nothing" that she does as she putters around her house at night, but feels that "it would be nice to know what kind of nothing that was" (38). Furthermore, she has begun to hear voices, she cannot even remember the word for her occupation ("housewife"), and she no longer feels attached to any of the things she owns, experiencing instead a repeated urge to deconstruct the houses which represent her socially constructed identity (39).
- 7 This troubled profile indicates that, although she may not have been sexually abused herself, Veronica demonstrates all of the textbook symptoms of a post-traumatic or "hysterical" subject who is suffering the effects of sexual abuse or violence (which are fundamentally synonymous, as I will discuss later³); however, Veronica's post-traumatic symptoms spring from the more primal cause that gives *The Gathering* its depth and shape. Her symptoms have been brought on by the death of her brother Liam, whose "great talent" in life had been "exposing the lie" and who has likewise exposed in death the lie of language, of the ideological world, which has, until now, assembled Veronica into a coherent subject and masked the fact that she is inherently split and lacking. Liam's death shows her that she "has lost something that cannot be replaced" and that, in order to tell the story of that loss, she must start "long before he was born" (11; 13). Veronica begins this investigation by recreating the story of how her brother's abuser, Lamb Nugent, first entered their lives by falling in love with their grandmother, Ada Merriman. Although the original trauma of the split subject really goes back to the beginning of human history, the story of Lamb and Ada does allow Veronica to investigate the imbalanced structure of sexuality, as we shall see shortly.

- 8 Veronica has trouble pinning down her personal history; partly because she realizes that her "true" memories are really just as fictional as the ones she imagines, since the entire construction of her identity has been a fiction. She apprehends this Lacanian idea with her words: "the only things that I am sure of are the things I never saw – my little blasphemies..." (66). The fictional construction of her identity and history is merely a symptom of language's nature as an unstable medium built around a lack – words can only symbolize absent things. As Rose articulates, "Lacan's statements on language need to be taken in two directions – towards the fixing of meaning itself (that which is enjoined on the subject), and away from that very fixing to the point of its constant slippage, the risk or vanishing-point which it always contains (the unconscious)" (43). Even as she struggles to fix meaning to her brother's death, Veronica finds that meaning continually "slips" out from under her. She finds that history keeps "sliding around in [her] head" (13); that her memory "slip [ps] by [her] too fast" (108). As she talks to her sister Bea on the phone as she rides into Brighton, Veronica finds herself staring at one line in the landscape "that refuses to move" but "slides backwards instead, and that is where I fix my eye" (44). Even as Veronica-as-constructed-subject "I" struggles to "fix" her imaginative "eye" on the past to attach meaning to it, she finds that, in her mind's eye, she still sees Bea as a little girl (43-44). Veronica realizes that it is "impossible" for her to grow up, to let her father die, to let her sister enter adolescence, because language will always slip off of whatever she tries to attach it to, causing the meaning she struggles to construct to vanish (44). Her unconscious mind will always remind her of this slippage, undermining her conscious mind's attempts to order her experience according to temporal, spatial, or historical 'realities.'
- 9 Veronica's narrative suggests that Liam's *inability* to order his experience is what ultimately destroys him – like many victims of child abuse, he has lost a basic trust in the orderly constructions of the ideological world and its authority figures. Liam has experienced sexuality (a false order imposed by language) prematurely and therefore chaotically; a fact which rends his split subjectivity further instead of patching over it. As a result, Liam fails to construct an identity that he or anyone else can believe in. Life seems like a "complete joke" to Liam, who exists "beyond the rules" (167; 163). He laughs at everything, including himself, spiraling into the destruction of a self that lacks the belief in stability and meaning that ideology usually constructs for the human subject as a means of disguising its split, lost origin. Veronica, thinking back on her own wilder days, realizes that she too "could have been lost," but saved herself by finding the "path" of respectability that Liam has "wandered off" (121; 123).
- 10 The gap between them widens as they travel in the opposite directions that language and sexuality can take, Veronica heading toward order and leaving Liam prey to the fearful, slippery content of the unconscious. She recalls, "Liam slid backwards from me into his misspent youth" and confesses: "I left Liam to the opening gap of the door, and to whatever was behind it. Something boring and horrible..." (165; 123). The gap in the door that "torment [s]" Veronica stands in here for the unconscious, the repressed, that original gap at the heart of subjectivity. Veronica chooses to repress the original trauma of split subjectivity; instead she hearkens to the stable sexual identity assigned to her that gives her meaning, admitting, "I wanted to be a girl. I wanted to have sex that meant something" (123). The sexual division here of Liam and Veronica into man and woman mirrors that first sexual division assigned to them by the law of the father.

