



## THE PECULIAR PAIN OF LOSS IN ANNE ENRIGHT'S *THE GATHERING*\*

ANNE ENRIGHT'IN TOPLANTI ROMANINDA  
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### Abstract

*Anne Enright's The Gathering (2007) is based on the painful testimony of the protagonist-narrator Veronica Hegarty, who tries to cope with the memories of her brother who, having fallen victim to child abuse, commits a tragic suicide. Veronica's fragmented narrative reflects a de-ontologised subjectivity which is disrupted by the affect of grief. By referring to Jean-Luc Nancy's and Eugenie Brinkema's theoretical discussions on writing, subjectivity and grief, this article argues that Veronica's writing process is non-therapeutic and her mourning process is undialectical because her intense biological experience of grief fails to be unloaded by linguistic signification and reveals that writing cannot access the truth of the body. The affect of grief, represented as biological experiences in Veronica's mourning process, is closely connected to the peculiar pain of loss underlined, though left unexplained, by Freud in his discussion of mourning and melancholia. Freud writes about a physical pain rather than a mental pain that is experienced at the loss of a loved object. In the novel, the portrayal of the biological aspect of loss with an emphasis on the concept of peculiar painfulness also contributes to the understanding of the contemporary approach to loss with its productive attributes. The depiction of Veronica's peculiar pain also draws attention to the issue of child abuse in Irish society and leads its readers to develop an ethical concern.*

### Öz

Anne Enright'ın Toplantı adlı eseri, Veronica Hegarty'nin erkek kardeşinin istismara uğramasına tanıklık etmesi ile ilgili travmatik çocukluk anılarını ve kardeşinin trajik intiharıyla baş etme çabalarını sunan acı verici anlatısına dayanmaktadır. Veronica'nın öz bütünlüğü olmayan anlatısı ontolojisi çözülmüş ve keder afektiyle dağılmış bir öznellik yansıtır. Bu makale, Jean-Luc Nancy'nin ve Eugenie Brinkema'nın yazma, öznellik ve keder üzerine olan kuramsal tartışmaları çerçevesinde, Veronica'nın hissettiği kederin yoğun biyolojik deneyiminin dil ile temsil edilemez oluşundan ve yazının da beden gerçeğine erişememesinden dolayı, Veronica'nın yazma sürecinin iyileştirici ve yas sürecinin de diyalektik olmadığını iddia eder. Veronica'nın yas sürecinde yaşanan biyolojik deneyimler olarak temsil edilen keder afekti, Freud'un, yas ve melankoli üzerine çalışmasında yer alan, vurguladığı ancak ayrıntılı olarak açıklamadığı kayba özgü acı kavramıyla yakından ilişkilidir. Freud bu kavramıyla sevilen objenin kaybında yaşanan düşünsel bir acıdan çok fiziksel bir acıdan bahseder. Eserde, kaybın biyolojik yönünün, kayba özgü acı üzerinde durularak betimlenmesi, kaybın yaratıcı özellikleriyle ele alınmasına yol açan yeni yaklaşımlara da katkıda bulunur. Veronica'nın kayba özgü acısının tasviri, İrlanda toplumunu, çocuk istismarı sorunu hakkında politik farkındalık ve etik sorumluluk olarak eyleme geçirmeyi amaçlar.

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## Introduction

Anne Enright's 2007 Man Booker Prize winner *The Gathering* presents thirty-nine-year-old Veronica Hegarty's attempt at writing a testimony of the traumatic childhood memory of her brother Liam's being sexually abused by the landlord of her grandmother at the age of nine and of her emotional crisis due to his tragic suicide at the age of forty. At the beginning of the novel, Veronica announces her intention of writing down the summer she spent with Liam at her grandmother Ada's house. She declares that this traumatic event, which she needs "to bear witness to", is an "uncertain event [,] .... a crime of the flesh" (Enright, 2007, p. 1). While she tries to recollect and represent this unsettling memory, she also struggles to come to terms with Liam's suicide, which, she believes, has its "seeds" (Enright, p. 13) in this molestation. Veronica's confessional account of the past, characterised by traumatised repetitions and half-remembered scenes, "may be false memory" (Enright, p. 144) as she suggests, but her distorted and restless process of recalling her memories is yet woven around the familial wound of child sexual abuse infecting the Hegartys through four generations.

