

Exorcising Personal Traumas / Silencing History: Jennifer Johnston's *The Invisible Worm*

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Jennifer Johnston's novel *The Invisible Worm* (1991) is an exemplary trauma narrative, both stylistically and thematically. It centres on the consciousness of its protagonist—Laura—and narrates her painful and protracted psychological process of coming to terms with a past marked by repeated sexual abuse by her father, which culminates in rape, and her mother's consequent suicide. Yet *The Invisible Worm* is also a contemporary example of the Irish Big House novel, a genre that articulates the identitarian, historical and social plights of the Anglo-Irish. My intention in this article is to consider how the narrative's evident interest in the personal dimension of Laura's traumas works to obviate the socio-historical and political elements that have also contributed to the protagonist's predicament. I will also analyse the different treatment afforded to the individual and the collective past: while the novel is explicit and optimistic in the case of Laura's personal story, it remains reluctant to speak out about historical evils, with the result that, at the end of the novel, although freed from her personal traumas, Laura remains the prisoner of her historical legacy.

Keywords: Trauma Studies; Irish history; the Irish Big House novel; Jennifer Johnston; *The Invisible Worm*

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Los traumas personales se exorcizan / La historia se silencia:

The Invisible Worm, de Jennifer Johnston

La novela de Jennifer Johnston titulada *The Invisible Worm* (1991) es un ejemplo perfecto de la "novela de trauma," tanto estilística como temáticamente. El centro de interés recae en el mundo interior de Laura, la protagonista, y la novela narra el proceso psicológico, doloroso y prolongado, que Laura debe experimentar para recordar y asumir su pasado: un pasado marcado por los reiterados abusos sexuales de su padre, que culminan en violación, y el suicidio de su madre a consecuencia de estos hechos. Pero *The Invisible Worm* es también

una novela que pertenece al género de la novela *Big House* irlandesa, y este es un género que tradicionalmente ha articulado los conflictos de identidad, históricos y sociales de los Anglo-irlandeses. En este artículo se considerará cómo el interés narrativo en la dimensión personal de los traumas de Laura—violación a manos de su padre y suicidio de su madre—simultáneamente sirve para obviar los elementos socio-históricos y políticos que también forman parte del conflicto de la protagonista. Intentaré así mismo llamar la atención sobre el tratamiento tan diferente que se otorga en la novela a la historia personal de Laura, en contraste con el pasado colectivo de la nación irlandesa: mientras la novela es mucho más explícita y optimista en cuanto a la historia personal de Laura, los hechos históricos se silencian, y al final de la novela, aunque Laura parece haber exorcizado sus traumas personales, su legado histórico todavía la mantiene prisionera.

Palabras clave: estudios de trauma; historia irlandesa; la novela *Big House* irlandesa; Jennifer Johnston; *The Invisible Worm*

Jennifer Johnston's novel *The Invisible Worm*, first published in 1991, is an exemplary trauma narrative, both stylistically and thematically.¹ It centres around the consciousness of its protagonist—Laura—and narrates her painful and protracted psychological process of coming to terms with a past marked by repeated sexual abuse by her father, which culminates in rape, and her mother's consequent suicide.² The novel presents an alienated, numb, dissociated and depressed personality trapped in an emotional turmoil of hatred, guilt and shame, initially unable and unwilling to integrate the traumatic events of her life into a coherent narrative. Formally, *The Invisible Worm* is divided into multiple brief sections that shift abruptly from present to past, from external to internal narration, from reported discourse to free indirect discourse to internal monologue, thus offering a discontinuous and fragmented surface that mirrors the temporal dislocation, instability and sense of disintegration of the traumatic self. As an incest survivor, the protagonist finally manages to work through her trauma when she finds an appropriate and empathic listener for her story. Yet *The Invisible Worm* is also a contemporary example of the Irish Big House novel, a genre that articulates the identitarian, historical and social plights of the Anglo-Irish.³

From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the Irish Big House novel came to record the declining power of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and its gradual demise as a dominant and vital force in Irish politics, history and culture. The Act of Union, successive land acts oriented towards the redistribution of land ownership, the growth of the Home Rule movement, the rise of Sinn Féin, the War of Independence, the partition of Ireland and the marginalisation of Protestants in the Irish Free State were all determining factors in the final downfall of this formerly ruling class. The decay and failing fortunes of the Anglo-Irish were symbolised in the Big House novel through their dilapidated and ruined mansions (Marsh 2006, 52-53).

