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‘THIS IS WHERE MY HEAD  
BEGINS’ :  
THINGS, TRAUMA AND  
FEMININE PROXIMITIES<sup>1</sup>

A n n e M u l h a l l \*

“Something comes to pass which does not belong as one’s own to the one or to the other. Something arrives which did not exist and that the bringing together of two worlds produces. What in this way occurs gives itself to each one inasmuch as he, or she, wants to welcome it, and to secure its memory. Not in order to keep it as a thing but as the mysterious legacy of an encounter which it is important to remember without simply appropriating it.”

Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, p. 153.

As Lisa Baraitser notes, “From a psychoanalytic perspective it seems strange and slightly perverse to make a distinction between material objects and embodied subjects” (Baraitser, p. 130). The object, even when it appears to aggregate from a material thing rather than a person, ineluctably slides back into the originary object, the maternal object, which the material thing covers over, “holds”, preserves. Baraitser, in her phenomenology of motherhood, is interested in articulating a relationship with the thing that approaches something like Jane Bennett’s “agentic assemblage” (Bennett, p. 21) and the *force* within the object that emplaces it as an actant in symbiosis with other actants, both human and non-human. There must be, Baraitser believes, “elements of the external world that escape our projective impulses, that resist internalisation, that remain intact despite our need to relate them in fantasy as part of our internal world” (Baraitser, p. 133). Christopher Bollas has likewise expressed a desire—very different to Baraitser’s enquiry into maternal objects—to attend to the “thing-ness” of material objects, that in the object that resists a purely substitutive function but that, for Bollas, enables thought itself. He attempts to distinguish the “evocative processional potential” of the object in its “integrity” and “thing-ness” (Bollas, p. 79) from the maternal transformational object (although as a kind of reverie

in the material world, it unavoidably evokes just this) and the “nostalgic evocative object” (p. 80), instead extending Winnicott’s transitional object “to argue that our encounter, engagement with, and sometimes our employment of, actual things *is* a way of thinking” (92), the effect of our everyday perambulatory free associating among the material objects we encounter on our capacity to think in a way that is distinct from “cognitive thought” (p. 93). The difference that embodied difference makes in relation to the kinds of objects that we encounter, objects whose specificity and integrity Bollas argues have an effect on our psychic constitution, is elided in this analysis. While there can be, for psychoanalysis, no absolute distinction between our experience of material reality and our “mental life”, yet the direction of movement in this instance is from out-side to in-side: “the source of that psychic moment will be from the real and will carry the weight of the real with it *down* into the unconscious” (p. 84). The precise quality of such perambulation is, however, effected by our ability to move *freely* among objects and, as Iris Marion Young elaborates in her phenomenology of female embodiment, the way in which the woman is *positioned in* space. The ease of movement that Bollas locates as one prerequisite for a plenitude of thought is, for many, constrained and restricted in particular ways that are inextricable from their situation within space, gender being, of course, one such qualifying structure that likewise structures the material reality that the subject takes as the ground of his perambulatory reverie. So, he notes of Emily Dickinson that her confinement to the space of the home had an impact on what he interprets as the degeneration of her capacity for thought; poetic form “decomposed in her intelligent hands as she lost the holding force of linear thinking and, as Helen Vendler illustrates, she moved around in increasingly crazed circles” (p. 84).

“I didn’t realise for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman” (Gilman, p. 1140). Written in the late nineteenth century, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is the interior monologue of a woman confined, ostensibly to ‘cure’ her madness, to her bedroom-prison in the uppermost reaches of her husband’s house. Thus imprisoned, she becomes increasingly obsessed by the wallpaper lining the room: by its confounding pattern, and by the women, indistinct yet perceptible, trapped beneath the pattern

which itself seems to hold them caged beneath the wallpaper, stuck so close to the walls that it seems impossible to find any rending purchase. In the end, having finally torn the paper from the walls, it is herself that she frees from incarceration beneath the "sub-pattern": "I've got out at last... And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!" (Gilman, p. 1144). The story speaks to the structural positioning of the woman within material and psychic space. Responding to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, Young shows how women's "immanence" emerges from the specificities of this positioning. For Merleau-Ponty, space is constituted as such by the presence of the embodied subject. As with Bollas' perambulatory reverie among objects, this generative capability of the embodied subject assumes the affordance of free movement. However, such fluid motility is impeded, Young argues, by the woman's experience of herself as *thing* as well as *subject*. In the "modalities of feminine spatiality" (p. 40) that she elaborates, this expresses itself in the "inhibition" (p. 41) of the woman's constitutive relation to space. "Feminine existence lives space as *enclosed* or *confining*, as having a *dual* structure, and the woman experiences herself as *positioned in space*" (Young, p. 40). To go further: she is positioned in space, and yet that positioning is ascribed to her as a quality intrinsic to her nature as woman. One mechanism for such attribution is suggested by Sara Ahmed's extension of Heidegger's apprehension of the object-in-itself, which becomes perceptible when the object fails to do the work that it is intended for. As she explains, the failure of the object is in fact "the failure of the object to extend a body"; its "failure" is "not a property of an object", but it has repercussions for the object insofar as the "experience of this 'non-extension' might then lead to 'the object' *being attributed* with properties, qualities and values. ... If this table does not work for me, I would 'turn toward' it a different way. I might then attribute my failure to write to the table, such that it becomes the cause of the failure" (Ahmed pp. 49–50).