The title of the novel, *The Gathering*, refers to the wake of Liam, which gathers Veronica, her mother and siblings in Dublin. Liam, whose suffering finds its expression in his excessive drinking, fills his pockets with stones and drowns himself in Brighton. Veronica's purgatorial quest for the truth starts with her flying to Brighton to retrieve Liam's body. By relying on flashbacks, Veronica starts rewriting the story of the dysfunctional family of the Hegartys starting from 1925 with her grandparents' marriage up until 1998, to the funeral of Liam. On the verge of a nervous breakdown, Veronica immerses herself in writing and drinking, isolates herself from her two daughters and her husband, suffers from insomnia and drives aimlessly all around the city. Veronica's fragmented narrative blends not only past and present, fact and fiction, but also the individual and the public, the historical and the biological by extending the individual trauma to a national one in order to address the issue of child sexual abuse in Irish society. Through Veronica's unreliable, but unambiguously painful account of Liam's being a victim of molestation, Enright unveils a national trauma in Irish context "with its child abuse scandals—and their systematic concealment—involving church - and state-run institutions that have attracted a torrent of media attention since the mid-1990s" (Harte, 2010, p. 187). In "Modes of Witnessing and Ireland's Institutional History", Pine et al. claim that the systemic abuse of children in Industrial Schools and the

Catholic Church throughout the twentieth century had not been recognised until May 2009, when Taoiseach Bertie Ahern acknowledged the institutional child abuse in Ireland. They draw attention to the “*fictionalised works, ... investigative books, ... individual memoirs of survivors ... seeking to make the public realise the extent of the abuse of children in Industrial Schools*” (Pine, Leavy, Keane, Casserly, and Lane, 2020, pp. 278-9) and to the documentaries, broadcasted by the radio and the TV, which reached a wider audience that have triggered the public response to the child abuse. Pine et al. believe that these attempts at making child abuse visible through documentaries, artistic and literary works created “*the cultural context that led to Ahern’s apology*” (p. 281). Thus, *The Gathering*, set in 1998, was written within such a cultural and historical atmosphere and therefore it cannot be separated from this political context. In this respect, *The Gathering* not only does revolve around the Hegarthys’ gathering for the funeral of Liam and Veronica’s attempt at gathering evidence for her repressed memories, but it also bids the whole nation to assemble around an ethical action that should put a stop to the abuse of the vulnerable. Veronica’s painful recollection of the past and her determination to write it down derive from her need to know the truth about Liam’s abuse and suicide, to reconnect with her damaged family and to reconstruct her collapsed subjectivity. Her preoccupation with writing is evident when she expresses that she spends her nights awake writing. Building a narrative framework on first-person perspective that strives to relate trauma for therapeutic purposes is a common fictional technique that highlights the connection between suffering and the relieving power of writing. However, in *The Gathering*, this writing process does not bring about healing or end in consolation. Its uncertain and dismantling narrative construction, stemming from Veronica’s ruptured memory as well as her biologically experienced grief, offers “*different possibilities of closure*” (Ganteau, 2015, p. 71) but not a renewal.

What Veronica presents to its readers is, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s terms, an act of “*exscription*”, that is, body-writing. Nancy’s definition of ontology has its roots in the material presence of the body and perceives the self as the body of sense, which forms the affective dimension of existence. He claims that “[*b*]y inscribing significations, we exscribe the presence of what withdraws from all significations, being itself” (Nancy, 1993, p. 339). Irving Goh explains this self as “*being-in-exteriority*” in relation to the concept of exscription as follows:

No matter how agile our minds, how dexterous our writing technics, that sense by and large escapes our meaning-making or signifying capacities and strategies at the moment of its passage, and after too,

as is often the case. In other words, all our attempts to inscribe it generally fail, and they do so on two counts: first, they fail to inscribe it at the very moment it passes; second, they fail to inscribe it in a precise and comprehensive (or even total) manner (2019, p. 1081).

As the body is anchored in senses and it is this corporeality which makes it exist, human experience is bound to the presence of sense which inherently functions beyond meaning-making processes. Exscription, like sense itself, moves in “*all directions beyond our determination .... [and] pertains to that aspect of our body which we fail to represent or even articulate, the presence of which, however, we cannot fail to feel*” (Goh, pp. 1081, 1083). Within this framework, this article argues that Veronica’s testimony fails, not in the sense of its lack of capacity to represent the truth, but in the sense of failing to provide linguistic signification of her traumatic memory and the therapeutic effect of writing due to the affect of grief she is immersed in. In relation to her unreliable account of her memories, Carol Dell’Amico marks that

Veronica never lies; as readers, we believe in Veronica even if we might not necessarily believe the truth of her statements: she never asks us to believe that her speculations are true and the force of her conviction and the depth of her pain and suffering carry us along (2010, p. 62).

