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Re-reading the Ryan Report: Witnessing via Close and Distant Reading

IN THE DAYS following the publication of the *Final Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (2009), also known as the Ryan Report, there was widespread national and international public reaction to the conclusions of the report that over the course of nine decades abuse had been severe and systemic in the Irish residential-institution system for children run by the religious congregations of the Catholic church.¹ In the *New York Times* John Banville reflected:

Everyone knew. When the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse issued its report this week after nine years of investigation, the Irish collectively threw up their hands in horror, asking that question we have heard so often from so many parts of the world throughout the past century: How could it happen?

Surely the systematic cruelty visited upon hundreds of thousands of children incarcerated in state institutions in this country from 1914 to 2000, the period covered by the inquiry, but particularly from 1930 until 1990, would have been prevented if enough right-thinking people had been aware of what was going on? Well, no. Because everyone knew.²

This essay considers Banville's statement that "everyone knew," re-reading the Ryan Report to analyze what people knew and, crucially, how they knew. Using a combination of close- and distant-reading

1. See the *Executive Summary* for repeated judgments that sexual abuse was "endemic" and that physical abuse, fear of physical abuse, and emotional abuse were "systemic." See Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, *Final Report of the of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (Dublin: Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, 2009), <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/publications/index.html>. *Executive Summary*, <http://www.childabusecommission.ie/rpt/ExecSummary.php>. Hereafter cited as *CICA Report* and *CICA Executive Summary*.

2. John Banville, "A Century of Looking the Other Way," *New York Times*, 22 May 2009.

techniques made possible by the transformation of the report into a searchable database that can be analyzed by using methods developed in the digital humanities, the authors show that “right-thinking people” were “aware of what was going on,” but that this awareness did not translate into action because of how this awareness was mediated and communicated. To function as an ethical witness is not just to see or know something, but to act with compassion in response to what is being seen. Yet this new history shows us that such compassion was almost entirely lacking. On the face of it, the publication of the Ryan Report and its public impact might suggest that this chapter of Irish history can finally be closed with the acknowledgment that “no one can say that they don’t know about it.” Yet the reality of the situation may be somewhat different, as the sheer bulk of the report (some 2,600 pages) makes it one of the least read, though one of the most important, texts in Irish history.

THE RYAN REPORT

In May 1999 the Irish taoiseach Bertie Ahern apologized to people who had suffered abuse while resident in the system of residential institutions for children in Ireland. Ahern stated: “On behalf of the state and of all the citizens of the state, the government wishes to make a sincere and long overdue apology to the victims of childhood abuse for our collective failure to intervene, to detect their pain, to come to their rescue.” This apology was issued just hours before the final episode of Mary Raftery’s television series *States of Fear* (screened on RTÉ), which uncovered and presented many stories of abuse of children within the childcare system.³ This series followed other impactful cultural responses to the history of child abuse in Ireland, notably Louis Lentin’s documentary *Dear Daughter* and the follow-up *Prime Time* program of the same name, both screened by RTÉ2 in 1996.⁴ On foot of these exposés of abuse the Irish government finally de-

3. See also Mary Raftery and Eoin O’Sullivan, *Suffer the Little Children: The Inside Story of Ireland’s Industrial Schools* (Dublin: New Island Press, 1999).

4. For a discussion of building a cultural narrative of abuse, see Emilie Pine, “Past Traumas: Representing Childhood Abuse,” in *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18–51.

cided to act, and following Ahern's official apology it established the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, or CICA (2000), and the Residential Institutions Redress Board, or RIRB (2002).⁵ In 2009, after nine years of investigation under the leadership of Judge Sean Ryan, who headed the commission starting in 2003, CICA issued its report.⁶

The Ryan Report found conclusively that over the course of seventy years the system of residential institutions, run by the orders of the Catholic church and funded and overseen by the departments of education, health, and justice, had constituted an emotionally, physically, and sexually abusive system in which thousands of children were seriously damaged.⁷ Claims by the Catholic orders, and indeed the state,⁸ that the children, now adults, were lying about the abuse were completely swept away as the report revealed the scale of the cruelty, violence, and exploitation; it described in great detail the "climate

5. It is not within the scope of this essay to examine the operation or results of the RIRB.

6. Judge Sean Ryan was appointed in the wake of Justice Mary Laffoy's resignation. See Laffoy's letter of resignation, "Letter to Mr. Dermot McCarthy, Secretary General," *Irish Times*, 8 Sept. 2003.

