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# THE LIGHT AND THE LENS:

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Streams of Damaged Consciousness in Post-Crash Irish Modernist Fiction

Aran Ward Sell



Submitted in satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of PhD  
in English Literature

The University of Edinburgh

2019



I confirm that this thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English Literature, and has

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- ii) been solely the result of my own work
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# ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the state of Irish literature since the 2008-9 financial crash. I contend that, whilst a supposedly mature Realism was the dominant mode of Irish writing during the 'Celtic Tiger' years of economic boom, since the crash an identifiably Modernist literary movement has (re-)emerged. Examples of this re-emergent Modernism are Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), Anakana Schofield's *Malarky* (2012) and *Martin John* (2015), Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone* (2015) and Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016). I position these texts in relation to discourses of both Realism and Postmodernism, and to Irish High Modernism of the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that they represent a dynamic extension of Modernist aesthetics, not merely a static recapitulation of Modernist convention.

I argue that the terms Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism (and 'Metamodernism', a recent category in which I include Barry's *Beatlebone*) more usefully denote literary techniques with a particular aesthetic/political relationship to the world, than fixed historical periods. I analyse these texts' use of such Modernist techniques through a theoretical lens which draws upon debates concerning literary form in twentieth-century Marxism, Gramscian theories of hegemony (notably as developed by Raymond Williams), Marxist-influenced theorisation of Ireland and Irishness, and linguistic criticism which contrasts Modernist interrogation and fracture with Realist meta-language and closure. I examine both the narratological techniques which comprise these texts' 'Modernism', and also the material circumstances of their publication, which has relied heavily on a small group of Arts Council-supported small presses and literary magazines. My thesis also draws on contemporary journalism, both with regard to the economic context of Celtic Tiger and post-crash Ireland and to the reception of my primary texts.

The thesis ends with a 'coda', which treats the immediately post-crash rejuvenation of Irish Modernism as a closed (or closing) historical moment, and speculates whether Irish Modernist aesthetics will continue to innovate and interrogate (as suggested by Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018)), or whether this 'Movement' is already expiring, to be replaced by a socially liberal but formally conservative return to Realist aesthetics (as suggested by Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018)).



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# LAY SUMMARY

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This thesis contends that the financial crash of 2008-9 provoked a major change in Irish Literature. During the boom years before the crash, known as the 'Celtic Tiger', more formally conservative 'Realist' novels dominated, often with historical settings far removed from the reality of contemporary Irish life. However in the wake of the financial crisis, a resurgence of experimental literature has occurred. This revived experimentalism harks back to the Irish 'High Modernist' texts of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the works of James Joyce. However it is not a simple return to Joycean techniques or styles, but a meaningfully contemporary extension of the Modernist ethos of innovation and formal non-conformity.

The novels which this thesis takes to be examples of a new Irish Modernism are Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), Anakana Schofield's *Malarky* (2012) and *Martin John* (2015), Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone* (2015) and Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016). I also examine the Northern Irish author Anna Burns' novel *Milkman* (2018) as a more recent continuation of this new 'Movement'. All of these writers create protagonists whose consciousnesses are in some way damaged—by the effects of traumatic abuse, by anxiety, by grief or by sexual perversion—and I argue that 'damaged consciousness' is a key tenet of the newly experimental Irish literature which has emerged since the collapse of the Celtic Tiger.



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A note of thanks, too, for the writers and critics whose words are quoted, sliced and diced herein. As well as novels, stories and academic critiques, this thesis depends heavily upon mainstream literary journalism. These are trying times for newspapers and magazines, so I salute the journalists, books desks and arts editors at all of the publications, such as *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, and *The White Review*, who have written, commissioned and published the reviews and essays which I draw upon. Justine Jordan's 2015 *Guardian*

article ‘A new Irish literary boom’ was a particularly key formative influence upon this thesis’ direction.

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# CONTENTS

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|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1: Introduction: Why Ask the Left about Literature?.....  | 15  |
| 2: The Tiger and the Crash: Eimear McBride's <i>A Girl is a Half-formed Thing</i> .....           | 61  |
| 3: <i>It is Never Defined</i> : Anakana Schofield's <i>Malarky</i> and <i>Martin John</i> .....   | 105 |
| 4: This is a Movement: Kevin Barry's <i>Beatlebone</i> .....                                      | 137 |
| 5: Conclusion: Mike McCormack's Solar <i>Bones</i> and the stream of post-consciousness .....     | 183 |
| 6: Coda: From the Ashes: Anna Burns' <i>Milkman</i> and Sally Rooney's <i>Normal People</i> ..... | 225 |
| Works Cited .....   | 265 |



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# THE LIGHT AND THE LENS:

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Streams of Damaged Consciousness in Post-Crash Irish Modernist Fiction

*all this is clear only in hindsight*

*as if every toppled edifice creates both the light and lens through which  
the disaster itself can properly be seen, the ashes and vacated space becoming  
the imaginative standpoint from which the whole thing is now clearly visible for  
those with eyes to see because up to the moment the whole thing came down it  
was never clear to me*

*or anyone else*

*what was happening*

— Mike McCormack, *Solar Bones*, p30



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# CHAPTER 1

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## Introduction: Why Ask the Left about Literature?

‘Why is Ireland so rich?’  
‘Because its capital is always Dublin.’

I cannot remember where I first encountered this pun. It could have been in a joke book, on a television programme or on the side of a chocolate biscuit wrapper. Wherever I heard or read it, it stuck with me. In part, perhaps, because it is a pretty solid joke. The polysemy of the word ‘capital’ and the homophonic alignment of Dublin/doubling make it a lean, tightly-engineered piece of wordplay<sup>1</sup>. And in part, perhaps, it stayed with me because its premise was a question in genuine need of an answer. *Why was Ireland so rich?* I was a child in 1990s Ireland. That the country was prosperous was not remotely in doubt: everybody told you so. The lustre of the words ‘Celtic Tiger’ permeated even the rural atmosphere of South County Kilkenny like petrichor after rain. But what these words meant, where they came from, who actually had all the money, and where it would go: all of these seemed like sacred mysteries. Or, worse, like jokes we weren’t to know the punchlines to. Why is a raven like a writing desk? And why is Ireland so rich?

Marx notes of capital, not that it is always doubling—or Dublin—but that it is ‘something immaterial, something indifferent to its material consistency’ (309). This acute description of the ephemerality of value neatly captures the impermanence of Ireland’s

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<sup>1</sup> Good enough, indeed, for an earlier version to catch the imagination of Ireland’s premier wordplayer, James Joyce. The opening lines of *Finnegans Wake* (1939) include the words ‘doublin their mumper all the time’ (3), a many-times-oblique reference to Dublin’s ‘double’, the town of Dublin in Laurens County, Georgia, USA (Joyce, *Selected Letters*, 316), where rapid population growth in the early twentieth century prompted the joke to circulate that it was ‘the only town in Georgia, that’s doublin all the time’ (Thompson 7).

pre-crash economy, the spectral economic boom known as the Celtic Tiger. The boom, of course, turned to bust in the 2008-9 financial crash, and capital flowed indifferently elsewhere. Irish art, however, stayed behind, although it was hardly unchanged.

This thesis surveys the literature which came after the crash. In particular, it identifies and analyses an experimental strand in contemporary Irish fiction. I analyse that strand in terms of an existing critical discourse of 'Modernist' experimentation, and in particular the Left or Marxian elements of that discourse. Although rooted in analyses of Modernism which first surfaced in the early twentieth century, its primary examples are novels (or works approximately identifiable as such) published since the 2008-9 crash. This will allow for the social and political circumstances of the past decade to be both incorporated and critiqued in the literary analysis which follows. My contention is that the discourse of Modernism and its Left analyses remain a pertinent method for critiquing the contemporary novel in the twenty-first century, particularly with regard to the political implications of a normative literary form and style. Furthermore, I argue that the predominant trend in Irish fiction since the financial crash has been a resurgence of Modernist techniques and the interrogative, innovative aesthetic ethos which identifies writing as Modernist. This opening chapter will lay-out the 'toolkit' which the following case study chapters base their analyses upon. Although the case studies will return only selectively to the narratological, aesthetic and political arguments explored in this chapter, these arguments are their theoretical foundation, and it is my intention that, for example, the definitions of key terms such as 'stream of consciousness' which are expounded below may be taken as read in the following case studies, as may the more complex positions on Modernist and Realist aesthetics, and their pertinence to Irish writing in particular, reached via the following analysis of arguments in twentieth-century Marxist literary theory.

In this thesis, as is often the case, the term 'Modernism' will be used in large part (although not exclusively) in opposition to 'Realism'. This is not just to treat Realism as a conveniently conservative control-group against which to contrast Modernist iconoclasm, but because of the dominance of the Realist novel in fiction of the Celtic Tiger era itself. Much as Modernist writing (Irish and otherwise) of the early twentieth century was created against a backdrop of Realist orthodoxy, so was Irish writing of the early twenty-

first century created in the shadow not just of distant Modernist forebears, but in the far more immediate shadow of contemporary Realism and its self-proclaimed maturity.

This becomes apparent most immediately at the level of narratological technique. My chief case studies of contemporary Irish Modernism are Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), Anakana Schofield's *Malarky* (2012) and *Martin John* (2015), Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone* (2015) and Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016) [Anna Burns' Northern Irish Modernist novel *Milkman* (2018) will also be explored in my final chapter, in comparison with Sally Rooney's neo-realist *Normal People* (2018)]. These novels are written using a particular type of non-Realist prose techniques, which I argue (most directly in chapter 3) can be meaningfully identified as 'Modernist' techniques, and I particularly focus on the ways that these non-Realist methods are used to present fictional characters' internal states. The methods in question are usually referred to as 'internal (or interior) monologue', 'free indirect discourse', 'stream of consciousness' or by other related terms. There is a considerable degree of inconsistency regarding these terms' general application, with 'stream of consciousness', in particular, sometimes used as synonymous with the more specific term 'interior monologue'. I use 'stream of consciousness' throughout this thesis as an umbrella term incorporating both wholly-internal *interior monologue* and partially-external *focalised free indirect discourse*. This is in keeping with Brian McHale's definitions of 'Speech Representation' in the *Living Handbook of Narratology*, in which McHale writes that

[Stream of consciousness] can be realized formally by first-person 'autonomous' interior monologue (as in Molly Bloom's soliloquy from *Ulysses*, or the first three sections of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*), or by FID<sup>2</sup> (as in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*), or indeed by a combination of means. (2014, 3.1)

In the post-crash era, I am particularly interested in the political potential of these techniques when they are used to represent the mentally ill, drug-affected, or psychologically traumatised individuals whose consciousnesses would not have aligned with the Celtic Tiger-era insistence upon optimism, maturity and prosperity. Indeed the

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<sup>2</sup> Free Indirect Discourse—see chapter three for an extended exegesis of the term

most striking commonality between the case studies presented herein is their shared focus on using Modernist techniques to create a representation of what I will henceforth refer to as ‘damaged consciousnesses’. This is another umbrella term by which I mean any individual psychologies which are presented as fundamentally incommensurate with the world as they perceive it. This usually takes some form of individual trauma as its instigating factor, and may range from the personal anxieties which haunt otherwise socially successful individuals, as presented by *Beatlebone* and *Solar Bones*, or the derailing of a previously mature and socialised consciousness by traumatising events, as in the grieving mother of *Malarky*, to the more fundamentally traumatised narrator of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, and even to the violent sexual predator who is the protagonist of *Martin John*, who is not only a damaged actor but a damaging one. It is no coincidence that such themes have emerged as the central topic of an emergent Modernism in the wake of a global financial crisis which has shown the contingency, the non-inevitability, of capitalist hierarchies: as Mark Fisher has written, ‘Mental health, in fact, is a paradigm case of how capitalist realism operates’ (19). Fisher notes that as far back as the 1960s ‘extreme mental conditions’ such as schizophrenia were argued to be ‘not a natural, but a political, category’ by radical theoreticians such as Michel Foucault and R. D. Laing (19). Fisher’s intervention is to extend this interrogation of ‘capitalist realism’ into more everyday forms of a-normative consciousness: ‘what is needed now,’ he writes ‘is a politicization of much more common disorders’ such as depression (19). Both ‘extreme’ damaged consciousnesses (*Martin John*, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*) and ‘more common disorders’ such as anxiety and even mourning (*Beatlebone*, *Solar Bones*, *Malarky*) will be used to substantiate this thesis’ linkage of the collapse of Celtic Tiger neoliberal capitalism to the emergence of a post-Tiger school of Modernist writing focusing upon the representation of damaged consciousnesses.

Whether the lineage of ‘stream of consciousness’ takes Marcel Proust, Edouard Dujardin or Dorothy Richardson as its true progenitor, it is certainly most strongly associated in British and Irish fiction with the Modernist movement of the early twentieth century (referred to hereafter as ‘High Modernism’). James Joyce and Virginia Woolf loom particularly large as antecedents to its use in twenty-first century fiction. Joyce is the central figure of this discussion within the specific context of Irish writing (and writing

Irishness), and will be the recurrent point of comparison for this thesis in its examples of both Irish Modernist writing and High Modernist writing writ large, although other writers both Irish and international (particularly Woolf) will also be treated as uncontroversially representative of 'High Modernist' writing (the Irish writers Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien also feature as antecedents: Beckett I treat generally as a High Modernist or 'Late Modernist', and O'Brien as a complicated overlap between High Modernism and Postmodernism for which I argue the recently coined term 'Metamodernist' is appropriate; these distinctions are outlined at length where relevant). I regard contemporary non-Realist portrayals of consciousness as engaged in a diachronic relationship with these 'High Modernists': in the case studies which follow I will ask whether these relationships constitute continuations of the Modernist movement itself, developments beyond it, or static recapitulation of its no-longer-fresh departures.

The various claims which I make, regarding both High Modernism and the 21<sup>st</sup> century novels which represent (I will argue) that movement's contemporary successors, make use of theoretical tools which I derive from a particular strand of political debate. This debate may be considered to belong to a Marxist or Left tradition, and itself falls mainly into two sub-strands: (a) the debates surrounding Realism and Modernism amongst early-twentieth century critics such as György Lukács and Bertolt Brecht; and (b) the theories of hegemony originally propounded by Antonio Gramsci, and developed by Raymond Williams among others. It is with reference to both of these sub-strands that the work of later twentieth-century Marxist theoreticians, such as Fredric Jameson and Marshall Berman, will later be introduced. Both of these sub-strands are internally heterogeneous, and I will survey existing commentary which links each sub-strand to Irish examples and to Irish Studies, and also provide my own justifications when importing theoretical models from *outwith* the Irish context into the case studies of Irish literary texts which follow. In this I am greatly aided by the tendency of critics such as Lukács who approach Modernist aesthetics from an international perspective to nonetheless choose Joyce, in particular *Ulysses* (1922), as the standard-bearing example of Modernism in literature.

There are of course *other* schools of thought which will also recur throughout this thesis; in particular a second 'strand' which, while also Marxian in genealogy and inflected

by the Marxist dialectic in its method, and also to a large extent Leftist in political opinion, is less straightforwardly interrelated with Left-wing party policy and is descended from the structuralist and post-structuralist modes of thought often now glossed as '(Critical) Theory'. This 'linguistic turn' in cultural criticism takes its lead from the semiotic analyses of Ferdinand De Saussure and the subsequent development of structuralism and post-structuralism, including the incorporation into this paradigm, by the 1960s, of another aspect of Marxist thought associated with the work of Louis Althusser; in this thesis it is mostly represented by Catherine Belsey's work on Realism and 'interrogative' textuality and by Colin MacCabe's work on Joycean Modernism and its refusal of Realist meta-language. These 'Marxist criticism' and 'Critical Theory' philosophical traditions overlap considerably, and I do not propose either that the work of (say) Fredric Jameson is uninformed by the work of (say) Roland Barthes, or that there is anything original in combining Historical Materialist/Marxist thought with linguistic/post-Althusserian Theory. However it is productive for the formulation of this thesis to treat them at the outset as distinct; following chapters will assume an underlying understanding of the Marxist positions outlined in this introductory chapter, and synthesise them with other modes of thought drawn from the linguistic turn of 'Critical Theory'—or elsewhere—as the task or reading at hand demands.

These disclaimers now observed, I will leave aside all other strands, to focus on and justify the recruitment into my thesis of Marxist literary criticism as such—to answer the question at the head of this chapter: why ask the Left about Literature? And, concomitantly, why ask the Left about *Irish* Literature? My attempted answer will turn first to the 'sub-strand' of early Realist/Modernist debates, and later to the 'sub-strand' of Gramscian theories of hegemony. It therefore will not involve an exhaustive tracing-back of contemporary literary disputes to Marx (or to Feuerbach, or to Hegel...): instead I treat the High Modernist moment itself as the most apposite 'Year Zero' for this thesis' theoretical genealogy, and begin the literature review which follows with an account of the Marx-derived squabbling of a collection of early twentieth-century literary thinkers. The squabble in question was the first serious attempt to theorise Modernist writing, and the more contemporary examples of Modernist theory which I will go on to cite may be predominantly treated as descended from the disputes between left theorists including

György Lukács, who regarded Modernist writing as a betrayal of Socialist Realism and by extension of Marxist egalitarianism, and the likes of Theodor Adorno, Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht, who shared Lukács' Leftist politics (on the macroscopic scale, at least), but not his interpretation of how Modernist writing interacted with those political positions.

That which divides these critics is in many cases (particularly that of Lukács) more striking than that which unites them, but I will treat these differences as productive oppositions in a coherent dialectic, rather than a series of dislocated conflicts which can only be summarised in terms of intellectual impasse. Apart from occasional signposts, the specificity of the Irish novel will be mostly put to one side for this section of the literature review, with High Modernism treated for the moment as a pan-European, or even pan-Western movement. However as it is, as ever, the work of James Joyce which is most scrutinised as representative of this movement, the ensuing argument's relevance to the Irish context, which I will outline more specifically in later sections, and more exhaustively in the subsequent chapter, should for the moment need no further illustration.

## 1: Realism: Marxist Solidarity

The Modernist novel, in its early-twentieth-century proliferation, was habitually observed to constitute a break from the Realist tradition, and usually critiqued in comparison to that tradition, as indicated by my previous categorisation of stream of consciousness techniques as 'non-Realist'. Gabriel Josipovici has more recently argued in his influential study *Whatever Happened to Modernism* (2010) that the Modernist novel's 'denial of genre' is more radical than the equivalent denial in poetry or painting because the novel is operating against an assumption of Realism as the default, unmarked form (65). This 'default' Realism's claims to mimesis, however, should not create the impression that Realism is not also a contingent and ideological mode. As Josipovici puts it:

That is the secret power of novels: they look like mirrors held up to the world, but what they are is machines that excrete spurious meaning into the world and so muddy the waters of genuine understanding of the human condition. (70)

As such, a sensible starting place for this précis of Marxist writing on Modernism is the ideological clash between Lukács' defence of Realism and the more avant-gardist writing of his contemporaries in and around the Frankfurt School such as Adorno, Brecht and Bloch. It is also worth noting the contemporaneous literary debates taking place within the British left in the 1930s, through the work of writers such as Alick West, Christopher Caudwell, Ralph Fox and (the British-domiciled Australian) Jack Lindsay.

Lukács was an active participant in first the Hungarian Communist Party and later the Third International (Comintern). From this position he argued for a party line on culture for the global communist movement, championing Socialist Realism. Two major explications of his position on literary style are his attack on Expressionism, 'The Greatness and the Decline of Expressionism' (1934)—to which Ernst Bloch replied directly in 'Discussing Expressionism' (1938)—and then his seminal polemic against 'Modern' art more generally, 'Realism in the Balance' (1938). In this latter essay, Lukács praises the German writer Thomas Mann as a 'true realist' (1938, 36) because he assigns 'parts of the total complex of reality [...] to their rightful place within the total life context' (1938, 36).

Realism was for Lukács a polemical cause, constructed without any great intellectual consistency in the terms of its (superior) relationship to Modernist literary styles: as Fredric Jameson writes, Lukács' shifts 'from description to prescription in the name of some a priori model of realism' (1971, 191). Mann, in Lukács' account, 'towers as a creative artist and in his grasp of the nature of society, above all those ultra-radicals' such as the 'Surrealist' James Joyce, who

imagine that their anti-bourgeois moods, their—often purely aesthetic—rejection of the stifling nature of petty-bourgeois existence [...] have transformed them into inexorable foes of bourgeois society. (1938, 36)

In this model, Realism's ability to accurately delineate subjectivity from objective truth renders it the only viable literary mode: Lukács claims that 'the major realists of our age have consistently shown their ability' to 'achieve a critical distance from [bourgeois] prejudices [...] by scrutinizing all subjective experiences and measuring them against social reality' (1938, 37). Against this Realist genius, modern attempts to innovate through Naturalism, Expressionism or Surrealism (Lukács praises Bloch for noting their commonality (1938, 43)) portray 'purely subjective' essences which 'are not the objective essence of reality, of the total process' (1938, 40). For Lukács, the argument ends here; Modernism is mere 'anti-realistic one-dimensionality' (1938, 43).

Lukács' essay, it is worth remembering, was deliberately prescriptive and delivered as a contribution towards communist policy in the late 1930s. Indeed, Adorno's essay 'Reconciliation Under Duress' (1961) accuses Lukács of labouring 'to adapt his obviously unimpaired talents to the unrelieved sterility of Soviet claptrap' (151). The British Marxists Caudwell, Fox and West were also inclined to cleave closely to Comintern pronouncements. John Fordham, citing Fox, Lindsay, West and Montagu Slater, writes that 'it is those Marxist critics associated with the *Left Review* who principally emphasize the disintegrating tendencies of the new modernist forms' (88). For these critics, Fordham writes, 'it was a work's closeness to social reality, its realism, which was the principle criterion for its acceptability' (88). The very term 'acceptability', with its implied censorship of the 'unacceptable', gives some insight into the prescriptive tendencies of this early Marxist engagement with (or rather disengagement from) Modernist art.

Lukács and these Communist true-believers amongst the British Left were alike in seeking to bring aesthetic theory into line with the doctrine of 'Socialist Realism' adopted at the Congress of Socialist Writers in 1934, at which Karl Radek infamously called Joyce's work 'a heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope' (qtd. in Bounds, 76). Pam Morris, in her monograph *Realism*, has identified Lukács' 'attempt to justify this Soviet attack upon modernist art' as the cause of his 'public quarrel with the critics of the Frankfurt school' (101). Some critics have urged nuance: Philip Bounds argues that 'British adaptations of Soviet theory were often highly unorthodox' (5), following Radek's polemic in sometimes 'ambiguous' or 'semi-dissident' fashion (81), while nonetheless acknowledging that Fox, West and Caudwell all 'tried to build on the theoretical insights' (81) of the 1934 congress. Fordham, similarly, wishes to give Alick West credit for being 'more generous, recognising initially in *Ulysses* a new vision of a social totality arising out of its formal innovations' (89) — and, as I will discuss below, Ralph Fox wrote about capitalist oppression as being visited upon Ireland by an English ruling class, paving the way for later postcolonial readings of Irish High Modernism: 'broadly speaking, capitalism [in Ireland] is an English importation' (306). Moyra Haslett, meanwhile, offers Lukács partial immunity from charges of Stalinist complicity, allowing that he 'cautiously, rebuked the programmatic definitions of [Socialist] realism' (87-8).