This attribution of blame for the subject's inability to extend itself to the object that thereby becomes the "bad object" (Ahmed, p. 50) resonates with Bracha L. Ettinger's critique of the "mother-monster ready-made", the mother of primal phantasy—the "*originary not-enough mother*", '*the abandoning mother*', '*the devouring mother*'" (Ettinger, 2006a,

p. 106)—a “ready-to-hand” figure, we might say, that psychoanalytic theory and practice has, for Ettinger, perpetuated in its failure to recognize the *primal* nature of these phantasies of maternal not-enoughness, attributing them instead to the “real” mother, the “mother-monster readymade”. Making a similar point, Jacqueline Rose has written of her unease with the tendency in the “British School” — the work of Christopher Bollas after Winnicott in particular — to “reassert early environment against fantasy, what is done to the infant against what the infant or patient projects on to her world” (Rose, p. 153). For Ettinger, this “disrealization caused maternity, feminine sexuality and most of all the daughter/mother relation a catastrophic damage”; the failure to recognize these primal phantasies “destroys mainly the mother/daughter relationship since it systematically rechannels hate toward the mother and destroys the daughter’s desire for identification with the parent of her own sex” (107). This situation is in stark contrast to that of the father, where psychoanalysis has long recognized the distinction between the primal father of fantasy (*paternal seduction*) and the real father. This recognition of the primal father and “disrealization” of the primal mother comes at the cost of the maternal-feminine; “primal phantasies that organize male sexuality and paternal authority were more easily recognized, causing benefit to the symbolic organization of the subject according to parameters of maleness and masculinity. It is the primality of the not less prevalent phantasies, that tortured mainly daughters *vis-à-vis* their mothers, that was disrecognized” (107). In Ettinger’s reading of Freud’s ‘The Uncanny’, repression itself inevitably causes anxiety to “stick” to what is repressed, so that when what is repressed returns, the anxiety that is intrinsic to the structure of repression itself reemerges. The “mother-monster readymade” is the figure to whom these anxieties without a cause are then attributed. So Ettinger argues that “Devouring and abandonment were mistakenly recognized by Freud as phenomena that are *caused by something* (rather than as primal). With Winnicott and Kohut (to mention just a few) these phenomena are already *explained* by *real* maternal failures, while in fact, being primal phantasies, they arise in the psyche and re-arise in transferential relationships in order to organize and give meaning to pain and anxiety brought about by human existence itself” (108).

In this essay, I want to explore this abjection and objectification of the maternal-feminine, a mortification that results from this attribution of qualities to the woman and mother that are misrecognised as intrinsic to her rather than as the effects of her positioning within material and psychic spaces. I am especially drawn to the interrelationship between the maternal-feminine and domestic space, most particularly the objects that populate and “clothe” that space. The novels and non-fiction writing of the Irish writer Anne Enright involve a serious engagement with such subject-object traversals, seeking to unfold not only the immobilization of the woman within the home – a position with specific juridical weight in the Irish case – but also the way in which Enright elucidates a spectral feminine stratum, one that resonates with Ettinger’s matrixial stratum, through the revelation and enigmatic articulation of a coinhabitation that is transgenerational and that undoes subject/object relations, while also registering the trauma of occlusion and non-recognition that Ettinger’s work so comprehensively and enigmatically brings to our notice. As such, the transitivities between the ‘theoretical’ and the literary might point toward that which eludes conventional signification and representation, a maternal-feminine that survives its occlusion within a dominant phallic mode of seeing and being.