The onset of the Troubles in Northern Ireland at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s triggered the revival of the genre of the Big House by some writers—among them Eugene McCabe, William Trevor and Jennifer Johnston—as a way of exploring contemporary sectarian violence through a fictional examination of the carnage during the turbulent years from the Easter Rising (1916) to the end of the Civil War (1923). Yet, in my view, these writers' intentions can also be seen as a way of casting a backward look—at times nostalgic, at times critical—at the

¹ The research carried out for the writing of this article has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and the European Regional Development Fund (EFRD) (code FFI2012-32719).

² The incest story in Johnston's novel led Christine St. Peter to relate it to a growing body of incest narratives by contemporary female Irish writers that started to give verbal form to the hitherto unspoken and unspeakable within Irish society (2000a, 49; 2000b, 127).

³ For previous scholarly work that argues the pertinence of Trauma Studies for the analysis of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish fiction, see del Río (2010) and Garratt (2011).

Ascendancy's historical role in, and responsibility for, past viciousness, as well as at the future possibilities for this class's integration into and relevant participation in public life in the Republic.⁴

As mentioned above, one of the Irish writers to revive the Big House novel, particularly at the beginning of her career, is Jennifer Johnston. Her own social background is that of the upper-middle class and urban cultured elite. Although not a member of the landed gentry, the fact that she is Protestant and born into a privileged minority group may explain her continuing interest in the plight of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. As Mark Mortimer remarks, "she is closely linked to this world through family connections, friends and personal tastes" (1991, 209).⁵

My reasons for choosing *The Invisible Worm* as an object of analysis over other Big House novels by Johnston are fourfold: (1) this is her last Big House novel to date and differs from previous examples of the genre in that it is not set during the revolutionary years but later on, in an unspecified time, probably in the late nineteen-eighties; (2) within her Big House novels, this is the one that most subscribes to the experimental features that Ronald Granofsky (1995), Laurie Vickroy (2002) and Anne Whitehead (2004) have identified as constituting the "trauma novel" and the one whose protagonist most evidently shows post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association (2013); (3) the protagonist's suffering is not apparently the result of sectarian brutality but stems from her personal circumstances: paternal sexual abuse leading to incest and (her mother's) suicide; and finally, (4) as several critics have perceived, and—misguidedly in my view—attributed to the more intimate nature of the female protagonist's victimisation, this novel marks a shift in Johnston's thematic interests, albeit a shift that was becoming increasingly evident in her fiction (Kreilkamp 1998, 214; Mahony 1998, 221).⁶ In this sense, certain critics maintain that while Johnston's earlier narratives deal with the politics of class and sectarian division in Ireland, from the 1990s onwards she centres mostly on the politics of gender. Caitriona Moloney, for example, has affirmed that "[a]lthough Johnston's early work reveals some nostalgia for the lost culture of the Ascendancy, the development of her women characters takes her fiction away from Ireland's troubled history and into a more emancipatory world where art equates with freedom and 'a room of one's own'" (2003, 66).

⁴ The notion that Jennifer Johnston's Big House novels were not exclusively a way of displacing contemporary violence onto a former historical period is supported by the fact that early in her career she wrote fiction where ongoing Troubles-related violence featured explicitly, for example in *Shadows on our Skin* (1977) and *The Railway Station Man* (1984). The same applies to writers Eugene McCabe and William Trevor.

⁵ However, when interviewed, Johnston herself has resented being labelled a "Big House novelist" by academic critics and has stated that for her, the Big House is just "a means to an end" and that she uses the setting without "trying to make statements of any sort about 'the Big House'" (González 1998, 10).

⁶ In a later novel, *Grace and Truth* (2005), Johnston returns to the theme of incest but this novel does not belong to the Big House genre.

In fact, two of Johnston's early novels dealing with the world of the Ascendancy—*The Captains and the Kings* (1972) and *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974)—feature male protagonists and revolve around male heroic acts—mainly the First World War. In *The Gates* (1973), *The Old Jest* (1979) and *Fool's Sanctuary* (1987) she however opts for female protagonists.⁷ In these latter three works she also draws on the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* and thus her novels start to blend historical, political and social factors with the psychological. In general, this tendency can be perceived in all her Big House novels of the 1970s and 1980s in her persistent attempt to fuse the private and the public so as to explore the ambiguity of Irish identity and “the national, cultural, political and religious divisions separating Ireland's two nations” (Kamm 1990, 137). The isolated and alienated female protagonists of these early novels, and their transgressive social and religious alliances—as customary in most twentieth-century Big House novels—serve to articulate Johnston's scepticism towards integrating the conflicting interests and worldviews of Ireland's competing factions in terms of class, history, politics, culture, religion and gender.