It also suggests the structural imbalance of sexuality, caused by that lack at its heart which causes the "inhuman excess" that so disturbs Veronica (PV 5). Veronica recalls, "the gap that opened between us was the gap that exists between a woman and a man – or so I thought, at sixteen – the difference between what a man might do, or want to do, sexually, what a woman might only guess at" (170). This is one of many places where Veronica associates manhood with excessive sexuality, a relationship that Lacan's ideas do, in one sense, support.

- 11 According to Lacan, the structure of sexuality is inherently imbalanced because of its constitution around the original lack of the split subject. The subject's original desire for the "big Other," the "Real" thing to which the subject hopes that language corresponds, arises from a lack because no such connection actually exists between language and the Real (Fink 29-30). This lack in the big Other is the void around which subjectivity, language, and sexuality come into being. Slavoj Žižek explains that this structural imbalance of sexual relationship "condemns any sexual practice to eternal oscillation between the 'spontaneous' pathos of self-obliteration and the logic of external ritual (following the rules). Thus the final outcome is that sexuality is the domain of 'spurious infinity' whose logic, brought to an extreme, cannot but engender tasteless excess" (PV 13). And further, "Sexuality is the only drive that is in itself hindered, perverted: simultaneously insufficient and excessive, with the excess as the form of appearance of the lack" (*Metastases* 127). This lack gives rise to desire, which of course can never be satisfied because of the original lack. Psychoanalysis tells us that frustration is part of the nature of desire: "desire's *raison d'être* [...] is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire" ("Desire vs. Drive" para. 7). This insatiable sexual desire gives rise to *drive* – the human subject's method of enjoying the thwarting of her desire. As Žižek explains, "drive emerges as a strategy to profit from the very failure to reach the goal of desire" (PV 387). This strange enjoyment goes beyond need or pleasure and is therefore excessive – becoming what Lacan calls "jouissance" (Rose 34).
- 12 Veronica Hegarty struggles to come to terms with the excessive nature of sexuality because she senses that this excess lies at the root of Lamb Nugent's abuse of Liam. Nugent's drives, like those of all human subjects, emerge from infantile trauma, a fact indicated by Ada's imagined observation of Nugent's childlike nature. Wondering, "What did the silly man have to hide?", Ada remembers the "greediness" of his mouth around her "biscuits," and ponders, "he had such a sweet tooth. He was such a child. Maybe that was the secret – the fact that he was only and ever five years old. Or two" (252). Lamb's childlike greed appears at first to be a hunger for pleasure, yet the excessive avarice of it suggests an insatiable hunger for the original lost object (the oral fixation suggests a longing for the mother's breast). Lamb Nugent desires Ada Merriman as his "object petit a," what Bruce Fink describes as, "a last reminder or remainder of the hypothetical mother-child unity to which the subject clings in fantasy to achieve a sense of wholeness, as the Other's desire" (83). In other words, the *object a* embodies the void in the big Other. Nugent's thwarted desire for Ada gives rise to drive – Žižek's "inhuman excess" of desire despite (or rather because of) the impossibility of satisfaction (PV 5). Although his interference with children, just like his consumption of sweets, probably brings Nugent some physical pleasure, both signify his unfulfilled desire for Ada, so that by enjoying them, he has found a way to enjoy being thwarted. Veronica's displaced memory of Liam's abuse imagines Nugent orgasming with Ada's name on his lips, as Veronica looks back and sees Ada standing there with the word

"nothing" written on her "blank [ed]" out face (222). As *object petit a*, Ada embodies the void, the nothing, which is at the heart of sexual desire. Veronica explains that the word coming out of Nugent's mouth will "fill the world but not mark it. It is there already [...] mocking us all" (222). The absence represented by the word "Ada" expresses that lack which is always already present at the heart of language and of sexual desire, mocking human beings' ignorance of their own split structure and the consequent emptiness masked by ideological constructions.