During her memoir of her pregnancy with her two children and their first two years of life, Enright describes what she thinks may be her first memory. She begins: “My earliest memory is of a pot stand. It is set into a corner with a cupboard on one side and, on the other, a shallow step. This is where my head begins. The step leads to another room, and far on the other side of the room, there is a white-haired woman sitting on a chair” (Enright 2005, p. 65). With her mother, Enright reconstructs the scene: the woman is her grandmother, and the pot stand was in her house by the sea, where the infant Enright stayed the first time her mother left her to bring her older brother to casualty with a broken leg. The thing – here, the pot stand – marks the severance of mother and child; it is where the narrator’s “head begins”, the separation from the mother that has engraved the material object and its surrounding scene as a screen memory. The object both obscures the originary event and is yet the object through which that event is preserved and made partially accessible to re-emergence and reimagining. It is, in a sense, the

material object that enables the resonance within Enright of the originary separation from the mother into partial awareness. The pot stand is itself the “holder” of a “container,” and Enright dimly apprehends two pots positioned on its shelves. The structural contiguity of these material objects with the mother’s function as holder and container of the child makes this a particularly resonant image for the trauma of separation. The maternal function of containment is one that Enright returns to frequently in her work; it is explicitly described elsewhere in *Making Babies*, when she wryly connects this function of the mother to the woman as “old bag” – that “‘Mother’ thing... The container (the old bag, my dear, the old bag)” (2005, 57).<sup>2</sup> Steven Connor alights on the bag as one of the “magical things” whose intricacies he unfolds in *Paraphrenalia*.<sup>3</sup> A magical thing is “more than a mere thing. We can do whatever we like to things, but magical things are things that we allow and expect to do things back to us” (Connor, p. 4). Moreover, some things “interrupt” our sense of being in the carried forward by a time imagined as processional and throw us back, or afford a re-emergence of the past in the present: “such things inhabit space, but are a kind of temporizing with it. ... things link us to our losses”; things can “haunt” us (p. 4). *Bags* are a particularly significant sort of thing for Connor, who connects this significance, of course, to parts of the mother’s body – to the mother’s breasts and to our experience of the womb; we are “carried, like bags, for long enough to come to know this intermediate condition [“living on the inside of another body”] intimately, and never to be able to forget it” (p. 16). Our attachment to bags resonates with the mother as “holding” environment: “holding things together, holding things up, and being ourselves held and held up, are so important to us” (p. 16). Enright’s narrative of this first memory travels forward to her daughter in the present: “At nine months, the baby puts her head into a pot and says, Aaah Aaah Aaah. She says it very gently and listens to the echo. She has discovered this all by herself” (Enright 2005, p. 65). The pot here may signify the “passing on” of this holding function between generations of women; an ambivalent inheritance, “fixing” the woman and mother within her functionality as object for use by the subject in the manner that Connor’s reverie on the bag as substitute for the internalized maternal part-objects nostalgically describes. However, in the

transitivity in Enright's account something else is suggested that is other, I think, than this intergenerational transmission of the maternal role. This transitivity is in part described by the temporal movement of the narrative and the transitivity between and within subject-positions that accompanies this, as the account weaves between past, present and future, between Enright as infant, and her own infant daughter, between herself as mother, her own mother, and her grandmother. Although the material object – here, the pot stand – marks the beginning of the end of the dyad, from an Oedipal perspective, it is involved with a mode of connectedness as well as separation that persists despite the severance from the mother, an umbilical transconnectedness, after Luce Irigaray, that Enright intuits here in the transitivity between grandmother, mother, daughter and the objects of domestic space (Irigaray 1993, p. 14). It is the transitivity of the material object here, in particular, that suggests a reaching toward something like Ettinger's matrixial borderspace, as an interval in the subject-object distinctions in Enright's narrative brings fleetingly into apprehension a submerged level of being wherein "traces" are shared between partial subjects and partial objects that transconnect beyond and before any phallic substitutive function.

Is there a connection here to what Iris Marion Young has called "the temporality of preservation", a mode of temporality that may suggest an association with this spectral feminine (Young p. 143)? While Young locates the preservative in "time and history," does this aspect of "dwelling" also intimate something of the traversal between the transsubjects and transjects that Ettinger apprehends as matrixial (p. 141)? Following Irigaray, Young retrieves the "preservative" as what is set aside in Heidegger's adumbration of "building" and "dwelling" – as she says, "a curious abandonment" (Young, p. 125). These preservative rhythms are described by Young in terms of transgenerational connectivity and they find their pulse in the relations between bodies and things, a process that Young describes as "sedimentation": things become sedimented with meanings that accrete to the object through time, and "things and their arrangement bear witness to the sedimentation of lives lived" in the home (p. 140). She continues: "The history embodied in the meaningful things of the home is often intergenerational. Traditionally women are the primary preservers of family as well as individual histories. Women

trace the family line and keep safe the trinkets, china cups, jewelry, pins, and photos of the departed ancestors" (p. 141). As Susan Pollock says of her grandmother's rolling pin in Sherry Turkle's collection *Evocative Objects*, "the evocative object is transitional in the fullest sense of the word – it can bring together generations, anchor memory and feeling, and evoke attachments that have been long forgotten" (Turkle, p. 230). Is there something else here, however, something that elides the fixity suggested by "sedimentation", evocative objects and transitional objects?