7. The Ryan Report was followed by a number of more focused reports with very similar findings, for example, the Ferns Report (2005) and the Murphy Report (2009). The McAleese Report (2013), much less detailed and less useful, addressed the history of the Magdalen laundries in Ireland. At this time of writing, there is an ongoing inquiry into the history of Mother and Baby Homes there. For evidence that the abusive culture of such institutions was not unique to the Irish Free State or the Irish Republic, see the *Report of the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry in Northern Ireland* (Belfast: HIA Inquiry, 2017) and the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* (Sydney: NSW Royal Commission into Institutional Response into Child Sexual Abuse, 2012). The methodologies developed by the Industrial Memories project are equally applicable to these other reports.

8. Though this article concentrates on the Industrial Memories project, which takes the Ryan Report as its primary text, this was not the first report to identify abusive conditions within the system. Previous reports had been commissioned and ignored. For examples of evidence of prior knowledge of the failings of the system, see Commission of Inquiry into the Reformatory and Industrial School System, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Reformatory and Industrial School System* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1936), also known as the Cussen Report; *Some of Our Children: A Report on the Residential Care of Deprived Children in Ireland* (London: Tuairim, 1966); *Reformatory and Industrial Schools System Report Chaired by District Judge Eileen Kennedy* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1970); and Department of Health, *Task Force on Child Care Services: Final Report* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1980).

of fear” in the institutions and the “systemic” nature of abuse.⁹ The Ryan Report was thus a major undertaking, and its findings directly impacted Irish society and members of the Irish diaspora.¹⁰

At over two thousand pages the Ryan Report makes for daunting reading. Indeed, the benefit of the report—its searching and detailed nature—makes a full engagement with it very difficult.¹¹ Moreover, the subject matter of child abuse is also obviously very challenging for readers. These difficulties are compounded by the narrative structure of the report—set up as a sequence of in-depth chapters on each institution and on different aspects of the institutional system (e.g., financial)—which obscures many aspects of the history that are visible only if read laterally and cumulatively. For example, it is quite difficult to gain a complete picture of the histories of individual abusers, who worked in several institutions, as they are distributed over many chapters. Thus, while the report sets out to describe the patterns of abuse, often across institutions, a “reading” of this history is actually obscured by the narrative structure. This state of affairs calls for a new approach to reading the report and to thinking about it as a text to enable us as readers to function as belated witnesses to abuse.

It is this search for a new approach that forms the justification for our initiative—the Industrial Memories Project (2015–18). Funded by the Irish Research Council and directed by a core team at University College Dublin that includes Dr. Emilie Pine (Principal Investigator), Professor Mark Keane, and Dr. Susan Leavy, the project aims to re-read the Ryan Report through a lens informed by digital-humanities methods. Because the Ryan Report does not readily com-

9. *CICA Executive Summary*, 20.

10. For example, the One in Four support group for survivors of abuse reported a “huge surge in new client numbers in the three months since the Ryan Report.” See One in Four, “Press Release, 15 September 2009,” *oneinfour.ie*, 15 Sept. 2009, http://www.oneinfour.ie/content/resources/One_in_Four_Launches_Annual_Report_2008_-_150909.pdf, archived at <https://perma.cc/68KT-QU6Q>.

11. Despite its length and detailed nature, the Ryan Report is not comprehensive. There were institutions (such as the Magdalen laundries) that fell outside the remit of the CICA and hence are not discussed in the final report. The report does not constitute an exhaustive archive, but often only a sample of the archive. As a result, the archives of the religious orders and the state departments are described and excerpted but not fully available to the reader. Yet even though it is a limited source, it constitutes the only publicly available access to those closed records and hence provides the means for valuable insights.