However even allowing for the political context which may have influenced his conclusions, and the constructive nuance detectable in his British comrades' adherence to Congress orthodoxy, there are omissions in Lukács' reasoning as he champions Mann and denigrates 'the negation of outward reality' which 'is present in almost all modernist literature' (qtd. in Whitworth 108). Lukács' argument rests on two unquestioning assumptions: first that the conventions of Realism are innately truer to life than the conventions of Expressionism, Surrealism, montage, etc.; and secondly that reality itself is an accessible, unitary 'overall *objective* social context' (1938, 33, my emphasis) which can be reproduced without ideological distortion. As he writes: 'Expressionism or Surrealism [...] denies that literature has any reference to objective reality. [...] literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is grasped' (1938, 33). But this makes demands of 'objective reality' with which the world outside is likely to be

incommensurate: as Terry Eagleton summarises, a ‘classic realist’ approach such as Lukács’ ‘depends on the assumption that the world is story-shaped — that there is a well-formed narrative implicit in reality itself, which is the task of such realism to represent’ (1995, 147).

These shortcomings in Lukács’ defence of the realist novel are addressed by Pam Morris, who has the comparative benefit of writing in the aftermath of not only the Modernist, but the Postmodernist and poststructuralist movements (to the extent, indeed, that she complains that a sceptical ‘anti-realism became the new orthodoxy within poststructural and postmodern cultural theory from around the 1960s onwards’ (135)). For Morris, although in this alleged orthodoxy ‘realist novels are accused of colluding with functional reason to produce philistine readerly narratives’ (37), there is an enduring value to Realism’s claims to, if not *reflection*, then at least mimesis: ‘Realist novels do not seek to trick their readers by “illusion”; they do seek to give them pleasure from the recognition of verisimilitude’, she writes (119).

In order to continue the thrust of Lukács’ polemic in the aftermath of this Blochian ‘new orthodoxy’, Morris not only concedes the unattainability of access to ‘objective reality’ such as Lukács’ identifies in Mann—‘Writing,’ she admits, ‘will always, in some way, entail the values and perspective of the describer’ (4)—but also to draw almost meaninglessly broad categorical boundaries for Realism: ‘literary realism [...] is distinguished by its implicit contract with the reader that it does refer in some way to a world beyond the text’ (142). Not even ‘the’ world but ‘a’ world: all fiction, Realist, fantastical and/or Modernist, except perhaps the most self-extinguishing Postmodern metatext, must surely meet this criterion ‘in some way’. Furthermore, for Morris, Modernist writers may ‘accuse’ Realism of all sorts of collusions, but on an ontological level they are ultimately Realists themselves. She writes:

Modernist writers wrote out of a troubled sense that ‘reality’, whether material or psychological, was elusive, complex, multiple and unstable, but still they believed that the aim of their art was to convey knowledge, by some new aesthetic means, of their intangibility. In this sense, their quarrel with realism was predominantly an aesthetic and epistemological one. (17)

Despite key differences in their attitude to both Modernism and mimesis, there is a shared strand in Lukács’ and Morris’ defences of Realism—and those of the British Marxists such

as Caudwell, West and Fox. It is the claim that Realist fiction, and Realist fiction alone, can access (although not, for Morris, 'reflect') a greater reality than the text itself can contain. Jameson refers to the '*typicality*' of Realist characters: they 'maintain a relationship with some more general or collective human substance' (1971, 191), and as such 'realism is dependent on the possibility of access to the forces of change in a given moment of history' (1971, 204). The individual Realist protagonist, through their archetypal nature as a subject under capitalism, gestures towards an objective and social *totality* to which Lukács would argue the 'subjectivist' Modernist character has no access.

Against this backdrop of approval of Realism, with varying emphases, I will now turn to those scholars who believe that Modernist fiction *is* different—and not necessarily inferior—to Realist fiction. As Morris, summarising their position with such élan that she almost seems of the Modernist party without knowing it, writes:

It can be argued that realist fiction [...] can function to naturalise a banal view of the world as familiar, morally and socially categorised and predictable. Such stories reproduce the gender, class and racial stereotypes that predominate in society at large; waywardness and unconventionality of any kind are shown, by means of the plot structure, to lead to punishment and failure of some kind, while morally and socially condoned patterns of behaviour are [...] rewarded. (19)

To take this position's development chronologically, it was Lukács' contemporaries and near-contemporaries in the Frankfurt School, such as Bloch, Theodor Adorno and Bertolt Brecht, who were his immediate interlocutors, and it was through their influence that a Modernist affiliation in Marxist criticism first became established.

## 2: Modernism: Marxist Subversion

Bloch, Brecht and Adorno offer various ripostes to Lukács' polemic, assailing his reasoning from one or more angles. In so doing, they began to lay the foundations of an identifiably Marxist theory of Modernist art which would be further developed in the work of Jameson, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton and others—and in some ways in the 'Marxist Humanist' approach of Marshall Berman, whose idiosyncratic approach to theorizing Modernism will become one of this thesis' theoretical touchstones in the following chapters. Brecht's arguments, which constitute a still-potent creative manifesto for Modernist innovation, are dealt with below under the heading 'The Contingency of Form'. First, however, I will outline Bloch and Adorno's more immediate responses to Lukács' position.

Bloch, Lukács' contemporary and sometime friend, begins his stern critique by highlighting two particular flaws in Lukács' critical methodology. Firstly, he accurately notes that Lukács relies upon a 'limited and highly untypical "selection"' (18) of quotations: rather than engage with Modernist texts directly, Lukács chooses to cite reviews and introductions: 'he does not get to the core of the matter, the imaginative works [...] his material is second-hand from the outset' (18-19). Secondly, Bloch criticises as 'mechanical, not dialectical' (21) Lukács' claim that Expressionism is unworthy of a neo-classical tradition stretching back to Homer and Goethe. This, as Bloch observes, is a critical approach inherently hostile to *any* innovation:

Given such an attitude [...] all [artistic experiments] must be summarily condemned as aspects of the decay of capitalism—not just in part, which might not be unreasonable, but one hundred per cent. The result is that there can be no such thing as an avant-garde within capitalist society; anticipatory movements in the superstructure are disqualified from possessing any truth. (20)

As Bloch here identifies, Lukács' decision to condemn Modernism in terms of its compatibility with its predecessors is a critical line innately hostile to any experimentation or rupture from tradition. One might expect such an argument from a conservative

commentator such as T. S. Eliot, and his great concern with ‘the tradition’, rather than from a revolutionary such as the Communist-affiliated Lukács. Bloch’s deconstruction makes it clear that Lukács’ riposte to Modernist literature is a patchwork of facile propositions designed to discredit a movement to which Lukács was personally opposed, rather than a philosophically consistent aesthetics of anti-Modernism.

Having diagnosed the shortcomings of Lukács’ argumentation, Bloch proceeds to defend Expressionism in positive terms. His argument begins by questioning the accessibility of ‘objective reality’ *per se*, but retreats into a less radical claim that discontinuous texts can, after their own fashion, portray just as ‘authentic’ a reality as the broad sweep of nineteenth-century Realism. Bloch writes:

what if Lukács’ reality, a coherent, infinitely mediated totality, is not so objective after all? What if his conception of reality has failed to liberate itself completely from Classical systems? What if authentic reality is also discontinuity? (22)

This final question is predicated upon the position that the innovations of Modernist prose — such as stream of consciousness — are reducible to ‘Psychological Realism’. That is, that by portraying the internal states of characters with limited contextualising narration, and by punctuating that prose according to how people *actually think* rather than according to the formal conventions of normative grammars of writing, writers such as Joyce, Woolf, Beckett *et al* wrote a genre of fiction *more realistic than Realism*. One narratologist who codifies Modernist prose styles such as ‘stream of consciousness’ in this manner is David Lodge, for whom Joyce’s use of stream of consciousness in the early and final sections of *Ulysses* has ‘taken psychological realism as far as it can go’ (49-50). Lodge describes *Ulysses* as therefore being a ‘psychological rather than heroic epic’ (47) in which:

We become acquainted with the principal characters not by being told about them, but by sharing their most intimate thoughts, represented as silent, spontaneous, unceasing streams of consciousness. For the reader, it’s rather like wearing earphones plugged into someone’s brain, and monitoring an endless tape-recording of the subject’s impressions, reflections, questions, memories and fantasies, as they are triggered either by physical sensations or the association of ideas. (47)

However, Psychological Realism is itself a precarious theoretical stance, still contingent upon a belief that ‘objective reality’ not only exists, and is both knowable and reliably accessible via human sensory perception, but also that it can be transparently reproduced in writing without being inflected by the text’s or author’s normative assumptions or

ideological prejudices. Furthermore, in using such verisimilitude as a qualitative measure, both Bloch and Lukács risk subservience to *realistic-ness* as the ultimate qualitative measure of fiction: a curious position to take on a mode of writing which is always, by definition, reducible to a lie. An apology for Modernism on the grounds of Psychological Realism, like Lukács' apology for Mann on the grounds of 'true realism', is effectively a rallying-cry for documentary non-fiction against the untruthful distortions of fiction itself. This may not in the final analysis be an unsustainable position, but it is certainly incommensurable with championing the art either of Mann and Realism or of Joyce and Modernism.

Bloch's implicit objection to (Lukács' favoured mode of) Realist writing's reliance on 'Classical systems' is subtler but more incisive. Bloch here observes that the 'reality' which Lukács praises Mann for summarising is contingent upon the particular ideological conditions which provoked authors such as Mann into choosing the Realist novel as their mode of expression. Lukács himself gives this rebuttal short shrift: although recognising that 'Bloch regards my insistence on a unified reality as a mere hangover from the systems of classical idealism' (1938, 30), he dismisses this critique through recourse to Marxist solidarity: it seems to Lukács that, as Marx himself wrote that "'the relations of production of every society form a whole'" (1938, 31), and as 'Bloch has stoutly proclaimed his commitment to Marxism' (31), there is no need for Lukács to counter-theorise against Bloch's identification of 'classical ideology' as an underlying bias in Lukács' programme for Socialist Realism. Lukács' glib evasiveness justifies Adorno's barbed summary: 'in a highly undialectical manner, the officially licensed dialectician [Lukács] sweeps all the irrationalist strands of modern philosophy into the camp of reaction and Fascism' (152).

Adorno, like Bloch, argues that 'the objectivity' which Lukács 'misses in modern art [...] is in fact achieved by the procedures and techniques' which Modernist writers deploy (153). Adorno endorses Modernist subjectivism in ostensibly Psychological Realist terms: 'the demand for pragmatic fidelity to life can only refer to a writer's basic experience of reality' (157). But also like Bloch, Adorno's opposition to Realism here begins to gesture to a position beyond either 'Classic' or 'Psychological' Realism; a recognition that ideology informs literature *of any sort*; whether that ideology is explicitly expounded by the author

or an unconscious expression of the dominant ideologies of the text's historical moment. Haslett summarises concisely:

while Lukács criticises such writers as Joyce and Proust for over-subjectifying, Adorno's response is that he has mistakenly conflated subject and object, and failed to recognise that their novels preserve a critical distance from the reality which they portray (101)

This call for 'critical distance' displays Adorno's awareness that the Modernist novel is more than a realignment of Realist focus: as Jameson, who has called Adorno 'perhaps the finest dialectical intelligence [...] of them all' (1971, xiii), writes, Adorno's work 'insists relentlessly on the need for modern art and thought to be difficult' (1971, 3). The term 'difficult' here is perhaps ill-chosen: the assumption that Modernist texts are *de facto* hard to read has become a lazy critical orthodoxy, and that which is interrogative need not necessarily be opaque (or vice versa)<sup>3</sup>. However, Adorno is nonetheless beginning to construct a meaningful position regarding the importance of art which makes visible its ideology, and thus invites interpretation as a prior condition, not subsequent option, to understanding. Adorno finds the 'most fundamental weakness of Lukács' position' to be his intellectual adversary's failure to distinguish aesthetic theory from idealist philosophy, 'a failure which leads him to transfer to the realm of art categories which refer to the relationship of consciousness to the actual world' (159). In short, Lukács assesses fiction according to the standards of documentary reportage, failing to acknowledge that 'In art knowledge is aesthetically mediated through and through' (160):

Lukács over-simplifies the dialectical unity of art and science, reducing it to bare identity, just as if works of art did nothing but apply their perspective in such a way as to anticipate some of the insights that the social sciences subsequently confirm. (163)

Art is, Adorno suggests, sufficiently 'aesthetically mediated' as to be inextricably ideological. Attempts to portray 'the actual world' aesthetically make an inevitable ideological claim that particular aspects of reality are worthy of attention. This recognition of ideology's insidious role in determining the normative values which literature contains and imparts, and the simultaneous, dialectically opposite, recognition of literature's

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<sup>3</sup> as I discuss in chapter 6 with regard to Anna Burns' *Milkman*

capacity to unmask such normativity by asserting its own ideological autonomy, are valuable tools which Marxism—via Marx’s ‘Historical Materialist’ reworking of the Idealist Hegelian/Feuerbachian dialectic—provides to literary critique. As Terry Eagleton summarises: ‘A scientific criticism would [...] search out the principle which both ties the work to ideology and distances it from it. The finest Marxist criticism has indeed done precisely that’ (1976, 19). Eagleton’s term ‘scientific’ has a complex relationship to ontological objectivity, and perhaps veers—rhetorically, at least—too close to a Lukácsian objectivism. But Eagleton’s crucial point here is that Marxist criticism need not reduce its critique to praise and scorn, treating Realism as progressive and Modernism as malign—or vice versa. A text or genre may be ‘tied’ to the dominant ideology, but still partially contradict those ties to create some ‘distance’ from the hegemonic norms which dominate its social context: this thesis will argue that Celtic Tiger Realism was tied to Celtic Tiger economic orthodoxy without the provision of any such distance, but that the destabilising effect of the 2008-9 financial crash allowed for the emergence of a Modernist literature in twenty-first century Ireland which, although by no means autonomous of its economic production, used Modernist techniques to create just such a hermeneutic distance from the ideology of neoliberal late capitalism. Another of the assumptions on which this hypothesis rests, of course, is that a twenty-first century text can be named ‘Modernist’ at all. This may seem counter-intuitive to the critical focus on ‘Modernism’ as a periodising term in which Modernism follows Victorianism (or Edwardianism, for the particularists) and precedes Postmodernism as naturally as night follows day. The next section will begin to justify this thesis’ scepticism towards such schemas of periodisation.

### 3: The Periodisation of Modernism

Modernist fiction's capacity to create a critical 'distance', as discussed above, by exposing its own ideological biases without losing its affective capacity dovetails strongly with Marxism, given that tradition's emancipatory politics. But what is Marxist theory, particularly later Marxist theory, identifying as the 'Modernist' text? When thinkers such as Lukács, the British CPGB Marxists and the early Frankfurt School discussed 'modern' writing, they were discussing currents in literature in their own historical moment, and accordingly they use the term 'modern' in its vernacular sense: to mean recent, current, contemporaneous with the present. The debate between modern—Surrealist, Expressionist, avant-gardist—and Realist literature was for them between writing of the new school and the old. Virginia Woolf, one of the moderns in question, emphasised this opposition when she wrote in her 1932 "Letter to a Young Poet" that her interlocutor ought not 'take yourself seriously [...] as a modern or as a conservative' (2009), demonstrating that the term 'modern', used as a noun, could then be placed in direct opposition to the noun 'conservative' to mean contemporary and non-traditional. Were this thesis solely concerned with early-twentieth-century fiction, with reference only to early-twentieth-century philosophers, this terminology would be sufficient. However, as I will draw upon more recent theories—turning next to the work and lasting influence of Antonio Gramsci—and interrogate twenty-*first* century literature using Modernist paradigms, it is necessary before proceeding to consider the assumptions carried in the terms "Modernist" and "Modernism" (and their now-inescapable attendant, "Postmodernism") when used a century after High Modernism.

'Modernism' in recent usage is often, reductively, employed to mean literature of the now-historical 'Modern' period. The chronological boundaries of this period shift between diagnoses, but always include the 1920s and 1930s. It is easy to juggle these boundaries—Susan Stanford Friedman, in ironic tone, implores:

Can't we just globalize modernism within a single and identifiable historical period—let's say, 1890 through 1950, as the Modernist Studies Association's website proclaims, or 1840 through 1950, if we want to include the French?' (2010, 491)

Any sincere attempt to define this period comes up against undermining counterexamples: Randall Stevenson's essay 'Not what it used to be: nostalgia and the legacies of modernism', which identifies nostalgia as a characteristic of the High Modernist text, not only argues that these "nostalgic inclinations" are extended "into the 1930s, and well beyond" (24), but also observes evidence of similar inclinations in texts as chronologically disparate as Thomas Pynchon's 2005 novel *Against the Day* (29), Dickens' 1860-61 novel *Great Expectations* (30) and even Milton's 1667 epic poem *Paradise Lost* (31). Interestingly, Morris argues against the periodisation of Realism on not dissimilar grounds: 'aspects that we want to call realist can be found in Chaucer's writing [...] while today artistically innovative realist novels are still being produced' (6). Patricia Waugh, meanwhile, warns that 'any engagement with ideas or literary texts through period concepts will be fraught with the dangers of generalisation' (4), and finds that *postmodern* techniques 'appear extensively in pre-Enlightenment literature and art' (55). The term *extensively* here is significant; Waugh is not merely finding amusing (or even instructive) exceptions to an otherwise overwhelming body of evidence in support of strict periodisation, she is finding that periodisation is so undermined by counterexamples as to be a questionable paradigm.

Such outliers are among many examples of nonchronological critical criteria of 'Modernism' applying equally to literature from outwith the 'modernist period'. Ástráður Eysteinnsson, like many writers, cites Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, which began its lengthy publication in 1759, in terms of Modernist debates—in Eysteinnsson's case, by identifying in *Tristram Shandy's* 'ceaselessly interrupted and deferred story' a likeness to Adorno's claims for 'modernist interruption and anticommunication' (202). For Eysteinnsson, this proves that it is 'misleading, therefore, to insist that interruption of prevalent social discourses is [...] limited to modernist practices' (202); equally, however, it troubles the validity of fossilising 'modernist practices' within a specific date range.

This approach is itself historically contingent; a consensus fixed in time not only by the historical moment when Modernist *texts* were produced, but by the historical

moment which subsequently canonised these texts as a singular corpus. John Fordham locates this latter moment shortly after the Second World War, as literary critics including Lionel Trilling, Hugh Kenner, Malcolm Bradbury and Frank Kermode attempted ‘the paradoxical task of formulating a uniform definition out of a heterogeneous phenomenon and responding to student demands to address the “contemporary”’ (83)—creating the further contradiction that, as the ‘contemporary’ canon created by these critics receded further into the past, its continued canonical identity as the ‘Modernist period’ excluded *newly* contemporary texts from being identified under the rubric of ‘Modernism’, regardless of their ideological kinship to the ‘original’ Modernists. The division of ‘Modernist’ as a periodising term from ‘modern’ in its vernacular sense was completed.

A further drawback with a chronologically-delimited ‘Modernist period’ is its implication that *all* literature of the given period is Modernism. This limitation is understood even across antithetical critiques: Chris Baldick’s vehemently negative account of ‘The Modern Movement’ dismisses all Modernism as ‘a pseudo-political cause’ (399), but nonetheless recognises that chronological definitions of Modernism are inadequate: for Baldick, this inadequacy causes overcategorisation *within* the avowed ‘modernist period’: he writes that

This recent expansion of [Modernism’s] canon beyond credibility seems to arise essentially from an undeclared assumption that other writers are worthy of notice only insofar as they resemble that central avant-garde. (399)

The result of this expansion, Baldick notes, is that authors such as George Bernard Shaw and E. M. Forster are overidentified with an aesthetic ethos with which they share little true commonality beyond a page of the calendar.

Baldick’s diagnosis of *overidentification* of Modernism *within* its emergent period reinforces more pro-Modernist assessments of the *under-identification* of Modernist tendencies *outside* that period. Madelyn Detloff, for example, argues that we should understand Modernism ‘as a constellation of discourses about widespread loss and violence’, as this ‘has the benefit of circumventing definitional debates about modernist orthodoxies’ including whether a text is ‘early or late’ (4). David James, introducing a collection entitled *The Legacies of Modernism*, points to the absurdity of an arbitrary end-date to the Modernist movement: ‘we can legitimately read the modernist period itself

via models of continuity and adaptation (rather than demise) after mid [twentieth] century' (3). I will return to James' theories of periodisation in Chapter 4, with reference to his and Urmila Seshagiri's attempts to use the currently vogueish theory of 'Metamodernism' in support of a rigid approach to literary periodisation. What James here calls the 'modernist period itself', presumably roughly the MSA's 1890-1950, I here and henceforth denote by the term 'High Modernism', to avoid the paradoxes which arise when one argues that the modernist period itself continues beyond the temporal limits of the modernist period itself.

Given this shared rejection of the periodisation of Modernism-as-such by both Modernism's apologists and its detractors, and the fallibility of those arguments which do call for a strictly periodising definition, a non-chronological understanding of Modern or Modernist literature is required. However, this cannot simply mean expanding the 'Modernist period' unto the point of meaninglessness. To make meaningful comparisons between Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism, an alternative distinction is required, whereby Modernist, Realist and Postmodernist texts can be differentiated even when produced synchronically.

If 'Modernism' is not an exclusive (and internally all-inclusive) date range, what is it? The term is here understood to mean art which engages *on the level of form* with the modernity which produces it. Although Friedman's solution of a 'planetary approach to modernism' (2006, 432) contains considerable drawbacks, notably her insistence that *modernity* is limited to 'the context of empires and conquest' and 'the intensifications of intercultural contact zones' (2006, 433), her summary that 'I regard modernism as *the expressive dimension of modernity*' (2006, 432) is a workable foundation. This broad definition will happily admit pre-1840 or post-1950 texts under its rubric. In considering the continued relevance of 'Modernist' potentials in the twenty-first century, this thesis will eschew periodisation as the arbiter of literary form (whereby pre-1890 would = Realist, and 1890-1950 = Modernist, or whatever it might be), and look instead to the politics of formal technique and formal innovation as those categories' denominating characteristics. Friedman's definition is not without its drawbacks—chiefly, that the phrase 'expressive dimension' perhaps suggests that these characteristics are passive, apolitical outpourings which inevitably emerge from 'modernity': this is a further

overdetermination, by which any text whatsoever could be taken as expressive of a historical or contemporary modernity. Therefore the stylistic/formal characteristics of the Modernist text must be understood as political, and at least partially autonomous of their context. I will address this autonomy, and its inherent politicization, in Chapter 3 with reference to the work of Marshall Berman, who wrote with great (and typical) rhetorical flourish that Modernism is 'an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization' (1983, 16).