As mentioned above, *The Invisible Worm* appears to signal a shift in Johnston's work. While still within the confines of the Big House novel, this narrative seems to be more interested in the personal dimension of its female protagonist's story than in exploring broader contextual issues.⁸ The story's detachment from turbulent historical periods—the revolutionary decade or the Troubles—as well as the personal plight of the central female character, probably contribute to this impression. In the same vein, Christina Hunt Mahony points out that the political context is not highlighted (1998, 221), Rosa González stresses the novel's concentration on the analysis of subjectivity “by presenting a story of personal and gender-marked drama in which Ireland's history is not a primary focus, but a mere setting” (1994, 119), and Rachael Sealy Lynch asserts that *The Invisible Worm*, “while by no means devoid of political resonances, is more concerned with Laura Quinlan's emotional and psychological growth” (2000, 252-253). Similarly, Heather Ingman has read the novel within Kristeva's theory of maternal abjection and has highlighted the protagonist's troubled relationship with her mother (2007, 87-91).

Considering that Robert F. Garratt has also read Johnston's novels, among them *The Invisible Worm*, from the perspective of Trauma Studies, his ideas deserve more attention here. In his study *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (2011), Garratt establishes a distinction between “trauma novels” and “novels about trauma.”

⁷ Although *The Old Jest* (1979) is not fully a Big House novel, it shares many of the conventions of the genre, such as the temporal setting, the unholy alliances between the upper-class Protestant girl and the Protestant and Catholic revolutionaries, and the constant presence of the girl's grandfather, a crumbling reminder of Britain's imperial past.

⁸ Undoubtedly, sexual violence is closely linked to questions of power and patriarchal institutions, and consequently always entails a social and cultural dimension. Additionally, in trauma there are no clear demarcations between the political and the psychological (Horvitz 2000, 4). I am here rather referring to the novel's silencing of the influence of Ireland's historical past on Laura's traumatised state.

Following critics such as Anne Whitehead (2004) and Laurie Vickroy (2002), for Garratt “trauma novels” use narrative strategies (temporal and spatial discontinuities, repetitions, abrupt shifts in focalisation and voice, fragmented identities, etc.) that mirror the process whereby the traumatised subject attempts “to discover, confront, and give voice to a vague yet threatening catastrophic past” (Garratt 2011, 5). On the other hand, “novels about trauma” deal with the character’s traumatic experience in an external, objective way, as a plot element in a story which is narrated through classical conventions (5). In the chapter devoted to Jennifer Johnston’s fiction (69-83), Garratt discusses *How Many Miles to Babylon*, *Fool’s Sanctuary* and *The Invisible Worm* as “trauma novels,” while he considers *The Railway Station Man* (1984) rather a “novel about trauma.” In some way, Garratt’s consideration of the first three novels just mentioned as “trauma novels” for their more experimental features, and his classification of *The Railway Station Man* as a more conventional or classical “novel about trauma,” indirectly shows that the cataloguing of narratives according to their more or less experimental features is questionable and always relative. If one reads the first pages of *How Many Miles to Babylon* and of *The Invisible Worm*, both of them “trauma novels” according to Garratt, certainly *The Invisible Worm* seems much more discontinuous, disrupted and fragmented in all respects. In this sense, if *The Invisible Worm* is compared to *How Many Miles to Babylon*, the latter would appear to be a “novel about trauma” and not a “trauma novel.” Garratt also argues that Jennifer Johnston’s “trauma novels” are grounded on the condition of “historical vacuity” (2011, 71). By this he means that “her characters return to the past precisely because they lack an awareness of it as history, as an event that is finished and therefore behind them, and that can be reconstructed in some form of discourse, usually as a story” (71).

In *The Mental State of Hysterics: A Study of Mental Stigmata and Mental Accidents* (1901), Pierre Janet distinguished between narrative and traumatic memory, a distinction that Ruth Leys has read as follows: traumatic memory “merely and unconsciously repeats the past,” while narrative memory “narrates the past as past” (Leys 2000, 105; emphasis in the original). This contrast also forms the basis of LaCapra’s differentiation between “acting out” and “working through” (2001, 21-23).