municate its contents to readers by virtue of its structure and size, we attempt to shape a new way to read the report and to re-present its contents in a manner that is much more accessible and insightful by using digital- and text-analytic methods. This enables us to witness again what needs to be acknowledged and, more importantly, to be understood.¹² By transforming the text of the report into a database searchable via any web browser, the reader is freed from the linear narrative of the paper document and empowered to make quick and easy searches across multiple chapters and subsections of the report (e.g., it is now possible to extract a “character” history for a particular individual using name searches). Our team has also deployed text-analytic methods to enable us to find patterns in the report that were not previously obvious. We want in particular to understand who knew what, how they knew, and how they communicated what they knew. We are therefore identifying recurring themes embedded within the linear narrative of the report to highlight how visible abuse was within the system. These patterns are then contextualized and interpreted through a close reading of the report. In this way qualitative and quantitative approaches are viewed not as opposing, but rather as complementary aspects of the study. In utilizing digital methods for reading the report, we are intervening in and analyzing the text in order to highlight hidden meanings. These actions require us to act as significant mediators of the report and, as argued below, as active readers and witnesses to its messages.

A FEW WORDS ON WITNESSING

Dori Laub defines witnessing as having three levels: the first-hand witness of subjective experience, second-hand witnesses to others’ subjective experience, and third-hand witnesses who observe the

12. There are of course multiple “reactions” to the report, both analytic and artistic, that share equally the aim of diversifying the narrative of historic abuse. See, for example, Mary Raftery’s documentary play *No Escape* (Abbey Theatre, 2010); Dominic Thorpe, performance piece, *Redress State* (126 Gallery, Galway, 2010); Fred Powell, Martin Geoghegan, Margaret Scanlon, and Katharina Swirak, “The Irish Charity Myth, Child Abuse, and Human Rights: Contextualizing the Ryan Report into Institutional Care,” *British Journal of Social Work* 43:1 (Feb. 2013): 7–23.

testifying process.¹³ Laub argues for the importance of testifying and witnessing in the wake of painful experience, and for the significance of being an “authentic witness” by recognizing the truth of the testimony to the experience. Without all three levels of witnessing functioning authentically, Laub argues, there is a “collapse of witnessing” whereby the experience and its subjective pain are not recognized.¹⁴ Tamar Ashuri and Amit Pinchevski likewise view witnessing as a complex field in which there are three zones that they identify as the “eyewitness,” the “mediator,” and the “audience.”¹⁵ This tripartite schema demonstrates that successful witnessing involves the event being seen by one person who then testifies about his or her experience to a second person (who did not experience the event). The second person chooses how to mediate that testimony for the third form of witness, the audience. This is a complex performance, as the information about the event must pass through two stages in order to be communicated to the audience. It is also a perpetuating performance in which the audience can in turn become witnesses and further mediate the testimony to another person, creating new audiences in turn.

This is to assume, however, that a relatively smoothly flowing system exists in which the event *is* successfully communicated. What we encounter time and again in relation to painful experience, however, are the blocks within the system.¹⁶ For example, there are scenarios in which the eyewitness is unable to fulfill the first level of witnessing and never recounts her or his experience of the event to anyone. Alternatively, the eyewitness may recount her or his experience, but it is not mediated to an audience, or the eyewitness recounts the experience and it is negatively mediated so that the audience, itself removed from the event, adjudicates wrongly on the nature of the event. Like the party game in which a message is distorted by being

13. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 75.

14. Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 80.

15. Tamar Ashuri and Amit Pinchevski, “Witnessing as a Field,” in *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*, ed. Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 133–55, 137.

16. For considerations of how traumatic effects may contribute to the failure of witnessing painful experiences, see Laub’s discussion of Holocaust witnessing. See also Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

passed around, this distortion is one possible outcome of the different stages of witnessing. And when the event being witnessed and mediated for an audience relates to the very serious issue of the abuse of children, then the distortion is equally serious.

Banville's assertion that "everyone knew" presupposes that there were copious eyewitnesses, some level of mediation, and a large audience for the abuse that was occurring in residential institutions across Ireland.¹⁷ Yet despite this situation, the abuse continued for decades. We argue that this persistence arose not from a lack of initial witnesses, but rather from failures on the part of mediation and the audience. It was a failure of witnessing. The focus of this article is on survivor, religious, and state witnesses. This is not to forget about or discount the wider community, but rather to concentrate in this instance on official reports of abuse circulating at the time of the abuse. We consider below examples that vividly illustrate that abuse was seen and known about. These examples, however, also show that seeing and knowing were not enough. On the contrary, testimony about abuse was mediated in order to downplay it or hostilely reject it. Thus we clearly identify that the oversight of the system did not either prevent or halt abuse, nor did it ensure the welfare of the child being abused.