- 13 The text indicates that Veronica has imagined this sexual abuse memory, yet the traumatic scene also expresses the primal scene – the traumatic splitting of her subjectivity. She explains that the imagined picture "is made up of the words that say it" and "comes from a place in my head where words and actions are mangled. It comes from the very beginning of things..." (222). This "beginning" is the moment when the law of the father (language) traumatically divides the subject. Veronica explains, "I think of the 'eye' of his penis, and it is pressing against my own eye," indicating that her subjectivity – her mind's eye/I – comes into existence through a traumatic splitting by the law of the phallus.

- 14 Veronica's deliberate exposure of sexuality-as-excess, embodied for her by the male sex organ, is an attempt to understand the imbalanced structure of desire and drive that subjects human beings in general and women in particular. The disturbing violence that Veronica senses is the violence inherent in the symbolic and sexual order: because language and sexuality are structured around a lack that gives rise to desire for an irretrievably lost object, the real object that is made to fill the "pre-given fantasy place" (*object petit a*) suffers an inevitable distortion by the desiring subject ("Desire..." para 7). This is complicated when another human subject, such as a woman, becomes the *object a*, the stand in for the lost object. Lacan speaks to this problem:

That the woman should be inscribed in an order of exchange of which she is the object, is what makes for the fundamentally conflictual and, I would say, insoluble character of her position: the symbolic order literally submits her, it transcends her... There is for her something insurmountable, something unacceptable, in the fact of being placed as an object in a symbolic order to which, at the same time, she is subjected just as the man (Lacan, qtd. in Rose 45).

- 15 This distortion of woman threatens Veronica's own existence as a subject because, "Defined as such, reduced to being nothing other than the fantasmatic place, the woman does not exist" (Rose 48). This distortion recalls Veronica's identity crisis discussed previously – her sense of being nothing and doing nothing – as well as her account of Ada and her mother (explained below).
- 16 Veronica experiences the erasure of her subjectivity as a reduction to mere flesh by the desires of her family: "Everyone wants a bit of me. And it has nothing to do with what I might want, whatever that might be – God knows it is a long time since I knew. There I am, sitting on a church bench in my own meat: pawed, used, loved, and very lonely" (244). This echoes the eroded subjectivity of Veronica's own mother: "If only she would become visible, I think... But she remains hazy, unhittable, *too much loved*" [italics mine] (5). Ada also functions as a kind of absence in the text, symbolizing the ever-desired lost object at the source of her family's original trauma. As a result, Ada can only exist as a fantasy of the narrative, lending irony to Veronica's statement that "Ada was a fantastic woman. I have no other word for her" (17). Veronica finds that ultimately she cannot blame Ada for what happened to all of them because Ada, another victim of the imbalanced nature of human desire, does not even really *exist*.

- 17 The idea of woman as *object a*, the place where man projects his lack, helps to explain the connection between desire and hatred, sexuality and violence, that troubles Veronica and, arguably, Enright herself. In an interview about *The Gathering*, Enright admits,