An equivalent sensibility to those definitions of 'Modernism' which define it in technical or aesthetic terms, and thus admit for the possibility of twenty-first-century Modernist texts, is broadly recognisable in Lukács', Woolf's or Bloch's otherwise divergent views of 1920s-30s modern writing. Diverse terminology was used by these writers, from Woolf's 'modern' to Lukács' 'Expressionism or Surrealism', reflecting the diversity of avant-garde writing at the time. But none of these terms sought to periodise, to treat *all* contemporary (as it was) literature as 'modern'. Rather, it was recognised that formal innovation in response to changing social and political circumstances was characteristic of the non-Realist art which would be later glibly taxonomized as 'Modernism'. As Eagleton writes, 'Political instability is the ruin of disinterested representation, and as such a significant curb on a major literary realism (1995, 149). When Realism is felt to be insufficient to represent turbulent historical moments, the breach is opened for a Modernist tendency to surface.

This redefinition of Modernism as a political/aesthetic juncture rather than a calendrical range allows for critical discourses inherited from early twentieth-century criticism to be applied to the twenty-first century novel. It is still important to historicise those debates: as the following section will illustrate, there have been valuable additions to Modernist discourses since the disagreements between orthodox Communists and the Frankfurt School bifurcated Marxist aesthetics into Realist and Modernist camps. Fredric Jameson's seminal commandment, 'Always historicize!' (1981, ix), has not been outmoded. But treating Modernism as a non-periodical diagnostic allows those earlier critiques to be integrated into the criticism of twenty-first century texts without the need to vindicate the inclusion of debates about a closed historical canon when analysing the always-open significance of contemporary texts. A political/aesthetic view of Modernism,

however, is not a diluted or all-inclusive category, and does not disregard or downplay 'High Modernist' writers, such as Joyce, over whom Lukács and Bloch disagreed so fervently. The claim being made here does not deny that there are periods of Realist or Modernist *dominance*—indeed, the central claim of this thesis is just such a claim. I hold that the Celtic Tiger was a period of Realist dominance in Irish literature, and that the subsequent, post-crash period has seen a falling-away of Realist aesthetics and a marked Modernist resurgence. The claim is simply that 'Modernist' and 'Realist' are not in themselves terms which *denote* periods, but aesthetic tendencies with particular affiliations of formal technique and aesthetic ideology which may be more or less dominant in any given era. High Modernism is one such era, when Modernism had a truly remarkable imaginative (and distributive) capacity, one against which contemporary literature in the twenty-first century is still measuring itself (this very thesis is an example of such a measuring). The early twentieth century, for reasons which have been widely attributed to technological change, Freudian psychology, and what Raymond Williams called 'the development of the city into the metropolis' (1985, 39), was an extraordinary period of experimentation in Western art in general, and in Irish Literature specifically, perhaps unprecedented and perhaps unrepeated; but not unrepeatable.

## 4: Hegemony and Cultural Theory

Williams himself was a leading figure in the rise of 'Cultural Studies', a development in Marxist literary thinking subsequent to the disagreements between Lukács and the Frankfurt school. Cultural Studies took inspiration from Antonio Gramsci's work on 'hegemony', which is another important part of the 'toolkit' which this chapter seeks to provide for the following thesis. Hegemony 'refers to the relationship between classes, sections, political groupings, and the state of social and political unity existing between them [...] hegemony is never absolute or static' (Haslett 57). It is therefore a vital concept in grasping the radical potential (or otherwise) of a Modernist text to counteract (or support) a prevailing cultural ideology, and therefore in understanding the links both between the neoliberal ideology of Celtic Tiger Ireland and its attendant dominant literary realism, and the subsequent coincidence of an emergent Modernism with the Tiger's collapse.

Gramsci's work, and Williams', analyses this dynamic relationship between classes, sections, and so forth to determine the role of *culture*—artistic, social and intellectual forces—in the maintenance of ideology. Terry Eagleton, for example, uses Gramsci's and Williams' work on hegemony to understand the historical relations between the colonial Irish and their British ruling class, maintaining that 'no occupying power in the country was able to maintain a hegemony sufficiently widespread, enduring and well-founded for its ends' (1995, 29). David Forgacs, meanwhile, writes of the 'importance of Gramscian concepts in freeing Marxism from "economism"' (70) in a British context. According to Forgacs, it was the introduction of Gramscian criticism which led to the 'post-1956 thaw, destalinization and the formation of the first new left' (73). When one considers the influence of Comintern policy on the work of Lukács and the earlier British Marxists such as Caudwell, Fox, West and Lindsay, and Lukács' success in setting the terms of the debate with even his fiercest opponents, the introduction of Gramscian thought into a world where the egalitarian credentials of Soviet orthodoxy were newly discredited is clearly significant. Although Gramsci's own writing was roughly contemporaneous to the 1934 Writer's Congress, Gramsci was in a sense already writing from a later stage of political development: Stuart Hall has argued that 'Gramsci had to

confront the turning back, the failure' of the 'proletarian moment' to occur in the 1920s (162). As Forgas neatly summarises, 'Gramsci was used to *fill the gaps* created by the theoretical and political crisis of Marxism-Leninism around 1956, to correct its economistic and mechanistic simplifications' (77).

The particular 'gap' filled by Gramsci's writings—a 'peculiar [...] fragmentary and posthumous' collection of 'letters, journalistic articles, internal party documents and a large body of manuscript notes' (Forgacs 71) written piecemeal during his imprisonment in Mussolini's Italy between 1926 and 1935—is, as mentioned, a focus on the role of *culture* in class division. Gramsci writes of 'the importance of fact of culture and thought in the development of history [...] to the moment of hegemony and consent as the necessary form of the concrete historical bloc' (195). This introduces the concepts of *hegemony* and *consent* to a Marxist overview of society; hegemony is not simply upper-class rule through coercion of a discontent population, it is the manufacture of *consent* to that rule using cultural means—among them, of course, literature. Martin Jacques' 1975 summary, itself a part of the Gramscian turn in British Marxism which Forgas identifies, is worth quoting at length:

[T]he bourgeoisie, for the most part, maintains both its economic and political dominance through consent rather than coercion, that is as a result of an acceptance of this state of affairs by the majority of the people (and, in Britain, that must mean the vast majority of the working class) as the 'natural order of things'.

How is this 'consent' of 'acceptance' secured?—essentially through the supremacy or, as Gramsci put it, the 'hegemony' of the bourgeoisie in the ideological and cultural spheres. The nature of the latter should now perhaps be spelt out more clearly: by ideology here I mean basically ideology in the relatively narrow sense, namely in terms of ideas and systems of ideas; and by culture, the general system of practices, meanings and values. In Britain, thus, bourgeois hegemony is exercised in relation to both the ideological and cultural spheres and it is this hegemony which enables the bourgeoisie to rule by consent rather than by open and continuous coercion. (111)

This adds a further dimension to the debates between Lukács and the Frankfurt School. Acknowledging the potential of cultural artefacts to contribute to hegemony means that a Left criticism must consider not only whether particular writers are indeed 'inexorable foes of bourgeois society', but also whether some or all writing is (partially or wholly) *complicit* in the conditions of social dominance which a politicised Marxist criticism seeks

to oppose. In terms of a debate surrounding Realism and Modernism, Jacques' use of the phrase 'the natural order of things' is particularly suggestive. The belief that there *is* a natural order recalls Lukács' demands that literature access an 'overall objective social context'. Hegemony, in other words, seeks to obscure a particular ideological bent as non-ideological; to efface the politically contingent positions which underpin the social order, until they come to seem self-evident. Hegemony, by this measure, is a Realist mode: in the Western world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which capitalism (in various modulating forms) has been hegemonic, *capitalism* has been a Realist mode.

Forgacs, writing in 1989, identifies the work of Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn as a significant continuation of post-Gramscian thought in Britain: Nairn and Anderson, he writes, 'display a peculiar awareness of the process by which historically contingent relations of social domination are eternalized and naturalized as "common sense"' (76), marking them out from both the 'culturalist humanism' of Raymond Williams and Eric Thompson and the 'economistic Marxist-Leninist science dominant in the Communist Party' (76). Anderson himself, 27 years later, has sketched his own version of Gramsci's legacy in the 2016 *New Left Review* essay 'The Heirs of Gramsci'.

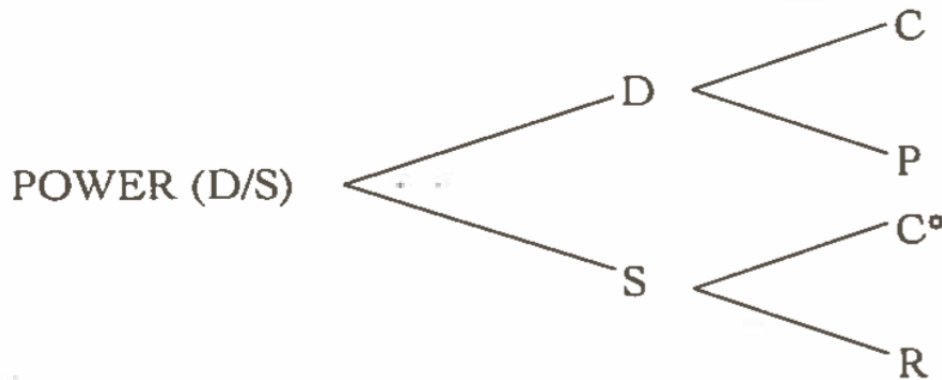
In Anderson's version, although Williams is credited as having 'endorsed and developed Gramsci's conception of hegemony' into a 'complex set of structures [...] actively adjusting to and where possible incorporating alternative practices and meanings' (2016, 73), it is Stuart Hall who is the most significant 'heir' to Gramsci in British letters. The Jamaican-born Hall, first editor-in-chief of the *New Left Review* in which Anderson's essay appears, used a Gramscian theoretical apparatus to diagnose the ideology of Margaret Thatcher's Britain as 'Thatcherism'. The relevance of this specifically British mode of analysis may seem somewhat removed from the explicitly Irish focus of this thesis, but as later chapters will demonstrate, starting with the introduction to Chapter 2, the free-market ideological turn most strongly associated with Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the United States was given remarkable unfettered expression, in some senses perhaps even consummated, by the rabid neoliberalism which obtained in 1990s-2000s Ireland before the financial crash. Thatcherism was to Hall a victory of conservative hegemony, which 'understood that social interests are often contradictory, that ideologies need not be coherent, that identities are seldom stable' (Anderson 2016, 75),

and which combined free-market economics with a cultural incentive to mass consent: ‘the ideological promise of an overdue modernity’ (Anderson 2016, 75). Gramscian thought for Hall provided a way of diagnosing this Thatcherite hegemony: Gramsci ‘had to face the capacity of the right—specifically, of European fascism—to hegemonise that defeat [of Soviet/Communist revolution]’ (162). Although Hall wisely warns that ‘we mustn’t use Gramsci (as we have for so long abused Marx) like an Old Testament prophet who, at the correct moment, will offer us the consoling and appropriate quotation’ (161), he gives Gramsci credit above all for understanding the messy, polysemous nature of hegemony: ‘One of the most important things that Gramsci has done for us,’ Hall writes, ‘is to give us an expanded conception of what politics itself is like’ (168), incorporating ‘political, moral, intellectual, cultural, ideological and sexual questions’ (170). Art is thus a key component (though one amongst many) of social dominance: ‘The question of hegemony is always one of a new cultural order’ (170). I return at length to the discussion of dominance, using Williams’ model of ‘dominant’, ‘emergent’ and ‘residual’ cultural modes, in the final chapter of this thesis.

Outside of Britain, Anderson identifies other heirs to Gramscian thought: the Argentinian scholar Ernesto Laclau, the Italian Giovanni Arrighi and the Bengali Ranajit Guha (Anderson 2016). It is perhaps with consideration of Guha’s work that we can find a way to apply Gramscian modes of thinking to the Irish context, via modes of analysis which treat Ireland, like Guha’s India, as a postcolonial nation (although the comparison is productive, it is also fraught, as we will see below). This application is not without precedent: both Eagleton (1990, 32) and Edward Said (91) have specifically called upon Gramsci’s formulation of ‘hegemony’ in their attempts to understand power relations in (post)colonial Ireland.

Guha’s work *Dominance Without Hegemony*, which Anderson calls ‘perhaps the most striking work ever inspired by Gramsci’ (2016, 86) is particularly useful to the theoretical model at hand, offering as it does a level of schematic precision which is almost by definition absent from the wide-ranging miscellany of the *Prison Notebooks*. Guha’s model, in his own words, ‘avoids the Gramscian juxtaposition of domination and hegemony [...] as antinomies’ (23). To this end, Guha inserts a diagram labelled ‘The General Configuration of Power’. According to this diagram, ‘power’ necessarily consists

of dominance (D) and subordination (S). In practice (although 'only under given conditions'), dominance is 'determined and indeed constituted' by coercion (C) and persuasion (P), while subordination is determined by collaboration (C<sup>o</sup>) and resistance (R). R and C thus form an opposing pair, as do C<sup>o</sup> and P. By this algebraic route, Guha arrives at a precise definition of hegemony: '*hegemony stands for a condition of Dominance (D), such that, in the organic composition of D, Persuasion (P) outweighs Coercion (C)*':



*Figure 1. General Configuration of Power*

(Guha 20)

This diagram builds on the recognition of the power of *consent* (collaboration) in social domination highlighted by both Jacques and Hall, and places it in a framework where it is given (perhaps artificially) equal status with resistance as a reaction to power.

These general principles can be seen to obtain in any 'configuration of power', but it is not irrelevant that Guha reaches this model by applying Gramscian thought to the power structures of colonial India. This thesis is inclined to treat the general theory that Ireland might not be a fitting site for the application of postcolonial theorising with the same breezy dismissal as Terry Eagleton when he says

are the Irish oppressed as Irish? In one sense, surely not: it was never of much interest to British imperialism whether the Irish were Irish or Eskimo, white or black, whether they worshiped tree gods or the Trinity. [...] In another sense, however, it is clearly abstract caviling to maintain that the Irish people has not been oppressed as Irish. (1990, 29-30)

As noted above, support for now treating Ireland as a *postcolonial* site comes from the recognition in 1924 by British Marxist Ralph Fox that Ireland was then a *colonial* site, even

though Fox's summary of the Irish national situation, 'Ireland To-day', was printed some eighteen months after the establishment of the Irish Free State in December 1922. Fox's description of Ireland initially grates due to its somewhat condescending summaries: Ireland 'broods over its troubles in a preoccupied way' (305), and 'As Ireland is a country of peasants and farmers, it is decidedly out of harmony with the industrial civilisation of England' (306). However the reasons for these rather primitively-framed traits, for Fox, was the treatment of the Irish by their colonial overlords: 'the Irish were hunted from the land [...] The alien ascendancy gang cut down beautiful forests and regard the people as vermin' (305). A people 'hunted' as 'vermin' by an 'alien ascendancy' is clearly being oppressed by colonisers, and as Eagleton says it is 'abstract caviling' to offer any reprimand to this claim.

It is not, however, abstract cavilling to point out (as the first part of the Eagleton quotation above recognises) that Ireland is *differently* post-colonial to a state such as Guha's India. Ireland is an industrialised Western nation, not strikingly racially distinct from Britain, with high levels of education and a ruling class of whom some elements are (and were, even in the days of Empire) not only resident but native citizens. Fredric Jameson claims that Ireland 'reproduces the appearance of First World social reality' whilst having an 'underlying structure [which] is in fact much closer to that of the Third World or of colonized daily life' (1990, 60). It is noteworthy that Jameson explicitly relates this to imperial power relations through the term 'colonized': for Jameson, somewhat reductively, this makes Ireland into a convenient petri dish for his contention that Modernism is inherently imperialist, as 'the special case of Irish literature, and of Joyce' (64) is both Modernist *and* colonial.

Jameson subsequently describes this 'special case of Irish literature' as a 'Third World Modernism' (1990, 64) apparently on the basis that Dublin is 'a classical city' (it 'remains classical because it is colonial' [1990, 62]) with public houses rather than a 'metropolis' such as London or Manhattan where pubs have ceased to exist and encounters can only take place in 'receptions and summer houses' (1990, 63). This suggests that the great man, however arch his tone, is somewhat disconnected from the reality of both the Third World proper (which is nothing like Dublin in 'underlying structure' or otherwise) and from public life in the First World metropolis (where pubs are

in plentiful supply). Nonetheless there is a point to Jameson's observation, which Luke Gibbons has theorised rather more sharply, if also potentially reductively: 'Ireland is a First World country, but with a Third World memory.' (1996, 3)

Colin Graham, meanwhile, explores this troubled colonial status by comparing Guha's postcolonial treatment of India to Seamus Deane's postcolonial treatment of (the island of) Ireland. Graham first notes the equivalences between the two:

Compare Ranajit Guha in *Subaltern Studies*, who says that the postcolonial Indian nation is 'the ideological product of British rule in India', to Deane, who says that 'Irish nationalism is, in its foundational moments, a derivative of its British counterpart'. Guha talks of the 'historic failure' of the Indian nation; Deane talks of the 'ultimate failure' of the project of Irish cultural nationalism. (87-88)

But beyond these similarities, Graham notes, there are telling differences: 'comparison of the Gramscian *Subaltern Studies* [i.e. Guha's] critique of nationalism with Deane's is even more revealing when they part company than when they appear to be in parallel' (88). Graham illustrates this by pointing out Deane's unwillingness, compared to Guha, to reject the nation state wholesale as a means of keeping down 'groups oppressed by the workings of nationalism' (Graham 88). Deane appreciates that 'all nationalisms can be understood as repressive' (Graham 89), but is unwilling to tar *Irish* nationalism with this repressive label, and so he creates 'British nationalism' as a distinct category, and pins any oppressive workings of the Irish state on its origin as a *copy* of its dominators:

'British nationalism', because Irish nationalism copied it (could only copy it), is to blame. The silent implication is that Irish nationalism, without the pernicious influence of Britain, would have been liberating (though of course paradoxically unnecessary). (Graham 89)

We are left, then, with an Irish nation-state which has emerged from colonial Dominance into post-colonial Hegemony, but which even a postcolonial thinker such as Deane maintains is (to return to Guha's algebra) not merely an artefact of Persuasion but a node of Resistance. Luke Gibbons offers a perhaps more considered analysis of what might be dubbed 'The English Question' in Irish nationalism. For Gibbons, there is no 'possibility of restoring a pristine, pre-colonial identity' (1996, 179) such as Deane might wish for, of a pure Irish nationalism without British colonial influence. There are simply too many structural elements of what is now *Ireland* which are obvious 'accretions of conquest': 'the English language, the inscriptions of the Protestant Ascendancy on the landscape and

material culture, and so on' (Gibbons 1996, 179). So rather than repress or even reject the colonial aspects of contemporary Irish identity, Ireland must retain these 'residues' whilst (ideally) recasting them outwith a colonial ideology:

the lack of historical closure, therefore, is bound up with a similar incompleteness in the culture itself, so that instead of being based on narrow ideals of racial purity and exclusivism, identity is open-ended and heterogeneous. But the important point in all of this is that the retention of the residues of conquest does not necessarily mean subscribing to the values which originally governed them. (Gibbons 1996, 179)

Ireland, then, is left as a colonised state in coloniser's clothing; clearly post-colonial, but clearly separate from many of the post-colonial identifiers (a legacy of racial oppression by white conquerors, a third-world or developing economy) which marked and sadly still mark many post-colonial sites. One attempt to square this circle is David Lloyd's treatment of Ireland as an 'anomalous state': although Lloyd himself writes that 'Gramsci's work provides the basis for any theorization of cultural hegemony' (9), Graham notes that it constitutes a theoretical turn away from Gramsci in postcolonial terms, as Lloyd's model constitutes an 'attempted subalternisation of nationalism,' which, contrary to Gramsci, 'is reliant upon understanding nationalism as *always insurgent* but never hegemonous' (109). For Lloyd, and to return the discussion of Gramscian nationalism to one of Gramscian aesthetics (of a national literature), the state 'determines the forms within which representation can take place. Access to representation is accordingly as much a question of aesthetics as of power or numbers' (6). Aesthetic forms such as Literature, then, are sites of Resistance inasmuch as they are inconsistent with the state's idea of itself, which Lloyd frames in explicitly Realist terms: 'What is at issue here is effectively a matter of *verisimilitude*: which narrative of 'Irishness' comes to seem self-evident, normative, truthful' (6). *Ulysses*, Lloyd posits, is exactly the type of text which will spoil such an attempt, comprising as it does a 'recalcitrant' mode 'precisely in refusing the homogeneity of "style"' (6). To this end, Lloyd even rejects the term 'stream of consciousness' as a descriptor of *Ulysses*, finding it too redolent of the type of homogeneity which could be reduced to a mode of verisimilitude which could be recast by a state formation as a normative mode of (in this case) Irishness:

The most familiar stylistic term in Joyce criticism used to describe the representation of subjective interiority is 'stream of consciousness', which implies

a certain consistency within the representation as well as a relative transparency and evenness among the elements. As such, the term is largely inadequate, even in the earlier sections of the novel (104)

Lloyd instead calls *Ulysses* an 'adulterous' text which resists easy categorisation: it is 'at once [...] the most typical *Irish* novel' and also 'the novel most destructive of the novel tradition itself' (129). This inconsistency, which finds its realisation in the inconsistencies of style which Lloyd notes in the text itself, is the same as the incommensurability in the repressive/emancipatory notion of an Irish nation state which Deane attempts to explain away through the terminology of an expressed, Dominant British Nationalism as opposed to an unexpressed, Resistant Irish nationalism. Through its stylistic and formal refusal of verisimilitude, a Modernist text such as *Ulysses* lays bare the contradictions of its formative modernity, expressing rupture without assimilating that rupture into a new hegemonic homogeneity. Gibbons is among those who have claimed that Ireland's colonial trauma influenced the extraordinary strength of High Modernism in Ireland; it had a tragic head-start when it came to acknowledging and responding to the ruptures of modernization:

In a culture traumatized by a profound sense of catastrophe, such as Ireland experienced as late as the Great Famine, is there really any need to await the importation of modernism to blast open the continuum of history? (1996, 179)

Eagleton makes a similar point, focusing on Ireland's unsuitability for realist aesthetics. However, Aaron Kelly provides a valuable cautionary note that Eagleton has a tendency to assign 'ideological dispositions' to 'an anomalous Ireland' and 'a developed England' and that he then 'repeats exactly those ideological positions as realities', as though those dispositions (and therefore a ruptured Irish poetics of Modernism, and an stable English poetics of Realism) were fixed components of national identity (6). One might hear an echo here of Jameson's over-eagerness to parcel out overgeneralisations based on First- and Third- world status to London and Dublin respectively. For Eagleton, operating within this somewhat glib framework, realism represents 'stability', 'liberal impartiality', and ultimately 'totality' (1995, 150) (just as Lukács claimed with reference to Thomas Mann, earlier in this chapter). Ireland, however, 'has been a remarkably difficult society to totalize' (1995, 151); a fact to which Eagleton gives direct credit for the strength of Irish

Modernism. Like Gibbons, above, Eagleton places Ireland's anomalous postcolonial relationship to the English language at the heart of Irish literary achievement:

The marginal nature of Irish realism is one reason why early twentieth-century Ireland was the only sector of the British Isles to witness an astonishingly rich outcrop of modernism. When James Joyce commented to Arthur Power that 'it is my revolt against the English conventions, literary and otherwise that is the main source of my talent', he enforced a startlingly direct connection between colonial dissent and modernist achievement. (1995, 154)

Literature can thus constitute either consent or resistance to dominance; it is certainly arguable that to some extent it always constitutes both. Gramsci himself wrote of 'the struggle for a new culture' (394) but was guarded in his response to the avant-garde. Gramsci's calls for a 'new literature [which] cannot but be historical, political and popular' that must 'sink its roots into the humus of popular culture [...] even if it is backward and conventional' (397) can be read as an apology for conventional art's collaboration with dominance. However elsewhere he praises the Futurists as cultural 'revolutionaries', and noted that workers' groups supported the Futurists, showing 'that they were not afraid of *destruction* [...] like the Futurists, these workers were supporting historicity, the possibility of a proletarian culture created by the workers themselves' (75). He diagnoses the extent to which culture is complicit with social oppression, but gestures also to the value of an artistic avant-garde willing to disassociate itself from that complicity.

