

“Curiously mundane hallucinations”: monstrous nightmares and spectral fears in John Banville’s *The Sea* and Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*

	Auteur(s)	Héloïse LECOMTE
	Revue	<i>Imaginaires</i> (ISSN 1270-931X)
	Numéro	23 (2021) : « Ireland: Spectres and Chimeras »
	Directeur(s) du numéro	Sylvie MIKOWSKI, Marine GALINÉ & Françoise CANON-ROGER
	Pages	131-144
	DOI de l'article	10.34929/imaginaires.vi23.28
	DOI du numéro	10.34929/imaginaires.vi23
	Édition	ÉPURE - Éditions et presses universitaires de Reims, 2021
Licence	<p>Ce document est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence <i>Creative Commons</i> attribution / pas d'utilisation commerciale / partage dans les mêmes conditions 4.0 international</p> 	

Les ÉPURE favorisent l'accès ouvert aux résultats de la recherche (*Open Access*) en proposant à leurs auteurs une politique d'auto-archivage plus favorable que les dispositions de l'article 30 de [la loi du 7 octobre 2016 pour une République numérique](#), en autorisant le dépôt [dans HAL-URCA](#) de la version PDF éditée de la contribution, qu'elle soit publiée dans une revue ou dans un ouvrage collectif, sans embargo.

Chapter nine

“Curiously mundane hallucinations”

Monstrous nightmares and spectral fears
in John Banville’s *The Sea*
and Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*



HÉLOÏSE LECOMTE
ENS Lyon



Abstract: John Banville’s *The Sea* and Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* are bereavement stories in which the death of a loved one reactivates memories of painful events. Since it cannot be rationalized by a traumatized mind, the haunting presence of the past can be articulated into ghosts, monstrous shapes and mythical creatures. In the imagery of both Banville’s and Enright’s novels, spectres can turn into uncanny narrative monsters or fear-inspiring oneirical figures. As memories turn into spectral or mythical manifestations, at once real and imagined, present and absent, undercurrents of Gothic fiction seep through both novels. Drawing on the interpenetrations between trauma theory, bereavement theory, Derridean hauntology and memory studies, I suggest that Enright and Banville subvert the codes of traditional ghost stories, giving a psychological turn to their (sometimes) mock-Gothic novels. It appears that the only way of liberating the mind from the terrifying hold of those ghostly shadows might be to give a concrete form to these threatening shapes. The narrators’ ghostly testimonies or confessions, with their faint religious undertones and (dark) humour, thus constitute an attempt to ward off the evil spell of painful, uncertain memory. Both novels fashion unsettling fictions in an attempt to verbalize anguish, thus questioning the possibility that ghostly dread might be tamed by those creations.

Keywords: Mourning, Banville, Enright, Trauma, Monster, Gothic, Laughter, Spectre, Chimera



In his grief memoir *A Grief Observed*, C.S. Lewis writes: “no one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness”.¹ By equating grief with the physical discomfort that comes with dread, Lewis argues, paradoxically, that the sense of anxiety that comes with mourning, even when the world has already been turned upside-down and the worst has arguably happened, is akin to an “anxious anticipation of danger”,² which imprints a lingering sense of impending doom into the mourners’ psyches. In John Banville’s *The Sea* (2005) and Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* (2007), the literary articulation of this intimate, fearful grief comes in a wider social context of agonizing loss and religious skepticism. It has long been acknowledged by critics that *The Gathering* in particular is a literary expression of cultural trauma, a “probing of national identity through an invocation of the child abuse in post-Independence Ireland, which fractured the country’s self-understanding during the economic boom”,³ in Carol Dell’Amico’s words. In both novels, on top of their private losses, the protagonists are mourning the loss of comforting religious beliefs and ideals: when Max Morden jokingly asserts that “it would be an impiety against God to believe in him”.⁴ in *The Gathering*, “God [is] smashed in the grate”.⁵ With their protagonists Max Morden and Veronica Hegarty poised on the brink of melancholy mourning, both writers strive to find an adequate narrative discourse to account for the uncertainty of a world robbed of its traditional structures of belief.

C.S. Lewis, though writing about his own deeply Christian experience of grief in the United Kingdom (and in the early 1960s), probes the depths of mourning in a way that finds an echo in Enright’s and Banville’s secularized early 21st century Ireland. He asks the same question as both novelists: “what’s left?” What is left indeed, in the wake of painful dispossession, when no solace is available in traditional structures? Lewis’s answer is threefold: “a corpse, a memory, and a ghost. All mockeries or horrors”.⁶ All three concepts (corpse, memory and ghost) are intricately connected, and participate in blurring the edges between past and present,