FORMS OF TESTIMONY

In the Ryan Report there are two main types of testimonial text—historical and recent. The "historical witness" testimony is taken from letters, earlier official reports (for example, the Cussen Report of 1936) and internal memos, newspaper reports, and parliamentary records; this type of testimony includes commentary on diverse aspects of the institutions, including contemporaneous testimony regarding abuse. "Recent witness" material was generated by the commission itself, including interviews with survivors and submissions from the religious congregations who ran the institutions. Within all of this material we can see two forms of witnessing: eyewitness testimony from people who were present at the time, and retrospective

17. For the purposes of the project we are using the commission's definition of the term "abuse," which includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, serious neglect, and undernourishment.

testimony from people who were not present at the time but who commented on historical witness reports and other evidence. Recent-witness material as a narrative category also includes the commission's mediations in the form of judgments and descriptions of the system. Proportionally, the largest body of witnessing material is in the judgments of the commission.¹⁸

Though the commission's judgments are extremely important elements of the text, the focus here is on historical witness material in order to assess the statement "everyone knew." Using automated methods, we can now identify extracts from the report across chapters that include historical inspection reports and investigations into industrial schools.¹⁹ The perspective granted to us by considering all the inspection reports on conditions in institutions has led us to a realization that the continuation of the abuse was not a result of a lack of oversight. For instance, the Christian Brothers, an order with perhaps the highest level of internal oversight, ran some of the most abusive institutions (for example, Artane and Letterfrack).²⁰ Many of these inspection reports could be highly critical of general problems such as lack of food or poor education, and they cited instances of harsh corporal punishment. Yet they cast these observations as minor events within a broader framework of approval for the institutions. Thus, although the abuse was seen and known about, its mediation created compromised witness testimony. This article will consider three representative examples from oversight reports, gathered from the less-linear reading facilitated by our database of the text, to show how failing to witness, mediating one's eyewitness testimony, and a hostile audience all combined to create an environment that was amenable to the abuse of children.

18. We have chosen to analyze the commission as a single, generic "voice," though it is important to note that this "voice" has multiple authors, including Ryan and other civil servants working on the commission.

19. This method identified 288 paragraphs in the report that mentioned state and government inspections. This is not a definitive list of all inspections that occurred, but because each paragraph is an excerpt addressing an inspection of a school, the method is indicative of the scale of official monitoring of industrial schools.

20. The Christian Brothers had a system of at least annual visitations of their industrial schools carried out by a member of the congregation. Given that the state inspectorate was under-resourced and as a result did not inspect every school annually, the Christian Brothers' rate of inspection was very regular.

FAILING TO WITNESS: DON'T RECORD, DON'T ASK

Keeping punishment books in which individual punishments were noted was one of the features of oversight within the institutional system.²¹ These books represent a form of historical witnessing. Yet the report reveals that most institutions kept no such record; it concludes that “out of all of the industrial schools examined by the Investigation Committee, only Upton and St. Joseph’s Industrial School, Dundalk, were able to produce punishment books, and then only for some of the period under investigation.”²² The absence of the punishment books required by the regulations governing the institutions seems to have been an issue for the congregations. Indeed, there is only one example of this information being sought directly:

It was clear from the 1937 visitation report that no punishment book existed at that stage. The visitor appended a list of points given to the resident manager that included the following: Get a punishment book and enter therein punishment given. . . . If a boy misconducts himself, he should be punished by the sup[er]ior or the br[other] in charge of the discipline, and the punishment recorded in the punishment book.²³

We can speculate on the reasons why a punishment book might not have been kept, such as insufficient time or resources, or because it was not viewed as an important task or regulation. Yet we can also imagine that school authorities did not wish to record the administration of punishment, potentially because the record (if complete) would reveal unacceptably high or cruel levels of punishment and corroborate allegations of abuse. Since the intended audience for the punishment books was the state inspectors, the failure to keep or present these records suggests a concealment of events and conditions in the industrial schools. Moreover, the failure by state inspections to demand access to the punishment books shows not only a disregard for the regulations but also a lack of interest in witnessing the actual level of punishment in the system and the daily experience of children within it.