Williams, to whose own complex position with regard to Realism and Modernism I will shortly return, writes: 'The work of Gramsci on cultural formations had been a major advance' (2007, 169): alongside other 'less orthodox Marxist cultural theory' from the likes of Walter Benjamin, Brecht and (generously) Lukács, Gramsci's work opposed 'formulaic applications of economism or populist idealism' (2007, 170) in Marxist criticism, reigniting Marxist thought and allowing it to offer an alternative mode of cultural thought to the now-dominant promotion of a conservative canon by F. R. Leavis and *Scrutiny*.

Gramscian thought, refined by the likes of Hall, Guha and Williams, and modified in the Irish (postcolonial) context by theorists such as Deane, Gibbons, Eagleton and Lloyd, thus provides a vital addition to Marxist literary debates by insisting that the relationship of superstructure to base in the social order is more than simply derivative. The

superstructure—culture—interacts dialectically with the base—ideology—and therefore the political importance of literature is far greater and subtler, for better *and* worse, than debates centred around the revolutionary merits of Socialist Realism would suggest.

## 5: Cultural Logic

The term ‘culture’ also crops up in the title of Fredric Jameson’s hugely influential essay ‘Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (1984), in which Jameson posits that the High Modernists underwent

a canonization and an academic institutionalization of the modern movement generally, which can be traced to the late 1950s. This is indeed surely one of the most plausible explanations for the emergence of postmodernism itself, since the younger generation of the 1960s will now confront the formerly oppositional modern movement as a set of dead classics (1984, 56)

Jameson further argues that this canonization of the ‘dead’ moderns led to the outbreak of ‘Postmodernism’, which was not only expressive *of*, but identical *with*, the global economic shift into Late Capitalism. This, it should be noted, comes subsequent to Jameson’s view, mentioned above that Modernism was inherently *imperialist* in character (1990, 44) — with Irish Modernism, as we have seen, as an isolated quasi-exception. Returning to Postmodernism, Patricia Waugh summarises Jameson’s position: ‘For Jameson, as Eagleton, Postmodernism is co-extensive with the culture of Late Capitalism, emerging in the sixties, and distinctive in its invasion of all remaining, potentially oppositional spaces’ (41).

Jameson’s and the Gramscians’ different but interrelated incorporations of Culture into twentieth-century art criticism develop leftist critique in the aftermath of Lukács, Adorno *et al.* My critiques chiefly address contemporary Irish novels as artefacts of a continually relevant Modernism, rather than Postmodernism, but the dominance of Postmodernism between ‘the late 1950s’ and the later (re)turn to Celtic Tiger Realism has nonetheless inevitably influenced subsequent literary trends — even if only by making its absence felt. Jameson’s work on *Postmodernism* in his essay and book of the same title offers a convincing historical context for the emergence of Postmodernism—unusually convincing, indeed, for a strictly periodizing diagnosis of an aesthetic tendency; this is largely due to his careful identification of this tendency with its specific historical/economic moment. I explore this caveat to my concerns regarding periodization further with reference to ‘Metamodernism’ in chapter 4. In providing a Marxist diagnosis of the Postmodern, Jameson offers an alternative diagnosis for fiction

under Late Capitalism: in accepting Jameson's definitions of Postmodernism as the cultural logic of Late Capitalism, any purportedly Modernist (or, indeed, Realist) text created under Late Capitalism's hegemonic purview will have to be provably resistant to, or distinct from, that economic ideology/hegemony.

For Jameson, it should be noted, these distinguishing factors between the Modern and Postmodern do not necessarily absolve Modernism of the hegemonic complicity he ascribes to Postmodernism: as Moyra Haslett summarises, he 'identifies realism, modernism and postmodernism as the dominant (but not exclusive or determinant) cultural modes of respectively market capitalism, monopoly capitalism and late capitalism' (113). This, however, is still rooted in the reductive periodisation of the Modern which I have rejected above. An alternative paradigm which is still consistent with Jameson's insights into the *emergence* of the Postmodern comes from the work of Brian McHale and Patricia Waugh. Waugh, summarising McHale's position in his 1987 book *Postmodernist Fiction*, writes that:

a characteristic mode of ontological problematisation [...] distinguishes postmodern techniques from the epistemologically questioning strategies of Modernism. Whereas modernist techniques foreground questions like 'How do I interpret this world?', postmodern ones raise questions like 'what world is this?' (54)

This ontological definition to some extent places Modernism as a middle ground between Realism and Postmodernism: Realism, it might be summarised, acts as though the author's ontological beliefs are both correct and reproducible in representational artworks; Modernism still believes in a 'real' world beyond the text but acknowledges that any artistic representation of that world creates a contingent and fallible process of mediation between both world/author and text/reader, while Postmodernism treats reality as (arguably) a fiction itself, and (at the least) inaccessible through linguistic processes which are in the final analysis infinitely self-referential. If this meta-ontological characteristic is indeed the 'cultural logic' of Late Capitalism, then it holds that a Modernist insistence on portraying social and political conditions even while acknowledging the impossibility of unmediated mimesis becomes a culture of resistance to Late Capitalist—and therefore Postmodernist—hegemony. The possibility of a mediation between Modernist and Postmodernist ethics based not upon a dialectical

synthesis but rather a rapid alternation between the two in a given text is offered by the more recent theory of 'Metamodernism', created by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker—I explore 'Metamodernism' with relation to Kevin Barry and (as mentioned above) Flann O'Brien in chapter 4.

Williams, although important to this thesis' attempt to seek anti-normative potentials in Modernist fiction, was, like Jameson, on some levels decidedly ambivalent about the value of Modernist art. As a student in Cambridge in the late 1930s 'he inhabited an intensely Modernistic political subculture' (Pinkney 8), but he would later move through near-hostility into a complex, dialectical position summarised by Tony Pinkney as 'two almost incompatible views of Modernism and the avant-garde' (27). This nuanced approach in Williams' work functions as a valuable corrective against championing Modernism too mindlessly. Astutely, he observes that the anti-bourgeois effect of Modernism's 'series [...] of breaks in form' (2007, 44) was not purely enacted by authors (or texts) of an egalitarian bent:

Modernism thus defines *divides* politically and simply—and not just between specific movements but even *within* them. In remaining anti-bourgeois, its representatives chose either the formerly aristocratic realm of art as a sacred realm above money and commerce, or the revolutionary doctrines, promulgated since 1848, of art as the liberating vanguard of popular consciousness (2007, 34).

The caution which Williams urges should be taken. To treat Modernist authors as a 'progressive' collective ignores not only the elitist class political views associated with Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and W. B. Yeats, but also the more radical (a term that is, sadly, non-synonymous with political egalitarianism) tendency of a number of High Modernist authors to move towards fascism: Williams cites Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and *Futurist Manifesto* author Filippo Marinetti (2007, 34). Of course, one could in a post-Barthesian sense argue that the personal opinions of these writers do not diminish the political liberation inherent in their art. But as Lukács himself wrote in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, 'the intention [is] realized in the work; it need not coincide with the writer's conscious intention' (1962, 19). British Labour MP and intermittent Marxist John Strachey, co-founder of the Left Book Club with Victor Gollancz (Bounds 249), argued in 1934 that

large swathes of modern literature served to express 'The Fascist Unconscious'. This work was not explicitly fascist in outlook, nor were its authors necessarily aware that they were conveying a political perspective; but it nevertheless betrayed certain attitudes and prejudices that can legitimately be regarded as 'the mental soil out of which fascism grows'. (Bounds 38)

Strachey identified this fascist aesthetic in the poetry of Archibald MacLeish, but Bounds asserts that Strachey's argument 'can arguably be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the work of more important conservative modernists such as Eliot, Yeats and William Faulkner' (38-9).

This does not mean that any one author's canon should be treated as irreducibly "Left" or "Right". It is certainly true that the *particular* oppressive biases in these writers' works do not discount their emancipatory assaults upon other oppressive biases: Woolf's salutary contribution to feminism is an obvious example. But the multiplicity of reactionary positions in Modernist fiction supports Williams' observations that its political character is ultimately *divisive*. Modernism's defining generic characteristics are best summarised not in terms of a Left (or Right) political agenda, but in terms of a *breach* or *rupture* with existing cultural ideology; it is not the 'cultural logic' of a given phase of capitalism, but a straining *against* any such dominant ethos. Gabriel Josipovici has written that 'As always, what Modernism does is to drive the contradictions out into the open' (82). This positions Modernism in stark contrast to both Jameson's capital-complicit Postmodernism in which 'aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally' (1984, 56), and to Mark Fisher's diagnosis of a 'capitalist realism' which 'entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment' (54). If hegemony is a Realist mode, then dissent may be a Modernist one.

## 6: The Contingency of Form

This 'breach or rupture', once made, must be constantly re-antagonised if it is not to be reabsorbed into the hegemonic norm. Williams, echoing Jameson's diagnosis of *Postmodernism*, identified just such a re-absorption in a 1987 lecture, in which he said: 'Modernism quickly lost its anti-bourgeois stance [...] the innovations of what is called Modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our present moment' (2007, 35). A similar point, with a different referent, has been made by novelist Tom McCarthy:

realism is a construction [...] It's about the constructedness of the natural and how everything that we take to be natural is in fact artificial. Nineteenth-century realists knew that what they were doing was a convention. To lose sight of that is catastrophic (2011).

McCarthy, who is one of a number of novelists, alongside authors such as Will Self and Ali Smith, to have been considered a 21<sup>st</sup> Century 'Modernist' writer in the UK (see, e.g., Bret Johnson's 2017 *New Statesman* article 'How we learned to stop worrying and love modernism (again)'), is here challenging the Lukácsian view that 'Great realism [portrays] man in the whole range of his relations to the real world' (1938, 48). Instead, McCarthy posits Realism-as-Modernism, a neat inversion of the Psychological Realist argument for Modernism-as-Realism. This entirely cogent point highlights the necessity of innovation (or perhaps more accurately, of nonconformity to dominant cultural modes) to the Modernist form. It is notable that McCarthy takes a text as antique as Balzac's 'Sarrasine', published in 1830, as his case study: by the time Joyce published *Ulysses* in 1922, almost a century of sedimentation had effaced the 'constructedness' of Realist prose and left apologists such as Lukács arguing for it as 'the organic product of the development of [the authors'] nation' (1938, 54). For Jameson and Williams, an even more rapid sedimentation had occurred by the mid-twentieth century to the emancipatory potentials of early-twentieth-century Modernist art. While Realism and Modernism seem reasonably easy to distinguish, given the formal and stylistic consistency of Realism against the urgent subjectivist experimentation of Modernism, many Postmodernist texts operate according to an experimental ethos which makes it harder to delineate them from Modernism on these grounds. Jameson's basic argument for Postmodernism as the 'Cultural logic of Late

Capitalism' is no longer helpful; it suggests that once Capitalism has become 'Late', *all* art is Postmodernist.

Eagleton offers a less epochal identifier of Postmodernism which may be more productive. First, he writes that Postmodern*ity* is a pessimistic ethos in which the 'fond hopes' of 'grand narratives of truth, reason, science, progress and universal emancipation' have been 'historically discredited' as 'dangerous illusions' (1996, 200). Then, he argues, the 'typical postmodernist work of art' which this mindset produces is 'arbitrary, eclectic, hybrid, decentred, fluid, discontinuous [and] pastiche-like,' resulting in art containing "a kind of contrived depthlessness, playfulness and lack of affect' (1996, 201). This 'lack of affect' is interesting, not only as a diagnostic of Postmodern fiction (therefore making *affect* a diagnostic of fiction that is resistant to Postmodernism), but in terms of its relation to the theories of Bertolt Brecht. Brecht, like Bloch and Adorno, reacted negatively against Lukács' hatred of the experimental novel; he wrote insightfully, *contra* Lukács, that:

we must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master. We shall take care not to describe one particular, historical form of novel of a particular epoch as realistic—say that of Balzac or Tolstoy—and thereby erect merely formal, literary criteria for realism (81-2).

There is a clear danger of terminological confusion here—Brecht uses the terms *Realist* and *Realism* in an essentially positive manner even while undermining the conventional generic form *Realism* as promoted by Lukács. The distinctions are clearer when he uses the term 'truth' rather than 'reality': 'the truth can be suppressed in many ways and must be expressed in many ways [...] the means must be questioned about the ends they serve' (83). There is still an appeal to an underlying 'truth' here which holds Brecht back from the 'arbitrary' and 'decentred' ideology which Eagleton attributes to Postmodernism, but he recognises that there is no such thing as a formally neutral approach to that truth; no mode of art which can claim access to 'reality' without mediation by its formal conventions. Instead, we must aspire to work which 'expresses' the truth while acknowledging that it is mediated by 'emphasizing the element of development' (Brecht, 82). The remainder of this thesis will substantiate Brecht's claims for Modernism in the form of chapter-length case studies, but a brief foretaste of such a case study with

reference to twenty-first century art is provided by Catherine Belsey's account of the play *War Horse*: she writes that:

The National Theatre's *War Horse* starred a mixture of human being and puppets [...] during such a performance illusion comes and goes. Awareness of the sheer ingenuity of the staging prevents the absorption in empathy Brecht condemns, but without distracting from the story [...] the mode of the play is far from realist. At the same time, it never ceases to allude to the historical facts of the [First World] war. (2011, 70-71)

Belsey's example, with specific reference to Brecht's theories, pinpoints *War Horse* as a text which confronts and rejects the illusionism of 'Classic Realism', but also one which uses innovative formal techniques to tell an affective story of a specific historical moment, without Postmodern irony or deflection: this thesis refers to such texts as *Modernist*.

Eagleton summarises Brecht's awareness of the inescapable contingency of form by saying that, for Brecht, 'the task of theatre is not to "reflect" a fixed reality, but to demonstrate how character and action are historically produced' (1976, 65). This awareness led to Brecht attempting to create a theatrical poetics in which the play 'is formally uneven, interrupted, discontinuous, juxtaposing its scenes in ways which disrupt conventional expectations' (Eagleton 1976, 65), and so the audience is prevented from 'emotionally identifying with the play in a way which paralyses its powers of critical judgement' (Eagleton 1976, 66)—as Belsey puts it, preventing 'absorption in empathy'. The result of this is a theatrical performance in which 'The audience must "think above the action", refuse to accept it uncritically, but this is not to discard *emotional* response: "One thinks feelings and one feels thoughtfully"' (1976, 67)—in Belsey's example, 'without distracting from the story': the text is still experienced *as* a story, not as a meta-narrative or a comment upon textuality. This succinctly articulates the conceptual lacuna between Realist effacement of language (whereby the formal and stylistic choices governing the prose attempt transparency) and Postmodernist denial of affect (whereby those choices are exposed, but exposed to be hollow) where the politics of Modernism can operate to create Brecht's 'living and combative literature' (85).

Belsey, monitoring the challenge to Realism posed by Brechtian aesthetics, writes that Brecht's 'first objective was to counter realism's power of engaging the emotions of the audience to the exclusion of judgement' (2011, 66-67). Although she allows that

Brecht 'may have overstated the case against mimesis' (2011, 68), Belsey is concerned that Brecht's radicalism may have been 'recuperated' by realism: Lukács and Williams, for Belsey, both engaged in 'pulling radical texts back towards the mimetic norm' (2011, 68) by creating arguments for Brecht's greatness founded on whether the portrayals which his formal innovations allow are ultimately 'realistic'. This strategy, another strand of the Psychological Realism outlined earlier, constitutes an artificial bridging-over of Modernist ruptures. As Belsey forcefully writes, 'a criticism that privileges mimesis filters out textual resistance, disarming potential challenges to generic and political orthodoxy' (2011, 69).

The Left tradition in literary criticism over the past century has thus presented a fertile, dissensual body of critique. The lens this provides for analysing the ideological position of contemporary literature (as a whole, and as individual texts) is invaluable. The defence of Modernism offered by Brecht and the Frankfurt school owes a great debt to Lukács' hostility to it, which largely set the terms of the debate in terms of Realism *versus* Modernism as socially progressive cultural forms. Another set of terms which have been outlined in this opening chapter are the terms of engagement of Gramscian hegemony, particularly with regard to the complex setting of First World postcolonial Ireland. This term-setting may operate largely in the background of the case studies which follow, and further contextualisation is of course needed, particularly with regard to the twenty-first century setting of this thesis' primary texts. But it is my hope that what has come before *does* provide sufficient background to give the reader understanding of the interaction between, on the one hand, the Modernist novels which comprise my primary texts, and on the other the Realist orthodoxy which held sway during the Celtic Tiger years in Ireland. If this ambition is realised, and the preceding literature review successfully contextualises and justifies the analytical tools which I will bring to bear upon the novels of Schofield, McBride, Barry and McCormack, then I hope that another goal will have been achieved *en passant*: a gradual and cumulative, but satisfactory, answer to the question: Why ask the Left about literature?

The development of Lukácsian Marxist literary arguments by Brecht, Williams and others are complementary to an alternative tradition, whose major thinkers (more generally) include Althusser, De Saussure and Roland Barthes, and (with specific reference to Realism and Modernism) Belsey, Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath. Moyra Haslett calls these 'antithetical marxisms' 'Hegelian' and 'Structural' Marxisms, and identifies Jameson's work as a 'synthesis' of the two (the very terminology of antithesis and synthesis, of course, could scarcely be more Hegelian) (Haslett 112-113). This 'structural' strand which I have so far neglected pays closer attention to the influence of ideology on linguistics, and as such can be useful in guiding the close analyses of particular texts; exemplary among these is MacCabe's reading of *Ulysses* in his monograph *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*. While heeding Haslett's caution that 'MacCabe's analysis also risks an exaggerated formalism in celebrating anti-realism as an absolute good' (118), my analysis will bring in the insights made by this strand of 'structural Marxism' with reference to the case studies which follow: MacCabe and Belsey in particular will be recurrent points of reference, as will Raymond Williams himself. Another theorist whose work has been mentioned but not interrogated in this chapter is Marshall Berman; Berman's work is important to the following chapters, as indeed is a further grappling with the inescapable legacy of György Lukács. My hope is that this introductory chapter will inform and contextualise not only the subsequent presentation of the primary texts and their historical context, but also the continued presence of such Marxian reference points to ground this presentation in a literary theoretical context. Finally, before moving on to the case studies and the contemporary context of Celtic Tiger Ireland, the financial crash and finally the post-crash context of my primary texts, I hope that it will prove productive to briefly outline the overall structure which the remainder of this thesis will follow.

## 7: Thesis Outline: Sonata Form

In musical terminology, 'sonata form' consists of three central elements: theme, development and recapitulation. The form may be embellished by the addition of two bookending elements: an introduction to begin the piece, and a coda to conclude it. Although my writing is likely deficient in the harmonious or melodious qualities which might buttress this analogy, I invite the reader of this thesis to consider it in terms of sonata form. This chapter, of course, has represented the 'introduction': this term carries over without translation from musical jargon into prosodic jargon and back again.

Chapters 2 and 3, on Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, and on Anakana Schofield's *Malarky* and *Martin John*, respectively, are the 'theme'. They present the central arguments and concerns of the thesis and should furnish the reader with all of the definitions and analyses which they require to understand it. The ordering of these chapters is unfortunately victim to the linearity of written prose; either chapter would work rather better if read with a working knowledge of the other. In the event, I have placed the McBride chapter, which outlines and analyses the specifically 21st-century Irish situation in terms of the Celtic Tiger (and its attendant Realist hegemony), the crash and the post-crash literary context, before the Schofield chapter, which deals with narratological concerns and definitions of 'Modernism'. In combination, these two sets of concerns comprise the 'theme'.

Chapter 4, on Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone*, serves in this analogy as the 'development'. *Beatlebone* is perhaps the least 'central' of the four 'central' texts to my diagnosis of a resurgent post-crash Irish literary Modernism, but in this non-centrality it develops—adds nuance and modulation—to the already-stated theme, and in operating at that theme's outer reaches it helps to define the parameters of the argument. Perhaps most importantly, in analysing *Beatlebone* in terms of 'Metamodernism', it breaks the stranglehold of the Realism-Modernism dialectic which might otherwise obtain too strongly in this thesis, and it puts the work as a whole in dialogue with *Postmodernism*, and with 21st-century developments in literary categorisation.

Chapter 5, on Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*, then operates as 'recapitulation'; not, I hope, as pure repetition, but as recapitulation which also develops. It returns to many topics already addressed in the 'theme' chapters, particularly chapter 2, in a way which will hopefully further substantiate this thesis' claims, as it is also in a position to reflect on all of the themes and developments of that theme which have thus far been offered, and recapitulate them in light of their combined implications. This recapitulation serves in more traditional academic writing terms as the *conclusion* of the thesis proper.

The 'coda', then, is chapter 6, on Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and Anna Burns' *Milkman*. This 'coda' I have indeed entitled as such, as this is the section of my thesis where I believe the analogy with sonata form is most potentially counterintuitive and therefore potentially most productive. It seeks to offer an ending-after-the-ending; the themes have been introduced, developed and recapitulated, and the *coda* then offers a more open and speculative engagement with the question: if all this is so, then what next?



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## CHAPTER 2

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### The Tiger and the Crash: Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

The Celtic Tiger, a period of Irish history characterised by a newfound, though unevenly distributed, prosperity brought about by attracting international capital through low taxes and free-market economics, stretched from the 1990s until the 2008-9 financial crisis, which brought it to a spectacular self-immolating end. In this period, the modernist tendency in 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish writing associated with such writers as W. B. Yeats and James Joyce, and later with Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien, seemed to have become defunct. However, this thesis contends that the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger has seen a resurgence of modernist aesthetics, as Irish literature grapples with the challenges of an impoverished post-crash national identity, and seeks to locate the artistic opportunities hidden in those challenges' interstices.