1. C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, London, Faber, 1961, p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Carol Dell’Amico, “*The Gathering*: Trauma, Testimony, Memory”, *New Hibernia Review*, 14(3), 2010, p. 59-73 ([doi:10.1353/nhr.2010.0014](https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2010.0014)), p. 59.
4. John Banville, *The Sea*, London, Picador, 2005, p. 185.
5. Anne Enright, *The Gathering*, London, Vintage, 2007, p. 139. In Enright’s novel, religion is not just facing the consequences of modern secularization. According to Ralf Haekel, “the novel 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” p. 170 (Ralf Haekel, “Un-writing the Self: Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*”, *Anglistik*, 27(2), 2016, p. 165-178, <https://angl.winter-verlag.de/article/ANGL/2016/2/12>).
6. Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

the material and the immaterial, life and death. Banville and Enright choose to focus on the impalpable memory and ghost more than the tangible corpse,⁷ but all three notions share a comparable horrific potential, as the corpse and the ghost are staples of the Gothic.⁸ As the concrete corpse gives way to the ethereal ghost, a sense of uncertainty emerges. I would argue that C.S. Lewis's alternative "mockeries or horrors" can be re-articulated into interdependence (mock-horror, or the mockery of horror) in both of these contemporary novels. Drawing from Sylvie Mikowski's claim that, "contrary to the theory of trauma narrative as being necessarily avant-garde", some Irish narratives of trauma and mourning "rely on well-established traditions and themes, such as the Gothic",⁹ my aim here is to analyse both the fantastic potential of literary ghosts and the transformation of spectres into hallucinations in Banville's and Enright's contemporary appropriation of the "tradition of mourning as a Gothic practice".¹⁰

Many a horror story or legend comes with a monster that needs be vanquished – be it the Minotaur hidden in the dark recesses of the maze or the chimera with its hybrid beastly status that combines parts of a lion, a goat and a snake. But in a variety of Gothic tales, the monster is not to be defeated, as it takes on a ghostly quality, and releases a chill that seeps through the narrative. The meanings of the two Latin words from which the terms "monster" and "spectre" are derived are closely connected, the former being taken from "*demonstrare*: to show, to reveal, to disclose"¹¹ and the latter from *spectare*, "to look". Etymologically speaking, both terms are thus firmly rooted in the realm of vision and revelation, thus articulating monstrous and spectral fears in Banville's and Enright's novels with the dialectic interaction between seeing and not-seeing, concealment and revelation. An uncertain visual thread is exploited to carve semi-fantastic narratives of grief, which expand on "the ghost of a ghost",¹² a reversal or furthering of traditional takes on spectrality. In order to explore the fearful proximity of spectres and chimeras in those

7. Although Liam's corpse does feature in *The Gathering*, it is mostly upstaged by the ghostly suggestion of Liam's impromptu and repeated irruptions within the protagonist's mind. There are no corpses in *The Sea*: Chloe and Myles simply disappear into the sea, and Anna's post-mortem fate is never revealed.
8. The "Gothic" mode of writing is defined as such by Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie: "a 'gothic' text combines, among other things, supernatural figures and events with medieval Catholic Continental settings, an interest in the Burkean sublime" (Christina Morin & Niall Gillespie, *Irish Gothics: Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions, 1760-1890*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 3).
9. Sylvie Mikowski, "Gothic and Noir: The Genres of the Irish Contemporary Fiction of 'Containment'", *Études irlandaises*, 42(2), 2017, p. 93-104 ([doi:10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5332](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5332)).
10. Joanne Watkiss, *Gothic Contemporaries, The Haunted Text*, Cardiff, Wales U.P., 2012, p. 5.
11. Dani Cavallaro, *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear*, London, Continuum, 2002, p. 172.
12. Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 142. As Gisèle Vanhese argues, the term *phantasia* (or fantasy), the root of the word "phantom", is close to the term *phantasma*, which designates a spectre, a ghost, also linking imagination and the spectral, as is done in fantastic literature (Gisèle Vanhese, "Thématique fantomale et spectralisation du récit dans *Biserica neagra* d'Anatol E. Baconsky", *Caietele Echinox*, 21, 2011, p. 248-261 (<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=173009>), p. 248).

Irish cultural narratives of mourning, I will focus on the way spectres are portrayed as traditional agents of fright, before moving on to the rationalization of ghosts as hallucinations or residues from the past, as if Banville and Enright were trying to twist the Gothic tradition. I will finally analyse the way both novels work at warding off the evil spell of melancholy grief through an incorporation of mock-Gothic laughter into the narrativization of trauma.