On a figurative level, *The Gathering* depicts Veronica’s desire to regain her subjectivity through writing what she remembers obsessively. On a narrative level, it presents a self-reflexive writing process of the ineffable, that is, the materiality of grief, while it simultaneously shows that writing cannot access the truth of the body. In order to understand the treatment of grief as an affect in the novel, it is important to explore the theoretical development of mourning and melancholia and their reception in the contemporary context.

### **The Peculiar Painfulness of Loss**

Jean-Michel Ganteau claims that “most influential novels, over the last two decades, have been elegies, or at least have been dominated by elegiac strategies” (2015, p. 71) and he counts *The Gathering* as one of them. Referring to Jahan Ramazani’s seminal work on the modern elegy, in which Ramazani claims that modern poets criticise the traditional elegy genre for its tendency “*to translate grief into consolation*” (1994, p. 3) and therefore they adopt “melancholic” mourning rather than normative mourning instead, Ganteau argues that *The Gathering* also works on the “*elegy template*” and “*is more concerned with chronicling melancholia than mourning*” (2015, pp. 72, 74). It portrays a melancholic mourning that “*rejects any*

*acceptance of loss and makes loss permanent and pathological, impossible to be forgotten*" (Ganteau, p. 74). According to Freud, the distinction between normative mourning and melancholia is that, in mourning, the libido strives to detach from the loved object that is lost. In melancholia, however, one feels a loss is being experienced but cannot understand clearly what has been lost (Freud, 1957b, p. 245). In this view, *"melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious"* (Freud, 1957b, p. 245). Thus, melancholic mourning is a kind of mourning that is *"unresolved, violent, and ambivalent"* (Ramazani, 1994, p. 4).

Eugenie Brinkema, in *The Forms of the Affects*, emphasises that in "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud also differentiates mourning from melancholia by underlining its processual, dialectical and durational nature after loss. Freud's definition of mourning as *"a normal emotion"* has a positive nature in the sense that the mourner works through mourning to realise that the loved object does not exist anymore and participates in a *"processual and durational"* (Brinkema, 2014, p. 57) labor that results in the libido's detachment from the lost object and the redirection of its attachment elsewhere. In this respect, *"[m]ourning has an expiration date"* and it *"ultimately sets one free"* whereas melancholia signifies a state of grief in which the melancholic remains attached to the lost object in *"an expanded duration"* (Brinkema, p. 57). In this regard, *"melancholia is the pathological, morbid, problematic version of mourning"* (Brinkema, p. 57). Melancholia acts like an open wound which drains the ego of its psychic energy because, initially, the introjection of and, then, the identification of the melancholic with the missing object leave no energy for other purposes and attachments (Brinkema, p. 58). Melancholia thoroughly consumes the subject. However, both states share a common ground in relation to loss, defined by Freud as a *"peculiar painfulness"* (Freud, 1957a, p. 169), which cannot be ignored. In "Anxiety, Pain and Mourning" Freud admits that, in his study on mourning and melancholia, he has left one feature of mourning, its peculiar pain, unattended. He argues that in common speech the psychological pain of loss is mostly associated with physical pain because *"the intense cathexis of longing ... creates the same economic conditions as are created by the cathexis of pain which is concentrated on the injured part of the body"* (Freud, p. 171).

Brinkema claims that it is this peculiar painfulness, which is lost in approaches to mourning and melancholia over the decades following Freud's theoretical account of them. Besides, she asserts that in the later twentieth century, melancholia's painful and affective dimension is replaced by a productive trait. The mental pain of melancholia is perceived as a positive potential for artistic creativity. Because of its "*never-ending negotiation or relationship with the missing thing*", melancholia (Brinkema, 2014, p. 66) turns into an agent of collective "*politics and ethics of not forgetting*" (Brinkema, p. 66) as well as a rich site for discussions of memory and history. In this view, melancholia leaves its private psychic territory and establishes connection with the remains rather than the loss and therefore promises political and ethical productivity for constructing a better future. Thus, in relation to this definition of melancholia, "*the work of mourning*" acquires a negative aspect due to its being a processual labor that comes to signify "*forgetting, non-commemoration, even the apolitical and ahistorical*" (Brinkema, p. 66).