One of the things I wanted to do in the book was explore how desire and hatred are closely bound up [...] You know, that sense that someone – usually a man – is enraged by the fact that he desires someone – usually a woman [...]... desire is sometimes like that. You hate what you desire because you desire it. That's why we speak about something that sounds so violent, namely fucking. I wanted to write about sex in a different way from that bad-boy stuff that men write so often, to think about the violence in desire (Jeffries Interview, para. 12).
- 18 Enright's account of sexual desire accords perfectly with Lacan's idea that man, while desiring woman, must also struggle to reduce her importance because, although she reminds him of the sexual difference that allows him to exist as a subject, she also reminds him of what he lacks ⁴. [Lacan argues that even man's belief in his own soul depends on his belittling woman: "For the soul to come into being, she, the woman, is differentiated from it... called woman and defamed," which is interesting because Ada is convinced that Nugent actually does not have a soul (Lacan, qtd. in Rose 48; *Gathering* 252).]. This reduction – the distortion of woman inherent in his construction of her as fantasy – is an inherently violent act, a symptom of sexuality's imbalanced structure and its consequent "inhuman excess," the drive (PV 5).
- 19 This violence is at the heart of Veronica's problem with sexuality; she sees the penis as symbolic of sexuality's violently uncontrollable excess. She tries to tell herself that the spontaneous erection of the sleeping man on the train to Brighton is "Harmless. Harmless. Harmless," yet it appears directly after her recollection of a masturbating Italian who followed her, giving her the "choking sense that this was the way I would die, my face jammed in the filthy gabardine, of navy or black, a stranger's cock in the back of my throat [...]" (52; 51). Veronica takes out her fear and disgust of male sexuality on her husband Tom, claiming that "this is sometimes what he is like, yearning on the pull-back and hatred in the forward slam [...] what he wants, what my husband has always wanted, and the thing I will not give him, is my annihilation. This is the way desire runs. It runs close to hatred. It is sometimes the same thing" (145). Veronica knows that her husband does not *consciously* want her annihilated – she speaks here of the more subtle violence endemic to the structure of sexuality and desire.
- 20 The more Veronica senses that sexuality is a violent, corrupt economy, the more the idea of love seems like a fiction. Veronica's college paper "Paying for Sex in the Irish Free State" illuminates the violence of sexuality for her: "men fucked women – it did not happen the other way around – and this surprising mechanism was to change, not just my future, which was narrowing even as I looked at it, but also the wide and finished world of my past" (92). The physical dynamics of fucking reflect, for Veronica, the symbolic fucking of women at the level of desire – the man's forcing of his own lack (the lost phallus) onto the woman, who is consequently distorted. In her imagined sex scene between Ada and Nugent, Veronica says cynically, "We are near to the truth of it here, we are getting man's essential bookiness and women's whorishness" (139). This idea assigns social roles to the sexual ones explored by Lacan: woman, as repository of man's insatiable desires, is a whore, while man is a kind of cheater whose objects of desire are arbitrary and who only invests himself for a payoff. Veronica imagines this

violence in Lamb Nugent's desire for Ada: "he must move from love to a kind of sneering, he must be smitten by hatred and touched by desire, he must find a final humility and so begin with love again. Each time around he would know more about her – more about himself perhaps – and nothing he learned would make any difference" (18). The fatalism of the last line proves most significant for us here; it shows Veronica's recognition that romantic love is simply the meaning that we graft onto desire, and consequently has an inherently violent core that none of us can change.

- 21 This recognition comes to Veronica through the identity crisis brought on by Liam's death – she begins to question the very nature of her family's love for her, especially Tom's. Death reveals that "most of the stuff that you do is just nagging and whining and picking up for people who are too lazy even to love you" (27). Her growing sense that love is nothing more than misdirected desire leads her to stop sleeping with Tom because, without the existence of real love, the sex act reduces her to a "quartered chicken" and "butchered meat" (40; 219). At times Veronica even feels the urge to escape her body altogether, speculating that people attach meaning to sex as a way of escaping what Žižek would call the "the raw reality of copulation": "Maybe this is what they are about, these questions of which or whose hole, the right fluids in the wrong places, these infantile confusions⁵ and small sadisms: they are a way of fighting our way out of all this meat" (PV 12; *Gathering* 140).
- 22 Veronica herself has tried very hard to attach meaning to sexuality by believing that a connection exists between sex and love. Reflecting back on her college days, Veronica realizes that she always felt compelled to love the men she sleeps with in order to not hate herself, which makes sense because the belief that she loves them allows her to retain some semblance of subjectivity despite her objectification by the desiring male subject. Facing the truth about Liam's abuse has made her realize that sexual desire does not always signify love or even "mean" something. She has trouble acknowledging that Nugent was "horrible" to her brother, because, as she puts it,