In my view, Garratt’s references to “history” denote the personal history of the character, whose recovery, undoubtedly, also has a public or collective value, but is not to be confused with the history of the nation. That is probably why, in line with previous critics, he asserts: “While the events of Irish history are not as crucial here [*The Invisible Worm*] as they are in *Fool’s Sanctuary*, they nonetheless play a role in Laura’s story, if only to stand as background to lend significance to Laura’s circumstances” (2011, 78-79). As I see it, and as I will try to argue in this essay, Irish history is not just a background for the protagonist’s predicament, for it also plays a crucial role in this novel. The question is not so much that the personal has been privileged over the political, social and historical, but rather that the systematic formulation of Laura’s traumatic story as deriving principally from her

family situation means that the historical and collective roots of her affliction are symptomatically covered up. Alternatively, reading *The Invisible Worm* as a narrative that articulates both individual and historical traumas yet handling them in different ways, and where personal trauma is ultimately rooted, though covertly—and probably unintentionally—in historical and political collective responsibility, will also illuminate the ending of this novel—an ending that, as will be seen, has been interpreted in contradictory terms.

“I stand by the window and watch the woman running. Is it Laura? I wonder that, as I watch her flickering like blown leaves through the trees. I am Laura. Sometimes I run so fast that my legs buckle under me; ungainly, painful” (Johnston 1991, 1). Thus starts *The Invisible Worm*, with its protagonist, thirty-seven-year-old Laura, staring through the window at a running woman, dressed “in the colours of weariness,” (1) who, she thinks, may be herself. But certainty lies beyond Laura’s reach. Her discontinuous thoughts, memories and words are saturated with doubts, tentative maybes, ellipses and gaps. As she herself says, she has become “ill with half-believing” (163). That is why for many years she has opted for silence and isolation while attempting to excise the memories of an all too painful past. For Laura, silence “was like the splint that held a broken limb tight, [...] prevented pain, prevented truth, prevented dislocation, falling apart. Long live silence!” (101). This has been her way of keeping up a fragile façade of sanity and safety. In the privacy of her Big House, looking out of the window, she feels as protected as a snail in its shell and she can pretend that order still prevails. Yet silence is a treacherous strategy to cope with traumatic events, since, as Dori Laub has stated, “[t]he ‘not telling’ of the [traumatic] story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events” (1995, 64). Consequently, as much as Laura has tried to hold back her memories and to dissociate herself from her past self, that Blakeian invisible worm keeps gnawing at her body and consciousness: a worm that figures as the corruption of her innocence, the shattering of her sense of self, her father’s violation of her body, and her mother’s ensuing suicide, for which Laura feels responsible.⁹

The novel starts on the day of Laura’s father’s funeral and it becomes evident in the first pages that Laura is haunted by frequent “unclaimed memories,” to use Cathy Caruth’s phrase,¹⁰ of both her mother and her father: memories triggered

⁹ The reference here is to William Blake’s famous poem “Sick Rose,” a symbolic rose that hosts a symbolic invisible worm which is destroying the rose’s life from within (*Songs of Experience*, 1794).

¹⁰ In her famous book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth refers to the traumatic memories that assail the individual as “unclaimed experiences.”

through associations based on present perceptions and sensations.¹¹ In the following quotation, we read Laura's thoughts and realise how, for her, a present and apparently innocuous sensation is immediately connected to a destructive past experience. The passage, although less evidently, also links Laura's Catholic husband with her likewise Catholic father.

The feel of his [her husband's] fingers pressing through my coat and my black woollie will stay with me for ever... not of course in the front region of my mind, but I will be able to recall, when I need to, the feel of those fingers, the faint smell of Eau Sauvage, the sound of his steps, confident on the polished parquet as we cross the hall.

Such scenes reverberate and conjure up other scenes in the past: my father's soft, white fingers imprinting their marks on my arms, as he shook me and my feet clattered on the floor and a dog barked at nothing, outside in the sunshine. The sound of my own voice screaming tears suddenly at the soft corners of my brain. (4-5)