In 'Time', Enright wonders what object her daughter might dimly retain from the first time she left her – again, with her own mother, who she imagines from her baby's perspective as a spectral "someone", implying a continuity with Enright's own memory of her grandmother as an indistinct white-haired woman. She hopes that her daughter will remember the carpet in her parents' house, the carpet Enright remembers from her own childhood. The carpet functions as one of Young's sedimented objects, those objects that are both themselves preservative and that resonate with the preservative aspect of dwelling associated with women and the feminine. It is also an evocative object such as Turkle describes: it is the container of memory and of transgenerational trans-connection. But does this transitive quality have further resonances with something more difficult to articulate; is there in this infinite pulse of connection and separation between mother and daughter and between generations something of the matrixial where the object becomes trans-ject? The preservative object of the cot – the layers of paint accumulated on its chipped surface the material manifestation of its 'sedimented' and transgenerational force–becomes in Enright's account both expressive of the relations between the oedipal subjects of mother, father, and child while at the same time this transitive, transsubjective quality that enigmatically and temporarily emerges and then fades comes into fleeting apprehension in and through the encounter between something submerged yet present 'beneath' both the subject and the object:

"The baby sleeps in my cot now – the one my father made over forty years ago with some half-inch dowel ... I sat beside it one night, feeding her, and I tried to remember what it was like to be inside: the view between the bars and the ripped wallpaper on the wall. Someone, over the years, had painted it a nursery blue, but I remembered a green colour, I could almost recall chewing



the cross bar at the top. ... I saw, under a chip in the blue paint, the very green I ate as a child. *A strong and distant emotion washed briefly over me and was gone.*" (Enright 2005, pp. 69–70; my italics)

The house in which you grow up is, to use Sara Ahmed's phrase, a "sticky object" (Ahmed 2003, pp. 44–46). The first home leaves its imprint on me, shapes me; and I likewise shape that house in specific ways, leave my mark upon it. Home is traumatic as well as generative, carceral as well as sustaining. A romanticising nostalgia for the home has incarcerating and impeding effects for the woman whose function it is to provide its ground, as Irigaray has demonstrated. For instance, Bachelard says of the house: "Without it, man would be a dispersed being ... It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. Before he is 'cast into the world' ... man is laid in the cradle of the house" (Bachelard, p. 7). The nurturing protection and imaginative sustenance that the house *ideally* provides for its inhabitants are described by Bachelard as its "maternal features" (p. 7). The association between woman and home is underlined by the aspects of care and preservation: "housewifely care weaves the ties that unite a very ancient past to the new epoch", and such care builds the house "from the inside ... we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside" (p. 68). Valuable as Bachelard's "topoanalysis" is, the house is not the "first cosmos" as he describes it, and is not originary of the nurture, protection, containment and creativity that he ascribes to it in his exploration (p. 68). In evoking such feelings and in enabling poetic reverie, the house reanimates the memory of the maternal body, a reanimation that resonates with the house's structural contiguity with that body. There is a sense in which Bachelard's topoanalysis, while gesturing toward the mother, again in his nostalgic longing fixes her as the ground of dwelling, simultaneously displaces her and in particular the transsubjective relation between the becoming-infant and the mother-to-be that the house evokes, reinscribing these positions as subject/object, positing the house as origin and source in place of what Ettinger describes as the matrixial borderspace, a space that has its origins in the transconnectivity of co-emergence in the womb that persists as a distinct, non-oedipal psychic structure. Irigaray has, of course, articulated the grounds of Heidegger's "dwelling", which is for him man's way of

being in the world. Through building, man reveals this prior ground of dwelling: “The bridge *gathers* the earth as landscape around the stream. ...the bridge does not first come to a location to stand in it: rather, a location comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge” (Heidegger, pp. 331–2). For Irigaray, “Dasein finds its being-in-the-world” on “a *constitutive* oblivion”, the “forgetting” of the mother, and this amnesic dwelling thus positions the maternal-feminine as “void” (Faulkner, p. 131). “Built on the void, the bridge joined two banks that, prior to its construction, were not: the bridge made the two banks. And further: the bridge, a solidly established passageway, joins two voids that, prior to its construction, were not: the bridge made the void” (Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air*, qtd in Faulkner, p. 129). For Irigaray, then, Heidegger’s dwelling is built over the void that woman’s dereliction opens up. As Young pithily summarises, the woman’s role “is to be the home by being at home” so that the home that displaces and substitutes for the mother, is, like the dwelling-place of language, founded on the void where the relation to the mother once was and is impelled by a chronic nostalgic urge to recoup this loss by assigning woman “to be place without occupying place” and by building for man a new home in language (Young, p. 129). Young describes woman thus *positioned in* space and woman becoming thing in terms of her function as mirror for man’s speculation: “Through projecting outward he makes objective works where he can see himself reflected. In this objectifying self-reflection woman serves as material both on which to stand and out of which to build, and women likewise serve as a primary object for reflecting himself, his mirror’ (Young, p. 128). ‘Home’ becomes for woman not a facilitative space, but her crypt, the place of her entombment.