Night terrors: uncanny ghosts and liminal monsters



If in Lewis's definition of grief, the corpse and the ghost are both "horrors", their varying degrees of corporeality colour the fear they inspire in mourners. According to Dani Cavallaro, while horror is conventionally "linked [...] to fear occasioned by the visible gore" (which one could relate to the corpse), terror is a liminal sort of fear, "triggered by indeterminate agents"¹³ (such as ghosts). In both novels, the porosity of the limit between reality and imagination, past and present, but also the light of day and the dead of night infiltrates the narratives, which ties in with Max Morden's depiction of grief in *The Sea* as "the *vague*, slow fright, which is perpetual with me now"¹⁴ (*italics mine*). The mourner is put in a never-ending state of abeyance by his wife's death, and seems to be living his life in slow motion. From the moment Max finds out about his wife's illness, his speech is riddled with figures of liminal anxiety: "in the ashen weeks of daytime dread and nightly terror before Anna was forced at last to acknowledge the inevitability of Mr Todd [...], I seemed to inhabit a twilit netherworld in which it was scarcely possible to distinguish dream from waking".¹⁵ The indistinctness of anticipated mourning is equated with death-related "ash" and correlated with fright, through the near-synonyms "dread" and "terror". Even before Anna's death, fear is inescapable and "perpetual" (see previous quote), invading both "daytime" and "night", which become indistinct themselves ("twilit"), as binaries are blurred and certainties are thoroughly undermined. A parallel oscillation between memory and imagination features in both novels through a paratactic balancing act: "a memory of mine, a dream of mine"¹⁶ (in *The Sea*) or an uncertain conflation: "this memory or dream of mine"¹⁷ (in *The Gathering*). This syntactic and semantic wavering is reminiscent of salient attributes of the "fantastic", a

13. Cavallaro, *op. cit.*, p. vii. There is a scene in *The Gathering* where a young Veronica faces her grandfather Charlie's corpse, and the visual confrontation with the concrete incarnation of death is shrouded in the language of horror: "maybe she wanted the whole world to witness, and be horrified" (p. 64). The correlation between "witness" and "be horrified", underlined by the conjunction "and", suggests that seeing the corpse is the cause of horror. The comma before "and" marks a short pause to incorporate the viewer's gasp within the text.

14. Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

17. Anne Enright, *The Gathering*, London, Vintage, 2007, p. 222.

subgenre or mode with which dark fiction can be closely intertwined, and which Todorov defines as a frontier region poised between the “uncanny” and the “marvellous”.¹⁸ However, these fantastic irruptions appear to be mostly due to the hauntological vein that runs through the texts, following Colin Davis’s definition of Derridean hauntology, which “supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive [...] making established certainties vacillate”.¹⁹ In stories of mourning, where the protagonists inhabit the limit between life and death, the hauntological version of the fantastic bolsters the liminality inherent to the narrative situation, and provides adequate expression for the characters’ experience of in-betweenness.

In the wake of traumatic loss, the “dreams” of the past are, ultimately, peopled with indeterminate, nightmarish creatures, or ghostly chimeras. In *The Sea*, Max remembers the “Medusa-head”²⁰ of a hospital patient photographed by Anna, but also the presence of a “minatory”²¹ stranger in the past, a term whose phonetic pronunciation carries faint echoes of the term “Minotaur”, conjuring up the mythical monster at the heart of the grief narrative. Even in Max’s memories of Anna’s dying days, she turns into a hybrid, part-human, part-animal frightening creature with her “claw-like, monkeyish grasp”.²² The suffix *-ish* reinforces the sense of indeterminacy that creeps in this fear-inspiring depiction of a haunting memory. It is no coincidence that for Cavallaro, the Gothic articulation of monstrosity should lie in its liminal status: “monstrosity eludes conclusive categorization insofar as it embodies the transgression of dividing lines meant to separate one body from another, one psyche from another, the pure from the impure, the delightful from the gruesome, virtue from vice, good from

18. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell U.P., 1975. The “uncanny” itself is a liminal concept, which for Romain Van Nguyen “lies somewhere between the known and the unknown, the not-fully-known and the not-absolutely-repressed” (p. 485), Romain Nguyen Van, “According to All the Authorities: The Uncanny in John Banville’s *The Sea*”, *Études anglaises*, 65(4), 2012, p. 480-499 ([doi:10.3917/etan.654.0480](https://doi.org/10.3917/etan.654.0480)).

19. Colin Davis, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 9, 11. Christine Berthin assures us: “hauntology is the dark double of ontology. It deconstructs and empties out ontology, being and presence. Neither alive nor dead, the Derridean spectre hovers between presence and absence, making it impossible to assign definite meanings to things. [...] It is in the nature of ghosts to stand in defiance of the binary oppositions (life or death, inside or outside as well as present or past) that constitute our symbolic system” (Christine Berthin, *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 3). The ghost signifies precisely that which escapes full cognition or comprehension: “One does not know: not out of ignorance, but because this non-object, this non-present present, this being-there of an absent or departed one no longer belongs to knowledge”, Derrida writes (Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* [1994], trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 5).

20. Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 238.

evil”.²³ As such, it matches spectrality’s uncanny liminality, from which emerges the nightmare-tale of terror and grief.

