

Pain and Narrative Shape: Beyond the Indocility of Trauma in Three Newfoundland Novels

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This article looks at trauma beyond the fixation on the limits of narrative as expressed in the mainstream theory of trauma in the 1990s, in the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, among others. Its purpose is to achieve an appreciation of narrative as a navigable textual itinerary whose very flows and discontinuities are energized by a reconciliation (or lack thereof) with life's shocking and incomprehensible moments. I build upon Amir Khadem's rejection of the polarity between narrative and the incurable psychic wound in order to provide textual analyses of a corpus of three contemporary novels set in the context of a historically traumatized regional identity, that of Newfoundland in Canada: *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* (2003), by Kenneth J. Harvey, *February* (2009), by Lisa Moore, and *Sweetland* (2014), by Michael Crummey. A revision of the role of genres traditionally used to describe historical and personal crises will help us observe how their conventions function within a context of outrage at the global and regional mismanagement of natural resources.

Keywords: Canadian literature; testimony; trauma; gothic; environmental disasters; Newfoundland

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El dolor y su forma narrativa: más allá de la indocilidad del trauma en tres novelas sobre Terranova

Este artículo examina el concepto de trauma más allá de la fijación recurrente sobre los límites del lenguaje que se manifestaba en influyentes estudios de la década de 1990—de Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman y Dori Laub, entre otros—que definían el trauma como la

antítesis de la narración misma. Cuestionamos esta interpretación para poder observar las narraciones como itinerarios textuales cuyos flujos y discontinuidades se manifiestan a través de las reacciones de los personajes con respecto a momentos desgarradores e incomprensibles de sus vidas. Partiendo de la propuesta de Amir Khadem, que sugiere dejar atrás la polaridad entre suceso traumático y narración, este artículo ofrece un análisis textual de tres novelas contemporáneas que giran en torno a una identidad regional canadiense traumatizada por su historia, la de la isla de Terranova: *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* (2003), de Kenneth J. Harvey, *February* (2009), de Lisa Moore, y *Sweetland* (2014), de Michael Crummey. Una reflexión en torno a cómo los géneros utilizan ciertas convenciones narrativas para canalizar momentos de densidad emocional de difícil descripción puede ayudarnos a identificar cómo operan las convenciones genéricas en un contexto de indignación por la destrucción a nivel regional y global de los recursos naturales.

Palabras clave: literatura canadiense; testimonio; trauma; gótico; desastres medioambientales; Terranova

The sea as it spends itself
 can teach us how to grieve—the way
 it rushes onto a rock beach, seethes
 and sucks back, informationless
 the way
 it booms under a cliff,
 calling all things to their hollows.
 (McKay 1997, 24)

1. INTRODUCTION: “TO WHAT EXTENT IS GRIEF NOT NARRATABLE?”

The novels *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe*, *February* and *Sweetland* deal with major tragic events in the history of Newfoundland, Canada—namely, the collapse of the Grand Banks cod fishery in the late 1980s, the sinking of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger* in 1982 and the resettlement of Newfoundland outport communities starting in the 1950s, respectively. *The Town That Forgot How to Breathe* (2003), by Kenneth J. Harvey, describes what happened to the members of an outport (i.e., a small coastal community) after overfishing led to fish stocks falling to unsustainable levels. The demise of the fishing industry in Newfoundland in the 1980s was an environmental disaster that involved massive job losses in the region and the disappearance of a way of life that for centuries had depended on the sea for sustenance. The novel encompasses the life of those whose existence no longer has a purpose in a place where the magical and the sinister start to run amok, causing its inhabitants to die in strange circumstances. *February* (2009), by Lisa Moore, focuses on what it meant for a young mother of four to lose her husband in the sinking of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger* in 1982, where all 84 men on the rig died after it capsized 300 kilometres east of St. John’s in the Hibernia oil field. This tragic event, caused by the company’s carelessness in matters of safety procedures, still reverberates in Newfoundland, in the past an underindustrialised region historically sensitised to the Canadian central government’s lack of concern toward them. *Sweetland* (2014), by Michael Crummey, revolves around the day-to-day tribulations of an aging man who refuses to accept the Newfoundland government’s package to leave the small island he lives in and move to a more urban location. When everyone else leaves the island, called, like himself, *Sweetland*, he has to confront the hostile environment. This, together with recollections of his somewhat failed life, threatens his inner peace as well as his physical integrity.