To contextualise these literary movements, it is first necessary to understand not only the material circumstances of both the crash (and post-crash literature) and the Celtic Tiger (and Tiger-era literature), but also to situate these circumstances in an understanding of their dominant ideologies and socio-political frames of reference. Having done so, this chapter will go on to situate Eimear McBride's 2013 novel *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* as a leading and emblematic text of this resurgent Irish Modernism, according to the technical and narratological definitions of Modernism outlined in the previous two chapters. In a recent article, Ruth Gilligan has noted that although *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 'can undoubtedly be classified as "modernist"' (2018, 775), 'McBride has yet to attract significant academic interest' (2018, 775-776) which might theorise and analyse *Girl's* role in a resurgent (Irish) Modernism: this chapter, alongside other new work including Gilligan's own, might serve to redress this lack.

## 1: The Celtic Tiger

### The Unending of History

In his seminal 1989 article 'The End of History?', Francis Fukuyama notoriously declared that humanity had reached 'the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.' (1989, 4). There were, his thesis laid out, simply no viable alternatives to 'Western liberal democracy' left: 'Fascism was destroyed as a living ideology by World War II'; and as for socialism, all Marxist-inflected ideas were simply outdated since, 'surely, the class issue has actually been successfully resolved in the West' (1989, 9). With China and the crumbling USSR dipping their toes in the shallow end of democratisation, all we had to do was wait for more and more countries to accept the US/European model of what would now be called neoliberalism: 'unabashedly pro-market and anti-statist' elected governments, led by 'conservative parties', and scornfully dismissive of 'the opinions of progressive intellectuals' (1989, 10). Any idea that all might not be well *within* these Western countries was not countenanced: in the 1989 paper's most revelatory moment, Fukuyama breezily announces that 'the egalitarianism of modern America represents the essential achievement of the classless society envisioned by Marx' (1989, 9).

Fukuyama's analysis made firm predictions (as a good hypothesis should), which have since been falsified by events. Between 1989 and 2019, numerous geopolitical events have shown the Ozymandian hubris of Fukuyama's declaration that History was at an end: the now-irrefutable scientific consensus surrounding global warming, with its attendant apocalyptic weather events such as the tsunami in South-East Asia in December 2003; the rise of fundamentalist Islamic terrorism, with the epoch-opening attack on New York on September 11, 2001, followed by major attacks in Paris, London, Manchester and others; the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Libya which have done so much to catalyse this fundamentalism; the Arab Spring and the subsequent authoritarian backlash in North Africa; and perhaps most directly the failure of Russia and China to conform to

Fukuyama's prediction of ever-greater democratisation (Fukuyama himself would eventually concede in 2010 that Vladimir Putin's Russia is 'an "electoral authoritarian" state', and Xi Jinping's China a nation of 'authoritarian capitalism', but he twists his own initial words to claim that 'liberal democratic principles' are nonetheless still 'universal' (2010, 1-2)). Even those countries which had already achieved 'post-historical' status by 1989 have been experiencing a remarkable amount of 'history': the Anglophone world's two nationalist-protectionist decisions in 2016—the United Kingdom population's vote to leave the European Union, and the American electorate's vote (via the distinctly undemocratic workings of its electoral-college system) to elect Ur-fascist Donald Trump<sup>4</sup> to presidential office on a platform of allegedly anti-establishmentarian principles—seem almost to be direct rebukes to Fukuyama's vision of a never-ending, ever-increasingly neoliberal, globalist democracy.

Then there was the 2008-9 financial crash, which punctured the lung of free-market late capitalism so emphatically that state aid was required to bail the global markets out. The 'class issue', meanwhile, has remained stubbornly unresolved, as income inequality in these 'post-historical' nations has widened to unprecedented levels—in 2017, Credit Suisse analysts blamed the crash for increasing inequality yet further: 'The bank's analysts see wealth inequality as largely being a result of the financial crisis [...] The top 1% started the millennium owning 45.5% of all wealth, and now they have 50.1%' (Meyer). Fukuyama acknowledges this catastrophe—'we've been thrown into this huge global recession because of the failure of unregulated markets,' he admits (2013)—but doggedly maintains that the crash does not qualify as a historical event, no matter how many workers were made redundant or millions of dollars lost, because, 'The real question is whether any other system of governance has emerged in the last 20 years that challenges this. The answer remains no.' (2013, 31). It was not until 2017 that cracks

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<sup>4</sup> Following Umberto Eco's 1995 exposition of 'Ur-fascism': a 'popular elitism' which 'seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural *fear of difference*.' Eco compounds the prescience of his description by concluding with a quotation from Franklin D. Roosevelt warning against the growth of fascism in America. Another of the tenets of Eco's Ur-fascism is that it is based on a 'cult of traditionalism', and 'Traditionalism implies the *rejection of modernism*' (Eco 1995, emphasises Eco's).

emerged in Fukuyama's supreme self-confidence, as he retrofitted his arguments to claim that 'ever since the financial crisis in 2008, I think we've been ripe for something like [Trump]' (2017, 4).

In the face of such discrediting evidence, why invoke Fukuyama's late-eighties bluster at all? Because this is a study of Irish literary Modernism since that 2008-9 crisis of late capitalism, and because Irish cultural output of the decade following the 2008 crash can only be understood in light of the calm which preceded the storm, specifically the two decades immediately prior to 2008: the era of national optimism, economic growth and ever-increasing international confidence known as the Celtic Tiger. The Tiger embodied Fukuyaman late capitalism in its fullest peacocking glory: in its reliance on the unregulated international flow of capital, in its structural integration of tax evasion and social inequality, and in its deadening assurance that, in Margaret Thatcher's favoured phrase, There Is No Alternative. As late as 2007—right on the cusp of the plunge—Irish historical materialist critic Joe Cleary evoked Fukuyama's rhetoric as he warned that

Now, in a post-Cold War climate where it is conventional to assume that the social templates of the future are already given, since *all serious alternatives to liberal capitalism have been eliminated* from the world stage, that sense of dogmatically stupefied certainty seems to apply more to the artistic and intellectual worlds of affluent Western societies, including Ireland, than to any others. (Cleary 2, emphasis mine)

Just a year later, the very status of Ireland as an 'affluent Western society' would be in question. As Gerry Smyth noted in 2012, in early 2008 'Ireland's place amongst the global economic elite was [still] guaranteed' (133), but this guarantee then collapsed with astonishing speed. 'We all know what happened next', Smyth summarises:

Credit Crunch leading to Financial Crisis leading to Global Recession [...] Ireland's great economic miracle was built upon very, very shaky foundations indeed; and once those foundations began to shake, they brought the whole edifice of the Irish economic miracle crashing to the ground in record time. (133)

## What the Tiger Was

The *Irish Times* journalist Fintan O'Toole has written an excoriating polemic—perhaps *the* comprehensive excoriation—of the Tiger years, entitled *Ship of Fools*. In *Ship of Fools* he notes the symbolic importance of Celtic Tiger Ireland to the neoliberal world-system:

The Irish economy was, for a full decade, the poster child of free-market globalisation. It was understood, not simply as the story of how one small and peripheral European country moved from relative poverty to prosperity, but as a moral tale with a happy ending for all those who learned its lessons. (10)

Donald Morse has subsequently praised O'Toole's polemic as the closest thing to 'a Juvenal with his righteous outrage' that the Celtic Tiger produced (249). But at the time, O'Toole was one of the few dissenting voices in the intellectual mainstream. The revisionist historian R. F. Foster then acknowledged O'Toole's status as an outlier from the journalistic consensus, calling him 'One of the most persuasive of the begrudgers (and certainly the best writer among them)' for arguing that 'the price of achieving prosperity has been paid by the poor' (12). The term 'begrudger' denotes an adversary of the Celtic Tiger's advocates, the 'boosters'. Foster himself, writing in 2007, did prevaricate somewhat before coming down on the side of the 'boosters' with impeccable comic timing: he wrote that 'In the end it is hard not to side with the Boosters rather than the Begrudgers, and to recognise that in several spheres, not just the economic, a certain amount of good luck was maximised by good management' (188), even as the executors of that 'management' were capering to light the fuses of their own petards. Such optimism was widespread, and suffers badly in hindsight. Smyth writes that 'The levels of corruption, ignorance, incompetence and sheer stupidity that precipitated economic disaster shocked everyone' (136), while O'Toole notes that 'It is no surprise that Irish-based financial companies played a large part in the global banking crisis that unfolded in 2007 and 2008' (148).

Foster praises the Ireland of 2007 for its 'mysterious achievement of prosperity' (36), and somewhat reverentially notes that 'economists are still not entirely sure why' the Tiger even came about (18), with an irresponsible lack of curiosity whether that mysterious prosperity might prove unsustainable. This 'mysterious achievement' was in fact built on the brittle foundations of internal political cronyism and an abject obsequy

to external investors: as Smyth observes (again with the advantage, over Foster's 2007 text, of hindsight): 'The Irish political community had sold the country to a free market ideology whose over-arching characteristic was its contempt for the sovereign governments' (133). Bertie Ahern, the Taoiseach from 2002-2007, accounted for Ireland's success in a three-point plan which he would deliver for a €30,000 speaking fee: '1) Low personal and corporate taxes; 2) a "business-friendly government";' and 3) light business and banking regulation, if any' (Morse 244). The three-point plan in effect read: deregulation, deregulation, deregulation. This was Fukuyama's Ireland, an apparently uncomplicated success story written largely through the simple expedient of lowering corporation taxes to ensure that major American corporations would set up headquarters on the island. It is worth noting, however, that O'Toole was not the only begrudger alive to the hubris of peak-Tiger Ireland. Joe Cleary's contemporary objections to Tiger neoliberalism have been noted above, and Foster's account shows that some Irish public figures were also alert to the similarities between Fukuyama's world-systemic pronouncement of 1989 and the atmosphere within Irish politics at the turn of the millennium:

looking at the new motorway encircling Dublin, the cultural commentator Ann Marie Hourihane caustically pronounced: 'history is finished here. Now we are going to live like everybody else.' (Foster 181)

The eventual disappearance of this too-easy 'success' would provoke the interrogative turn in Irish literature which this thesis analyses. Before turning to the fallout of the Tiger's collapse, however, it is instructive to analyse the two strands of literature which were dominant in the country while Celtic Tiger optimism still felt like it would last forever: commercial romances and—at the literary end of the publishing marketplace—historical Realism.

## Literature in the Tiger Years

Without downplaying the achievements of more innovative late-20<sup>th</sup>-century Irish writers such as Patrick McCabe, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne or John McGahern, there is a noticeable critical consensus that Celtic Tiger art tended towards Realism and an unabashed straining for

commercial viability. O'Toole emphasises the latter when he accentuates the commodification of Irish fiction in this period of consensus in *Ship of Fools*:

[T]he most thoroughly globalised brand of Irish culture in the boom years was also the most conservative [...] The popular fiction writers who sold vast numbers of books in shiny covers around the word [...] package[d] and market[ed] aspects of pre-Celtic Tiger Irish culture as globalised commodities, [instead of attempting] to respond in any real way to contemporary Ireland' (186).

It is worth noting, *en passant*, that O'Toole's prescription for this diagnosis, contrary to my own focus on Modernist form, is that what Ireland needed was to do Realism *better*. Celtic Tiger Ireland, for O'Toole, lacks a 'realist epic that could give a multi-layered and shifting society a sense of where it was and how it got there' (185). In this regard Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know*, though not wholly Realist, is worthy of attention. Indeed, Kilroy satirises so many of the same (very specific) examples of Celtic Tiger hubris that O'Toole's book identifies that *The Devil I Know* may be a deliberate attempt to fill the literary absence that *Ship of Fools* identifies. Regardless of this differing assessment of the value of Realist epics to early twenty-first century Ireland, O'Toole's assessment of what the Celtic Tiger cultural production line *was* offering up is succinct and astute. O'Toole posits Michael Flatley's globally profitable reworking of Irish folk dance, *Riverdance*, as a 'statement about how it was possible to be Irish in the twenty-first century', that offered a 'comforting narrative of cyclical continuity' (187)—a form of closure noticeably congruent with Realist literary aesthetics. O'Toole also notes the shared cultural viewpoint between *Riverdance*, pop boybands like Westlife and Boyzone, and commercial romance novels marketed at a female readership, often termed 'chicklit', such as Cecilia Ahern's bestselling *P.S. I Love You*, to which this chapter will return.

In a more specifically literary analysis, George O'Brien in *The Irish Novel 1960-2010* agrees that in his titular time period 'formal developments show little interest in replicating, much less in adding to, the innovations that earned the modernism of Joyce and Beckett its international eminence' (xxii). Instead, 'the contemporary Irish novel is on the whole narrower in scope', characterised by 'a comparative formal conservatism, consisting mostly of modest modifications of pre-modernist novels' (xxiii). Jennifer M. Jeffers similarly writes that for 1990s Irish writers, Joyce is 'the quintessential or primal "father" who must be "killed" in order for the "son" to assert himself' (1); the result is a Realist literary scene which 'depicts the norms in Irish society as mobile with abundant

economic opportunity' (2), in which the "real" Ireland is Dublin, where [...] everything important happens' (3).

It should be noted at the outset that neither O'Brien nor Jeffers make these assessments of 1990s-2010s Irish writing disparagingly; indeed for Jeffers 'The 1990s was a boom period for the Irish novel' (1). Likewise, this thesis intends no insult to vaunted Irish writers of this period by pointing out that their work is not Modernist: indeed R. F. Foster, also drawing on O'Brien, praises the likes of Colm Tóibín and Dermot Bolger as a 'new direction in Irish fiction' precisely on the basis that they have escaped the dead hand of Joyce and Beckett and begun to write an identifiably Irish Realism (167). This is not inconsistent with Terry Eagleton's insistence that Ireland has been too historically unstable to produce a Realist literature, as the Celtic Tiger's mythos was founded on a Fukuyaman confidence that it comprised not only a new prosperity but a new stability too. The point is that Irish Modernism was largely submerged during the Tiger years (and, as I will demonstrate with reference to Eimear McBride, where it *was* written it was often unpublished), and that Realism, particularly historical Realism, was the era's preferred mode—indeed its *attendant* mode—of narrative fiction. O'Brien quotes O'Toole: 'Irish novelists, in short, "have noted that the novel has survived its destruction by the Irish modernists, and that it remains oddly adequate for their own contemporary purposes"' (O'Brien xxiii, quoting O'Toole's 'Future Fictions' (2010)). Therefore, O'Brien tells us (of the period up to 2010), 'Very few Irish novelists aspire to the performative flair of the experimental international style [...] found in *Ulysses*, for example' (xxiii). Ruth Gilligan quotes Eve Patten (whose critique I discuss below), Sylvie Mikowski and Anne Enright as others who have found that commercial and cultural pressures combined to promote Realism and suppress Modernism during the Celtic Tiger's years of ascendancy (Gilligan 2018, 783).

Similar assessments were being made among some younger and less established Irish writers, often with a strong antipathy towards this Realist dominance. Mike McCormack, whose work I will focus on in chapter 5, said in a 2012 interview: 'Look at the types of writing which governed the Celtic Tiger. Look back and see how many historical novels were published [...] at a time when we could have been curious we became curatorial' (V Nolan 2012, 95). Novelist Julian Gough, writing in 2010, lamented this same

conservatism in an angry polemic. This polemic will be a recurring source in this chapter and the following chapters, so I will here quote it at length:

If there is a movement in Ireland, it is backwards. Novel after novel set in the nineteen seventies, sixties, fifties. Reading award-winning Irish literary fiction, you wouldn't know television had been invented. Indeed, they seem apologetic about acknowledging electricity (or "the new Mechanikal Galvinism" as they like to call it.)

I do read the odd new, young writer, and it's usually intensely disappointing. Mostly it's grittily realistic, slightly depressing descriptions of events that aren't very interesting. Though, to be fair, sometimes it's sub-Joycean, slightly depressing descriptions of events that aren't very interesting. I don't get the impression many Irish writers have played Grand Theft Auto, or bought an X-Box, or watched Youporn. (And if there is good stuff coming up, for God's sake someone, contact me, pass it on.) Really, Irish literary writers have become a priestly caste, scribbling by candlelight, cut off from the electric current of the culture. We've abolished the Catholic clergy, and replaced them with novelists. They wear black, they preach, they are concerned for our souls. *Feck off.* (Gough 2010)

The male-dominated nature of Gough's examples of outmodedness—ignorance of mainstream videogames and internet pornography—perhaps reveals his own biases towards what constitutes contemporaneity, and his grandfatherly misspelling of 'Xbox' suggests that he himself is not at the cutting-edge which he endorses (in his defence on this front, Gough has since written an 'ending' to the non-narrative videogame *Minecraft* (2011), and the techno-futurist novel *Connect* (2018)). However, the 'electric current' of his own critique is potent; Irish literary fiction of this period does display an intense discomfort with portraying its own material circumstances, and consistently displaces its settings into the semi-distant past. Even more relevant is Gough's identification of 'grittily realistic' prose as the dominant format—a formula which, of course, recalls the apologies for Realism put forth by György Lukács in my introductory chapter and to which I return in the following chapter. Even those who praise Irish literary fiction of this period, such as Foster who writes (again in 2007) that 'the confidence, originality and bravura of the new Irish writing is undeniable' (169), corroborate Gough's contention that it was dominated by Realist aesthetics and historical settings (169-70). A surprising variation on Gough and O'Toole's disappointment with Celtic Tiger literature comes from a 2003 lecture by Declan Kiberd (with O'Brien a founder of what Foster calls 'the self-righteous Ireland Institute' (177)). Kiberd also identifies a lack of great Irish literature in the Celtic Tiger era, and

agrees that what does exist is largely historical fiction, citing the examples of 'Brian Friel's 1930s, Frank McCourt's 1940s or John McGahern's 1950s' (2003, 276) (he also points to Éilis Ní Dhuibhne's *The Dancers Dancing* (1999) and Keith Ridgway's *The Parts* (2003) as partial exceptions (2003, 277)). And, like O'Toole, Kiberd laments the failure of Irish literature to engage with its present circumstances:

It would be hard to imagine a James Joyce or a Sean O'Casey passing up the rich pickings for an artist in such a profound social change, yet that, most incredibly, is what the current generation of writers, with only rare exceptions, has so far done. There is no major celebration or corrosive criticism of these developments [of the Celtic Tiger] in good novels, plays or poetry [...] the pace of change may just be too fast for most.' (2003, 276)

However, unlike O'Toole's focus on 'corrosive criticism' in calling for a more self-examining national literature, Kiberd places the emphasis squarely on 'celebration': in a 'booster' mirror-version of O'Toole's 'begrudger' position, Kiberd laments Celtic Tiger historical Realism on the grounds that Irish writers should be *celebrating* the Tiger's 'opportunity': 'the current affluence, far from threatening art, imperilling identity or killing the Celtic soul, is a great opportunity for a second national flowering' (2003, 87). This call for a *second* flowering depends upon a bizarre interpretation of the first: in Kiberd's view, the Irish High Modernism of Joyce and Yeats was essentially a celebration of arch-capitalist excess, of which the Celtic Tiger is its second coming: a beast with 'shiny surfaces' (2003, 276) whose hour has come forth at last. In fact, Irish high modernism of the 1920s emerged from a context of significant national upheaval, as Kiberd has self-underminingly observed elsewhere when noting that 'France in the 1940s must have reminded Beckett of Ireland in the 1920s: blasted, inchoate, but with the potential to start all over again' (2017, 16). The style begotten by the late capitalist 'brave new world' (Foster, 176) of Celtic Tiger Ireland was not a troubled and troubling Modernism, but a self-consciously mature Realism in which 'history remains the preoccupation' (Foster, 170). For Kiberd, however, the Tiger is Sinn Féin's vision of the Irish Republic, finally realised:

This generation in Ireland has inherited wealth but also a willingness to spend as well as save. It is almost as if the promise latent in those words 'Sinn Féin' [translation: 'we ourselves'] has at last begun to be made good. As if to symbolise all this, one of the major exports of the last five years has been plane-loads of Viagra, from the land of Eternal Youth. (2003, 276)

Recalling Fukuyama's outlandish claims for American 'egalitarianism' as the end-point for Marxism, Kiberd grounds his comparison on an understanding that Irish High Modernism was unencumbered by any pesky concerns about social class: 'the Irish Revival [...] unlike other forms of European modernism, did not proclaim the need for eternal antagonism between bohemian and bourgeois', he writes, adding that Joyce, George Bernard Shaw and Flann O'Brien 'shunned the artist-in-a-garret cliché, seeing it as a snobbish inflection of the old notion of the aristocrat as one above common toil' (2003, 273).

The gruesome terminus of Kiberd's train of thought is that Irish literature, far from critiquing the excesses or corruption of the Celtic Tiger, should take not James Joyce but Leopold Bloom as its guardian angel. Kiberd claims that 'the unfinished project of national renewal could come to fruition, and economics and art might harmonise' (2003, 287), if only we let the capitalists take the wheel: 'Then the bohemian and bourgeois might be as one, as they were briefly at the close of Joyce's *Ulysses* when an ad-man named Leopold Bloom took an artist named Stephen Dedalus back to his house, in order to explain the workings of the real world to him' (2003, 287). This is a wilful misidentification not only of the profession of Bloom with his character, but also the character of Bloom with the aesthetic ethic of *Ulysses*. A far more alert critique (and one which signposts the exact point at which Kiberd's reading of *Ulysses* veers off the track of critical awareness), is Terry Eagleton's recognition that *Ulysses* can only function because *neither* Bloom or Stephen is a necessary and sufficient spokesman for the text:

If Leopold Bloom has something of the all-embracing sympathies of the realist novelist, he lacks his or her imaginative intensity; Stephen Dedalus's problem is just the reverse. Neither character could have produced the work in which they figure; and what Joyce himself conjures out of this impasse is, among other things, a magnificent parody of fictional realism. (1995, 151)

Kiberd's identification of capitalist authority with 'the real world' is a reminder of the singular premise which underpins both Realist hegemony in art, and neoliberal hegemony in late capitalism: that, once again, There Is No Alternative, and that a lack of imagination is the only sober analysis. I have previously contended that capitalism is a Realist genre, and here Kiberd presents us with an outright neoliberal usurpation of Lukács' position: the great communist commissar's insistence that "Literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is grasped" (1938, 33) has been appropriated as a defence of

the free market. As Mike McCormack points out, Kiberd appears to be demanding a *lack* of social interrogation:

When we reclaim our experimental instincts then a work of social overview will be the manifestation of that. People are putting the cart before the horse, people like Damien [sic] Kiberd continually asking, where is the novel of social overview? Where is the socially engaged novel? They're asking for the nineteenth century [but] Joyce, Flann [O'Brien], and those lads have shown us the lead. Experiment is the way to go. Until we reclaim those instincts we won't find a novel of social overview. (V. Nolan 2012, 97)

Eve Patten, writing in 2006, also acknowledges the dominance of Realist prose styles in the Celtic Tiger novel, although unlike O'Toole or Kiberd she does not straightforwardly align this with a begrudger or booster agenda—her analysis' disciplinary foundation is literary studies, rather than contemporary history, and she is concerned less with political side-taking than with literary taxonomy—and she is keen to point out exceptions to the rule. First, she notes that

the fiction of the contemporary period [...] remained formally conservative: beyond a prevalent social realism, its chief stylistic hallmark was a neo-Gothic idiom which signalled a haunted or traumatised Irish society and deep-seated disturbances in the national psyche. (2006, 259)

And later adds that

it might be argued that the emphasis on thematic treatments of social issues has restricted formal experimentation in the Irish novel, endorsing a realist conformity which obscures any relation to the non-realist antecedence of James Stephens or Flann O'Brien' (2006, 271).