The home in Enright wears the dual aspects that feminist phenomenology suggests: the house is protective, nurturing containment; the house is carceral, toxic entombment. In *The Gathering*, we witness the narrator Veronica’s deep mourning for her brother, who has committed suicide having emigrated to England, having become increasingly estranged from his family, on the downward spiral of chronic alcoholism and the doss house. Her narrative is, however, focused on the trauma of sexual abuse that has led to Liam’s pitiable and lonely death; this trauma is the terrible “gap” at the centre of the novel, for most of the narrative

pointed toward through allusion, metaphor, metonymy, hallucination, slippage – those gaps in language that bespeak the unrepresentable – a trauma that her brother, and possibly herself, and, it is hinted, generations of her family have suffered. The houses that Veronica and Liam lived in as children are intimately, inextricably involved in this trauma and in its 'passing on' and persistence across generations – the parents' house, the grandmother's house persist within Veronica, lending her a particular psychic shape. These houses are suffused with animism: the family home grows as a living thing as the family sprawls outward, and the narrator describes it as haunted by the ghosts of the children she and her siblings once were. Not only are the houses haunted by these ghosts; Veronica is herself, importantly, haunted by these houses, too. These domestic spaces – the houses that 'gather' the family, to limn Heidegger's bridge that makes the void—are themselves crypts of the transgenerational trauma of abuse, not static objects but rather vitally implicated with the transgenerational phantomatic preservation and passing on of trauma. Does this traumatic coinhabitation suggest a connection, a bridge, between Ahmed's phenomenological reorientations, whereby she reanimates the mutually shaping interplay between objects and bodies that coinhabit space, and Griselda Pollock's exposition of the Lacanian Thing, that shapeless yet shaping void? For Ahmed, "Bodies as well as objects take shape through being orientated toward each other, an orientation that may be experienced as the co-inhabitation or sharing of space. ... Bodies are hence shaped by contact with objects and with others, with "what" is near enough to be reached. Bodies may even take shape through such contact, or take the shape of that contact" (Ahmed, p. 54). Filtering this through Enright's enigmatic exploration of the mutual shaping of the house, no longer quite an object but neither quite a subject, and the bodies that inhabit it, no longer quite present but yet shaping in their absence, bespeaks the enigmatic absence/presence of trauma itself. Pollock explicates:

"the Thing, *la Chose*, which is the affectively, corpo-real and for which the psychic object creates but a shaping within which the Thing's unsignifiableness, nonetheless presses, acting like the apparent void inside a vase that, in effect, determines the shape the vase takes for us to see and hold: does the vase hold nothing, or does that no-Thing press the vase/object into its perceptible

shape, on the other side of the Real revealing to us both the psychic shaping and the unsignified or unimaged ghost: the Thing which none the less donates something important to what we then work with psychically in the object?" (Pollock, p. 42).

In the traumatic currents relaying between the subject and the object that "holds" them, between the family and the house, as perhaps the most symbolically freighted of what Ahmed calls "kinship objects" that 'gather' (Ahmed, p. 81) – and therefore in a sense give shape to while being shaped by – the family, where is this governing Thing that is no-Thing to be located? For Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in their analysis of transgenerational trauma, the crypt is the no-place that 'hides' or houses this no-Thing. Gabriel Schwab expands: "The crypt is a melancholic, funereal architectonic in inner space, built after traumatic loss [which] needs to be silenced and cut off from the world. The crypt contains the secrets and silences formed in trauma ... entombed and consigned to internal silence by the sufferers" (Schwab, 45). This crypt finds expression in those 'gaps' that disarticulate language and symbolic representation – a "cryptonomy" concealed within the "house" of (phallic) language to which I will shortly return. Such trauma does not remain entombed within the bachelor subject, but can be both collective and transitive: the "secret" is communicated beneath and within speech and representation, between generations, becoming a phantom whose origin is not within 'me' but that haunts me nonetheless. For Bracha Ettinger, the transitivity of trauma as described by Abraham and Torok reveals something that has somehow escaped full recognition: that is, that trauma is thus shared, not as a sealed-off tomb that passes from subject to subject, but on a sub- and trans-subjective level: at this matrixial level, trauma—its traces, its residues, its phantoms—is "carried" between partial subjects, and thus Ettinger proposes *metramorphosis* as the capacity that enables the passage of 'crypts' between subjects on the transsubjective level of the matrixial borderspace, a psychic capacity first inscribed in the transmissions between the partial subjects of mother-to-be and becoming-infant before originary repression and castration. Ettinger describes the process:

"A crypt, when transmissible in the matrixial borderspace, is a lacuna that corresponds to an unsymbolized event belonging to someone else. Thus we

can conceive of a chain of transmissions, where the traumatic Thing inside my other's other is aching inside me, and where a forsaken Event that took place between ‘my’ unknown others struggles for recognition through me and with me.” (2006, p. 166).