The traditional Gothic monsters of fantastic literature assume new shapes in *The Gathering*, as their (omni)presence metaphorizes the inescapability of grief and trauma that pervades the narrative. As Enright argues in an interview with Boyd Tonkin, “there is often a dark secret in books [...] There is often a gathering sense of dread, a gap sometimes in the text from which all kinds of monsters can emerge”.²⁴ When discussing her writing of *The Gathering*, the novelist herself equates the darkness of secrecy with the threat of lurking monsters. Contrary to the Irish nation’s history of containment of horrific child abuse underlined by Sylvie Mikowski in her 2017 article “Gothic and Noir: the Genres of the Irish Contemporary Fiction of ‘Containment’”, Veronica represents the abuser’s ghost as “a slick of horror”,²⁵ which cannot be contained, “oozing sly intent”,²⁶ and infecting the atmosphere all around him: “it was the air he breathed that did for us”.²⁷ By giving both a liquid and aerial quality to Lambert Nugent’s nefarious influence, Enright emphasizes his alarming ubiquity. Strikingly, this ever-expanding threat is associated with imminent spectral immateriality: “I think he would have had it from the start, this trick of not existing much”.²⁸ Lambert Nugent’s human status is subtly questioned here, and the term “trick” conjures up images of dark magic, as if this semi-ghostly quality were the disguise of a threatening creature.

If Lambert Nugent is not physically deformed, his depravity is infinitely more worrying, and seems to epitomize Jarlath Killeen’s claim that “there is something uncanny about the human monster that looks completely normal. They resemble that which is long known and familiar, but they are actually hollowed-out shells containing a terrifying otherness [...] These people are not biologically impure but are, rather, psychological deviants”.²⁹ Veronica constructs Lambert Nugent’s ghost as an uncanny evil presence which makes reason falter and induces physical and oppressive dis-ease: “I am sickened by the evil of him [...], I am sweltering in it” and “I do not believe in evil [...], and yet I experience the slow turn of his face towards the door as evil”.³⁰ It is no coincidence that Veronica should also depict her vision of ghosts as a concrete and

23. Cavallaro, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

24. Anne Enright & Boyd Tonkin, “Interview: The Fearless Wit of Man Booker Winner Anne Enright”, *The Independent*, 19 October 2007 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/interview-the-fearless-wit-of-man-booker-winner-anne-enright-394987.html>, last accessed on 3 October 2019).

25. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

29. Jarlath Killeen, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction: History, Origins, Theories*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2014 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt9qdrh2>), p. 148.

30. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

malevolent procession of obstacles when they materialize on the house's stairs, a typically liminal space, during Liam's wake: "these are my nightmares. This is what I have to walk through to get downstairs".³¹ The nightmarish apparition of the threatening ghosts of the Hegarty family's past is unmistakably the product of Veronica's mind, a creation of her feverish imagination, as she acknowledges they are "*my nightmares*" (italics mine). Gothic undertones are often used to articulate overwhelming trauma in contemporary fiction, the gap in the understanding of an experience, since in modern Gothic, for Colin Davis: "the ghosts are now inside our heads rather than roaming the outside world",³² as Enright's choice of vocabulary in *The Gathering* implies.

Gothic reversals: from ghost to hallucination

In narratives that intertwine trauma and grief, the ghosts are confined to the characters' minds, in the shape of "curiously mundane"³³ hallucinations, deceptive incarnations of one's worst fears. The oxymoron "curiously mundane" encapsulates the uncanny quality of this inner haunting, in which the fantastic nature of haunting is drawn back to everyday experiences. In *The Gathering*, the threatening ghosts are always lurking: "here come the dead. They hunker around the walls".³⁴ When Veronica describes ghostly intrusions into her existence, the syntactic structures "here come", "these are" are recurrent, emphasizing the inescapable presence of the departed, who lurk in the darkness, around the corners of the protagonist's consciousness like prowling beasts ("hunker"). The hallucinated presence of Liam's ghost on the plane also conveys a paradoxical "slumbrous menace".³⁵ When in Brighton, Veronica thus acknowledges her anxiety to the undertaker: "I can't take the flight with him. It's just too...".³⁶ Here the aposiopesis conveys a vague sense of dread, as Liam's corpse becomes the embodiment of Veronica's repressed fears, which cannot be put into words. As Christine Berthin argues, "since the Reformation, ghosts have ceased to inhabit an improbable purgatory, a non-place between life and death. They have been relegated to the 'night-side of life', 'the world of dreams and of the repressed guilts and fears that motivate them'".³⁷ The "slumbrous menace" and nightmarish quality of Liam's ghostly presence in the narrator's mind perfectly illustrate Berthin's words, as it is suggested that Veronica experiences guilt over her protracted

31. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

32. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

33. Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

34. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

37. Berthin, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

silence in the matter of her brother's childhood abuse. So when she hallucinates a "headrest ghost"³⁸ while driving around Dublin, the irrational interpretation is quickly dismissed, as Gerardine Meaney remarks, while quoting from Enright's text: "he is always there (it is always a he), a slumped figure in the front seat', it begins madly, 'who turns out, on examination, to be the tilting headrest' (132), it ends sanely".³⁹ The narrator's rationality thus prevails in the end, when Veronica also admits that she does not see ghosts, but "sees" them, between inverted commas: "I 'saw' the ghosts".⁴⁰ The quotation marks indicate an ironical perspective that questions the reality of the character's vision.