However, Brinkema draws attention to the theoretical loss of peculiar painfulness in the discussions of melancholia and mourning. According to her, such a theoretical perspective revealed above completely ignores Freud's insistence on the peculiar painfulness of loss. She says, "*In place of the 'peculiar painfulness' of mourning, it is now a peculiar painlessness that centers post-Freudian discourses of loss: mourning made melancholia, or mourninchoia, has been dialecticized, and it has been anesthetized, deprived of the intensity of its affective force*" (Brinkema, 2014, p. 71). She terms this shift in contemporary grief discourse by combining two terms mourning and melancholia as "*mourninchoia*", which implies a blending rather than an opposition between these two liminal experiences and she names this peculiar painfulness grief. According to her, grief resides outside "*the relational dimension of loss*" (Brinkema, p. 71). It is not situated in the process of working through, which is based on the investment of energy on the lost object and then the withdrawal of this energy from it. Since grief is the peculiar painfulness of the experience of loss, it does not promise a dialectical illumination for the future.

As is discussed above, both Ramazani and Brinkema observe the collapse of the boundaries between mourning and melancholia in the later twentieth century and detect a tendency to experience mourning in a perpetual state of melancholia. They highlight this tendency in the terms they coin, melancholic mourning and mourninchoia, respectively. These definitions can offer a possibility of reconciliation because they disregard the intensity of affective grief. *The Gathering* embodies the



peculiar painfulness of grief and shows that healing cannot take place because Veronica feels this grief as a pain in her body and cannot detach herself from the lost object, Liam. Sarah C. Gardam notes that Veronica's narrative can be perceived "as a mere therapeutic narrative" and "an attempt to neutralize the traumatic memories" (2009, p. 99) on a first read, which relates the protagonist's painful effort of writing to cope with her brother's sexual trauma and deal with his suicide. However, Veronica's narrative does not offer a therapeutic relief through writing. On the contrary, it presents the intensity of grief through biological descriptions so that the reader is also overwhelmed by the grief she experiences. Her grief unravels her subjectivity, and thus instantly disrupts the neutralisation of her traumatic memories. Her depressive state is observed in her developing the habit of drinking after Liam's suicide. "It is the only way [she] know[s] to make the day end" (Enright, 2007, p. 38). She remembers how Liam's "drinking was an existential statement ... There was certainly nothing metabolic about it" (Enright, p. 55). Her inability to detach herself and mourn for the lost object is overtly expressed, when she declares that she "has lost something that can not be replaced" (Enright, p. 11).

The strictly demarcated boundaries of Veronica's self are annihilated when she imagines herself as one with Liam at two main liminal states of existence: birth and death. First, she imagines herself as an embryo in her mother's womb: "There were eleven months between me and Liam. We came out of her on each other's tails; one after the other ... Sometimes I think we overlapped in there, he just left early, to wait outside" (Enright, p. 11). Then, she visualizes Liam's death and feels "the lapping around [her] waist of black salt water" (Enright, p. 76) as if she were the one who walked into the sea off Brighton coast. Thus, Veronica's traumatic loss splits her subjectivity and resists the mourning process. As Ana-Karina Schneider says, "until she has mourned for her brother, her self fails to become completely structured" (2014, p. 214). This structurelessness, which is aesthetically mirrored in the narrative voice of Veronica at different ages, in disintegrated narration of uncertain memories and events, in non-chronologically entangled plotlines, and in the oscillation between invention and truth, stems from the peculiar painfulness, that is, the affect of grief that Veronica is experiencing.

### **Representations of the Affect of Grief in *The Gathering***

In *The Gathering*, Enright employs *grief* as affect at a personal level as is observed in the representation of Veronica's loss of her beloved brother and at a social level as is observed in the conveyance of a biological narrative in order to evoke the

same affect in her readers to draw attention to the concealment and the denial of child sexual abuse observed in post-Independence Ireland. In addition, the portrayal of Veronica's peculiar pain, her grief, aims to urge Irish society to follow a course of action on the problem of child abuse with political awareness and ethical responsibility.

Brinkema lists the changes of meaning in the history of the word grief by focusing on its etymology and finds the peculiar painfulness Freud highlights in its etymological roots. She indicates that grief meant "*hurt, harm, mischief or injury ... a bodily injury, a physical pain or discomfort ... before its very late definition of 'mental pain, distress, or sorrow' that dates from about 1350*" (Brinkema, 2014, p. 72). From the very beginning of the novel, Enright's commitment to the presentation of the affective state of grief is overt in the representation of Veronica's pain for Liam's suicide. Veronica's grief also performs this initial meaning of grief as biological hurt and thus as peculiar painfulness experienced at a loss when Veronica visits her mother to tell her that Liam is dead and try to console her "*in deference to a grief that is biological, idiot, timeless*" (Enright, 2007, p. 11). Since affect signifies a system of biological operations which precedes awareness and cognition and disturbs the boundaries of the self, destabilizes the unity of the being and then opens up a space for a possibility to reconstruct subjectivity anew, grief presented here does not reach a cognitive level yet. It is not a response given upon a dialectical, meaningful chain of thought or awareness but it annihilates the strictly demarcated boundaries of the subject. Such aspect of affect can be observed in Veronica's words as follows:

I am a trembling mess from hip to knee. There is a terrible heat, a looseness in my innards that makes me want to dig my fists between my thighs. It is a confusing feeling – somewhere between diarrhoea and sex – this grief that is almost genital (Enright, 2007, p. 7).