21. Punishment books were legislatively covered under the 1908 Children’s Act governing corporal punishment in all Irish schools until 1983.

22. *CICA Report*, vol. 2, ch. 2, par. 45.

23. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, ch. 9, par. 144.

Time and again children were ignored as witnesses within the system or, as explored below, were abused on the basis of their witness testimony. In descriptions of inspections of schools in the Ryan Report, out of a total of 227 church inspections, only three mention speaking to pupils of the schools. The state inspections only once cite an instance of a pupil being consulted—out of a total of 61 inspections. Indeed, both state and church inspections showed little concern for the testimony of children; they are thus, according to Ashuri and Pinchevski's framework, "condemned to silence."²⁴ In the rare instances where testimony from a child was included, these exchanges were described as interviews and the children were never quoted directly.²⁵ These two observations illustrate that in the main children were excluded as eyewitnesses. Where their testimony was sought, it was indirectly provided and thus subject to a layer of mediation. These exclusions and minimizing of eyewitness testimony, alongside the absence of punishment books, illustrate the largest stumbling block to any "reading" of the historical witness testimony, namely, that the testimony cannot be read if it does not exist.

EYEWITNESS MEDIATION: "I AM HAPPY TO BE ABLE TO SAY"

In the 1930s a Christian Brothers' visitation report on Artane commented on one instance of abusive behavior:

[The boys are] well disciplined, and I am happy to be able to say that there was no evidence of undue or severe corporal punishment. I was assured by practically all the brothers that there is very little corporal punishment indulged in. I did come across one case of the free use of the slapper. This was in the classroom of Br. Maurice. He gave about sixteen slaps, one after the other. I walked in just at the end. The slaps were not severe, and the effect could only help towards demoralising the poor lads. I had a word with Br. Wiatt and asked him to help Br. Maurice to establish his control without having recourse to the useless method of indiscriminate slapping. But it is indeed satisfactory to find that there is very little corporal punishment, and that in recent times there has not occurred any instance of undue severity. Br. Eliot is master of discipline and is doing very well in this position. He is

24. Ashuri and Pinchevski, "Witnessing as a Field," 144.

25. Examples include *CICA Report*, vol. 2, ch. 4, par. 104 and 110.

very anxious to do his best, and he is succeeding very well in his exacting duties. There is still too much reliance on the slapper and not enough on personal influence.²⁶

The simultaneity of asserting that there is “very little corporal punishment” and that “there is still too much reliance on the slapper” suggests this witness’s awareness of the negative impact (physically and emotionally) of severe corporal punishment. This awareness, however, was accompanied by a repeated downplaying of the existence of severe corporal punishment. This written report is thus a good example of an agenda to mediate a first-hand eyewitness testimony to lessen its impact on an audience. We might say that this witness “knows” about abuse but is not willing to admit this knowledge fully or publicly.

In order to discern whether this downplaying of negative testimony was a single instance or was typical of other school inspections, we examined the overall attitudes expressed in language associated with state and church inspections by evaluating the degree to which they contained terms of positive or negative sentiment.²⁷ The language associated with both state and church inspection reports was found to be three times more positive than that found from analyses of witness testimonies describing abuse.²⁸ It is not entirely surprising that historical testimony describing experiences of abuse was more negative than the language associated with industrial-school inspections. If we assume, however, that the use of positive language to frame evidence of abuse lessens the potential impact of that message, then we can read how the mediation performed by state and church inspections may have served to lessen the impact of negative appraisals of conditions at the schools. This suggests that another layer of complex-

26. *CICA Report*, vol. 1, ch. 7, par. 83.

27. This language analysis includes excerpts that were classified as “abuse descriptions” and excerpts that contained quotations. The analysis resulted mostly in paragraphs consisting of survivor-witness testimony, but also included are a small number of abuse paragraphs containing testimony from members of the religious orders. Sentiment was evaluated on a scale between 1 and -1, with positive numbers representing positive sentiment.