In these early pages of the novel, the reader learns of Laura's visceral hatred towards her father and of her refusal to forgive him on his deathbed. What the reader also learns is that Laura is the daughter of a mixed marriage between a pragmatic and successful Catholic statesman and a beautiful Anglo-Irish heiress: the owner of the Big House the family inhabits. Senator O'Meara is Laura's father and the perpetrator of incest. Yet, as several critics have observed, he is also representative of the misogynist and oppressive features of post-independence Ireland, and of the new postcolonial political elite that has replaced and marginalised the old colonial order embodied in his wife's Protestant values and Anglo-Irish lifestyle (Kreilkamp 1998, 215; Backus 1999, 227; Lynch 2000, 264). The constant clashes and tension between Laura's Protestant mother and Catholic father connote the unsuccessful integration and reconciliation among Ireland's competing factions, and they impinge upon the child Laura, who suffers from divided loyalties even at an age when she is still unable to grasp the socio-historical significance of such confrontations. Although Laura's rape by her father represents the culmination of repeated sexual abuse, and in this sense calls attention to the permanent vulnerability of children within the institution of the patriarchal family, in Laura's case the feeling of self-division and fragmentation common to abuse victims had already started before any sexual assault. Such a feeling could have originated as the result of her registering the violence and unresolved conflicts of Ireland's history, encapsulated in her parents' incessant skirmishes, without her yet understanding their historical provenance and meaning. In this respect, Kai Erikson has argued that "in order to serve as a generally useful concept, 'trauma' has to be understood as resulting

¹¹Situational triggers that lead the subject to recall the original traumatic event can be seen as instances of acting out, or repetition as re-traumatisation, but they can also become a mechanism for working through, or repetition as cure. They can be used to release emotion and "offer the chance to explore the sensations and feelings associated with abusive events in order to construct change" (Cvetkovich 2003, 113-114).

from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discrete happening, from a *persisting condition* as well as from an acute event" (1995, 185; emphasis in the original).

Initially, the child Laura sees her mother as distant and cool, and she feels safer under the warm protection of her father, a powerful man full of charm and energy. Laura resents her mother's constant taunts and mockery of her father, always at odds with the idealised image Laura has of him. In time though, her alliances will shift and she will come to see her father as a domineering and abusive figure, as the destroyer of her hopes and future. She will, at the same time, come to admire her mother's resistance to his attempts at control, her refusal to become Catholic and her decision to bring Laura up as a Protestant, thus defiantly disobeying the dictates of the Catholic *ne temere* decree, according to which children of mixed marriages should be brought up in the Catholic faith.¹² Laura's fidelity to her dead mother is nowhere more evident than in her decision to become the guardian of the Big House—her house—that has been handed down for three generations through the female line. Likewise, Laura's initial refusal to work through her traumatic past can also be linked to her loyalty to her mother. Dominick LaCapra has explained such resistance as a "[m]elancholic sentiment that in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past" (2001, 22). In Laura's case, nevertheless, the emotional attachment to her dead mother combines with feelings of guilt for her death and for having been unable to mourn her properly, since her body was never found. Burdened by the maternal—Anglo-Irish—inheritance, Laura's only way of commemorating her mother is by remaining trapped within her own traumatic memories.

From her mother, Laura will also inherit an arrogant and aloof stance and a loathing for pragmatic and materialistic contemporary Ireland; an abhorrence that is but an extension of her hatred towards her father (Kreilkamp 1998, 219). In spite of this hatred, Laura has married a Catholic man she does not love and who very much resembles her own father. She confesses that she married Maurice in retaliation for her father's behaviour (Johnston 1991, 121, 169). Yet she does not seem to be aware that, in doing so, she has repeated the damaging dynamics that first wounded her. Her decision to replicate the social configuration of her parents' marriage signals the extent to which her subjectivity has been built through a cumulative traumatic experience of division and confrontation whose roots lie in Irish history. Maurice is a gentler version of Laura's father, not so much the abuser as the womaniser, though equally vain, ambitious and insensitive to Laura's needs. To Maurice, Laura is his treasure, his darling, a beautiful ornament, just the vehicle to purchase the glamour, and sense of history and tradition

¹²Laura's critical perception and memories of her mother point to Johnston's ambivalent treatment of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Johnston's Big House novels evoke this fading world nostalgically and lovingly while also registering its failings. In Vera Kreilkamp's words: "Throughout Johnston's fiction, her acknowledgement of the snobbery, injustice, and self-destructive improvidence [...] of gentry life is balanced by her idealization of ascendancy taste, an idealization that is strikingly absent from earlier (pre-Yeatsian) fiction about Anglo-Ireland" (1998, 208).

that, in the terms established by the novel, Catholics lack (Kreilkamp 1998, 217). He only demands that Laura look and act like the lady she is, while he indulges in his extramarital affairs. Laura accepts his lies and infidelities because Maurice leaves her alone, allows her to preserve her silence and privacy (Lynch 2000, 265). It becomes clear that Maurice will be of no help in Laura's potential process of recovery. He is not the good listener she perhaps needs, since, as Laura herself says, he "never listens when you tell him things. He just shuts his ears to what he doesn't want to hear" (Johnston 1991, 23). And Maurice, who thought highly of Laura's father, considering him a patriot and a great man, will not want to learn of his vicious behaviour.