As is observed in this quotation, Veronica's grief "*points to the affect's peculiar, separate, apart aspect that is opposed to all that is common, shared, or shareable*" (Brinkema, 2014, pp. 73-4). In fact, her unique pain in reaction to her brother's loss, which is depicted as genital above, dates back to the peculiar curiosity of physical pain she explored in her body when she was a child. She remembers how she "*practised with [her] own wounds and scabs, and was taken, each time, by the brightness of the red on the white toilet paper*" (Enright, 2007, p. 129). She also recalls another moment when she tries "*acupuncture on [her] thigh, testing the depth of the needles as they went through fat and meat to the cartilage or the bone*" (Enright, 2007,



p. 129) with childish curiosity. Veronica's obsession with writing her personal and familial past, and her restless effort to represent both her physical and psychological pain in words can also be regarded as a mature version of her childhood play with wounds. At the very beginning of the novel, she admits that what she writes "*are stories, night thoughts, the sudden convictions that uncertainty spawns [,] ... ravings, more like*" (Enright, 2007, p. 2). She also highlights that she is "*lay [ing] them out in nice sentences, all my clean, white bones*" (Enright, 2007, p. 2). Her association of writing process with the material body is observed in this quotation. She thinks that children can understand and feel what pain is only when they grow up, but until then, "*they experiment with it*" (Enright, 2007, p. 129) with great interest, not being able to grasp it fully. In this sense, her attempt at narrating her painful memories are also experimental, which is evident in her fragmented narrative style as is discussed earlier. She is experimenting with words in order to represent, and then understand her own pain like she did with her bodily wounds during her childhood. Yet, she still cannot grasp the meaning of them because she thinks that she does not "*know the truth*" or "*how to tell the truth*" (Enright, 2007, p. 2). However, she continues to play this childhood game in her adulthood, which shows that both her physical and psychological wounds play an essential role in her relentless struggle for expressing herself.

Her sexual relationship with her boyfriend, Michael Weiss, in her teenage years also hints at her association of pain with sexuality. She "*hack[s] away [her] inner leg, with a biro of all things ... running through the ineffectual lines with his kitchen knife*" (Enright, 2007, p. 130). She still "*remember[s] the coolness of the cut*" (Enright, 2007, p. 130). This scene in which Veronica learns physical pain through injuring her body - her thighs and inner part of her legs - during her summer holiday at her grandmother's house, the summer when Liam becomes the victim of molestation and during her relationship with Michael, whom Liam has got along very well with, shows how Veronica's experience of pain is established in her personal history. The grief she feels for Liam's death is associated with her childhood physical pain which is described as genital and in that sense very peculiar: "*This is how we all survive*", announces Veronica, "*We default to the oldest scar*" (Enright, 2007, p. 97). Liam's death becomes Veronica's wound that drains all her life energy and sends her back to the memory of her childhood scars because this is the way she knows and feels what pain is. She cries out: "I am the one who loved him most" (Enright, 2007, p. 11), which indicates her deep attachment to Liam. Thus, Veronica's grief annihilates her boundaries and makes her body a site of mere grief. Now that Liam is gone, Veronica

evades any tactile experience. This is indicated in her attempts at isolating her corporeality from the other bodies around her. She refuses to have sex with her husband; her daughters' affectionate touching discomforts her; when she tells her mom that Liam is dead, she cannot touch her and calm her down; she cannot hold her sister Kitty's hand when Kitty cries in pain for her brother's death; she feels overwhelmed when her family members touch her at Liam's funeral:

I have been so much touched these last few days. .... Everyone wants a bit of me. And it has nothing to do with what I want, or what my body might want, whatever that might be – God knows it is a long time since I knew (Enright, 2007, p. 244).