...somewhere in my head, in some obstinate and God-forsaken part of me, I think that desire and love are the same thing. They are not the same thing. They are not even connected. When Nugent desired my brother, he did not love him in the slightest. That's as much as I know. I could also say that Liam must have wanted him too. Or wanted *something* (223).
- 23 Here Veronica struggles to come to terms with the Lacanian idea that desire is constituted around a lack, that even a child like Liam must have experienced a longing for an unattainable lost something. Liam was forced to face early the subversive nature of desire, that desire does not equal love, that love is a meaning that we attach to desire. His likely skepticism about love exemplifies the failure of language, of the ideological world, to construct the illusion of a stable identity for him and cover over his split subjectivity.
- 24 As Veronica recognizes the nature of the damage that Liam suffered, she also must negotiate the disconnection between desire and love. At the beginning of her narrative she expresses surprise at the fact that human beings really love each other at all:

...what amazes me as I hit the motorway is not the fact that everyone loses someone, but that everyone loves someone. It seems like such a massive waste of energy – and we all do it... We each love someone, even though they will die. And we keep loving them, even when they are not there to love any more. And there is no logic or use to any of this, that I can see (28).

- 25 She senses that love, as the meaning that language attaches to an actually insatiable desire, can only be a kind of excess, a waste. What she wants to know here, and what she discovers at the end of the story, is how this excess breaks its own rules: how love still persists despite its impossibility.
- 26 Veronica's crisis is one of belief: she struggles to retain a belief in love as the ideological world that constructs it crumbles away. Facing the truth about Liam's abuse has forced Veronica to see into the lack, the empty heart of human sexuality and desire, and as she sits in the church during his funeral she "tr[ies] to believe in love" but finds it is "Not easy" (228). Veronica's introspection reveals that her love for her children still holds up in the face of her newly disillusioned view of sexuality and desire: "I bow my head and try to believe that love will make it better, or if love won't then children will. I turn from the high to the humble and believe, for many seconds at a time, in the smallness and necessity of being a mother" (228). Her biological connection to her children is ultimately what "saves" her; because she "liv[es] in" her family, she already has a connection stronger than any ideological construction; however, she must put this connection into words so that she can reconcile it with the stable sense-of-self that language has allowed her to construct (66). As she tries to believe in love, she feels something "hot and struggling" in her chest: "The chest thing is like fighting for words and the forehead thing is pure and empty, like after all the words have been said [...] Belief. I have the biology of it. All I need is the stuff to put in there. All I need are the words" (229). Veronica needs words because words are what will reattach love to desire, patching over her split subjectivity again and thereby allowing her to continue living with her family and her "self."
- 27 This view highlights the importance of her daughter's words over the hotel phone, words which come just as Veronica is about to relinquish her belief in the stable life she has created: "I give you a word," says her daughter, "And that word is 'love'" (257). By giving her mother the word "love," Rebecca allows Veronica to attach the ideological dimension of meaning ("love") to the biological connection between mother and child. This naming of the blood tie prevents Veronica from floating free of her signifiers and losing her subjectivity altogether. Veronica then imagines that the world is "wrapped in blood, as a ball of string is wrapped in its own string. That if I just follow the line I will find out what it is that I want to know" (258). She senses that blood is the tie that binds, the "love" that persists despite a more radical awareness of its origin in a primal loss. Veronica finally knows what she wants – not a different life, but simply to be able to go on living the one she has created. She must patch over the original trauma that Liam's death cast her back upon, coming to terms with the failure that exists at the core of the human subject. Veronica has realized that beneath the terror of abuse exists a more fundamental terror – the loss of self accompanying split subjectivity: "I know he [Nugent] could be the explanation for all of our lives, and I know something more frightening still – that we did not have to be damaged by him in order to be damaged" (224). Although she now recognizes this, she turns away from it and back toward the safety of ideology and family. As she puts it, "I just want to be less afraid" (260-261).
- 28 Enright leaves the specifics of Veronica's fate ambiguous, yet the text indicates that, although the language of Veronica's narrative has allowed her to take apart her illusions of coherent identity, blood ties ultimately triumph over a radical understanding of the unstable core on which they are based. Enright's interviews, her previous fiction⁶, and her current novel suggest that she puts faith in a biological tie to