Judith Lewis Herman has explained that traumatic events call into question basic human relationships and breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community (1992, 51). Fundamental for recovery is the establishment of safety, the reconstruction of the traumatic story and the restoration of the connection between survivors and their community. In her own words: "Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (133). Here Laura faces a problem which again points to the novel's shrouding of the historical by the personal, for, while the discrete traumatic events in Laura's life may have deepened her sense of isolation and abandonment, the truth is that her alienation derives too from her social and historical position in the contemporary south of Ireland: as said above, she is the offspring of a mixed marriage, though identified as Protestant and representative of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. That is, should Laura wish to re-establish her bonds with her social community she would find that the community is virtually extinct. In her own conclusive words, Laura thinks that Protestants in the Republic of Ireland constitute "an endangered species" (Johnston 1991, 120). Laura's consciousness repeatedly records her estrangement, and her ostracism as an Anglo-Irish Protestant reverberates in the novel: the derelict and crumbling Anglican Church that she occasionally attends, her exclusion from the visiting circuit and her paranoid conviction that people consider her standoffish, snobby, cold, different, indifferent (19-20) or an arrogant "Protestant bitch above in her Big House" (59). Together with her personal traumas, Laura may also be said to suffer from a trauma deriving from historical forces, the type of collective trauma defined by Kai Erikson as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality" (1995, 187). As Erikson further argues, "the community [...] serves as the repository for binding traditions. And when the community is profoundly affected, one can speak of a damaged social organism in almost the same way that one would speak of a damaged body" (188).

The empathy and generosity that Laura needs in order to regain trust, open herself up again to the world and bear witness to her traumatic story, will come from Dominic: another outcast, another victim of contemporary Catholic Ireland. He resisted his father's vicarious ambition of a successful career in the priesthood and abandoned the seminary to become a Classics teacher. This decision led his father to disinherit him

and his sisters to blame him for their father's untimely death. Dominic is a sensitive and cultured Catholic young man whose masculinity is completely different to that of Laura's father or her husband's Maurice. He is unthreatening, untroubled by women and walks behind Laura "with docility" (Johnston 1991, 41), "sedately" (81), always listening attentively to Laura's words and respecting her wishes. Laura establishes a relationship with him based on their shared estrangement, a transgressive coalition that crosses boundaries of religion and social group. The pair formed by Laura and Dominic could apparently be seen as an illustration of Jenny Edkins's ideal community: "a form of community that does not entail a circuit of power between oppressors and victims, a community that does not produce forms of subjection" (2001, 7). And I say *apparently*, because although their bond has been read as offering a utopian solution for Ireland's historical conflicts and as an "emblem for inter-sectarian political and affective alliances" (Backus 1999, 234), it also recalls outdated forms of courtship precisely based on subjection: in this case the subjection of the male to the female. From the moment he meets Laura, Dominic is mesmerised by her beauty and sees her as an Italian painting, as one of Giovanni Bellini's *Madonnas*. He is perhaps a little too docile, too servile, and their relationship is too asexual, rather a Platonic affair of the soul than of the flesh.¹³ Laura may confess her love for him but refuses his proposal to build a future together somewhere else, away from "the bogies of the past" (Johnston 1991, 113). She finally sends him away and, although Dominic initially feels angry at her dismissal, he ultimately complies with her wishes.

Together with her conversations with Dominic, there is an act that features centrally in Laura's healing process: her decision to recover the summerhouse built a hundred years before by her maternal ancestors, now choked and drowned under piles of rubbish and shrubbery, echoing Laura's mother's drowning at sea. The summerhouse is overdetermined as an emotional symbol: both of her mother's freedom and suicide, and of her rape by her father. Laura's determination to excavate the debris around it and bring it to light again with Dominic's help plunges her into a frenzied activity that partially neutralises her traumatic symptoms, and thus empowers her. As Ann Cvetkovich has argued, vehicles for physical activity "counteract the sense of physical and emotional helplessness that contributes to traumatic loss of memory" (2003, 97).¹⁴ In addition, Laura's resolution also signifies her willingness to disinter the traumatic past, to confront it, hence leading to her final narrative retelling of the traumatic events. Once the summerhouse is restored to its former graceful shape, Laura chooses to burn it in a gesture that symbolically exorcises the evil past and purges her of both guilt and hatred.