This premise established, Patten quickly seeks to assert its non-totality, writing that '*In fact*, several novelists continue to exploit non-realist or metafictional devices in their work' (2006, 271, emphasis mine). Patten, like Kiberd, mentions Élis Ní Dhuibhne (Patten chooses to cite *The Bray House* (1990) rather than Kiberd's example of *The Dancers Dancing*), and also cites Anne Enright, Patrick McCabe, Patrick McGinley and Dermot Healey as 'non-realist' authors. But her emphasis falls upon John Banville: 'Metafictional and philosophical writing in Ireland continues to be dominated, however, by John Banville (b. 1945). Since the mid 1980s, Banville's fiction has continued its analysis of alternative languages and structures of perception' (2006, 272).

Patten's analysis is sound, and her list of exceptions is a valuable corrective to any claims (including those of this thesis) that might imply an utter uniformity among Irish

fiction in the Tiger years. But the *nature* of her exceptions is also worth examining: Patten quite rightly does not reach for the antecedence of Joyce or Beckett's Modernism when describing Banville or Enright's experimentalism, but 'metafictional and philosophical writing' (2006, 272). The non-Realist tendencies which she describes in Banville are not the resurgent Modernist textual aesthetics which I will shortly attribute to Eimear McBride (and subsequently to Anakana Schofield, Kevin Barry<sup>5</sup> and the most recent work of Mike McCormack), but an 'indulgence in a post-modern gothic'. This is undoubtedly a valuable exception to a Realist hegemony, but, as Patten acknowledges, the work of this generation of authors 'may not have constituted the critical counter-tradition of Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien'—although, she claims, the writing of Banville et al 'has nonetheless broken ground in forwarding the plurality of modern Ireland and in capitalising on voices of dissent, disillusionment and diaspora to narrate the multiple personalities of the present-day [2006] nation' (2006, 273-4).

## The End of the Tiger

Fukuyama's Ireland, then, was unsurprisingly accompanied by a predominance of relatively quiescent literary modes; either a Tiger-celebrating strand of commercial romance which, *Riverdance*-fashion, exuberantly commodified itself for an international audience, or a more self-consciously literary historical Realism which doubtless produced many fine texts, but few which challenged either the parameters of Realism or the near-sighted carnival of capitalism that was taking place in Ireland at the time. This does not mean that such texts were not being written, but that they were not in keeping with the mores of Celtic Tiger publishers and audiences: as the following section will explore, McBride began writing the Joycean *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* in 2003 (although it remained unpublished until 2013), and McCormack's novel *Notes From a Coma*, an unsettling West-of-Ireland sci-fi, did achieve publication in 2005. The latter novel's

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<sup>5</sup> Although Barry has clear Postmodern elements in his work too, and it is in chapter 4, on Barry's *Beatlebone*, that this thesis engages most directly with the question of *Postmodernism's* relation to the Realist/Modernist divide.

combination of the prevalent social Realism with 1950s science fiction<sup>6</sup> positions it rather well as a harbinger of the Modernist revival to come; the ‘Ship of Fools’ hadn’t sunk yet, and McCormack’s novel is still half-Realist, but *Notes From a Coma*’s speculative elements and indulgence in a form-disrupting metatext in footnotes<sup>7</sup> begin to fracture this Realism, and the experimentalism of this novel can perhaps, in retrospect, be seen as an early acknowledgement that the ship was beginning to founder: referring to McCormack’s *Solar Bones* (2016), to which I devote chapter 5, Val Nolan says that ‘the roots of his long-form experimental tendencies are clearly visible in the prescient and intentionally fractured *Notes from a Coma*’ (V. Nolan 2016).

*Notes from a Coma*, however, was not the commercial or critical success which novels such as *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* and *Solar Bones* would become in the post-crash landscape. The contrarian journalist John Waters, while acclaiming *Notes From a Coma* in 2010 as ‘The greatest Irish novel of the decade just ended’, notes that McCormack’s work was largely ignored at the time of its publication: Waters calls it ‘a dazzling book disgracefully overlooked when the literary prizes were handed out at the time of its publication, and which now appears, even more disgracefully, to be out of print’ (Waters). It was only in 2013 that *Notes From a Coma* found a US publisher, ending ‘a period of five lonely years when [McCormack] continued to write without having any publisher’ (Duggan); this was the price, it seems, of writing experimental fiction at the height of the Celtic Tiger.

What happened, then, to allow writers such as McBride and McCormack to not only create Irish Modernist texts, but for those texts to flourish, in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

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<sup>6</sup> As McCormack himself described it on the *Irish Times* podcast in 2017 (Doyle).

<sup>7</sup> McCormack himself rejects the term ‘footnotes’: ‘I go mad when people call them footnotes [...] my wife tells me I’ll go to my grave roaring *they’re not fucking footnotes!*’ (V. Nolan 2012, 93). Instead he describes these ‘footnotes’ as ‘contingent riffs’ (V. Nolan 2012, 93) on his novel, existing below the ‘event horizon’ of a black line drawn across the page, whose ‘function is to be this kind of broken, circumambient horizon around the book’ (Maleney). For those who have not read the book, however, the concept of ‘footnotes’ will serve to describe their appearance on the page, if not necessarily their literary nuances.

First, the economy collapsed.

## 2: Post-crash Modernism

### Circumstances of the crash

When, in 2007-8, the global financial crisis catalysed an economic downturn now referred to without hyperbole as ‘the great recession’, Ireland, along with Spain, Iceland, Italy and Greece, was among the worst-hit western countries (Reinhart and Reinhart). With an economy largely dependent upon foreign investment and property development, Irish prosperity ended almost immediately when the bubble burst. Donald Morse offers a damning but inarguable summary:

In 2008 the largest housing bubble in history burst in Ireland causing the country's fall from the richest per capita state in Europe to one struggling with rapidly increasing unemployment, decreasing net worth, a failed banking system, and a short-sighted government taking action designed to paper-over previous inaction rather than to address the fundamental economic and political swamp that led to this economic and social disaster, which is commonly called the End of the Celtic Tiger. (243)

By 2010, as Morse writes, all the shine was gone from the ‘shiny surfaces’ of Celtic Tiger Ireland. Morse gravely concludes that ‘for today, there are few or no cranes to be seen on the Dublin skyline as the building trades remain idle’ (254). Even low corporation taxes were not enough to stop the rats of global capital abandoning the sinking ‘ship of fools’: ‘banks have collapsed including all investment banks with a few of their officers indicted, [and] several multi-nationals have left for greener pastures and cheaper labour’ (254).

The Irish government’s reaction was meek complicity to the ensuing Anglo-American-EU culture of ‘austerity’: O’Toole, in a 2010 postscript to *Ship of Fools*, observes that Ireland’s willingness to follow external directives aimed at reconsolidating the newly-threatened neoliberal consensus became so abject that protestors in Greece, who were similarly impoverished but took an altogether more combative stance against austerity, ‘end[ed] up chanting "we are not Ireland!", meaning "we are not passive stooges!"' (238).

And yet O’Toole’s postscript also notes that, however badly the Irish State might pine for the Tiger years, they are gone: ‘the crisis is too profound—and will probably be

too long-lasting—for disengagement and disillusion to be sustainable options,’ he writes. ‘Sooner or later, the Irish people themselves will have to reinvent politics’ (240). Another thing they would have to reinvent was literature. And just as ‘the forces that would destroy the Celtic Tiger would be nineteenth-century revenants, come back to haunt its dream of twenty-first century success’ (O’Toole 214), so too would the Irish post-crash literary revival bear distinct echoes of the emergence of Irish twentieth-century Modernism from fin de siècle Realism.

## Rejuvenated experimentation

As demonstrated above, Celtic Tiger literature was dominated by temporally displaced, essentially nineteenth-century-style Realism. However, since the banking crisis, these historical Realist tendencies have come to seem inadequate to express the lived realities of Irish, particularly rural Western Irish, psychology. This has evinced itself in an emergent genre which could be called *stream of damaged consciousness*, where Irish and Irish-diasporic writers offer space on the page to traumatised, mentally ill and even dead characters, depicting an Ireland defined negatively against the glib corporate idiom of the Celtic Tiger. What was needed, in the fact of the collapse of Realist certainty, was a Modernism which—as Gregory Castle writes of Joyce— ‘brings to the fore the ideological assumptions about what aspect of [the] world is “real” and proper for representation’ (2006, 181). Significantly, this genre draws openly on the techniques of Joycean literary Modernism.

If Classic Realism is the expression of a confident, muscular Fukuyaman capitalism, the fracture of this capitalism in the Irish recession has stimulated the need for innovative and hermeneutically demanding art, in a manner multiply analogous to the ‘need’ for High Modernism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in general and in Ireland specifically. The crash has, of course, been global, and it is not this thesis’ intention to argue that post-crash Modernism is a uniquely Irish phenomenon; English novels such as Jon McGregor’s *Even the Dogs* (2010) and Will Self’s ‘De’Ath trilogy’ of *Umbrella* (2012), *Shark* (2014) and *Phone* (2017), and Scottish writer Ali Smith’s *How to be Both* (2014), as well as the continued

output of the Scottish stream-of-consciousness doyen James Kelman such as *Mo Said She Was Quirky* (2012) can all be seen as participants in a parallel phenomenon (although Kelman's most recent novel, the nostalgic and unconvincing *Dirt Road* (2016), cleaves to a far more Realist aesthetic), and the British Goldsmiths Prize, of which McBride was the first winner in 2013, has certainly had a revitalising effect to both British and Irish experimental fiction (I discuss the effect of the Goldsmiths prize and prizewinning generally in chapter 6). However what is an occasional tendency in Anglophone writing overall has achieved something close to critical mass in the Irish novel, at least within 'literary fiction', and in the best examples has a particularly sharp cutting edge. As Gilligan writes, 'despite—or precisely, because of—this renewed sense of uncertainty, the years that followed have seen some of the most fertile and exciting developments in the Irish cultural landscape.' (2018, 783)

I propose two factors which help to explain why *Irish* authors in particular have enacted a resurgent Modernism. One, which this chapter is developing, is that the recession hit Ireland so badly that what Marshall Berman calls the 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' of modernity was made obvious (Berman 1983, 15). Berman's ideas are important to this thesis and will be returned to at length in the following chapter. Ireland, forced into disillusionment with capitalism and its attendant aesthetic modes, needed alternative art. An obvious extra-literary parallel would be the creative dynamism of British punk rock in the early years of Thatcher's Britain, when working-class youth reached for their guitars to rage against their accelerating disenfranchisement, or, in the post-crash moment, the dynamism in post-crash Greek art which Rachel Donadio identifies as 'an intriguing bright spot' created by the debt crisis: 'a burst of artistic activity in response to the national identity crisis it [the crash] has provoked' (Donadio).

Secondly, Ireland has, and teaches in its schools and universities, a Modernist literary heritage which equips writers with the tools of Modernism—and in the wake of the crash, the hour came forth for these tools to be smashed out of the boxes labelled 'Break Glass in Case of Emergency'. McCormack summarised this trend in a 2017 interview with Justine Jordan of *The Guardian*:

‘The generation behind me seem to be much more open to the idea of experiment,’ he says. ‘I sometimes think we forget that Irish writers are experimental writers. Our Mount Rushmore is Joyce, Beckett and Flann O’Brien, and if you’re not talking about those writers then you’ve lowered your gaze. For me they’re the father, son and holy ghost. They’ve nothing in common except they all went to some trouble to expand the received form, and there’s something of that happening again—a rejuvenation of the experimental instinct.’ (Jordan 2017)

A year earlier, interviewed by the website *Writing.ie*, McCormack related this anti-Realist trend specifically to the financial crisis:

The collapse of the Celtic Tiger was a dramatic and surreal event which was both physically tangible and a collapse of abstract values. Therefore it seems likely those fictions which would deal with it would have to step outside the bounds of the realist novel (Derek Flynn)

Key texts in this Modernist resurgence include McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), Barry’s *Beatlebone* (2015), Schofield’s *Malarky* (2012) and *Martin John* (2015), and McCormack’s *Solar Bones* (2016). Barry, quoted in 2015, said that:

it would be smug and premature to herald a golden age but maybe a proper radicalism is at last starting to re-emerge in Irish writing [...] We should always remember that being innovative and wild and not afraid to go completely fucking nuts on the page is what built its reputation in the first half of the 20th century (Jordan 2015).

These novels are no simple recapitulation of Joycean or Beckettian prose styles, but a revivification of a Modernist textual ethos which incorporates subjectivism with a defamiliarizing insistence upon innovation.

As the above quotations (and especially the *publication* of these quotations) from Barry and McCormack indicate, the re-emergence of an innovative tendency in the Irish novel did not go unnoticed by certain sections of the literary press (allowing, for now, that the terms ‘experimental’, ‘radical’ and ‘Modernist’ are used more or less interchangeably at the broadsheet journalistic end of the literary discourse). As the ‘Works Cited’ list of this thesis will make apparent, the *Irish Times* and the British *Guardian* in particular have published multiple features by and about these authors, and the British weekly *New Statesman* is a sponsor of the aforementioned Goldsmiths Prize. The Kevin Barry

quotation in the previous paragraph exemplifies this press coverage: it comes from a thorough October 2015 *Guardian* article, also by Justine Jordan, in which she writes that:

[A]s the real-world aftershocks of the Celtic Tiger's downfall continue, one Irish sector is booming: with the rise of a new wave of writers, from Paul Murray, Kevin Barry and Donal Ryan to first-time authors such as Eimear McBride, Sara Baume, Lisa McInerney and Colin Barrett, there is a palpable energy to Irish fiction. (Jordan 2015)

Two months previously, the British *Telegraph* had highlighted the same phenomenon, with Francesca Wade reporting on 'a new wave of writers [which] has been challenging traditional conceptions of "Irish literature", their weapon the vibrant experimental fiction being published by Dublin's independent presses' (Wade). And in direct response to Jordan's article, Conor Goodman of the *Irish Times* published a piece entitled 'New stars of Irish fiction: Did 'The Guardian' get it right?', in which he assembled responses to the *Guardian* article from the *Irish Times'* own in-house literati—not all of whom were convinced: the *Irish Times'* then assistant literary editor (now books editor) Martin Doyle was particularly cautious, noting that the Realist tendency had not vanished overnight: 'I don't quite buy into the notion of a clean break with a turgid literature bogged down in pastures of the past. Colm Tóibín's [historical novel] *Nora Webster* is one of the best books I've read in the past two years but it sounds like the sort of novel we're supposed to have evolved beyond' (Goodman). There is no doubt that Historical Realism, as represented here by *Nora Webster* (2014), has continued to be produced by Irish authors since the crash, particularly by those same authors such as Tóibín who were writing it already. Nobody would argue that Realist authors of the *fin de siècle* stopped writing Realism the moment that *A Portrait of the Artist* came along; the question is one of emergent forms displacing dominant ones, and there is an inescapable weight of evidence to show that *Nora Webster* was stylistically a novel more in keeping with residual and formerly-dominant modes than emergent and becoming-dominant modes in its 2014 year of publication.

Similarly, the breadth of authors described in these press summaries stretches far beyond those who could be reasonably deemed 'Modernist': Jordan quotes at length from Claire Kilroy, whose *The Devil I Know* (2012), as noted above, does depart from Realist *content* in its depiction of supernatural forces, but is in form and subject a work of sweeping social Realism. Jordan also praises Lisa McInerney, whose dark and humorous

*The Glorious Heresies* (2015) and *The Blood Miracles* (2017), depicting the intersections of criminality and working-class life in contemporary Cork, likewise departs from the 'historical' but not the 'Realist' tendency of the Tóibíns, Bolgers, *et al*, of the previous generation (although McInerney's style is not without interesting departures from Realist orthodoxy either, and could be interestingly compared to Roddy Doyle's treatment of Northside Dublin in terms of its sure-footed use of Irish urban vernacular dialect transcription). This is not to criticise either these novelists, or Jordan's article (which does not explicitly operate under the rubric of a 'Modernist' revival), but simply to constrain the scope of this thesis to examining those texts which can reasonably be considered a continuation of the innovative ethos of the Irish Modernist tradition. This term 'tradition', alongside McCormack's 'Mount Rushmore' analogy in which he images Joyce *et al* to be literally graven in stone, might seem to problematise the idea of twenty-first century Modernism as an iconoclastic novelty displacing a hidebound Realism. The difference is that a truly *Modernist* turn must not simply be a return to what Julian Gough's blog calls 'sub-Joycean' imitation (or pastiche), but a commitment to the innovation and interrogation on the level of form which are irreducible facets of the Modernist aesthetic (as argued, in the following chapter, by Marshall Berman), rather than to the closure and ontological fixity presumed by a dominant Realism (as presented by Catherine Belsey's work on Classic Realism, or Colin MacCabe's identification of the Realist 'meta-language'; again, these narratological definitions are picked over more fully in the following chapter, with reference to the literary aesthetics and therefore aesthetic politics of Anakana Schofield's novels). In short, a return to Modernism can only *be* a return to Modernism if it is a return with a difference. McCormack's use of the word 'rejuvenation', in his phrase 'rejuvenation of the experimental instinct', is an apt one; that which is made young again is not fated to grow into the exact same image of maturity as it did in its previous incarnation.

One novel which can unambiguously be considered in this light is McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*. As Gilligan writes of McBride's poetics: 'it is not McBride's adherence to some fixed formal template, but rather her sensibility, her aesthetic agenda, which is distinctly "modernist"' (2018, 780). Modernism *cannot* be a recapitulation; it must innovate *to be* Modernist, otherwise we are left with only a husk of Modernism —

Gough's 'sub-Joycean, slightly depressing descriptions'. Gilligan again summarises this nuance astutely: 'modernism is not a dead entity, or rather an *entity* at all, but rather a living, breathing impulse; a source of inspiration and reformulation which, by its very definition, generates forms which are entirely new' (2018, 780).

As Jordan's summary article points out, 'the dense, fractured prose of McBride's debut has its roots in the modernism of Joyce, Beckett and Faulkner' (Jordan 2015), but it grows into the sky of a century which those roots never saw to create an inextricably twenty-first century Irish Modernism. This claim will be substantiated shortly. First, two other commonalities between the contemporary Irish Modernists McBride, McCormack, Schofield and Barry must be at least briefly asserted, because the subsequent argument takes these assertions as premises: firstly, these authors' Modernist texts have a shared setting—the north-west Republic of Ireland. Secondly, they have a shared thematic focus—the representation of damaged minds.

## The West

McBride's, Barry's, Schofield's and McCormack's recent novels are not only united by narratological innovation. They share a focus on Ireland's rural and smalltown west, which has often been stereotyped as a rural backwater or mystic hinterland: as Luke Gibbons writes, 'the invocation of the west as a source of heroism, mystery and romance goes back at least to antiquity' (1996, 23), amounting to 'a construction imposed on the periphery as a foundation myth for the centre' (1996, 96). The contemporary Modernists in question, however, challenge this stereotype, portraying Western Irish subjects who, far from existing in a pre-modern refuge, are damaged or excluded by the normative grammars of late capitalist modernity. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, *Malarky* and *Solar Bones* all operate from the narrative perspectives of indigenous residents of the Irish west, while *Beatlebone* shows the west from the perspective of a visiting Englishman of Irish descent (a fictionalised version of John Lennon), and *Martin John* (as with McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016)) portrays a western Irish protagonist abroad in London. These authors themselves have various strong biographical connections to the west.

McCormack was born in London but has spent most of his life resident in Louisburgh, Co. Mayo, which is also the setting for ‘nearly all of his fiction’ (Jordan 2017) including both *Solar Bones* and *Notes From a Coma*. Barry’s childhood was spent in Limerick, and after years spent in Liverpool, Edinburgh and New York he returned to the west of Ireland to live in Co. Sligo (Barry 2011). McBride was born in Liverpool to Northern Irish parents, and has since lived in London, St. Petersburg, Cork and Norwich, but spent her childhood in Counties Sligo and Mayo, and has acknowledged herself as a diasporic writer (Collard). Schofield, an ‘English born author, who identifies as Irish-Canadian’ (Quill and Quire), is more diasporic still, having lived in Vancouver since 1998 (Quill and Quire). Like all of these writers, however, her childhood was at least partly spent in the Irish west, as she told an *Irish Times* interviewer in 2016:

I was born in England to an Irish mother and a Northern English father. I grew up in an Irish diaspora there and spent time throughout my childhood down in Mayo where my granny and extended family lived. I later lived in Dublin for many years before I shifted to Vancouver, Canada. I feel fortunate to have been exposed as a child to the cosmopolitan and hence diversity, along with rural Ireland and its very particular language and excessive volume of wind! (McVeigh)<sup>8</sup>.

This thesis does not seek to take an essentialist approach to ‘Irish’ literature; the canon does not require DNA checks at the door. What can be stated confidently is that all these writers assert their identities as Irish or partially Irish, that all the texts under examination here feature either characters in Ireland or Irish characters abroad, and that all of these entities—authors and characters alike—have a biographical link to Ireland’s rural west, usually the counties of Sligo and/or Mayo (in *Beatlebone*’s case, the islands of Clew Bay, off the Mayo coast). The treatment of this West of Ireland location in McBride’s novel will be partially explored below. It will also be examined in greater depth later in this thesis. The ‘Return to Clew Bay’ section of Chapter 6 gives a more detailed treatment of both the authors’ biographies and these texts’ Irish ‘westness’ more generally, incorporating Joep Leerssen’s convincing diagnosis of Irish ‘auto-exoticism’ as a key tenet of the romanticisation-from-Dublin of Ireland’s supposedly romantic and peasant west.

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<sup>8</sup> All biographical details in this section, to my understanding, are correct at the time of writing in 2019.

## Damaged consciousness

The most significant commonality, however, between the work of those contemporary Irish writers who can be dubbed Modernist, is their shared thematic interest in damaged or a-normative consciousness: with remarkable consistency, the likes of McBride, McCormack, Barry and Schofield have all used Modernist style to the end of portraying characters whose minds do not work according to normative social grammars. Some of these damaged characters are straightforwardly society's victims, as with McBride's *Girl*, while others are figures whose marginalisation is more morally or existentially fraught — most notably Schofield's Martin John Gaffney, but also Barry's drug-addled John Lennon stand-in, and McCormack's recently deceased (and quietly baffled about it) Marcus Conway. My following chapter will explore the relationship between Modernist prose and a-normative consciousness by tracking the development of Modernist prose styles between Schofield's semi-experimental *Malarky* and wholly-experimental *Martin John*. First, however, this chapter will lay the groundwork for that analysis by analysing perhaps the best known of the post-crash Irish modernist novels, and the most straightforwardly Joycean of them: Eimear McBride's 2013 debut work *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*.