family that may be more cultural than anything else, even as she acknowledges that family ties are perceived as more binding in Ireland than in the American or British contexts⁷. At any rate, the narrative's apparent faith in the indissoluble blood tie as a fundamental kind of love suggests that Enright's text, although engaging with Lacan's theories at a compelling depth, also rejects his basic premise – that human subjects do not exist outside of language. Or, in another sense, perhaps she does not threaten his ideas at all, but simply reminds us that human subjectivity, constituted through a language that creates sexual difference, is still grafted onto a biological, animal body that operates on the level of instinct and therefore "loves" its offspring partly *because* it does not know the difference between self and other. This seeming contradiction makes the book all the more compelling by tracing the irresolvable parallax of the human animal – the gap between the human "self" and the grey matter that houses it.

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NOTES

1. Barbara Olasov-Rothbaum, and Edna Foa. "Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder." *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. Ed. Bessell Van der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth. London, The Guilford Press, 1996, p. 426.

2. This basic summary can be found in many different places, so I didn't think it needed citation.

3. Trauma theory explains that "victims of violence experience six common symptoms: 'distancing,' a psychic construction of fantasy life designed to protect an individual from further damage; 'anxiety,' an exaggerated fear of death and attack; 'guilt' regarding survivability; 'loneliness and vulnerability,' which arises as a consequence of the disruption in normal social relationships and a reluctance, as a consequence of trauma, to expose oneself to further relationships; 'loss of self control,' which results in an individual yielding control to external, seemingly more powerful forces, including mythic and historical forces; and 'disorientation,' which involves a debilitated capacity for reasoning and making individual associations. All of these symptoms are themselves a consequence of and contribute to a further sense of loss of self-control" (McKenna 10).

4. Lacan says that either a man or a woman can occupy these positions, but he genders the object petit a female because it accords with the most common patterns manifest in traditional gender roles (e.g. courtly love).

5. Just a side note: Enright's reference to "infantile confusions" here suggests an awareness of the psychoanalytic drama at play in her text. She also mentions the helpfulness of "psychological" readings in her essay "F Slits T."

6. Jeanett Shumaker points out that the character Grace from Enright's *The Wig My Father Wore* "transcends despair about mortality by becoming pregnant" and thereby "discovers a new, richer self" (114).

7. Carol Coulter argues that in Ireland "Family bonds are still close, and the extended family still a source of strength to most people. If the family is looked at more critically in light of the revelations of child abuse, it is done within the context of a widespread attachment to the family" (277). Enright says herself in an interview, "As a mother, I

think the bond between mother and child is stronger than any other. But in cultural terms I think Irish people can never leave their families" (Russle Interview para. 16).

ABSTRACTS

The Gathering lends itself to closer psychoanalytic study because the text's exploration of sexual trauma is simultaneously an investigation of the inevitable human trauma of the split subject, as articulated by Jacques Lacan and his antecedents. Lacan's ideas help to explain the inseparability of language and sex in Enright's text, thereby illuminating the depth and complexity of narrator Veronica Hegarty's struggles against and within language and sexuality in the wake of her brother's death.

The Gathering se prête à une étude psychanalytique parce que le texte se présente comme l'exploration d'un traumatisme sexuel qui est à la fois une réflexion sur le traumatisme du sujet clivé propre à chaque être humain, comme l'ont défini Jacques Lacan et ses prédécesseurs. Les idées de Lacan aident à expliquer l'inséparabilité du langage et du sexe dans le texte d'Enright, mettant ainsi en lumière la profondeur et la complexité du conflit contre et à travers la sexualité et le langage auquel est confrontée la narratrice Veronica Hegarty à la suite de la mort de son frère.

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