These three iconic Newfoundland crises—environmental, economic and social—were provoked by aggressive international fishing technologies, a lack of security protocols in the extraction of oil and inadequately thought-out resettlement policies. However, the three novels under examination in this article are not limited to a warning message against global greed or to a description of the unease provoked by the loss of traditional lifestyles. Their value also lies in how they tap into a range

of genres, literary resources and motifs that have been frequently used to narrate tragedy and loss, from allegory to journal writing. Thus, their textual rendition of historical disasters gives visibility to the manner in which generic conventions can make pain and loss tractable and observable within a story. In their appropriation of the allegorical ghost story and of the journal's first-hand account of ongoing experience, Harvey, Moore and Crummey explore ways in which fantasy and elegy, among other generic modes, can come to terms with the contemplation of destruction, loneliness and death. A reflection on the effects of crises on literature, whether social or individual, demands we bear in mind questions about how reality is represented in fiction and about the adaptability of established narrative structures to absorb and articulate contemporary catastrophes.

The creative act of giving narrative form to crises, trauma and harrowing situations signals the need to give meaning to experiences which a priori undermine any attempt "at explanation or rationalization," according to Shoshana Felman (1992, 4). That trauma is at odds with representation, that it lies outside the explicable, has been a predominant approach taken by trauma and witness studies, their main claim being that narrative is insufficient to express acute distress (see, for example, Scarry 1985, 2-22; Felman 1992, 5, 9, 200-201; Laub 1992, 78-80; Van Alphen 1997, 43-53; Gilmore 2001, 32; Müller 2002, 20). These formulations, as Judith Butler has noticed, set "violence and language in opposition, as the inverse of each other" (1997, 6). In the 1990s, the definition of the violent traumatic event as a physical or psychological wound that exceeds our cognitive and linguistic capabilities was often both the starting point and the conclusion of highly influential studies that centred around the memories of the Holocaust, such as those by Felman and Dori Laub (1992), Cathy Caruth (1995, 1996) and Kirby Farrell (1998), among others. These interpretations, which focused on the drama produced by the impossibility of verbalising the effects of extreme violence, seemed to emerge from an overpowering interest in the moments when language and narrative tried and failed to communicate properly. Literary expression or expression of any kind, especially in the form of a story, becomes, clearly, a desired aim in the aftermath of any shocking event, and this instinctive search for understanding makes any thwarted attempt at narration an even more anticlimactic and painful experience, a kind of paradigmatic moment of genuine pain that bears a powerful hypnotising attraction. Narrative as such was therefore often regarded by trauma and witness criticism as a medium whose value lay precisely in its very impracticability (Felman 1992, 3; Engdahl 2002a, 8-9). The subtitle of Felman and Laub's influential *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), as well as the mythological image invoked in the title of Horace Engdahl's introduction to the field, "Philomela's Tongue: Introductory Remarks on Witness Literature" (2002), significantly emphasise the centrality of the idea of failure of verbal articulation to mainstream witness and trauma theory. The impossibility of the telling became valuable in itself because it seemed to reach

beyond linguistic and narrative structuring in order to take us to the authentic reality of an unmediated contact with unbearable grief (Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2010, 230), a sort of “dramatization of obstruction” (Al-Kassim 2010, 120).

Although this general conceptualization of trauma has also been used in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there have been other theoretical approaches that have sought to surpass this fixation with the indocility of the traumatic occurrence by shifting attention from the pain of the individual psyche to the social construction of trauma. This constructivist explanation of the traumatic event claims that trauma “appears as a complex composition of material elements, social scripts and protocols for agency” (Tygstrup 2012, 198) and is produced by acts of collective memory. It is this approach to trauma that serves as the starting point of this article.

Horrific events, according to Jeffrey Alexander, “are not inherently traumatic”; instead, “trauma is a socially mediated attribution” (2012, 13). Amir Khadem, following Alexander’s approach, defines historical trauma not as a natural response but as a social construction produced and maintained by the media. On this basis, he suggests addressing the issue by moving beyond psychoanalytical theories applied to separate individuals and then automatically projected on society, as if society “at large” could be studied “like an individual human being” (2014, 183). From Alexander’s and Khadem’s perspective, trauma is not first-person and impassable, but rather it can be analysed as a cluster of texts, images and narratives that are instrumentalised by political and cultural institutions. Khadem focuses on the processes through which individual memories have been collected, accumulated, publicised and made to represent the index of a shared past. He addresses literature as “part of the social interplay of forces that lead to trauma” (2014, 187). Through stories, movies, documentaries, books, television series, photographs, interviews and other forms of representation, trauma is mobilised and ascribed a set of meanings, as well as a set of emotional reactions. Thus, when literature is defined not only as a container of shocking situations but as an active agent that generates interpretations of historical crises, the observing positions from which trauma can be studied in literature are expanded.