However, more often than not, the protagonists of *The Sea* and *The Gathering* are frustrated by the lack of actual ghostly apparitions and by the dismantling of common Gothic tropes, which leaves them without landmarks or traditional means of expression. Max's desperate injunction takes on a metatextual quality in *The Sea* when he admonishes his late wife: "send back your ghost. Torment me, if you like. Rattle your chains, drag your cerements across the floor, keen like a banshee, anything".⁴¹ The accumulation of Gothic stereotypes is combined with a threatening alliterative accumulation of [r] sounds, in an attempt to recreate the aural effect of aggressive haunting, as Max strives to bring a sensory dimension to ghostly apparition. While this new kind of haunting departs from the traditions of Gothic and Irish mythology alike, Max's hyperbolic prayer, slightly comic in its exaggeration, also highlights the disorienting frustration of contemporary mourning, robbed of its folklore. In *The Gathering*, Veronica feels Liam's "absence laughing at [her]"⁴² when she realizes that her brother's corpse is not accompanied by any ghost: "there are no ghosts with Liam's body, not even his own".⁴³ This partial absence appears to constitute the modern kind of haunting, replacing actual apparitions with liminal shapes: "he is completely there, and not there at all".⁴⁴ It is possible to be haunted by the absence of a ghost, which is the epitome of spectrality. When the tomb of grieving imagination is open, releasing the ghost, the vault's emptiness invites the worst nightmarish chimeras instead, as Enright argues in an interview: "the nightmare logic [...] is also the logic of mental breakdown. It is all about rupture and repetition, not progression, growth and change".⁴⁵ In both texts, the experience of frightening

38. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

39. Gerardine Meaney, "Waking the Dead: Antigone, Ismene and Anne Enright's Narrators in Mourning", *Anne Enright*, Claire Bracken & Susan Cahill (Eds.), Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2011 ([hdl:10197/6014](https://doi.org/10.1017/6014)), p. 148.

40. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

41. Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 248. In Irish mythology, a banshee is a fairy whose laments anticipate the passing of a person.

42. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

45. In Deborah Treisman, "Anne Enright on Rupture and Repetition", *The New Yorker*, March 2, 2020 (<https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/anne-enright-03-09-20>), last accessed on 5 March 2020).

nightmares is strongly correlated with mental breakdown and an endless traumatic or melancholy reiteration of the past.

In the absence of actual ghosts, the mourners appear to be losing substance themselves,⁴⁶ thus turning into liminal creatures. In *The Sea*, Max's leitmotiv is: "I am becoming my own ghost", "a phantom version of me",⁴⁷ "I was there and not there, myself and revenant, immured in the moment and yet hovering somehow on the point of departure".⁴⁸ Once contaminated by spectrality, he starts inspiring fear to his fellow lodger, Colonel Blunden: "he grew anxious in my company – I did not blame him, I grow anxious in it myself".⁴⁹ As Joanne Watkiss argues: "Banville's postmodern Gothic is concerned with the idea of the ghost rather than the ghost itself; his focus is on haunting where the ghost does not appear, the haunting of ourselves by ourselves".⁵⁰ The mourners thus become the monsters they fear and complete the experience of dread. When Max remembers his own past self, he depicts himself as monstrous in terms that remain similar to his aforementioned description of the dying Anna: "I dug my claw [...] into his flesh".⁵¹ While Max sees himself as a hybrid creature, Veronica also experiences a strange sense of defamiliarization, by comparing herself to a disproportionate, "mislaid giant".⁵² The deformity of the monstrous past and the spectral creatures that populate it is thus reversed and applied to the mourners, highlighting the internalization of ghostly figures and anxiety.

Monstrous cures? Laughing off mock-Gothic spectres



The imagining of a monstrous spectre helps narrativize terror and make visible the mental ghosts of the inherently unrepresentable traumatic event, thus tying in with the etymological meaning of the verb *spec-tare*, to see. In *The Gathering*, the monstrous chimera (or the skeleton in

46. Strikingly, in *The Gathering*, Veronica's mother is so "vague" (p. 4, 86, 197, 223) she almost becomes a ghost, as Mulhall remarks: "the mother is the unspeakable phantom, the gap enclaved within the novel's genealogy. Enright works to make this absence present, to answer to its uncanny insistence" (Anne Mulhall, "Now the Blood is in the Room: the Spectral Feminine in the Work of Anne Enright", *Anne Enright*, Bracken & Cahill (Eds.), *op. cit.*, 2011, p. 68).

47. Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

50. Joanne Watkiss, "Ghosts in the Head: Mourning, Memory and Derridean 'Trace' in John Banville's *The Sea*", *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 2, March 2007, p. 55-71 (<https://irishgothic horror.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/joanne-watkiss.pdf>), p. 55.

51. Max pictures himself as a dead man walking, someone who tells his story from beyond the grave: "someone had just walked over my grave" (p. 4), "these days whole churchyardsful of mourners traipse back and forth unfeelingly over my grave" (p. 64), a major Gothic trope whose interpretation remains uncertain here: is the narrator buried alive (locked in the labyrinth of his own memory, with minotaurs aplenty) or is he anticipating his future death, furthering the disruption of time brought about by hauntology and spectrality?

52. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

the closet) is the spectre of Liam's assault at the hands of Lambert Nugent, an oppressive memory which spills into the present in the shape of its direct consequence: Liam's suicide. Veronica's recounting of the long-repressed event oneirically conjures up monsters:

It was as if Mr Nugent's penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam, who, I finally saw, was *not an extension of the man's member*, set down mysteriously on the ground in front of him, but a shocked (of course, he was shocked, I had opened the door) boy of nine. [...] They *were not one thing*, joined from open groin to shoulder, they were two people that I knew. (italics mine)⁵³

If for Ulrike Tancke, "the naïve perception of the little girl clearly registers the wrongness of the scene, and attenuates its violent impact as it coats the image in the reassuring terms of a kind of fairy tale",⁵⁴ this particular snippet of a monstrous tale evinces an uncomfortable sense of uncertainty, potently expressed by the adverbs "strangely" and "mysteriously". The hypothetical dream-logic of metaphorical monsters (introduced by the comparative clause "as if") is here defeated by rational explanation, as the past perfect subjunctive "had grown" is replaced with the negative indicative verbs "was not" and "were not", which shatter the chilling illusion. As the haunting presence of the traumatic past cannot be rationalized by the overwhelmed mind it turns into a nightmarish world of monstrous creatures, in which the reconstruction of meaning can only be achieved after a delay. Enright stylistically reproduces the little girl's confusion, and the asyndetic rhythm of the scene captures the lack of coherence and the narrator's failure to immediately grasp the shocking reality of what she is witnessing. She recognizes a "shape", and then "a boy" before identifying her own brother "Liam". As Bridget English reminds us, "the narrative is written in a style that resembles psychotherapy".⁵⁵ The monster being a culturally-recognized way of addressing anxiety, the ghostly confession thus becomes a way of warding off the evil spell, and keeping the nightmare at bay by giving a concrete shape to the ghostly shadows of past trauma. Verbalizing this vague terror is akin to turning on the light to rid oneself of nightmarish shadows. The monstrous chimera is therefore designed to cure evil with evil, in order to properly articulate unrepresentable anguish. When Veronica reveals her truth to the reader, she professes: "it is time to *put an end* to the waking dreams. It is *time to call an end* to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was

53. *Ibid.*, p. 143, 144.

54. Ulrike Tancke, *Deceptive Fictions: Narrating Trauma and Violence in Contemporary Writing*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2015, p. 115.

55. Bridget English, *Laying Out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel*, Syracuse, Syracuse U.P., 2017, p. 151, 153.

eight” (italics mine).⁵⁶ The syntactical parallelism emphasizes the narrator’s determination to come to terms with her fears and wake up from her spectral nightmares.

In *The Sea*, Max also presents Anna’s cancer as a form of monstrous pregnancy, a malignant growth (in both senses of the adjective): “there it was, squatting in her lap, the bulge that was big baby De’Ath, burgeoning inside her, biding its time”.⁵⁷ It is striking that Enright and Banville should use the same kind of flowery and organic vocabulary to depict horrific visions: abuse and cancer are “flowering” and “burgeoning” into monstrous flowers of flesh. The ironical image of natural rebirth underlines the Gothic transformation that plants the seeds of death long in advance, and condemns the living to become liminal, living-dead creatures. As those tentative references to mythical monstrosity help make sense of overwhelming realities and represent them, the teratological interpretation seems to open a potential way out of the Minotaur’s maze of uncertain and tortured memory.