Veronica struggles hard to detach her body from other bodies and to remain attached to her loss. Such closeness to the lost object throws Veronica into a state of subject-in-crisis and blurs the boundaries of her subjectivity and she comes to identify with the missing object so much so that she even reaches a state of imagining herself as the one who has been molested. She cannot discern between her memories and reality. She feels that this scene plays itself out in her "*head where words and actions are mangled*" (Enright, 2007, p. 221) and she cannot tell whether it is true or not. She "*owe[s] it to Liam to make things clear – what happened and what did not happen*" (Enright, 2007, p. 223).

Veronica's blurred vision, which, in fact, stems from grief causes her to identify herself with her victimized brother. This second characteristic of grief as affect is defined by Brinkema as follows: "*grief darkens, it blackens; dim eyes, dusky heart – all such hurt is stygian*" (2014, p. 54). That is, the pain of loss also makes itself evident in relation to sight. The association of blindness with mourning's peculiar pain underlines the mourner's desperate seeking of the dead beloved in vain. The eyes separate themselves from the anguished body and they persistently look for the lost one around only to see absence. In a scene in which all the Hegartys gather for Liam's funeral in the family house and pay their respect to Liam's dead body in the coffin placed in the living room, Veronica listens to her siblings' conversation and watches them while they are making jokes and laughing. She suddenly hears Liam's contribution to these jokes in his own way and laughs at it for the first time in her narrative. "*I start to laugh and turn to catch him, but he is not there. He is dead. He is laid out in the next room*" (Enright, 2007, p. 209). As is observed in this scene, Veronica's eyes seek for her lost object in vain. She hallucinates Liam as the revenant.

She turns to see the presence of Liam's absence. His ghostly presence over the text shows Veronica's attachment to the lost object that she cannot mourn.

This uncertainty, disorientedness, incoherency and non-straightforwardness that dominate Veronica's testimony are main characteristics of a trauma narrative as well as the signification of the loss of any meaning-making process under the attack of affects on which material dimensions of identity are based. As Veronica tries to write and represent the moment Liam was abused by her grandmother's landlord, she gradually loses her contact with the outside world. As Denell Downum argues, "*Her own trauma of witnessing, combined with her inability to protect her brother or to testify to what she saw, animates the guilt, anguish, and compulsive repetition that torment her throughout the novel*" (2015, p. 82). The impact of trauma prevents her from participating in meaning-making processes and she relies on her bodily symptoms to assert her existence. She says: "*I pause as I write this, and place my own hand over my face, and lick the thick skin of my palm with a girl's tongue. I inhale. The odd comforts of the flesh. Of being me*" (Enright, 2007, p. 146). In this scene, Veronica is pursuing her senses imbued with grief in order to reach out to herself. She yearns to go back to her ordinary state, the essence, the body which is formed of senses, as Nancy conceptualizes. As Laura Sydora indicates, "*Veronica must cease to be a stranger in her body, and rediscover the origins of her flesh in order to render it visible*" (2015, p. 259). However, in order to identify with her body, she needs her brother. Liam himself becomes a precondition for this ontological process.

Brinkema identifies a third aspect of grief by constructing its etymological intimacy with "grever" which means "*afflict, burden, oppress*" and with "gravare" in Latin which also means "*to ... make heavy*" both of which derive from "*gravis*" that means weighty (2014, p. 73). She explains the weight of grief as "*a pressure on the body, a dragging the body down to earth like gravity, a vector of invisible force pulling down and down further still*" (Brinkema, p. 73). In her opinion, contemporary discourses on loss have forgotten the special pain of sorrow by not only "*dialecticizing of mourning and the anesthetizing of sorrow's special pain*", but also ignoring "*the heavy, gravitational weightiness, of the affect*" (Brinkema, p. 73). The emphasis on this aspect of grief and its signification by gravity is observed in *The Gathering* especially in the image of falling. Enright ends her novel with Veronica's following remarks: "*Then again, I have been falling for months. I have been falling into my own life, for months. And I am about to hit it now*" (2007, p. 261). The last words show the whole narrative of Veronica is based on this gravitational sorrow reflecting the feeling

of falling. However, at the same time the indication that she is falling into her own life implies the possibility of closure in the near future. *The Gathering* presents a grief that is undialectical which remains at that peculiarly painful dimension of loss with its strong emphasis on the material, the biological and the corporeal in anguish, and the splitting of subjectivity, but it also establishes its relation to the contemporary discourse of melancholic mourning by implying the possibility for healing and for subject formation. Such a shift is perceived, when grief is carried on to the social level. Veronica regrets that she could not understand Liam had suffered from abuse before “hearing about what went in schools and churches and in people’s homes” on the radio or in the newspapers. She admits that “[i]t went on slap-bang in front of me and still I did not realise it” (Enright, 2007, p. 173). When the issue of child sexual abuse is uncovered on the media eventually, the individuals have started to confront with it in their private lives.