In the quotation that forms part of the title of this introductory section, Rochelle Almeida succinctly questions the non-narratability of grief, before going on to explore other (related) issues (2004, 217). Similarly, Khadem’s proposal is to look at narratives outside the bonds of a blinding preoccupation with cognitive walls and linguistic blockades by shifting the main question from “is it possible to narrate?” to “how is the narration perceived?” (2014, 182). He considers literature to be one of the instruments that solidifies memories of a horrible past. His discussion of the ways in which novels may construct, in different and various ways, the established Western trauma narrative of the 9/11 terrorist attack in New York shows how narratives can deploy existing strategies to redefine the response of the victims to memories of violence and injustice.

Narratives about disasters have historically given cohesion to Newfoundland as a cultural community. A foundational loss was the failure to establish itself as a nation in

1949 when the vote in favour of joining Canada won by a whisker. A string of political and social plunders followed, like the traumatic resettlement program, starting in the 1950s, which uprooted whole communities across the island, relocating people in urban centres where jobs failed to materialise. Other economic disasters were the failure of the attempted new industries in the 1950s and 1960s and, in particular, the 1992 cod moratorium, which provoked massive out-migration to distant parts of Canada and beyond. These losses still resonate deeply in the region and they often feature in popular and serious literature along with stories of tragic adventure, shipwreck, sealing disasters and the extinction of one of its indigenous groups, the Beothuk. Although perhaps no longer so relevant, a strong sense of separateness has been sustained in Newfoundland by this sense of loss and outrage, which became part of a renewed sentiment of nationalism in the 1970s. My focus in this article, however, is not to assess Newfoundland's long emotional bondage to a history of victimisation, as this issue has been amply discussed elsewhere (Chafe 2004, Hanrahan 2015). And although it is necessary to allude to these important concerns in Newfoundland's collective imaginary for the sake of contextualisation, my aim is to redirect Khadem's proposed paradigm of inquiry from social context toward generic choice and the inner workings of the texts themselves.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler emphasises the importance of paying attention to the kind of narrative frame or genre within which a cataclysm is explained because it delimits “what we can hear” (2004, 4). Jakob Norberg has also insisted that formal choices bias our “opportunities of thought” in a crisis (2011, 135). In this connection, Ilka Saal insightfully notes that when “translating a wound into narrative,” it is not only the incomprehensibility of trauma that is at stake, but also important questions “with regard to what kind of narrative perspectives, structures and tropes we ultimately deploy to render the ineffable fathomable” (2011, 453). I will therefore attempt to reach an understanding of how three internationally read novels coming out of Newfoundland have imagined crucial traumatic events in its history by discussing how those harrowing moments that, according to mainstream trauma theory, seem to lie outside language, are actually given shape by the conventions of certain literary genres.

2. THE GOTHIC AS APPEASING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Narrative is a source of intelligibility, a human resource meant to alleviate meaninglessness and chaos, at least in traditional storytelling (Andrews et al. 2004a, 7). Genres, as meaning-making structures, are formalised symbolic practices that give form to imaginative experience thanks to the use of certain familiar conventions. They also organise and generate the writer's desire to act, creating certain appetites in the reader (Bawarshi 2003, 78, 91). Genres make the intersection of literature and ritual visible (Nünning et al. 2013a, 6); they channel emotion into pattern, eliminate “randomness from life by turning it into a plot” (Ryan 2013, 32) and create

a sense of human relatedness. Plot has traditionally been defined as an “armature,” “a promise of progress toward meaning” (Brooks 1992, xii) that symbolises our desire for synthesis and retransmission. From this perspective, story itself seems to be epistemologically in contradistinction to the apparently intractable nature of the traumatic psychological wound.

Each of the stories that Harvey, Moore and Crummey create in order to ponder the traumatic event follows a different pattern. Harvey organises grief and social chaos through an allegory of epic proportions and shapes it as an apocalyptic tale; Moore and Crummey, on the other hand, register the effects of social vulnerability through an itemised stream of consciousness, similar in structure to the journal, where characters are engaged in a disciplined routine aimed at counteracting a psychological process of depression. Their novels occupy different positions within a representational spectrum ranging from the uncanny incident (*The Town That Forgot How to Breathe*), apparent domestic banality (*February*) and gritty naturalism (*Sweetland*). In these literary spaces, individuals live isolated lives in the aftermath of decisions taken in remote centres of power.