28. The sentiment scores are as follows: state, 0.30; church, 0.26; witness testimony, 0.10. Terms are enumerated using the Python library TextBlob’s sentiment analyzer. See Steven Loria, *TextBlob: Simplified Text Processing*, v. 0.12.0 (2014), <https://textblob.readthedocs.io>.

ity needs to be added to the tripartite witness schema in order to take into account the fact that all texts are produced for an audience. Eyewitnesses are always mediating their testimony and positioning themselves in relation to it; the mediator is a secondary witness who again mediates her or his own testimony (based on the testimony of eyewitnesses) and positions herself or himself in relation to it; and finally, the audience always mediates the received testimony. The role of mediation—how the narrative of witnessing is constructed and re-constructed—is thus key to the outcome of the act of witnessing.

For the child eyewitness to give testimony, she or he needs to attain both agency and voice. This is not an easy task for a child in an adult world, even when that environment is not abusive. When that environment is hostile to witnessing, then the role of witness becomes highly risky. For instance, in the Artane residential institution for boys run by the Christian Brothers, one boy complained in the mid-1960s to the chaplain during confession about being sexually abused by a brother. The priest asked the boy to repeat the allegation outside of the confessional, and he then took the boy's complaint to another brother at Artane and to the provincial superior. The consequence of this episode was twofold: the abusive brother was transferred to another institution and the eyewitness was punished:

According to the witness, he was taken out of class the next day and was questioned about boys he had been "committing badness with." He was beaten in the course of this questioning until he named boys. Those boys were in turn taken out of class and beaten until they gave names. He was taken out again over two or three days and was beaten because of being named by other boys.

It was just one vicious circle that kept going on for two—for three days. I had been taken out because other boys started giving my name back again. It was even said to me, but who said it I don't know, "you should have kept your mouth shut and none of this would have happened."

[. . .] I was beaten by so many of them at that particular time. . . . It was like it was a punishment over me going and reporting.²⁹

29. *CICA Report*, vol. 1, ch. 7, par. 415–17.

This quotation from the report is a combination of historical and contemporary witnessing, given that it recorded the historical experience of having been a witness to abuse, and also constituted recent testimony given by that witness in the present to the commission that recalled the events of forty years previously.

In terms of the three stages of witnessing, in this example we see a successful chain of actions: first, the eyewitness reports the abuse; second, the mediator (the chaplain) acts ethically on this report; and third, the audience (the Artane authorities) act on the mediated witness testimony by removing the abuser. Yet the situation was more complex as the outcomes did not end the abuse but actually increased it by transferring the abuser to a new institution with new opportunities for abuse. The eyewitness was also punished by the audience as he was beaten for giving testimony. The identity of the witness, then, is highly risky, for as Peters argues, “To witness always involves risk, potentially to have your life changed. . . . You can be marked for life by being the witness of an event.”³⁰ In the threat that “you should have kept your mouth shut,” we can clearly read the beatings as punishment of the boy for having acted as a witness and for having broken the culture of silence about sexual abuse. The lesson that was being delivered to the first “witness” boy was then distributed across the whole of the peer group and arguably the whole institution, with the likely result that boys would not have acted in the future as eyewitnesses to abuse they suffered or saw.

Despite the failure of the audience, however, it would seem that initially the chaplain who had heard the child’s testimony of abuse acted as an ethical and, to use Laub’s term, “authentic witness.” Yet it is notable that the priest did not refer the actions of the abuser to the police. In 2006 the Christian Brothers order made a statement to the commission: “They also conceded that complaints of sexual abuse were not reported to the gardaí. This they justified on the basis that at the time ‘an incident of sexual abuse was considered more of a failure in morality than a criminal act and therefore the idea of reporting to the garda was not considered to be usual practice.’”³¹ The viewing of sexual abuses as “failures in morality” is supported by contrasting

30. John Durham Peters, “Witnessing,” *Media, Culture, Society* 23:6 (Nov. 2001): 714.

31. *CICA Report*, vol. 1, ch. 13, par. 74.

patterns in language use associated with church and state inspections. On extracting words associated with belief systems and legal systems from the excerpts referring to state and church inspections, we uncover a pattern whereby language associated with belief systems is more associated with church inspections, whereas language associated with legal issues is associated with state inspections. These findings also show that terms associated with moral judgments, derived from the “General Inquirer” lexicon developed by Philip Stone and John Kirsch, are used more often in relation to church inspections (see Table 1).³² This evidence points to the validity of the assertion presented earlier in the statement of the Christian Brothers to the commission that allegations of abuse had been dealt with on the basis of morality rather than as a criminal issue.