At the very end of the novel, and after excluding Dominic from her life, Laura is again looking out of the window, alone in her Big House, only now she can think of the future

¹³Richard York has referred to this relationship as "a new love, a love deliberately restrained, a thing of the imagination, but one that takes [Laura] beyond the confines of her own community and family" (2006, 272).

¹⁴In this sense, Laura's fondness for rituals, such as the making and drinking of tea or the writing of lists, can also be seen as failed attempts on her part to achieve empowerment.

for the first time, “an empty page on which [she] will begin to write [her] life” and “try to embellish the emptiness of living” (Johnston 1991, 180), and now she knows that the running woman, whoever she may be, will no longer run away (181). Some critics have interpreted this ending as intimating individual renewal and regeneration: Laura “learns to accept solitude” and her dismissal of Dominic is a gesture of withdrawal into the privacy of her mind whereby “memory perpetuates love, and replaces it” (York 2006, 272). Similarly, Margot Gayle Backus has seen the whole process Laura goes through as an inward quest toward “self-possession, toward an active, conscious inhabitation of her own body, her own present, her own familial house, her own marriage, and her own country” (1999, 235). From the perspective of Kristeva’s concept of abjection and her theories on the maternal, Heather Ingman concludes that “[*The Invisible Worm*] ends on a note of hope [...] [S]o far from fleeing the mother, this daughter takes what inspiration she can find in her mother’s life and uses it in her quest to become the subject of her own life” (2007, 91). Finally, Robert Garratt draws on the restorative power of narration and writing—the empty page on which Laura will now be able to write her future—as well as on Backus’s reading of the novel’s ending to state that in its closing lines “Johnston implies that the future may indeed be an open page upon which to write, free from the violent pain of the past” (2011, 82).

On the other hand, Laura’s resumed loneliness and her entrapment in a loveless marriage she will not forego and a house she will not forsake may signify her desire to avoid confrontation. According to Rachael Lynch, “Laura clearly believes that her safety and even her survival depend upon rendering herself as invulnerable as possible, through the rigorous maintenance of a continued degree of isolation, alienation and emotional frigidity [...] [We] do not leave her with a future that looks in any way inviting” (2000, 265-266). Lynch’s conclusion blatantly contradicts the readings previously referenced, therefore pointing to the novel’s ambiguous ending. I would claim that such inconsistencies derive from the novel’s obscure treatment of the historical dimensions of Laura’s trauma, from a certain reluctance to connect the private and the public, and, in my view, the text’s silences as regards Ireland’s history, and Anglo-Irish responsibility in that history, result in a final paradox: while at an individual level Laura has managed to liberate herself from the ghosts of her father and mother, she still remains trapped by her mother’s Anglo-Irish legacy. Dominick LaCapra has stated that “specific phantoms that possess the self or the community can be laid to rest through mourning only when they are specified and named as historically lost others” (2001, 65). The novel’s uncertain ending points, in my opinion, to the fact that certain communal, historical phantoms have not been sufficiently specified and named. If *The Invisible Worm* is approached from a “hermeneutics of suspicion” framework, the text’s historical vagueness seems devious.¹⁵

¹⁵The phrase “hermeneutics of suspicion” refers to certain reading and interpreting practices, such as the one developed by the neo-Marxist critic Pierre Macherey in *A Theory of Literary Production* ([1966] 2006), by some strands of psychoanalytic criticism, and by deconstruction, which focus on the text’s silences, aporias, interstices and marginal elements.