The Town That Forgot How to Breathe (henceforth *The Town*) adapts gothic protocols to the description of a Newfoundland outport called Bareneed after the demise of the cod fishery. People in Bareneed are dying because of a strange physical disorder that causes them to forget how to breathe. They become apathetic and violent, they wonder where they are and who they are, and then die. This disease soon assumes huge proportions: the town comes to resemble an epic apocalyptic movie of the most commercial kind, where doctors, scientists, soldiers and police officers become distraught by the baffling turn of events. The town is gradually seized by a paroxysm of gothic occurrences, and the danger of the spread of a virus that causes people to drown in air comes together with the sighting and fishing of anomalous sea creatures. Also, the uncorrupted bodies of men who were lost to the sea centuries ago resurface dressed in their old clothes and, for lack of a better location, they are laid on the filleting tables of the community’s abandoned fish plant.

Some wise locals claim that the strange events are caused by industrial progress and by the refusal of the community in general to believe in spirits. Their knowledge of local lore, conveyed in Newfoundland dialect, is bizarrely mixed with the massive display of the military paraphernalia of a quarantined town. The story of Joseph, a fishery officer and a “towny”—a slightly derogatory word Newfoundlanders use for city dwellers—is the thread that helps the reader keep up with the unstoppable supernatural manifestations. The motifs of the apocalyptic tale, the ghost story, the gothic grotesque and satire are adapted and combined by Harvey to fit the specific history and geography of a Newfoundland outport at a time of inaction and despondency.

The gothic genre has traditionally provided conventions to represent shocking events: violence, slavery, power abuse, cruelty, inequality and so on. It creates a territory where the actual and the imaginary can meet and display a variety of

resonant motifs, including burial, invasion, personality disruption, disease and entrapment, among others. Its codes are often studied on a par with trauma narratives because the gothic is an instrument of translation, a comparison model that, like any other genre, endows narratives with a certain amount of navigability. We expect the strange occurrences in the gothic to embody fears and anxieties, to flesh out historical breaches of the natural or desirable order of things. The potential of haunting as a trope for Canadian identity may operate within the unsettling atmosphere of “traumatized nations” and “the return of the repressed,” as Justin Edwards has noted (2005, 131-2), but also within a more invigorating scenario where acceptance of the supernatural has positive implications, since it provides humanity with spiritual reparation and cultural sustenance. Brian Johnson (2009), Cynthia Sugars (2010, 2011) and Marlene Goldman (2012), for example, regard the gothic as a genre that enables poetic justice.

This latter therapeutic goal is given narrative shape by Harvey’s novel in a literal fashion. At the end of *The Town*, a tsunami engulfs Bareneed and we get a glimpse of what comes after this metaphorical cleansing. Locals stop using electricity and other technological commodities, forget about television and turn to storytelling. The fish are “gradually replenished” (Harvey 2003, 470) along with the spirits. Sugars concludes that, in this novel, characters have been punished “for a failure to believe” in ghosts (2011, 67), their sin consisting in not having been “haunted enough” (2010, 17). There is in Newfoundland a long tradition of the supernatural story, both oral and written, and the novel’s final turn to the gothic genre’s healing project reinfuses the community with the sense of belonging they allegedly possessed before capitalism. The return to a neglected legacy of ghosts is the antidote for mental vacancy, for “the plague of pointlessness” (Harvey 2003, 27), and its curative effects come in the form of successful community management.

According to Sugars (2011, 17), the gothic as a corrective implies a conservative ethics in the case of this particular novel. Indeed, its apparent facile outcome is tongue-in-cheek, appearing childish in its automatic transformation of every detail of stereotypical outpost life into elements of the horror tale. Adherence to the generic codes is so relentlessly pursued in the novel that the gothic atmosphere becomes a caricature from the very start. Characters become puppets who blindly follow a stereotyped symbolic agenda and the final surrender to the happy ending appears too shallow a trick to heal what has been an open wound in Newfoundland’s memory. But perhaps rather than assessing *The Town* in relation to the mode of fantasy, we should relate its playfulness regarding the supernatural with a deliberate adhesion to ritual and game as it stays at the level of the children’s tale, its ending being a staged performance of grief followed by reward. Wellbeing is restored to this wayward community once it accepts, as in the past, the nonmaterial and otherworldly guidance of a mellowed gothic version of social life. The gothic here does not send mortals a dose of damnation, but the promise of renewed spirituality.