The comic potential of the absurd pregnancy metaphor in *The Sea* seems to open up possibilities of thwarting spectral terror and defeating the threatening chimera. Banville overdoes his own horrific repertoire of hackneyed personifications in the scene that follows the visit to Mr. Todd, who hands in Anna’s death sentence: “I found the brandy bottle and tremblingly poured a measure into a tumbler, the bottle-neck and the rim of the glass chattering against each other like teeth”⁵⁸. The sounds produced by the glass are turned into grotesque objective correlatives of Max’s own fear. On his way to *The Cedars*, Max also casually passes a “ridiculously grand mock-Gothic gateway”,⁵⁹ whose architectural depiction doubles as a metatextual comment. For Elke d’Hoker, in Banville’s work, “the gothic references to ghosts, devils and haunted houses are often exaggerated to the point of self-deflating parody”.⁶⁰ This release of fear and tension partakes of Bakhtin’s famous definition of laughter: “laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close. [...] Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite for fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically”.⁶¹ The dark humour that comes from mock-Gothic references therefore acts a pressure valve that allows the characters to release a build-up of anguish. This principle is crucial to a famous scene in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, where the heroes face a magical shape-shifting creature called

56. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

57. Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

60. Elke D’Hoker, *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2004, p. 183.

61. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* [1981], Austin, Texas U.P., 1996, p. 23.

the “boggart” (or the aptly-named “épouvantard” in the French version), which automatically takes the appearance of its opponent’s innermost fear. In the Harry Potter series, the only way of neutralizing the Boggart is to cast a spell (the no less aptly-entitled “Riddikulus”) that will turn it into a laughter-inducing shape (a huge spider with roller-shoes at the end of each leg, for instance).⁶² A similar process is at work in some scenes of Banville’s and Enright’s novels. In *The Gathering*, the headrest ghost, a slightly ridiculous emblem of “a thousand mechanical friends in a thousand cartoons”⁶³, is also robbed of its terrifying potential by the narrator’s sarcastic mind. The Disneyfied ghost is here reduced to a commodity, a source of children’s entertainment, thereby robbing it of its dread-inspiring quality⁶⁴. For Lisa Colletta, “dark humor celebrates the protective capacity of the individual by its insistence on making comic sense out of overwhelming non-sense. It takes on our greatest fears and makes a joke out of powerlessness, loneliness, chaos, nihilism, and death, allowing them to be mastered for a moment”.⁶⁵ The laughter that arises in the midst of trauma and grief serves as a temporary shield. In both *The Gathering* and *The Sea*, however, dark humour is often equated with self-pity or ironical despair, and acts as a means of covering up the characters’ emotions, but it does release the stronghold of the irrational over Gothic traditions, and relieve the symptoms of fearful haunting in contemporary tales of grief.

Conclusion



As I have argued, Enright and Banville articulate Gothic and mock-Gothic features in order to outline the anxieties of grief and trauma and attempt to cure them. But the monsters and ghosts, be they internal or external, are not just fearful, liminal hallucinations. Their presence becomes revelatory instead, as Jarlath Killeen argues: “‘monster’ is derived from, or at least connected, to the Latin word “*monstrum*”, meaning to show, to reveal, or warn. Monsters tell us something – warn us to watch

62. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, London, Bloomsbury, 1999. The character who teaches the class tellingly declares: “what really finishes a boggart is laughter. You need to force it to assume a shape you find truly amusing” (Chapter 7).
63. Enright, *op. cit.*, p. 148.
64. This ties in with Christian Gutleben and Marie-Luise Kohkle’s assessment of neo-Victorian ghost stories, and what they call “Disneygothic”: “ghosts in general in neo-Victorian fiction are treated with an ironical distance that dispels their frightening power and their supernatural ontology” (Christian Gutleben & Marie-Luise Kohkle, *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2012, p. 312).
65. Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 7. Strikingly, dark humour exhibits some of the same characteristics as trauma and Gothic fiction, according to Lisa Colletta: “dark humor is [...] generally defined by ambivalence, confused chronology, plots that seem to go nowhere, and a conflicting or even unreliable, narrative stance. It presents violent or traumatic events and questions the values and perceptions of its readers as it represents, simultaneously, the horrifying and the humorous” (p. 2).

out”.⁶⁶ Indeed, in this case, monstrous chimeras have a crucial cultural impact, as indicators of a diseased society or disquieted psyche.⁶⁷ If in *The Sea*, the results of Max’s sometimes ironical treatment of dread remain uncertain, in *The Gathering*, Veronica’s ability to embrace the liminality of memory enables her to bear witness to her past, own it and potentially recover from it.⁶⁸

Héloïse Lecomte is an alumna of the ENS de Lyon and a PhD candidate at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon, under the supervision of Professor Vanessa Guignery. Her research focuses on the narrative poetics of mourning in contemporary British and Irish fiction, and more particularly the metaphor of the tomb in novels by John Banville, Anne Enright, Penelope Lively, Ian McEwan, Ali Smith and Graham Swift.