There has been a long tradition in Irish politics and culture of equating the family with the nation, the most famous proclamation in this respect probably being Éamon De Valera's speech delivered on St Patrick's Day 1943. Even though the family envisioned by de Valera as emblematic of Ireland was implicitly Catholic, *The Invisible Worm* introduces the unsettling novelties of making the family a mixed one and of embodying the suffering Dark Rosaleen or Mother Ireland in a Protestant woman. Yet it is these long-established analogies that propitiate a symbolic and/or allegorical reading of the novel. In this sense, Laura's Catholic father can be seen as representative of the "newly ascendant class" that covets and mimics "the symbols and attitudes" of the old colonial order represented by his Protestant wife and daughter (Kreilkamp 1998, 214-215). In Kreilkamp's view, a view that focuses on post-independence Ireland, Senator O'Meara is a violent aggressor whose violation of his daughter "is part of a larger social violation, an assault on the land, on culture, and on old pieties by a new nation" (1998, 220). On the other hand, for Backus, whose interpretation of O'Meara's infamous actions looks backwards towards Ireland's colonial past, Laura's rape signifies her father's attempt "to come to grips with the historic problem of dispossession through an abuse of patriarchal and parental power" (1999, 231). Following Kreilkamp's arguments, it is true that in the novel Laura is aware of the fact that her father came to enjoy the mythological edge, glamour and air of history of Anglo-Ireland through her, not through her mother (Johnston 1991, 121). What Laura is not aware of is that her father's rape, symbolic of colonisation and domination, may not only represent his perverse vengeance for his symbolic emasculation at the hands of his wife, always an independent woman who managed to escape his control (Lynch 2000, 264). As Backus has it (1999, 231), it may also signify Senator O'Meara's retaliation for historical Catholic dispossession through the agency of the Anglo-Irish. The colonial violation of Ireland is nevertheless silenced in the novel. In this sense, Laura vehemently disclaims her mother's family's involvement in empire building or soldiering, and she cherishes her memories of her great-grandfather, a mere traveller of the world, who only collected jade and other exotic objects now displayed in the house, but who was, though, always accompanied by his Catholic servant (Johnston 1991, 22-23). So, in terms of relationships between Protestants and Catholics, this, to Laura, appears to be the natural order: master and servant, or, when it comes to herself and Dominic, beloved lady and courtly lover.

It is also significant that the Big House itself, symbol of former Ascendancy wealth and influence but also of conquest, colonialism, and historical conflicts between Anglo-Irish landlords, Catholic tenants and landless labourers is not described in this novel, while the summerhouse, figuring rather the personal dimension of Laura's trauma, is depicted at different stages of its recovery. This absence of representation of the material building is all the more telling since, in the genre of the Irish Big House novel, the house is accurately evoked and becomes a central symbol of the history, condition and fate of its inhabitants.

When describing different ways of dealing with trauma in the contemporary novel, Ronald Granofsky has argued for the usefulness of symbolism in cases where "new

information resists easy assimilation into memory” (1995, 6). In his words: “The literary symbol in the trauma novel facilitates a removal from unpleasant actuality by use of distance and selection” (1995, 6). Literary symbolism, thus, by imposing spatial distance between the mind and the thing symbolised, and by letting only certain aspects of the traumatic experience emerge, “allows for a ‘safe’ confrontation with a traumatic experience” (7). Similarly, Laurie Vickroy, following object relations theorists Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott, has argued for the role of symbols “as crucial to the formation of an individual’s relation to the world and to the interchange between external reality and personal psychic reality—symbolism, fantasy and imagining are all important to self-construction” (2002, 30). She further associates “[d]isturbed symbolization processes” with “poor early object relations, trauma, or other psychic upheavals, where the individual never develops or loses the ability to distinguish between inner and outer reality” (31), thus effecting “a defensive fusion between self and object or object and symbol” (Segal 1957, quoted in Vickroy 2002, 31). True symbolisation, indicating the overcoming of an accepted loss, occurs in *The Invisible Worm* as regards Laura’s personal traumas (her incestuous father and her mother’s suicide), which, as previously explained, are manifestly embodied in the summerhouse.

The other side of her predicament is nevertheless downplayed: her unwitting introjection of her parents’ cultural and social clashes, her marginal status in contemporary Ireland, the lack of a sustaining community and, most importantly, her oblivion or lack of concern for the Ascendancy’s forceful intervention in Irish affairs and this class’s historical contribution to strengthening Britain’s dominion over Ireland and other colonies. That is, the historical implications of her Anglo-Irish inheritance are left disembodied, with Laura self-protectively merging her identity with the symbol that her Big House should have represented, therefore overlooking the mansion’s historical significance by transforming it into an extension of her subjectivity. In other words, she is unable to separate herself from the symbol and she has become the house itself, trapped in its empty rooms and corridors. That is, perhaps, why she cannot abandon it. While therapeutic healing takes place at a personal level, the wounds of Irish history are left open. In order to effect a successful process of symbolisation, *The Invisible Worm* should embark on a further process of excavation, this time of the original colonial violation of Ireland, a time when the Anglo-Irish were not as a rule, or not exclusively, the traumatised victims of Catholic violence, and the Catholics were not the only perpetrators of abusive and violent actions.

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