3. THE FIGHT AGAINST COMMODIFIED EXPLANATIONS OF REALITY

In view of this appealing final solution, we might think that *The Town* conveys a superficial view of life as a controllable, and explainable, project. The characters' assimilation of trauma no longer seems a daunting task once it is made amenable to the conventions of a popular genre. However, in my view, what really acts as a catalyst in the novel are the few moments when what is witnessed is rendered not as a ready-to-use symbol but as actual impressions of the fear deeply rooted in the characters' minds. In these instances, the characters become humble witnesses who are unable to absorb the historical dimension of the idea they are supposed to represent. This happens most frequently in the visions they have of the ocean.

Lloyd Fowler, one of the main characters, refuses to draw another breath, loses his command of language and shuts his eyes before dying: "He felt the pitch-black swell of the sea, rising, the death that the sea held for them all. His hands pulling on the latticework of a net, his weather-beaten hands dragging in the empty weight, black water running from the net holes" (52-53). Miss Laracy, town elder and prey to solitary visions of apocalypse, remembers the tragic toll a storm took in the past, "Without a gust of warning, chaos had blustered in on the wind, boiling the sea black in an unsteady count of minutes. [...] The sky descending, the ocean rising to become one and eclipse the two human specks in the speck of a boat that had dared to venture forth" (70). Joseph, the fisheries officer, imagines "how the rain must be beating against the surface of the ocean and how all the drowned bodies with their heads tilted upward were watching the pinpoints striking the division between air and water, the barrage of piercing that might fully fragment the surface" (129). Through these lyrical depictions of the sea, what I would describe as the generic incontinence of this novel is momentarily punctured. These moments of, so to speak, inner sinking, are perceived by the reader as sincerity pieces, lying, as they do, outside of nature's premeditated gothic plan to take revenge on those who have forgotten to respect traditions. The attitude toward grief shown here is not an attempt at domestication, but the realisation of a power of destruction beyond oneself. Lyricism counteracts trite allegory: the act of witnessing, as in the selected quotes, is not associated with a loss of words, but with a renewed capacity to look at the ocean in all its fearful intensity. No healing narrative is needed, or sought, simply the capacity to visualise an immense body of water rising and falling.

Surprisingly, the intimacy and terror conveyed by these images of the sea closely resemble the visions that the characters have in the other two novels, where people's heads are seen tilting upward while they descend into a dark ocean. In *February* and *Sweetland* respectively, Helen, the bereaved wife, and Moses Sweetland, the old timer, use stories to save themselves from despair and loneliness, but their memories seem to contain only suspended moments of panic and sorrow, vivid recollections of death they cannot digest with only the discourses available: clichéd consolatory thoughts provided by relatives, anecdotes of resignation provided by neighbours, political justifications provided by the media. Helen's life is relentlessly haunted by the image of her husband falling into the icy

water in the darkness of the night. And Sweetland often remembers the painful moment when his brother fell overboard into a fishing net, the white of his face disappearing under the weight of fish, dying as he was being pulled down “into that black” (134).

These are occasions when characters are trapped by the physicality of a situation whose underlying motives are not defined. Although the impact of what is imagined or witnessed may outweigh any verbal response, the plot of the narrative is precisely created out of a dynamic of emotional continuity and discontinuity, of fluidity and blockage around the moment of shock. The lack of intelligibility of the situation becomes an incentive on a diegetic level for the characters. On the extra-diegetic level, the story’s hold on the reader is not only energised by the hurtful event as such or by the impossibility of encapsulating it in words—this in itself forms part of the ritualised scenario of affect cherished by trauma criticism—but also by its role in propelling or hindering narration. The danger of being forever engulfed by muteness, by the “magnitude of the shock,” in Khadem’s words (2014, 192), is overridden by the characters’ struggle to find alternative scenarios and discourses that prepare them to assimilate what has happened. In *February* and *Sweetland*, the moments when the accidental or the unaccountable occur, that is, those events for which there is no epistemology, are revered rather than pathologised. There is disorientation and disconnection, but other kinds of logic and emotion are sought.

In *February* events and emotions are mostly portrayed as effects of light on surfaces, and the constant rendering of emotional life in these terms becomes in itself the dialectics through which Helen understands what has happened to her. For example, her recollections of married life are “bits of afternoons that sharpen in focus until they are too bright” (249). When she hears the news about the sinking of the oil rig where her husband Cal was working, tragedy is perceived as a flood of light that dazzles her, leaving people and objects around her forever altered: “A blanket of white was aglitter out there. Magnificent and frigid and light-spangled. As long as she lives Helen will never forget how beautiful the snow was, and the sky, and how it flooded her and she couldn’t tell the beauty apart from the panic. She decided then, and still believes, that beauty and panic are one and the same” (271).