Since she is under the attack of peculiar pain and cannot fight against her loss, she does not act and demand solution to the question of child abuse at this point in her life. “*This is what shame does. This is the anatomy and mechanism of a family – a whole fucking country – drowning in shame*” (Enright, 2007, p. 168). In this respect, Liam’s victimization and his suicide act as a revelation of what happened to the Irish nation (Ganteau, 2015, p. 77). His ghostly presence becomes an ethical tool that haunts Veronica’s biological history: “*What is written for the future is written in the body*” (Enright, 2007, p. 163). Thus, when Veronica strives to find a future for her complete subjectivity in her body, she also maps out a future for the historical body as well.

According to Ganteau, after rejecting conventional representations of mourning and consolation, the novel shows a “*wavering of intent*” when all the family members sing Liam’s favourite song with tears in their eyes on the day of Liam’s funeral and most particularly when they meet Liam’s secret child, Rowan, an indication of “*consolation from grief and promise of resurrection*” (2015, p. 82). Veronica’s dissolved boundaries urge a yearning in her to merge with Liam through the body of his son: “*I want Rowan. I yearn for him ... My skin wants him*” (Enright, 2007, p. 244). Her longing for the lost object is also described in physical terms.

Subjectivity is biological and Veronica’s shattered subjectivity knows no distinction between the self and the other. Although she thinks that she has “*never been to a happier funeral*” (Enright, 2007, p. 248), she cannot surrender to the regenerative power of life. This is observed in the last scene of the novel, when she

dreams about having a baby at the airport trying to find her way back home. She talks to her husband in her inner mind and tells him that she already knows the name of the baby, implying that she will name him after Liam. Yet, she also confesses that “*this is not what I want most .... I just want to be less afraid. That’s all*” (Enright, 2007, pp. 260-261).

At the beginning of the novel, when she was too much burdened with grief, Veronica cried out once for calling for an end to procreation. However, now, Veronica’s pondering on having a baby hints at the possibility of her becoming a part of life again. Yet, she cannot overcome her fear. Her momentary decision of having a boy-child from her husband and naming him after her brother reveals her desire to mould Liam into a part of her body through pregnancy. Christian symbolism used in the names of Veronica and Liam is also another emphasis on Veronica’s suffering and her inability to separate herself from Liam. Veronica, the woman who wiped Christ’s face on Golgotha, is believed to receive the imprint of Christ’s face on the cloth she wiped his face with. In her interview with Enright, Hedwig Schwall implies that Veronica is trying to “*catch a vera icon, a true image of her dead brother*” (2008, p.16) by trying to provide a testimony for his trauma that lies beneath his suicide. Liam, on the other hand, “*is the lost one, the scapegoat. In a very original sense, he is the sacrificial boy*” (Schwall, 2008, p.19). Behind her intention of having a baby and naming him after Liam, Veronica wants to save and revive her brother and also to give him another life that he can restart all over again by being protected from harm by Veronica herself. Veronica has rediscovered her origins in flesh; now, there is at least the possibility of finding her way out of this grief again through her flesh, through pregnancy, if she can overcome her fear.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the peculiar pain Veronica feels over her loss locates her at a threshold where the boundaries between subject and object are blurred, and turns her into a subject-in-crisis that cannot uphold its borders. It can be claimed that *The Gathering* is a novel of grieving which has its representational roots in the loss of a beloved one as well as in the traumatic memory. The central notion introduced by Veronica’s announcement: “*(h)istory, like grief and belief, is only biological*” (Enright, 2007, p. 162), binds the biological affect to the dialectical melancholic mourning on the narrative level. We witness Veronica’s peculiar pain as well as her melancholic mourning which still keeps her attached to her lost object, Liam.

Another aspect that should be emphasized is that Veronica's repressed childhood memory of Liam's molestation returns, as is discussed earlier, when she starts to hear about widespread child abuse cases in Ireland unearthed by various forms of media. Veronica could make the connection between her childhood memory and Liam's suicide only when the issue of child abuse in institutions was made visible and speakable. She says:

Over the next twenty years, the world around us changed and I remembered Mr. Nugent. But I never would have made that shift on my own – if I hadn't been listening to the radio, and reading the paper, and hearing about what went on in schools and churches and in people's homes. It went on slap-bang in front of me and I still did not realise it (Enright, 2007, p. 173).