The representation of the house as a kind of body that must be gutted and eviscerated, exorcised of its psychic ghosts through the evacuation of the things that clothe it, recurs in Enright's fiction, and it is here too in *The Gathering*. If it is true that, as Bachelard has it, each one of us is inhabited by the “oneiric house”, the “house of dream-memory”, then it is her grandmother Ada's house, rather than her mother's, that forms the “crypt of the house we were born in” for Veronica (Bachelard, p. 15). Toward the end of the novel, Veronica fantasises about buying her grandmother's old house so that she can strip it down, gut it, unmake the scene of a trauma deepened by generations of wounds that have never been spoken:

“I am standing in Ada's front room, pulling up a corner of the wallpaper, talking to some nice architect about gutting the place [...] while telling him to rip out the yellow ceiling and the clammy walls; to knock down the doorway to the front room, but save the Belfast sink in the little kitchen [...] I will ask him to get the place cleaned out with something really strong, I don't want a woman with a mop, I will say, I want a team of men in boiler suits with tanks on their backs and those high-pressure steel rods” (Enright 2007, p. 238).

The only object that Veronica wants to preserve from Ada's house is the Belfast sink: this is the place, she has told us earlier, where her *imagination* began, and continues to begin. It also retains its specific integrity here as a thing that cleans – in a full empathy with Veronica's need to cleanse. The object mediates transconnection in the feminine, not solely ascribable to the sink's association with domestic work, although that association is part of what is transmitted, not alone in its “preservative” function but also in the structuring trauma that is ‘passed down’ the female line in the phallic inscription of the female subject that the woman at the sink evokes. Like the pot holder that marks the place where Enright's “head begins” in ‘Time’, so here the Belfast sink is where her imagination begins: both beginnings are also endings, separations, signifiers of originary trauma, but the transitivity again between not-quite-object and not-quite-subjects manifests another and specifically

feminine stratum of exchange, an ethical relation that Veronica intuitively wishes to preserve.

The toxic and generative capabilities of domestic objects and spaces are recurring motifs in Enright's work and this toxicity is often countered by the focalising protagonist's evisceration of such spaces and the things that give these spaces and the gendered subjectivities they co-constitute their shape. *The Wig My Father Wore*, *What Are You Like?* and *The Gathering* all feature climactic moments in which female protagonists tear the insides of the house apart, or fantasise about doing so, impelled by a suffocated desperation toward necessary acts of unmaking and remaking. Torn wallpaper, and the shape of the gap it leaves behind, likewise recur in Enright's fiction, a recurrence that recalls the yellow wallpaper of Charlotte Gilman Perkins' short story.<sup>4</sup> Talking elsewhere about the 'Yellow Eyes' chapter in *The Wig My Father Wore*, where Grace eviscerates her sitting room, Enright describes it as "a menstrual image." She explains: "Well, it's all buried under the wallpaper. We are living in it; it's in bits, it's half-mad, the wallpaper and all the historical bits and scraps which are all real things. That's a menstrual image – we have to rip at the lining of this for something new to happen" (Moloney, p. 64). In *The Wig My Father Wore*, Grace first tentatively pulls off a tongue of wallpaper that has come loose, and then with an increasingly frenetic urgency rips off its sedimented layers, down to the newspapers that line the walls, and finally gouging through to the "plaster underneath" which, anticipating the plaster revealed beneath the torn wallpaper in *Making Babies*, is "an old-fashioned pink" (Enright 1995, p. 86). In her analysis of this section of the novel, Patricia Coughlan draws out the historical and sociological significance of these layers of uncovered history:

The previously confessional nature of Ireland makes its presence felt ... in the snatches of text from the 1930s and earlier which she finds when she strips the wallpaper in her house. [It is a] kind of anthology of Irish culture, especially in its devotional aspect, from the previous one hundred years ... References to our Lady's protection of Franco's troops in the 1930s are jumbled together with a Theatre Royal 1939 playbill, a nostalgic emigrant's letter, and a recipe for 'Faggots'. (Coughlan)