WITNESSING AND READING:

BETTER READERS MAKE BETTER WITNESSES

The occurrence and persistence of child abuse in the institutional system had many causes, including top-down and distributed-management systems, under-resourcing, and unhelpful attitudes to children and poverty. A major contributing factor was also the failure of ethical witnessing. The authorities did not listen to children or ask them about their experiences, indicating that their voices were considered low priorities for both the religious orders and the state. Punishments were not recorded, suggesting that corporal punishment went unchecked. Allegations of abuse were covered up and/or punished. When abuse was confronted, it was dealt with as a failure of morality and concealed from further witnessing. We can argue, then, that historically both the mediators and the audience functioned as unethical witnesses of abuse. This situation could have been mitigated if more people—within both the religious orders and the state bodies regulating the system—had chosen to react with compassion to the abuse that they had observed and heard from children’s testimony, and if they had read between the lines of the inspection reports that were routinely coded positive.

32. Philip J. Stone and John Kirsch, *The General Inquirer: A Computer Approach to Content Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966). Patterns in word usage are identified using a support-vector machine-learning algorithm.

Table 1

Vocabulary of Moral Judgments in Church-versus-State Inspections

CHURCH			STATE
poor	filthy	repulsive	abuse
bad	hazardous	unclean	lack
immoral	guilty	dissatisfaction	limit
unfit	improper	notorious	damage
unfortunate	unpleasant	severity	illness
severe	emergency	bound	unfair
harsh	excessive	penalty	prohibitive
violent	ill	study	dangerous
trouble	blame	difficult	cold
manner	failure	particular	threat
mean	interference	sorry	dirty
grim	deplorable	lazy	badly
chaotic	drab	wrong	unnecessary
primitive	sick	demand	difficulty
unable	strict	unpredictable	danger
depraved			brutality
			unsatisfactory

But can reading function as part of a performance of witnessing? In some ways we could argue that the report is itself the outcome of reading, as a written document representing the assimilation of information from interviews and archival research that the commission inspected. The Ryan Report thus represents a form of belated ethical reading-as-witnessing, with the commission “reading” across the historical and recent witness testimony, evaluating it, and mediating it for a new audience. The status of the report—and here genre is vital—as an official document based on a nine-year inquiry means that as a witnessing text, it has a complete authority reversing the previous hierarchy of witnessing, in which the religious authorities had the power to discredit or cover up individual testimony and to punish the eyewitness. The generic status of the report affects how it is read as a text, as readers bring particular expectations of that genre (for example, expectations of clarity of language and style over plot or

characterization). Moreover, readers expect, and need, the report to be both accurate and accessible, especially given that readers without direct experience of the institutional system for children are entirely reliant on its contents for information. For readers with direct experience of the system, and for readers who have experienced abuse, this generic requirement for accuracy will be particularly acute. Finally, readers' ultimate expectation of this genre is that it will be a robust and factual representation of the field of inquiry. Because of all of these generic expectations, readers encounter this form of narrative with a high degree of trust—a trust verified in this instance partly by the scale of the report and partly by the weight of its moral resonance.³³

Besides the generic expectations and the authority of the report as a witnessing text, another factor shaping the audience's reaction to this testimony is precisely the distance between the events being recounted and the moment in which they are being described. The issue of proximity is crucial to witnessing because it gives the eyewitness a claim to veracity: "I was there. I saw it. And it was real." Yet proximity to abuse, as we saw above, also involves significant risk. The temporal distance dividing an audience from the abuse being witnessed in the report, combined with the sanctioning authority of the commission members as mediators, removes that risk. In reading the report, most readers therefore function as an audience to the discourse of historical abuse, not to the abuse itself. It is thus relatively unproblematic for a contemporary readership to act as a belated tertiary audience to historical abuse. To respond to Banville's critique, what we can say is that publication of the report enabled an audience not only to know but to *say* that they know, that is, to publicly perform the role of audience-witness. This role does require imaginative engagement with the past and active compassion for the victims, but even with the challenge of engaging with such upsetting material, the risks of witnessing in the contemporary moment are hugely mitigated.