### 3: *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

#### *Girl* as Tiger/Crash novel

Conventionally, we treat a text's year of publication date as the moment of its creation. Thus, *Ulysses* (published 1922) is a novel of the nineteen-twenties, despite its serialisation in the previous decade, and texts such as *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and *Heart of Darkness* (1902) are situated in the canons of different centuries, despite their simultaneous gestation in the 1890s. In this project's examination of the Modernist literature produced by Western Irish novelists in the years following the 2008-9 financial crash, Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013) thus introduces a temporal problematic. By the conventional reckoning, it is a novel of 2013, when small English press Galley Beggar Press published it. As a 2013 novel, *Girl* was an immediate critical and commercial success. It rapidly garnered awards, winning the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction, and becoming the first recipient of the Goldsmiths Prize, an award for experimental or 'genuinely novel' fiction (Farrington 2013), which has been won in subsequent years by the aforementioned works of contemporary Irish Modernism by Kevin Barry and Mike McCormack, and has featured Anakana Schofield, and McBride's follow-up novel *The Lesser Bohemians* (which then won the James Tait Black award in 2017 (Flood)), on its shortlists. A one-woman stage adaptation of *Girl* followed the book's prizewinning, directed by Annie Ryan and performed 'with frightening intensity and power' (Crompton) by actor Aoife Duffin, which toured internationally. The script of the play—consisting entirely of McBride's own prose, abridged and with added line breaks but otherwise unaltered—was published by Faber in 2015. Seen as a 2013 novel, McBride's *Girl* can thus be seen as the critical and commercial figurehead of the new school of Western Irish modernist prose.

However there is another history of *Girl*, in which it is not a highly visible novel of the same post-crash experimental school as McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016) and Barry's *Beatlebone* (2015), but a submerged novel of the Celtic Tiger itself. *Girl* was written 'in six months, during 2003 and 2004' (McBride 2016). Had a publisher picked it up immediately,

*Girl* might have entered booksellers' charts underneath Cecelia Ahern's aforementioned *PS, I Love You* (2003), which topped those charts for nineteen weeks (Byrne), and which perhaps represents the celebrity glamour of the Irish boom years better than any other novel: Cecilia Ahern is the daughter of then-Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, she is the sister-in-law of a Westlife boyband singer, and she is a writer whose work, Fintan O'Toole notes, bears much, including a 'strangely antiseptic, coy sexuality' (186), in common with *Riverdance*, whose narrative 'was actually the nearest thing the first phase of the Celtic Tiger created to a myth of itself' (O'Toole 187). Instead of competing in the Tiger marketplace with *PS, I Love You*, however, *Girl* languished in publishers' slushpiles until the small English publisher Galley Beggar took a risk on it nine years later (Rustin), by which time the Celtic Tiger had spectacularly self-destructed.

This contradiction—that *Girl* is a 2004 novel published in 2013, or rather a 2013 novel written in 2003-4—helps to explain a great deal about both the novel, and about the changing publishing industry across that decade. In many respects, *Girl* was ahead of its time; its brutal depiction of sexual trauma, and its Joycean, pre-linguistic prose, clearly needed to wait until the Tiger's collapse to find a sympathetic publisher: it is no coincidence that a world where *PS, I Love You's* 'strangely antiseptic, coy sexuality' was a runaway success was one in which commercial publishers were unwilling to publish *Girl*.

But *Girl* also bears a closer relationship to the Irish literary scene of the mid-2000s than McCormack's *Solar Bones* or Barry and Schofield's novels, which represent a cleaner break. Its setting, for one thing, is historical: as explored above, critics have noted both in praise and condemnation that the Irish literary novel of the Tiger years had a tendency to look backwards in time. R. F. Foster, praising the likes of Colm Tóibín (who obligingly returns the praise with a back-cover blurb on Foster's *Luck and the Irish*), Dermot Bolger and Sebastian Barry, notes 'the power and suggestiveness of historical themes' in the novels which have 'poured out of Ireland over the last thirty-odd years' (169-70). McBride's work is not entirely foreign to the prevalence of historical settings in the mid-2000s Irish novel which Kiberd, Gough and Foster diagnose. *Girl* does not set its sights as far back as 'Brian Friel's 1930s, Frank McCourt's 1940s or John McGahern's 1950s' (Kiberd 2003, 276), but it does narrate events set at an appreciable historical distance from the reader of 2004, and even more so from the reader of 2013. David Collard writes that *Girl* is 'about the 1980s' because this is when McBride lived in the West of Ireland, but that

there are few 'contemporary details' to prove this in the novel itself (10). Some such details, however, can be found—enough to date *Girl* to the 1980s or 1990s. Few things date a novel so accurately in late capitalism as currency and consumer trends: the Ireland of *Girl* uses pounds as currency, even at the eponymous Girl's nineteenth birthday (96) (Ireland adopted the Euro in February 2002 (Irish Statute Book), meaning that the Girl cannot have been born after February 1983). More impressionistically, the Girl's appreciation of blueberries as 'something in New York like muffins lattes and ice-tea' (66) dates the setting to the late 20th century (before these three consumables' 21st-century ubiquity across the British Isles) as clearly as the now primitive-sounding video games played by her mentally disabled brother: 'See this fella he kicks him. See now. Hit. That button. Go on. Now. Now. A back flip? Isn't it mad?' (90)—Boy's complaint that 'the computer game's stuck in the tape thing' (90) must date, at the latest, to late-nineties video game technology, before discs supplanted 'tape things' (and long before downloads supplanted discs). *Girl* also represents continuity with late 20th-century Irish fiction in other ways; it is *thematically* coherent with the historical realism popular at the time of its writing: as McBride has said, it invokes 'the much feared "Irish" themes of sex, death, family, guilt and religion—all done up in a parochial bow' (McBride 2016).

## The Half-formed Girl

Sex, death, family, guilt and religion do, indeed, provide the narrative backbone of *Girl*. In McBride's novel, the eponymous and unnamed 'Girl' has an older brother whose intellectual development is stunted by a brain tumour suffered in infancy (the novel refers to the brother only as 'you': I identify him henceforth as Boy, and the extended family, as Girl does, as Mammy, Uncle and Granda). Boy's disability becomes a living parallel for the Girl's own 'half-formed' status as a female in the deeply patriarchal Catholic society of late-twentieth century rural Ireland: Gina Wisker writes that 'For traditional Christianity, a girl, any girl, is "a half-formed thing," because she is only formed from the rib of Adam, always lacking and secondary' (63). This partial subjecthood is compounded when the Girl is viciously raped by her uncle in her early teens, the trauma of which supports and infests the remainder of the novel until the Girl's eventual suicide some years later, echoing the

doctors' assessment of her brother's unsuccessful tumour removal: 'it's all through his brain like the roots of trees' (3).

But as McBride says, there is more to *Girl* than a recapitulation of familiar themes. Her explanation continues:

When I tried to circumvent [these 'feared' themes] my sentences immediately dried into platitudes, so I knew something different was called for and this was when Joyce's quote woke up in me. But how to describe those parts of life which grammatical English and linear sentences fail to serve? Presumably new methods of binding the reader closer to the character's experience than 'wideawake language' normally allows, had to be explored. (McBride 2016)

The quote to which McBride here refers is "'One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot'", which Joyce wrote in a 1926 letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver (Ellmann 146), and which McBride had 'pinned above her desk' whilst writing *Girl* (Collard, 69).

Her novel expresses these poetics from the very beginning; the novel's opening is narrated by the foetal *Girl*; existent and human but far from wideawake. The fragmentary, dissonant prose, right from the outset, distances *Girl* from the historical Realist texts which share its thematic concerns. Paige Reynolds' review summarises *Girl's* incompatibility with these comparisons:

In some ways, the novel's content offers little that is new. McBride trots out almost every trope of modern and contemporary Irish literature: the rural poverty, the unhappy family, the sexual abuse, the oppressive Catholicism. However, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* does something fresh and important with these themes, thanks in part to its canny adoption of modernist form. It deploys modernist tactics in an innovative way, using them to convey a feeling of intimacy with the protagonist. (Reynolds)

The opening sentences of *Girl* introduce these 'modernist tactics' immediately: 'For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her sin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did' (3). These opening lines have rapidly become symbolic of McBridean modernism—as Gilligan notes, they are 'oft-quoted' (2018, 777). Wisker uses the quotation to exemplify how McBride's 'style reflects her narrator's fragmented and damaged psyche' (71), and Reynolds to introduce a 'disjunctive prose style [which] never changes or matures: the broken sentences, the

snarled syntax, and repetitive phrases remain consistent throughout the entire novel' (Reynolds) — I discuss this claim that the prose 'never changes' below. Martin Paul Eve deploys the same quotation to demonstrate that McBride 'evoke[s] modernist minimalism and syntactic experimentation within the frame of late Beckett' (73), and Kira Cochrane uses these same words to show that McBridean language is 'devoid of commas, a fractured, poetic, preconscious voice, pregnant with full stops and half rhymes' (Cochrane). David Collard, in his hagiographic 'Reader's Guide' to *Girl*, writes of these opening lines that 'While all these words can be correctly read and spelled out by an average eight-year-old child, they appear here in combinations that actually unsettle or intimidate the unwary' (24). One simple explanation for why the first few sentences of *Girl* have proven such a frequent resource for critics is that McBride's jarring narratological aesthetic makes an indelible first impression. Furthermore, as Collard writes, the scrutiny applied to these opening lines 'could be applied to almost any other passage in the book', given McBride's close-textured prose (31).

As the first chapter of *Girl* proceeds, it can be interpreted that these oft-quoted opening lines are not the protagonist's own thoughts, or not entirely: they are words she hears while still in the womb. They are Mammy's words to Boy, telling her firstborn that he can choose his little sister's name when she is born, and affirming it— 'yes you'—when Boy questions her. This introduces the reader to the critical strategies that are necessary to make sense of *Girl*. David Lodge has referred to stream-of-consciousness writing as being 'like wearing earphones plugged into someone's brains' (47), an interpretation which I refer to throughout this thesis as 'Psychological Realism'. But far more of the reader is required than simply tuning into the Girl's uterine brainstem and passively listening: there are levels of mediation between the unborn Girl, the text and the reader: as Reynolds puts it, McBride 'uses modernist form to remind us of our alienation and distance from her protagonist's experiences, even as she mesmerizes us with vividly candid interior monologue' (Reynolds). The opening exchange, although taking place between Mammy and Boy, prefigures and overlaps with the novel's governing perspective of second-person narration, where Girl is the narrator and Boy the intended interlocutor, referred to throughout as 'You'. This second-person address continues even after Boy dies from his brain tumour, indicating on a diegetic level that the Girl's grief leads her to

continue to think as though 'to' her brother, even when he is gone, but also rupturing further the idea of placing *any* comprehensive schema of narrative frames onto *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*: these frames are shifting and their authority is incomplete and irreducible to clear categories of narrative distance—as has always been the case in the Modernist (as opposed to Psychological Realist) novel.

### *Girl* as Contemporary Modernist *Bildungsroman*

In its subjectivist portrayal of a mind's development from before birth to young adulthood, *Girl* is a Modernist *Bildungsroman*—continuing a lineage in Irish literature stretching through Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996), Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992) and Frances Molloy's *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985). The *Bildungsroman* form typically constitutes 'an individual's passage from singularity or particularity to social integration' (Lloyd 134) (in this quotation Lloyd is actually talking about the Realist novel as such, not only the *Bildungsroman*, but it is a fine and concise summary of the *Bildungsroman* as usually defined). The Modernist *Bildungsromane*, however, divert their protagonist's journey, so that Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Molloy's Ann McGlone end up not socially integrated but journeying into self-imposed exile.

Franco Moretti<sup>9</sup> offers an authoritative account of the *Bildungsroman* as it existed in the nineteenth century, as a 'coming of age' text which culminates in the successful socialisation of the now-mature youthful protagonist:

[I]n the course of the nineteenth century, the *Bildungsroman* had performed three great symbolic tasks. It had contained the unpredictability of social change [...] established the flexible, anti-tragic modality of modern experience. [And] Finally, the novel's many-sided, unheroic hero had embodied a new kind of

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<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing Moretti is accused of multiple accounts of historic sexual harassment, and at least one of rape, although he denies these charges (Hsu and Stone). I acknowledge the unpleasant irony, in this context, of using Moretti's literary analyses to elucidate the aesthetic politics of McBride's emancipatory representation of a victim of severe rape-induced trauma.

subjectivity: everyday, worldly, pliant—‘normal’ [...] the Great Socialization of the European middle classes’ (Moretti 230)

But then, as Virginia Woolf writes, ‘human character changed’ (1924), although Moretti locates the turn not at Woolf’s favoured 1910, but at the outbreak of World War I in 1914: the same year that Joyce and Kafka ended the classic *Bildungsroman* and introduced the Modernist one through their publications of *Amerika* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (229).

Moretti calls the Joyce-Kafka model (which I extend to include Deane, Molloy, etc., later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) the ‘late bildungsroman’. I amend this classic/late bifurcation to a tripartite schema: the classic *Bildungsroman* (pre-Modernist, culminating in maturity realised as socialization), the High Modernist *Bildungsroman* (culminating in maturity realised as withdrawal from society) and the defeatist contemporary Modernist *Bildungsroman* (culminating in an inability to achieve maturity, such as McBride’s *Girl*)—although as we will see below, ‘broken’ or ‘frustrated’ may be a better, less fixedly periodizing name for this third type than ‘contemporary Modernist’. Of the second category, the High Modernist type of *Bildungsroman*, Moretti writes that rather than culminating in socialization, ‘Youth begins to despise maturity’, and ‘looks now for its meaning within itself [...] the relevant symbolic process is no longer growth but regression’ (231). Notably, for Moretti, the ‘late’ *Bildungsroman* was not a new solution to a failed form, but a ‘failure’ itself (243), which could not overcome the problem of trauma: ‘the insoluble problem was the trauma [...] it dismantled neutralized spaces, originating a regressive symbolic anxiety. In the end nothing was left of the form of the *Bildungsroman*: a phase of western civilization had come to an end’ (244).

Gregory Castle, however, offers a diagnosis of the High Modernist *Bildungsroman* which displays rather more in the way of vital signs. In his view, ‘the modernist return to classical Bildung is a return with a difference’ (2006, 249): ‘the modernist hero is able to recuperate his or her own experiences as part of a productive process of self-development’ which does not lead to socialization but to ‘self-sufficiency’:

Self-sufficiency does not mean solipsism or isolation. It is rather an ethical frame of mind that entails a readiness to turn towards one’s inner resources, one’s inner life, in order to critique and restructure social relationships. (2006, 249)

As alluded to above, a particular facet of the *Irish Modernist Bildungsroman* is that even as the character turns psychologically inwards, they journey physically outwards: Joyce's Dedalus and Molloy's McGlone both take ship from Dublin for Europe, realising that their rejection of socially mandated 'maturity' means a rejection of Irish society as such—although Stephen, at least, will return after some years in Paris, to adopt the mantle of co-protagonist in *Ulysses*. The maintenance of his now 'mature' outlook, however, is signalled by his continued insistence on flying by the nets of social nicety: even upon his return, he will not pray at his mother's deathbed to satisfy her or the watching fellow-mourners; he chooses instead consistency with his own inner, atheistic belief system.

Castle's account of the 'late' *Bildungsroman* is certainly more nuanced, as well as more favourable, than Moretti's (this is perhaps unsurprising, given that it is Castle's chief subject, whereas Moretti's is the classic *Bildung* of the nineteenth century). Arguably, however, the contemporary development in the Modernist *Bildungsroman* takes a form closer to Moretti's diagnosis of 'regression': while the youth in the classic *Bildungsroman* becomes socialised, and in the High Modernist *Bildungsroman* they become independent, in the contemporary Modernist *Bildungsroman* such as *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, they are defeated. Stephen Dedalus, in Castle's words, 'combats the identitarian philosophy at the heart of a bourgeois ethics of socialization' (2006, 250), but *Girl* goes further still in its rejection of closure. Paige Reynolds' claim that, 'unlike Joyce's experimental *Bildungsroman*, the narrative voice of *A Girl Is Half-Formed Thing* never changes or matures' (Reynolds) is questionable—*Girl's* narrative voice as a traumatised adult is unsurprisingly different to her voice as a pre-trauma child, let alone as a foetus, and Ruth Gilligan rightly corrects Reynolds by pointing out that 'there are in fact a number of linguistic shifts which occur at significant moments in the text' (2018, 779). There is something to Reynolds' argument, however, if one recasts it to mean simply that *Girl's* narrative voice never becomes *socialised* like Stephen's. While Stephen ends *A Portrait* writing neatly lucid diary entries, in *Girl* 'the broken sentences, the snarled syntax, and repetitive phrases remain consistent throughout the entire novel' (Reynolds). As Anne Fogarty writes, 'becoming adult [...] is never represented as a viable alternative' (25). *Girl* struggles through adolescence into young womanhood, but with her brother's death and her uncle's repeated sexual abuse, she has no opportunity to 'become adult' in the

*Bildungsroman* sense of a mature and stable self. Instead, Girl decides that the ongoing trauma of her existence cannot be continued but—especially after her brother’s death—only ended, and she drowns herself in a lake. As the following section will show, it is the sexual trauma which governs her psyche from adolescence onwards that proves insurmountable. There is no closure: the incommensurability between Girl’s mental state and the world in which it compelled to exist reaches no negotiated final relationship, no narratively satisfying agreement or disagreement. Instead, it is simply cut short. This is expressed stylistically and syntactically by the abrupt final words of the novel. As David Collard writes, ‘The book doesn’t so much end as stop dead’ (76), with the lines:

Floating hair. Air damaged eyes. Brown water turning into light. There now. There now. That was just life. And now.

What?

My name is gone. (203)

Thus Girl ends, not with affirmation, but with deletion. It offers a new, defeatist conception of the Irish Modernist *Bildungsroman*: recovering Irish Modernism but also reworking it.

The difference between classic/High Modernist/contemporary Modernist *Bildung* is not pre-determined by the year of a text’s publication: an interesting illustration of this is Sara Baume’s *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), which although written in the twenty-first century, cleaves closer to the Joyce/Molloy model by ending with self-imposed exile from Ireland. Perhaps showing some overlap between the models, however, Baume’s character Frankie frames her exile more defeatedly than Stephen: Frankie knows that she will take her depression with her into exile, and concludes her narrative by asserting/affirming ‘Art, and sadness, which last forever’ (302). This example of a *contemporary* Modernist novel (in terms of the date of its publication) which fits the ‘High Modernist’ type of *Bildungsroman* makes ‘contemporary Modernist’ a rather clunky denominating term for the type of *Bildungsroman* which (I am arguing) *Girl* constitutes. Another review of *Girl*, by Hector Ramírez, offers a more useful generic categorization: according to Ramírez, *Girl* is a ‘broken’ *Bildungsroman*, never completing its protagonist’s ‘passage’ at all. The choice between integration and exile is denied to her by the traumatising experience of sexual abuse. As Ramírez writes:

McBride herself seems genuinely frustrated with the limitations and conventions of the Irish bildungsroman. She breaks the language apart not to demonstrate some arbitrary linguistic pyrotechnic skill—she does it to demonstrate the limitations of the form she nevertheless feels obliged to deploy in order to tell her story. *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* is a frustrated novel, as it should be. (np)

This ‘frustration’ is ably sketched by Anne Fogarty’s analysis, as quoted above, of three contemporary novels of Irish childhood: *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010) and Ciarán Collins’ *The Gamal* (2013). Fogarty’s paper focuses on childhood, and she theorises the ‘child’ in the specific context of social conditions in Ireland in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century: considering, for example, the sexual abuse of children by priests, and situating this explicitly within Celtic Tiger Ireland (15). She delineates the differences between the classic and Modernist *Bildungsroman* and then writes about *Girl*, *Room* and *The Gamal* as texts where the choice between socialisation and isolation is never achieved because progress towards maturity is disrupted:

Childhood, moreover, as evoked by Ciarán Collins, Emma Donoghue and Eimear McBride is a state from which there is no rescue or point of egress. Growing up or becoming adult in these fresh permutations on the Irish Bildungsroman is never represented as a viable alternative. (25)

Of the three novels which Fogarty analyses, *Girl* is by far the most interrogative. Although Collins and Donoghue do experiment with form in their novels, both of which possess convincing and highly sympathetic juvenile narrators, their texts are entirely bound by the device of this narration: Collins and Donoghue do not produce rupture, or deny closure, between the individual and the social formation in the same textual manner as *Girl*: bounded by the caprices of their narrators, their experiments can more plausibly be explained away as psychological Realism (and in Collins’ case by the conceit that *The Gamal* is in fact written by its central character on the suggestion of his psychiatrist). It is also worth noting, *en passant*, the Irish author Donoghue’s decision to set her 2010 novel in America, contributing to *Room*’s position as a less ‘Irish’ and less overtly High Modernist-influenced experimental novel whose more obvious canonical stablemates are other subjectivist novels of mentally damaged children such as American author Lionel Shriver’s *We Need to Talk about Kevin* (2003) and English author Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003). All of these texts function less as Modernist interrogation of the structures of modernity through formal innovation than

as high-calibre examples of the affective resonance of Psychological Realism when it is written well. *Room*, like McCormack's *Notes from a Coma*, can be considered an intermediary text between the loosening of the Celtic Tiger's Realist hegemony, and what this thesis argues is a McBride-led Modernist resurgence of the 2010s—as can Schofield's *Malarky*, as the following chapter will demonstrate.

## 4: Trauma

### Breaking the Madonna

The other commonality between *Girl's* development of the Modernist *Bildungsroman*, and Moretti's assessment of that development's original emergence in 1914, is the central role played by trauma in its narrative politics. Fogarty's essay, again, provides a sensitive summary:

The half-formed language of the girl is wielded by McBride to question every aspect of Irish reality, but particularly the way in which adults wield social and sexual power over children whom they lastingly damage and misshape. (24)

This 'damage' reaches its fullest expression after the Girl's Uncle assaults her, but it, and the 'frustration' to which Ramírez refers, are present in the language from those increasingly-canonical opening lines onwards. Damage and frustration are both exemplified in the following quotation, taken from an early chapter of *Girl* when the Girl is 13, shortly before her first assault. In this excerpt, the Girl's Mammy tells her, while driving home, that her older brother is educationally 'subnormal', and that this is pathological in nature: 'Well that tumour could've done more harm than we,' Mammy says (the sentence is left unfinished) (41). The Girl reacts furiously, grabbing her mother's statue of the Virgin Mary from Lourdes off the dashboard, and smashing it:

Stop. I belt young Virgin Mary on the dashboard. Take it. Take that. Wobbling the car. She. Swerve it. What the stop it stop it stop. I don't want to. Hear. I don't want. In my life. Stop the car. She stop the car. I must get. Out. On the roadside. Stop it. Let me out. Pull in.