The death of her husband on the night of February 14 on the Ocean Ranger rig turns her life into a sustained effort to try to see, not just to imagine, his last moments alive. With three young children and another one on the way, her existence becomes a whirl of tasks and jobs and life lessons to teach her kids, but what crosses like a burning arrow through the details of her life is her inability to move beyond the moment of Cal’s body hitting the sea. Her longing to be with him *inside* that moment undermines the deceiving grammars of cause and consequence that the oil company uses to appease the victims’ families, “the linguistic dimension of neoliberalism,” as Herb Wylie describes the corporation’s glossy definitions of risk for workers (2010, 67). It was a lexicon around safety that was actually detrimental to safety: “Shoreline Group specialized in risk assessment, organizational restructuring. They specialized in all the touchy-

feely stuff from the 1980's: lateral thinking, creativity in the work-place, psychological support during downsizing or natural disaster, pink slips, sweater-vests and distressed denim, a bold new self-generating speak that boiled over and reduced to a single, perfect word: *efficiency*" (Moore 2009, 130; italics in the original).

For Helen, the persistence of that moment actually helps her to deconstruct any reparatory narrative of explanation, whether from relatives, the company or the government. The entrepreneurial, legal, institutionalised phrasings, even the language of mourning, of counselling and of yoga instructors, which takes healing for granted, are unusable. They are presented as sham discourses, deceitful argumentations full of their own smug morality. Helen wishes to avoid catharsis and mourning, since surrendering to them would somehow imply her acceptance. She does not allow the reabsorption of the disturbing element into the continuity of her life, even when this would enable her life to begin to flow again. The ethical position she takes in the face of tragedy is not the management of grief, but she internalises what has often been called resistant mourning, an attitude that discards closure and objects to any healthy measure of forgetting. This personal choice is in keeping with the concept of unresolved mourning, advocated, for example, by Jacques Derrida (1986) and by other critics such as Almeida (2004), R. Clifton Spargo (2004) or Daniela Agostinho et al. (2012), who have questioned the ethics of any conventionalised strategy of grief management. It is also in keeping with other proposals claiming that individual pain cannot be subsumed under a universal master trope of trauma (Saal 2011).

Helen's is the repeated enactment of a maddening experience, refusing to abide by "the societal imperative to get over loss quickly" (Charman 2014, 143). Again and again, she plays in her mind the scenes previous to the sinking of the rig, creating a mixture of fact and nightmare. By trying to figure out this moment and the sequence of events that led to it, she engages in a narrative that combines elements from the detective story, the documentary, or the legal and business statement, including imaginary descriptions of the domestic details of the men's lives on the rig and the technicalities of safety procedures. In order to better appreciate the direction of her thoughts, a fragment of the novel will be quoted at some length here:

THERE WAS A smashed portal, and that is key. But everybody knows this already; there is always a key, there is always a portal. A wave of ice hit the window and it smashed. The metal lid had not been drawn shut over the glass, as it should have been, and the window smashed and water got over the electrical panel and short-circuited it. The men had to operate the ballast doors manually and they didn't know how. But everybody knows that; so let's just take a moment. Just slow down.

Imagine instead a man with his feet up—for the sake of argument—and a cup of coffee cradled near his crotch, and maybe he's reading the manual. For the sake of argument: he has a manual open on his lap, and he's going to place a call later to his wife, and he's also got a book. It's a long shift. Later on he will read the book.

Do we know what they had on the rig for supper that night? Helen does not know. She is imagining pork chops with applesauce and she is imagining big steel plans of mashed potato on the steam table, dusted with paprika, smoothed over, decorated with parsley. The men won't eat the parsley. The Newfoundland men won't. Cal wouldn't. [...]

Imagine his surprise when the ocean forms itself into a fist and flies across the ballast room through that portal. The ocean burst through the window sometime between 7:45 and 8 p.m. [...]

The portal and the fist of water, a piston driving itself through that portal, a fist of ice with stone knuckles; the ocean has become part monster, part machine [...]

She tries to run down the corridors, she tries to find out where Cal is, what he's doing, but she gets lost. (148-51; capitals in the original)

Helen has read the reports, has learned the mechanisms of the systems on the rig, is aware of the lack of emergency training. Her strenuous act of imagination, her language of distress, her defining of the ocean—all these emotional paths undermine the certainties of apologetic jargon that circulated in Newfoundland after the disaster. Our reaction to this passage is not only a realisation of agony, but also an awareness of the conventions invoked at the moment of utterance, the kind of discourses the character is familiar with and the resources she uses to discard them. Almost at the end of the novel, when Helen has already started a new life, she is still trying to face the real story in a section entitled “She sees it”:

This wall of water has always been. It did not design itself or come from anywhere else or form itself. There was never a forming of. It just is.