Reading the report involves the performative act of reading the text, and thus the creation of a new relationship between the reader,

33. This is not to suggest that readers accept the views of official reports uncritically, but that a reader's expectation is that the genre performs certain functions, including being factual, thorough, and authoritative. These are expectations that can of course be disappointed.

the text, and the context. In this formulation reading is not merely a private and intimate connection between text and reader, but also an active and shifting dynamic in which the reader moves between reading the text and “reading” the situation (both historical and contemporary); the reader situates her or his reaction to the text within that larger situational context. Reading is thus not passive but active, and it therefore has the potential to activate the reader-audience. Whether that opportunity to activate translates into a transformation of attitudes and behavior in relation to witnessing is another matter entirely. As Marianne Hirsch asks, “How can we allow the knowledge of past atrocity to touch us without paralyzing us? What aesthetic strategies might galvanize memory in the interest of activist engagement for justice and social change?”³⁴ In this case the fourth stage of ethical witnessing might be for the audience to move from throwing up their hands in horror at the historical abuse (as perhaps Banville does), to asking what systems enabled the abuse to happen and to persist. To answer that question the reader-audience must inevitably recognize that part of the explanation lies in a historical failure of witnessing. In admitting historical failures, the contemporary reader-audience also recognizes the attendant necessity to expand its own capacity for witnessing structural callousness in the present.

This analysis brings us back to distant reading and to the ways in which the narrative form of the report obscures the findings that might answer that question. Distant reading is necessary in order to read across the report and to define the patterns—of attitudes, behavior, and responses—that structured the system. These patterns can tell us about how the system functioned, as in our analysis of the language that shaped the coded reports on conditions in the schools. The patterns that distant reading reveals contradict assumptions about the frequency of inspections, as, for example, when a search for the term “report” illuminates the extent of internal and external reporting that was prevalent within the system. Furthermore, reading the results for “report” side-by-side with the results for the search term “punish” tells us that there is a significant gap between the extent of oversight (regulations or inspections) and the seriousness with

34. Marianne Hirsch, “Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times,” *PMLA* 129:3 (2014): 330–48, esp. 334.

which physical abuse was treated. A close reading of a sample of these results illustrates that a system of oversight cannot be conflated with a system of ethical witnessing.³⁵

One of the values of digital tools for distant reading is the identification of patterns in the narrative that would otherwise be invisible and that substantiate intuitions based on close reading. There is a correspondence here between the role of the commission as collectors and readers of data and the role of data analytics. There is also an intentional mirroring of the facilitation of collective witnessing by the commission. As one of the survivors testified to the commission: “They all said ‘that couldn’t have happened,’ but they can’t say that to 5,000 of us when we all have a similar story to tell.”³⁶ It is our hope that in creating a database from the report, we will enable a different form of collective reading-witnessing, allowing us to show the significance of so many similar stories being told across the report. And we hope that in performing these actions, we will counteract what Paul Ricoeur has termed the greatest failure of witnessing: the circumstance in which “witnesses . . . never encounter an audience capable of listening to them or hearing what they have to say.”³⁷ The report, as an act of belated or secondary witnessing, has been brought into being because of a failure of primary, historical witnessing. As a society, we wish it did not exist because we wish to live in a world in which it does not *have* to exist. Our duty now is to understand and assume our obligation as an ethical audience, because if we do not, we risk being poor readers and even worse witnesses.

35. The relationship between distant reading and close reading can also be compared to the ways in which collective witnessing creates space for individual witnesses. For example, following publication of the report, Michael O’Brien testified on television and in the newspapers about his experience of abuse as a child. The connection between publication of the report and O’Brien’s testimony suggests that the link between the collective-witnessing text and the individual witness creates a context in which the individual can be heard—and also in which his or her testimony is read as representative of the group. O’Brien described his experiences of abuse in St. Joseph’s Industrial School in Clonmel on Newstalk Radio, and on RTÉ’s *Questions and Answers*, on 25 May 2009. His comments on *Questions and Answers* were printed in full in the *Irish Times*. See “Ex-Mayor Tells of Abuse,” *Irish Times*, 27 May 2009, 9.

36. *CICA Report*, vol. 3, ch. 2, par. 49.

37. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 166.