This is also how *The Gathering*, as a literary text, creates an ethical and political awareness in its readers because Veronica's traumatic history foreshadows a collective history. As Downum argues, "*The Gathering can be thought of as a form of testimony that, though fictional, speaks to the lived experiences of survivors of Ireland's collective childhood trauma*" (2015, p. 84). This intention is echoed throughout the subjective narrative moulded in the biological terrain in order to evoke the affect of grief in the social body of Ireland. Firstly, by equating history and biology, the material and the cognitive, Enright attempts to urge Irish society to follow a course of action on the problem of child abuse with political awareness and ethical responsibility. Then, by representing melancholia on the personal level, she introduces Irish society to "*a dimension of bodily suffering*" (Shepherdson, 2008, p. 83), which might "*gather*" the Irish around a communal work of mourning that might offer the possibility of healing at the national level as well.

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### Summary

This article explores Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) by focusing on the representation of the peculiar painfulness of loss, a concept which was introduced by Freud in his study on melancholia and mourning, but has been ignored by the contemporary theoretical approaches to loss. The novel presents thirty-nine-year-old Veronica Hegarty's attempt at writing a testimony of the traumatic childhood memory of her brother Liam's being sexually abused by the landlord of her grandmother at the age of nine and of her emotional crisis due to the tragic suicide of him at the age of forty. At the beginning of the novel, the Veronica announces her intention of writing down the summer she spent with Liam at her grandmother's, Ada, house. While she tries to recollect and represent this unsettling memory, she also struggles to come to terms with Liam's suicide, which, she believes, has its cause in his being molested by the landlord of her grandmother. Veronica's confessional account of the past, characterised by traumatised repetitions and half-remembered scenes reflect her distorted and restless process of memory which is woven around the familial wound of child sexual abuse infecting the Hegartys through four generations.

Veronica's fragmented narrative blends not only past and present, fact and fiction, but also the individual and the public, the historical and the biological by extending the individual trauma to a national one in order to address the issue of child sexual abuse in Irish society. Through Veronica's unreliable, but unambiguously painful account of Liam's being a victim of molestation, Enright unveils a national trauma in Irish context. In this respect, *The Gathering* not only does revolve around the Hegarthys' gathering for the funeral of Liam and Veronica's attempt at gathering evidence for her repressed memories, but it also bids the whole nation to assemble around an ethical action that should put a stop to the abuse of the vulnerable. Veronica's traumatic recollection of the past and her determination to write it down derive from her need to know the truth about Liam's abuse and suicide, to reconnect with her damaged family, to reconstruct her collapsed subjectivity, and to find a therapeutic outlet for her unbearable pain. Building a narrative framework on first-person perspective who strives to relate their trauma for therapeutic purposes is a common fictional technique that highlights the connection between suffering and the relieving power of writing. However, in *The Gathering*, this writing process does not bring about healing or end in consolation. Its uncertain and disunifying narrative construction, stemming from Veronica's shattered memory as well as her biologically experienced grief, does not offer a renewal. This article argues that Veronica's testimony fails, not in the sense of its lack of capacity to represent the truth, but in the sense of failing to provide linguistic signification of her excruciating memory and the therapeutic effect of writing due to the affect of grief she is immersed in.

According to Eugenie Brinkema, the peculiar pain Freud mentions is the affect of grief which is experienced biologically. On a figurative level, *The Gathering* depicts Veronica's desire to regain her subjectivity through writing what she remembers, obsessively, day and night. On a narrative level, it presents a self-reflexive writing process of the ineffable, that is, the materiality of grief, while it simultaneously shows that writing cannot access the truth of the body. In order to understand the treatment of grief as an affect in the novel, this article focuses on the descriptions of grief in its embodied forms. *The Gathering* presents a grief that is undialectical which remains at that peculiarly painful dimension of loss with its strong emphasis on the material, the biological and the corporeal in anguish, and the splitting of subjectivity, but it also establishes its relation to the contemporary discourse of melancholic mourning by implying the possibility for healing and for subject formation. Such a shift is perceived, when grief is carried on to the social level. Thus, Enright employs *grief* as affect at a personal level as is observed in the representation of Veronica's loss of her beloved brother and at a social level as is observed in the conveyance of a biological narrative in order to evoke the same affect in her readers to draw attention to the concealment and the denial of child sexual abuse observed in post-Independence Ireland. In addition, the portrayal of Veronica's

peculiar pain, her grief, aims to urge Irish society to follow a course of action on the problem of child abuse with political awareness and ethical responsibility.