It is still and self-combusting. Hungry and gluttoned with love. Full of mystery, full of a void.

Full of God. Get down on your knees before this creature.

It is the centre of the outside.

This wave is death. When we say death we mean something we cannot say. [...]

The ocean is full of its own collapse, its destiny to annihilate itself thoroughly, but for a brief moment it stands up straight. It assumes the pose of something that can last. (298-301)

Panic does not really threaten to destroy language here; it only creates a different kind of language, one that uses old beliefs to describe the fallibility of new technology. The uneasy juxtaposition of an apprehension of apocalypse with a resistance against a technological dialectic exposes how absurd it would be to believe in the rational continuum of causally interlocked events that science claims reality to be. As Helen's short, bumpy sentences convey the unstoppable fury of a rogue wave, they carry a truth that does not admit any of the subordinate clauses that are so abundant in the company's report of what happened. Rather, her language strives to approach the radical nature of a poetic statement. The Royal Commission adheres to a different kind of factual

account: they claim it was a fatal chain of events plus a lack of technical information. For Helen, however, “there is also the obdurate wall of water, and because of it [she] will finally give up her careful recital of the fatal chain of events” (301).

In spite of her *sui generis* explanation, which identifies a sea storm with god, Helen’s acute desire to know is not placed outside of the political and economic implications of the disaster, as Wyile (2010, 63-65) and Caitlin Charman (2014, 135) have noticed. It is precisely her not knowing what it was like, what happened, how it happened, that compels her to create a string of words that can take her there, to the moment of the capsizing and to the moment of the aborted rescue. Paradoxically, her fiery recitation is the only account that exposes the risks associated with oil extraction that had not at that time been seriously considered by corporate industry. Helen’s thoughts mobilise our attention because of this enigma. And we can choose to consider enigma as an obstacle to comprehension or as a catalyst that produces, in this narrative, an internal revolution of the senses while a voice strives to articulate a different kind of reasoning for incomprehensible death.

If the gothic approach in *The Town* transformed a catastrophe into a collective traumatic event only to be finally exorcised and tamed, in Moore’s *February* an uneducated woman’s rant has the power to continue resisting cursory explanations of disaster. Her words lash at narrative itself and at its effect of diluting grief through logical order and catharsis. She could, but does not, adhere to the codes of the genre of elegy regarded as a ritual or a theatre of mourning; instead, she prefers to slip out of her skin into the void to be with her husband forever. She longs to learn from emptiness itself, from the hollowness of truth that Don McKay captured so eloquently in the poem that introduces this article, “Grief and the Sea.” In order for the pain not to be subdued by oblivion, she chooses to continuously position herself before the time the event happened. The men are still standing there: “Cal is on the deck and he is almost gone” (301). Helen’s hopeless diatribe allows for an enigma to be newly upheld as “scandal” and as “interpellation,” two conditions that are, according to Engdahl (2002, 10), defining features of witness writing.

In a similar vein, *Sweetland* is constructed through the haunting of those who are absent. Sweetland, like Helen, finds himself tracing the steps of other lives when he becomes the only remaining inhabitant of an island. Like a detective, he continually draws inferences from the useless objects others left behind when they departed from the place. His memories are literally attached to the rubble scattered on the island; he pursues the ghosts of those gone both as a scrupulous janitor and as an avid chronicler. He tries to disengage himself from official and local discourses, those of the government men and of his friends and neighbours. All of them tried to talk him into leaving the island, but he refused to become a migrant. However, all his efforts appear to be in vain. Gradually, his recollections of past conversations with his neighbours acquire a phantasmagorical nature and his chance of survival on the island decreases.

Sweetland, like *February*, becomes a coherent narrative by showing the defocalising power of life’s random occurrences. Sweetland’s existence is, like Helen’s, in a

permanent state of disconnection. He is threatened anonymously, probably by his former friends, because he does not accept “the package” and leave the island, an island from which he cannot escape when he needs to. In the meantime, he is assailed by regrets of his inability to form a family and to save the lives of the only two people he cared for, his brother and a young friend, a mentally disabled boy who worshipped him. The distressing scene in which he is hanging onto a ladder attached to a cliff, clinging to the drowned body of the boy above the foaming ocean, represents the extremity of his stance, his lack of relatedness to the world, an effect often associated with trauma.