Bibliography

- BAKHTIN, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* [1981], Austin, Texas U.P., 1996.
- BANVILLE, John, *The Sea*, London, Picador, 2005.
- BERTHIN, Christine, *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- CAVALLARO, Dani, *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear*, London, Continuum, 2002.
- COLLETTA, Lisa, *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- DAVIS, Colin, *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- DELL’AMICO, Carol, “*The Gathering*: Trauma, Testimony, Memory”, *New Hibernia Review*, 14(3), 2010, p. 59-73 ([doi:10.1353/nhr.2010.0014](https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2010.0014)).
- DERRIDA, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx* [1994], trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York, Routledge, 2006.
- D’HOKER, Elke, *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2004.
- ENGLISH, Bridget, *Laying Out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel*. Syracuse, Syracuse U.P., 2017.
- ENRIGHT, Anne, *The Gathering*, London, Vintage, 2007.
- & Boyd Tonkin, “Interview: The Fearless Wit of Man Booker Winner Anne Enright”, *The Independent*, 19 October 2007 (<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/interview-the-fearless-wit-of-man-booker-winner-anne-enright-394987.html>), last accessed on 3 October 2019).
- HAEKEL, Ralf, “Un-writing the Self: Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*”, *Anglistik*, 27(2), 2016, p. 165-178 (<https://angl.winter-verlag.de/article/ANGL/2016/2/12>).
- HARTE, Liam, “Mourning Remains Unresolved: Trauma and Survival in Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*”, *Literature, Interpretation, Theory*, 21(3), 2010, p. 187-204 ([doi:10.1080/10436928.2010.500590](https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2010.500590)).
- KILLEEN, Jarlath, *The Emergence of Irish Gothic Fiction: History, Origins, Theories*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2014 (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt9qdrh2>).
- LEWIS, C.S., *A Grief Observed*, London, Faber, 1961.

66. Killeen, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

67. That is one of the main features of Enright’s “post-national” fiction, for Eve Patten: “beyond a prevalent social realism, its chief stylistic hallmark was a neo-Gothic idiom which signaled a haunted Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche” (Eve Patten, “Contemporary Irish Fiction”, *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, John Wilson Foster (Ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., p. 259)

68. Andrew Smith also remarks: “how to represent the past is one of the central concerns and the figure of the ghost is used to raise questions about making visible that which a culture has lost or has been forced to forget [...] Ghosts are never just ghosts; they provide us with an insight into what haunts our culture” (152-3). Andrew Smith, “Hauntings”, *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, Catherine Spooner & Emma McEvoy (Eds.), London, Routledge, 2007, p. 153. In Gutleben & Kohle, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

- MEANEY, Gerardine, "Waking the Dead: Antigone, Ismene and Anne Enright's Narrators in Mourning", *Anne Enright*, Claire Bracken & Susan Cahill (Eds.), Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2011 ([hdl:10197/6014](https://hdl.handle.net/10197/6014)).
- MIKOWSKI, Sylvie, "Gothic and Noir: the Genres of the Irish Contemporary Fiction of 'Containment'", *Études irlandaises*, 42(2), 2017, p. 93-104 ([doi:10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5332](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5332)).
- MORIN, Christina & Niall Gillespie, *Irish Gothics: Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions, 1760-1890*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- MULHALL, Anne, "Now the Blood is in the Room: the Spectral Feminine in the Work of Anne Enright", *Anne Enright*, Claire Bracken & Susan Cahill (Eds.), Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2011.
- NGUYEN VAN, Romain, "'According to All the Authorities': The Uncanny in John Banville's *The Sea*", *Études anglaises*, 65 (4), 2012, p. 480-499 ([doi:10.3917/etan.654.0480](https://doi.org/10.3917/etan.654.0480)).
- PATTEN, Eve, "Contemporary Irish Fiction", *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, John Wilson Foster (Ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge U.P., p. 259-275.
- ROWLING, J.K., *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, London, Bloomsbury, 1999.
- SCHWALL, Hedwig, "Trauma and Narrative Techniques in Contemporary Irish Fiction", *Narrating Ireland in Different Genres and Media (Irish Studies in Europe, 7)*, K. Rennhak (Ed.), Trier, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft Trier, 2016, p. 45-59.
- TANCKE, Ulrike, *Deceptive Fictions: Narrating Trauma and Violence in Contemporary Writing*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2015.
- TODOROV, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell U.P., 1975.
- TREISMAN, Deborah, "Anne Enright on Rupture and Repetition", *The New Yorker*, March 2, 2020 (<https://www.newyorker.com/books/this-week-in-fiction/anne-enright-03-09-20>, last accessed on 5 March 2020).
- VANHESE, Gisèle, "Thématique fantomale et spectralisation du récit dans *Biserica neagra* d'Anatol E. Baconsky", *Caietele Echinox*, 21, 2011, p. 248-261 (<https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=173009>).
- WATKISS, Joanne, "Ghosts in the Head: Mourning, Memory and Derridean 'Trace' in John Banville's *The Sea*", *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, 2, March 2007, p. 55-71 (<https://irishgothichorror.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/joanne-watkiss.pdf>).
- , *Gothic Contemporaries, The Haunted Text*, Cardiff, Wales U.P., 2012.