Reproductive and menstrual images, images of an eviscerated female body that is "written over" by language, that language renders indeci-

pherable—but a body which, in its return, calls into question the givenness of the reality language orchestrates, become inseparable from the space and 'skin' of the house here, suggesting the dwelling spaces of both home and language that Irigaray unfolds in her analysis of Heidegger's dwelling that constitutes maternal origin as void and woman as home who is thereby left homeless. The gaps, the menstrual shreds, that Grace's eviscerations leave in the newspaper and the madness of the textual palimpsest beneath the wallpaper render their conventional cultural meanings and inscriptions as vertiginously jumbled and only partially decipherable: "Sharp edged flakes of pink stick to the paper in liquid shapes, blotting out words and phrases, or they fall off in scabs, leaving the page pockmarked with meaning, or a piece shreds as I pull it off, leaving a central tongue stuck to the wall" (Enright 1995, pp. 86–7).

The breaching of the walls of the homely dwelling place by a kind of unhomely feminine writing are recalled by Jacqueline Rose during her critique of Christopher Bollas' "fantasies of the mother" (Rose p. 156). Writing about H.D.'s narrative of her experiences as Freud's analysand, Rose alludes to H.D.'s visions in her hotel room while on holiday in Corfu – a pivotal moment for her as a poet. H.D. describes her "pictures on the wall" as hieroglyphs, like the pictographic writing of the dream and the unconscious. Freud sees in what H.D. calls the "writing on the wall" "a desire for union with the mother", interpreted not as the workings of inspiration but as a disturbing symptom (Rose, p. 154). Freud's discomfort, Rose observes, the "moment of danger", is "the point where the boundaries of consciousness are transgressed, where the limits between inside and outside, between a subject and a world of objects that surround her, breaks down" (p. 154). For Freud, then, this blurring of the threshold between "me" and "not-me" evokes an uncanny return of what has been repressed, the relation to the mother. What might happen, Ettinger asks, what might be apprehendable and recognised, if this "intrapsychic remnant of the body" that so disturbs Freud here were acknowledged as revealing "a transferential unconscious field stretched between several individuals unknown to each other?" What is perceived as a dangerous breach of threshold between 'me' and 'not me' would instead be shown to belong to an entirely other order of psychic co-inhabitation:

“Such a transgression of the celibate boundaries would disclose what I call a *matrixial aesthetic borderspace*, where rhythms of interval capture and trace co-engendering with/by the stranger. ... In matrixial transferential relations, several I(s) and uncognized *non-I(s)* are interlaced, beyond space and time, in matrixial space and time, together opening repeatedly the wounds of nomadic places, and working-through to re-in/di-fuse the celibate place” (Ettinger 2006, p. 158).

For Abraham and Torok, “cryptographic speech” manifests the traces of trauma in language: a “psychic aphasia” (Rand qtd in Schwab p. 54) whose “haunted language” (Schwab p. 54) disarticulates conventional signification and the speaking subject. Cryptographic speech, like the crypt itself, can be transgenerational, and in “extreme cases, secreted “phantom words” can become the carriers of another’s story” (Schwab pp. 54–5). Ettinger’s elaboration of *metramorphosis* and its manifestation and working-through in the *transcryptum* of art-working significantly reconfigure our understanding of this transmission of trauma. The crypt that travels across the boundaries of “bachelor” subjects

“can be transmitted from one subject to another by metramorphosis, because a capacity and an occasion for this kind of transmission, co-affectivity, co-acting, co-making already occurred in the archaic relations between each becoming-subject and the m/Other. Metramorphosis turns the subject’s boundaries into thresholds, and co-affectivity turns the borderlines between subjects in distance-in-proximity and between subject and object, into a shareable borderspace” (Ettinger 2006, p. 166, and qtd in Pollock pp. 49–50).

The potential for representational systems to act as a metramorphic “transport station” of a shareable trauma whose traces are transmitted in the matrixial rather than phallic stratum unfolds what would otherwise be the “madness”, the “psychic aphasia”, of the three generations of women whose enigmatic transconnectedness is at the core of Enright’s second novel, *What Are You Like?* In this novel the sacrificial mother Anna speaks from the grave. She is literally the sacrificial mother: during her pregnancy, she is diagnosed with a brain tumour, and in accordance with the law of the theocratic state she is denied medical treatment so that the lives of her daughters-to-be may be preserved. She bleeds to death while giving birth to her daughters, and her husband Berts makes the decision to keep one daughter, Maria, giving his other