While in *February* no effort is made on the part of the protagonist to accept the assistance of ritualised healing methods, the last moments in the life of Sweetland create an alternative space where he can see himself connected to other members of his community. The end of the novel has him joining a crowd of figures that walk silently toward the island’s lighthouse; they seem to have a common purpose and destiny. They look like ghosts but are real to him: “strangers every one of them, though he felt they knew him. That he was known to them somehow” (264), “they seemed resigned and expectant standing there, their eyes on the fathomless black of the ocean” (318). In this final scene, the novel makes room for Sweetland’s longing for community and seems to provide the reader with a final moment of hopeful and ecstatic union.

However, what galvanises the reader’s attention may not be so much this consolatory attempt at communion—Sweetland is, after all, gravely ill and has lost his grip on reality—but those other sections of the novel that narrate Sweetland’s real encounters—his rescuing of Sri Lankan refugees in the middle of a cloud of fog, his attempt to recover the body of the drowned boy, his finding of the corpse of his dog, his looking at his own emaciated body. What prevents us from believing that Sweetland is just the literal embodiment of the author’s desire to give transcendence to Newfoundland’s history of courage and marginality is Sweetland’s unanswered attempts at understanding why things happened in a particular way. His unending meditations provide suspense and effectively counteract any temptation to transform the disaster that engulfed him into a conciliatory epilogue. He accepts the impenetrability of life throughout but keeps ruminating about the mystery of his failures: “A crazy person wouldn’t be capable of separating the strangeness from the rest of his life, he thought, of settling in the midst of it” (243), as he has done. His unhinged stance, his refusal to agree with what others think life is worth, propels the narrative forward before its mollifying ending.

4. CONCLUSION

The genres available in each culture translate social problems into fiction and thus make them observable within literature’s complex imaginary dimension. However, individual works contain cognitive impediments, hollow spaces that deemphasise the legitimacy of the very same conventions narratives use to achieve their transcendent

goal of making meaning. This subversive strategy can be described as “writing within a genre against a genre” (Nünning et al. 2013a, 12). In the three novels analysed in this article, the irruption of extreme grief makes the characters’ power for reasoning falter. The literary strategies that keep these characters’ ordeals in a perpetual present in our mind are the compelling language and “alter-narratives” that their subjectivities create—submerged stories that are triggered by a realisation of life’s opacity, by an acutely-felt ignorance about why things happen and an impotence to change them. These emotional predicaments show to various degrees the characters’ loyalty to that uninterpretable strangeness; there is a stubbornness on their part to remain inside a disturbing moment of wrongness. There is no giving up of those lost; the alleged liberating power of catharsis becomes tainted.

The textual approach given to this dilemma in these novels allows us “to see the pathos of the simultaneous pursuit and evasion of meaning in narrative,” using Dennis Foster’s words when describing the role of confession in narrative (1987, 10). A continual insistence on saying and knowing may perhaps serve as a vantage point from which to destigmatise the presence of the traumatic wound as an unsurmountable obstacle, a presence that has often led in witness and trauma criticism to a definition of the literary text as a truncated narrative space. If critical attention moves from the disarming magnitude of pain to the textual itinerary of advances and retreats from suspended moments of shock, the plot can be regarded as productive and transformative, especially in *February*, where the protagonist wholeheartedly accepts beauty in grief and discomfort. In the final moments of joy in this novel, there still lurks a terror that the protagonist can no longer live without—the image of her husband seconds before being swallowed by the ocean in the horrendous accident. However, even when she knows that her grief can never be stabilised and that it is inextricable from the idea of drowning in the sea, she can still experience the ocean “blasted all over with light. Each wave capped in silver. It was like hammered metal, sparkle-pocked” (306).

Reading novels like these augments our capacity to observe trauma beyond concern for the limits of representation and encourages us to assess how the power of what is unsolved pulls the strings of narrative in different directions, forming parallel lines of narration. In *The Town*, the acknowledgement of the inevitability of disaster brings about a lyrical language that, in occasionally surfacing over the heavy plot of a sensationalistic apocalyptic tale, defeats the trite logic of predictable allegory. In turn, in *February*, a woman’s courageous insistence on delving into the details of an unbearable traumatic moment causes her to dethrone the unethical vocabularies of efficiency displayed by neoliberal thinking. She does it through the matter-of-factness of her experience as a working-class wife. Finally, in *Sweetland*, the protagonist’s utter inability to communicate to others his intimate attachment to the land and his first-hand knowledge of loss leads him to develop a subtle, detective-like internal language for the observation of change in the human and natural worlds.

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