daughter Rose up for adoption. The mutilation of the relation between mother and daughter within a phallic economy that both Irigaray and Ettinger have so powerfully elaborated in their work is shown in this all too recognisable material way, demonstrating the inseparability of the psychic dereliction of both mother and daughter within an Oedipal teleology from the transformation of the female subject to a fleshly object whose primary value is in reproducing the nation and being made to carry the burden of the murderous consequences of an iconography of maternity as coerced sacrifice of the mother for the other. Despite this traumatic severance, and despite the fact that Anna and her daughters are unknown to each other – and that Rose, named as such by her adoptive parents, does not know her birth family or the circumstances of her abandonment by her father – each of these women carry traces of their transconnectedness, a transconnection that is both traumatic, traumatized, and generative. This transitivity expresses itself as, precisely, a kind of aphasia – a disruption in expression and in the relation between the woman and objects, particularly objects of domestic space. Phantomatic words ghost the narrative and bespeak both severance and jointness; “Rose” – the name given to Anna’s abandoned daughter and thus the embodied “sign” of the traumatic wound to the matrixial enacted by phallic repression and matricide – becomes a signifier that haunts both Anna and Maria. Staying in her grandmother’s house—where she is expected to do the work for which she is, as woman-object, intended and attend to her male relatives, emphasising the connection between her severance from her sister and the ideology of compulsory domesticity that was one of the founding principles of the Irish state—Maria sees roses everywhere, beginning with the unexpected contiguity of the “rose” with the animal-turned-object for consumption by the subject and then moving through conjunctions between roses and domestic things: “The blood of the joint was salty-sweet and pink, the same colour as the roses on her grandmother’s delph. There were roses on the cloth as well as roses on the wallpaper and modern roses blocked out in triangular petals on the new plastic breadboard” (Enright 2000, p. 48). When she speaks from the grave, Anna’s narrative likewise carries the traces of the daughter she has never known; her trauma manifests as a rupture between word and thing that, from a conventional perspective,

signals aphasia but that, “looking awry”, reveals the actual ‘gap’ between language and the objects it fixes in place, the illusion of the coincidence of language and the world that is the necessary fiction underwriting the speaking, “gathering” subject: “I wrote words down and I buried them in the garden, the names of flowers: wallflower, phlox, *peony rose*, *dog rose*, *tea rose*. A twist of baking soda, sugar, a wick, two wicks, a bar of soap cut down the middle so it leaves itself on the knife” (p. 247, my emphasis). The last list of household objects manifests Anna’s connection to her own mother, likewise “afflicted” by a kind of aphasia whereby she constructs her own “language” through the objects of the kitchen in place of conventional language: “My mother’s lists were things that she shifted around the kitchen; the tea cosy placed on the table for more tea, the lid of the bread bin propped open for flour ... I would hold the list of things translated in my head as I ran down the road ... a twist of baking soda, sugar, a wick, two wicks, a bar of soap cut down the middle so it leaves itself on the knife” (p. 234.) So, the aphasia that is attributed at the beginning of the novel to Anna’s brain tumour is revealed enigmatically throughout the narrative and here, more explicitly, as a disruption in phallic language that is transgenerational and feminine. This “psychic aphasia” is also transitive between the dead mother and the unknown daughter Rose; during her pregnancy Anna manifests “symptoms” that Berts attributes to the mysterious hormonal configuration of the woman and that come to be retrospectively attributed to a more sinister disturbance in her brain’s functioning but that, read as metamorphosis, reveal the proximity-in-distance of the matrixial web: she drinks “out of the hot tap” and for her the “sound of a tap dripping smelt of roses” (p. 6), while later we are told of Rose that ‘When she opened her mouth, the wrong words hopped out of it. Everything she tried to do came out backwards. *She drank from the hot tap*’ (pp. 153–4, my emphasis).<sup>5</sup> In this novel, to recall Ahmed, both women and things fail to do the work that they are intended for. This “failure”, however, is the very idiom of a newly configured feminine proximity: a proximity that neither elides trauma nor deposits it to the account of the other, but that instead bespeaks the generative beyond the boundaries of the bachelor subject, a generative ethics of proximity that Ettinger likewise ascribes to the artwork as transcriptum: “In art, repetitions in anam-

nesic working-through do not reestablish the lost object. Rather, they make present the unrepresentable *Thing*, crypted in the artwork's unconscious, that keeps returning because its debt can never be liquidated' (Ettinger 2006, p. 158).

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## N o t e s

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss the significance of 'bags' and their connection to the umbilical at greater length in "Now the blood is in the room": the spectral feminine in the work of Anne Enright', *Anne Enright*, eds. Claire Bracken and Susan Cahill (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Michael O'Rourke whose work introduced me to Connor's book.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Luz Mar Gonzalez Arias for pointing out the significance of 'The Yellow Wallpaper' for a reading of this aspect of Enright's novel.

<sup>5</sup> See my article "Now the blood is in the room": the spectral feminine in the work of Anne Enright' for a more thorough discussion of crypt, transcriptum, and the manifestation of trauma in representation in this and other of Enright's works.

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