Fuck that virgin onto the tarmac. Take her head does she like it? What's the. Don't tell me. Don't tell me that. What do I do? Aha. Aha. It makes my head run. Makes my face run. I fall in the grass. I graze my hand. I feel lungs closing up under the breathless. No. No. Breathe it. Breathe it. (41-42)

McBride's jagged stream of consciousness prose combines splinters of plot summary—'She stop the car', 'I graze my hand'—with a breathless flurry of pre-linguistic fragments (as Gilligan writes, McBride's 'formal decisions were driven by the desire to discover a viable means through which consciousness might be rendered into language; or as she

puts it "the moment just before language becomes formatted thought" (2018, 778)), communicating both the content and the nature of the Girl's distress. This hybrid style clearly refuses the authority of an omniscient narrator, but it also refuses the easy summary that stream of consciousness is simply Psychological Realism, or Lodge's 'earphones plugged into someone's brains' (47). In this hybrid, fragmentary style, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* connects to those 'feared themes' of death, sex, family, guilt and religion, but ruptures the Realist meta-language in which they have traditionally been framed, thus allowing for the objects of those discourses to assert their subjectivity in a way which requires a constant hermeneutic act by the reader, demanding that they not only observe, but actively attempt to interpret and understand the Girl's subjectivity.

The Girl's impulse to destroy the Virgin Mary icon, in an act of literal iconoclasm, prefigures the violent loss of her own virginity, and her subsequent self-destructive actions, where she seemingly attempts to endlessly re-lose her virginity to obscure this initial trauma—for example, on a train journey when the experience of this trauma begins to overwhelm her, she swiftly propositions the nearest available male for sex in the train toilet. She does not take physical pleasure from the act but emotional relief: 'I'd be sick but what else. It's what I have to do. And watch him bobbing. For he must do my thing. Under my skin [...] Let the pus run out' (150). Returning to the earlier incident, the young girl's decision to smash the statue also shows the symbolic value that her cultishly Christian surroundings place upon conservative feminine docility. Although at this stage the Girl's frustration with her taboo-led upbringing is still formative, she can already identify that shattering a Madonna statue from Lourdes is a means by which to rebel against one strand of the web of taboos which prevent a young girl from attaining full subjecthood.

She regrets breaking the statue, but the act cannot be undone: 'Sorry I broke the statue I say wet with cry. Don't mind. Don't mind the statue. Don't mind that. I don't want. Shusha shusha. I. I. No. I don't want. And I feel a sinus. Feel a brain erase' (42). Here, again, the unmediated confusion between these sentence fragments that the Girl says, those that she hears her Mammy say, those that are extradiegetic descriptions, and those that are the direct transcription of her inner monologue—means that the scene must be actively interpreted by a critically alert reader. Although the scene may be thematically

congruent with Celtic Tiger Realism, the means of its telling renders this an interrogative, Modernist text.

## Critical misreading of trauma

Later, in moments of still greater distress the prose breaks down yet further, disassembling into spelling errors and near-unintelligibility. When Boy dies, *Girl's* sentences are further truncated and staccato: 'My. lllllllllllllllllll. Love my. Brother no.' (188). During the repeated rapes by her uncle—the experiences which are accountable for the psychological instability which Girl experiences even during everyday life, consensual sexual encounters and non-sexual relationships with family members and college friends—the prose shatters: 'Jesus. I nme. Go. Away. Breeting. Skitch. Hear the way he. Slows. Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos the fuck the fucking slatch in me [...]'(193-4). There is a parallel here with Schofield's *Malarky*, in which (as the next chapter will demonstrate, and further theorise) the prose becomes disoriented when the focalising character is grieving, but in *Girl* the disorientation is far stronger, and its effects are not limited to (although they are intensified by) passages of particularly acute distress. The Joycean textuality of McBride's prose foregrounds the damage which the Girl's traumatic experiences have done to her, impairing her ability to think according to a normative mental grammar which would align her thoughts with the logic of the social formation which objectifies her.

Some critics, however, have offered a noticeably unsympathetic reading of *Girl*. Tim Aubry's *Music & Literature* review opts to ignore the underpinning role played by trauma in disrupting the Girl's consciousness. This elision allows him to patronise *Girl* as a shallow and hectoring novel of a woman who 'is not all that well psychologically' (par.7)<sup>10</sup>, which 'may go over quite well with American readers. They have a long history, after all, of cherishing novels about characters in search of some undiscovered Eden where they can

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<sup>10</sup> Aubry's article, published online, does not have pagination, but is lengthy, so paragraph numbers are supplied instead.

reclaim their lost innocence' (par.16). Aubry's reading characterises *Girl*, bizarrely, as a moral polemic against promiscuity. He believes that Girl's eventual suicide shows that McBride thinks she 'must be punished for [her] sexual transgressions' (par.15), a conclusion which can only reasonably be drawn from Aubry's own moral shrillness. He recoils from 'the narrator's grotesquely dysfunctional sex life' and refers to her promiscuity as 'her sins' (par.9) and 'dirty sexual acts' (par.8). McBride never once portrays sex as 'dirty', only that rural, conservative, Christian mindsets might find it so. Indeed the text provides plenty of evidence that such squeamish diagnoses of female sexuality are harmful and reactionary: when the Girl, her sexual awakening prematurely forced upon her by her rapist uncle, begins having sex with boys at school, her brother's moralising fury is portrayed as unsympathetic and informed by a morally conservative social context: 'Do all that? You say. Dirty stuff. Dirty things. [...] Don't you lie. You don't lie here. Is it true? Bang me off it. Go on slut say that it's so' (73). Nonetheless Aubry decouples Girl's sexual behaviour from her traumatising experience so that he can summarise this passage, ineptly, as a deliberate strategy on the teenage Girl's part: 'sex serves as a means of gaining popularity in school' (par.6).

The equivalence which Aubry creates, in a text which is cynical about religious faith throughout (see the above analysis of the Madonna incident), between compulsively seeking sex and 'sins', which he claims 'reaffirms a traditional Catholic ideal of female purity' (par.3), is echoed by Dierdre Sullivan's review of Annie Ryan's play of *Girl*, in which she writes that 'Sex, for Girl, is the same as prayer for her mother' (233). Sullivan does acknowledge 'the impact [Uncle's] rape had on [Girl's] emotional and sexual development' (233), and Aubry does open his review with reference to the narrator's life being 'emotionally terrorised by two separate traumatic ordeals' (par.1) (her brother's tumour, and 'her own sexual molestation' (par.1)), and he occasionally returns to this, to concede imprecise caveats such as 'her relationship with her uncle makes it impossible for her to view sex as anything other than sinful, dirty and wrong' (10). However, in between these signposts, Aubry does not place any sustained weight on the role of trauma in mediating the narrator's thoughts: indeed his opening summary refers to her sexual molestation 'at age thirteen' (par.1), whereas this is only the age at which Girl is *first* raped; her uncle's molestation recurs throughout her life. Neither critic acknowledges

that the Girl's trauma precludes her enjoying sex: Sullivan writes of her cathartic sexual experiences as 'physical pleasure' (233), and Aubry seems annoyed that the novel's conclusion 'seems more like a continuation of than an escape from her destructive pattern of behavior' (par.11). When one reads *Girl's* narrative aesthetic as a formal representation of the *inescapability* of rape trauma, Aubry's own sermonising, moral attempts to paint *Girl* itself as a sermonising, moral novel come to seem bizarrely unsympathetic. Thankfully, other critics demonstrate a greater command of the text, notably Anne Fogarty, who summarises Girl's psychological position with empathy and precision:

The rape is depicted ambivalently as a seduction of and an unwarranted attack on girl. Its horror is made all the more evident because it is at once willed and rejected by her. Thereafter, she internalizes the degradation at the hands of her uncle and seeks out numerous casual sexual encounters in which she both takes charge of her sexuality and perversely seeks out the role of victim. Her compulsive enactment of sado-masochistic roles is further borne out by her pursuit as an adult of a liaison with the uncle who had once raped her. (23)

As though taking the imprecision of Aubry's approach as a challenge, Gina Wisker manages to read *Girl* with an unparalleled inattentiveness. She begins by insisting that those sections of the novel which are set in 'the city' where Girl goes to college take place in 'an English city' (58), which she subsequently identifies as 'the bohemian possibilities of London' (73). This unnamed city is in fact in Ireland (and is probably Dublin), as indicated by the way Girl makes the journey to and from her west of Ireland family home by train (e.g. 90, 115, 121, 143), not by ferry or aeroplane as would be required for her to travel to England, by her college companions' use of the Irish language in their drinking games (115), and by her flatmate's threat to call, not the police, but 'the guards' (145). Wisker also claims that 'some critics saw her relations with her uncle as a romance' (73). This is a grievous claim—that any literary critic would read an adult man's deliberate rape of his 13-year-old niece as 'romance'—but a hollow one, as Wisker fails in her academic

duty to cite her sources; the impression left is that Wisker has invented ‘some critics’ for merely rhetorical effect.<sup>11</sup>

Aubry and Wisker’s misguided readings of *Girl* provide a cautionary example of what happens if Modernism is read as though it followed a Realist ethic; as if, that is, it is the novel’s duty to lay all the ‘facts’ plainly before the reader. Their analyses lack the care which is needed in order to understand *Girl*’s narrative, and especially the way that the entire novel must be read through an active, alert interpretation of the protagonist’s traumatised consciousness if its themes are to cohere. This is where the legacy of Joycean Modernism, as McBride indicates in quoting his aversion to ‘wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot’ is deployed in order to create a contemporary Modernist text which draws upon, without dully imitating, Irish High Modernism of the early twentieth century. As Wisker, in a far more perceptive passage, writes, Joyce may be the most obvious High Modernist influence upon McBride’s writing, but in some ways the more defeatist tone of Beckett is an even more immediate comparison:

Beckett is less optimistic and positive. He uses stream of consciousness and an unnamed narrative voice to create a lack of control of any relationship with the world, a dissolution of self [...] Language fails this unnamed character. The rhythms of all three writers [Joyce, Woolf and Beckett] are reworked in something new by McBride, whose style reflects her narrator’s fragmented and damaged psyche. (71)

I would add, however, that her style does something rather different than the Psychological Realist act of ‘reflecting’ her narrator’s psyche: in making-visible her novel’s own textuality, she expresses that psyche in a manner which cannot be passively absorbed. The half-formed prose of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* voices most directly the traumatic experience of violent sexual abuse, but also (and intersectionally) references the ‘already half-formed’ status of a girl in a patriarchal society, and (by implication) the

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<sup>11</sup> Bizarre critical oversight is not the sole purview of those who dislike or even criticise McBride’s novel: David Collard is fulsome in his praise for *Girl* (‘if you’re a reader who admires Ulysses then *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* is likely to knock your socks off’ (27)), but slapdash in enumerating his reasons why: he claims that his favourite McBridean coinage is the “portmanteau” word “glitching” (71), a term which has existed since at least 1973, and as “glitch” since 1962 (“glitch, v.”).

experience of the mentally ill Boy to whom Girl's lived experience is compared by the novel's title.

## 5: Conclusions

A new Irish literary Modernism has been resurgent in the wake of the financial crisis, as exemplified by the publication of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, which has become a figurehead text for this new school of Irish writers using experimental, Modernist-inspired writing techniques to offer textual representation of damaged consciousnesses such as the Girl's. It was no coincidence that the Fukuyaman capitalist jamboree of the Celtic Tiger inspired a literary landscape dominated by historical Realism, and it is not coincidental that capitalism's greatest crisis in a century should provoke—in one of its worst-affected Western regions—a backlash to this conformist, or at least quiescent, Realist dominance. As Gerry Smyth writes,

the crash of 2008 represented the return of the real with a vengeance, and it's clear to see that the waves from that momentous, ignominious fall are still crashing on the shores of the Irish consciousness today . . . The question is: what does it mean—what can it mean—to be Irish in the wake of the Celtic Tiger? (136)

But it is also not coincidental that capitalism has carried on; these Modernist texts are symptomatic of a modernity in which the cracks have appeared—catalysing the capacity for and publication of protest—but which has not been halted or replaced—catalysing the need for that protest. As Fintan O'Toole puts it in *Ship of Fools*, 'the Irish establishment has been both remarkably (and shamelessly) resilient and fiercely determined to insist that no fundamental change has happened' (216).

What is important to the 'abnormality' of Modernist style in twenty-first century writing, to the employment of this abnormal style, and to this style's correspondence with abnormal consciousness, is that the hegemon (capitalism, Realism, neatly ordered sane sober inner speech) has failed and yet remains. The crash could not have been any more clearly a wholesale repudiation of There Is No Alternative neoliberal economics — and yet, as O'Toole points out, no-one was punished for corruption in Ireland (31-32). As the subsequent decade wore on, the Ship of Fools—that is, the brazen political self-interest of Irish neoliberalism—could again be glimpsed, struggling to rise from the waters: consider the Irish government's bizarre attempts to avoid collecting a €13bn tax bill from

American multinational technology firm Apple. The Irish state apparatus, it appears, is so desperate to bring the good times back that they must be ordered by the European Commission to collect tax receipts to which they are legally entitled. This state apparatus would rather have Apple keep the receipts (BBC News), if, in exchange, Ireland's status as an international tax avoidance scheme can be swiftly restored without loss of goodwill from its American-based multinational once-and-future overseers. Yet more recently, Bertie Ahern's declaration that the UK's exit from the European Union can be successful, provided enough 'blind eyes' are turned at the Republic-Northern Ireland border (*Irish Times*), is deeply reminiscent of the atmosphere of extralegal cronyism over which Ahern presided in his role as the Celtic Tiger's anointed leader.

The re-emergence of Modernist prose in Ireland, which McBride spearheads, is thus of course not a revolution; the capitalist hegemon lumbers on, denying that it was ever wounded, and there is no guarantee that Irish literature will continue to produce radical texts. But the Tiger's collapse has precipitated the emergence, at least, of a school of textual resistance in Irish literature, which uses experimental representations of damaged consciousnesses in an attempt to unpick the seams of twenty-first century neoliberalism, or to query the continued existence of social forces, such as repressive patriarchy, which that neoliberalism might claim to have already overcome.

McBride's first novel thus bridges the pre- and post-crash eras not only in its content, but also in its form. It evokes the dominant themes of Celtic Tiger literature, but gestures far beyond them in its refusal of a Realist meta-language or the consolation of closure. All of this, in hindsight, made McBride perfectly placed to emerge as an elder-stateswoman-in-waiting for the 2010s resurgence of the experimental Irish novel. As Mike McCormack has said, in praise of her leadership in the rehabilitation of Joyce's influence: 'She made no bones about the fact that she was influenced by Joyce. And you never, ever hear Irish writers saying that, because Joyce seemed to be more a luring, disabling presence in many ways. She saw him properly, as an enabling presence, and she ran with it' (Jordan 2017).

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## CHAPTER 3

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### *It is Never Defined: Anakana Schofield's Malarky and Martin John*

#### 1: Updating 'modernism' and the 'contemporary'

In my introductory chapter I argued for the Marxist potentials of avant-garde Modernism, and against an 'endpoint' for Modernism, promoting instead a synchronic understanding of formal terms such as 'Modernist', 'Realist' or 'Postmodernist', whereby such texts can co-exist (and cross-fertilise) rather than simply proceed or alternate in a fixed chronology of succession. I also located a particularly Irish aspect to this discourse. In the remainder of the thesis I identify *contemporary* Irish Modernist novels from the early 21st century, beginning in the previous chapter with its account of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent financial collapse; this chapter identified Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* as the leading text of a post-crash Irish Modernist resurgence. This chapter looks at two further novels which participate in this resurgence, Anakana Schofield's novels *Malarky* (2012) and *Martin John* (2015), and it returns to the Marxist-oriented narratological concerns which I begun to outline in the opening chapter. I read these texts alongside critical readings of 'High Modernist' literature from the 1920s, but also through the lens of more recent critiques which pursue an 'interrogative' reading of non-Realist prose styles.

These accounts construct Modernism simultaneously as a potent artistic element of, and resistance to, 'modernity'. This modernity does not allow all of its subjects' minds to function according to the normative principles which it, and its attendant Realisms, would seek to impose. In examining *Malarky* and *Martin John*, I will expand upon definitions of '[the] contemporary', 'modernity' and 'Modernism', to substantiate one of this thesis' core arguments: that contemporary Modernism takes representations of damaged or a-normative consciousnesses as a key tenet. This argument will then be

evidenced by the structural importance of these damaged minds to *Malarky* and *Martin John*.

This illustration of what is meant by contemporary Modernism, and by damaged consciousness, is a necessary prerequisite to this thesis' placing of its arguments that contemporary Modernist representations of damaged consciousness are a key literary development in the context of post-crash Ireland; in this respect it complements Chapter 2 which deals with that context directly. As mentioned in the conclusion of the introductory chapter, these chapters are intended to work together to form the 'development' of this thesis' central argument.

## The moving ratio of modernity

Paul Rabinow's 'anthropology of the contemporary', *Marking Time*, defines the 'contemporary' not as an 'epochal term' denoting particular dates, but as a 'moving ratio of modernity [...] that gauges modernity as an ethos already becoming historical' (2). This is predicated upon the dual vernacular meaning of 'contemporary', meaning both *contemporaneous with* ('Kit Marlowe was a contemporary of Shakespeare') and *recent* ('smartphones are ubiquitous in contemporary society'). This thesis' explorations of contemporary Modernism depend upon both aspects of contemporaneity: the early-21st-century texts under scrutiny are recent at the time of writing, and roughly contemporaneous *with* the time of writing: I operate not from the position of the antiquarian, but that of the reporter or living historian; this work of criticism is 'already becoming historical' in tandem with its examples (this line of thought is developed further in chapter 6, in which I acknowledge the nascent historical distance emerging even between the post-crash historical moment of early- and mid-2010s Irish Modernist writing such as *Malarky* and *Martin John* and the 'post-post-crash' historical moment of this thesis' completion in 2019).

Rabinow writes of a 'conscious abandonment of epochal thinking', which examines 'the operations of the distinction modern/contemporary' (3). In Tom McCarthy's novel *Satin Island* (2015), which acknowledges having 'freely and shamelessly

lifted' Rabinow's theories (177), the anthropologist protagonist expounds upon the etymology of 'epoch' to argue for a perspectivist study of human culture:

The term *epoch*, I informed my listeners, originally meant 'point of view', as in the practice of astronomy; only later, I said, did it start being used to organize the world into fixed periods. This latter use, I argued, was misguided. Instead of making periodic claims which, since they can't be empirically justified, only produce an infinite regress of details and futile quibbling over boundaries and definitions, we should return to understanding *epoch* as a place from which one looks at things. From that perspective, I went on—the perspective of shifting perspectives—we can still pose the question of the difference introduced by one day, one year, one decade, in relation to another. (115-116)

This maps out the 'contemporary' side of Rabinow's 'modern/contemporary' distinction. It is a 'site of inquiry' (Rabinow 3): a collection of overlapping perspectives reminiscent of Wittgenstein's 'family resemblances', by which we may understand 'the clustered elements and stylized configurations of the modern' (Rabinow 3) in order to perform cultural inquiry. What it permits us to inquire *into* is the other side of the distinction: modernity.

Here the American Marxist Humanist Marshall Berman offers a set of conceptual tools, in his study *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, which he calls 'a study in the dialectics of modernity and modernism' (16)<sup>12</sup>. For Berman, Modernity is defined by dynamism, in opposition to stasis. As Perry Anderson summarises, Berman treats 'modernity' as 'the key middle term' between *modernization* and *Modernism*: modernity is 'neither economic process [modernization] nor cultural vision [Modernism] but the *historical experience* mediating the one to the other. What constitutes the nature of the linkage between them? Essentially, for Berman, it is *development*' (1984, 97, emphases Anderson's). This refers to both economic development—'the gigantic objective transformations of society unleashed by the advent of the capitalist world market' (Anderson 1984, 98)—and to 'the momentous subjective transformations of individual life and personality which occur under their impact' (Anderson 1984, 98). Vitally, these are processes, not states: Berman sees modernity as 'capable of everything except solidity and stability' (19). He dates the

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<sup>12</sup> All 'Berman' references in this thesis, save for the 'Signs in the Street' reference in the following footnote, are to this text

onset of 'the modern' back not to the late-nineteenth or early-twentieth centuries, but 'close to five hundred years' earlier to the early 16th century, when modernization began to disrupt an essentially pre-modern public who lacked 'an adequate vocabulary [...] a modern public or community' (17) with which to harness, or even comprehend, the dynamism of modernity. 'Although most [...] people have probably experienced modernity as a radical threat to all their history and traditions,' (15-16) Berman understands 'modernity' as dialectically galvanizing *and* enervating. It is 'a unity of disunity [...] a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' (15).

Modernism is for Berman the very act of creating that 'adequate vocabulary', forging (in the true Joycean double-sense: *manufacturing* and/but also *faking*) that public and community which not only suffers the exigencies of modernity, but also demands agency from them. For Berman, this vocabulary began to take shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Modernism is 'an amazing variety of visions and ideas that aim to make men and women *the subjects as well as the objects* of modernization' (Berman 1983, 16, emphasis mine). In the introductory chapter I quoted Susan Stanford Friedman's claim that Modernism constitutes the 'expressive dimension of modernity' (2006, 432): as noted there, this could infer that Modernism is a *passive* symptom, automatically created by modernity without agentive action from autonomous or semi-autonomous artistic creativity. Berman's insightful definition avoids this possible reading except where it is dialectically intertwined with a culture of resistance within the Modernist text: 'all forms of modernist art [...] are at once expressions of and protests against the process of modernization' (235).

Modernism is a product of modernity, but it turns to face its producer. Berman even positions it as the *only* art which can apprehend (again, two meanings are in play) modernity: writing on modern literature in 19th century St Petersburg, he notes Realism's failing grasp of its unstable context: 'realism in literature and thought must develop into modernism, in order to grasp the unfolding, fragmenting, decomposing and increasingly

shadowy realities of modern life' (257). As Anderson states, 'modernism is profoundly revolutionary, for Berman' (1984, 100)<sup>13</sup>

A particular strand of these 'shadowy realities' has become a recurrent, even generic, theme of the Modernist novel in Ireland in the wake of the financial crisis: mental a-normativity, or damaged consciousness; we have already seen how *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* evinces a traumatised poetics. The subjectivist impulse of the early twentieth-century 'High Modernist' novel has been inherited, and re-focused specifically upon the subjective experience of minds which, through inflicted or innate damage, are subordinate to social norms. Such characters were certainly present in High Modernism: Woolf's Septimus Smith (*Mrs Dalloway*), Beckett's Molloy/Moran (*Molloy*) and Faulkner's Benjy Compson (*The Sound and the Fury*) are all notable examples of such damaged High Modernist minds. However there has been a crystallization of this theme as the *defining* narrative characteristic of the twenty-first century Modernist resurgence, with texts such as Schofield's novels and McBride's *Girl* turning to non-Realist prose to give voice to marginalised, mentally a-normative subjects.<sup>14</sup>

In sum (and to over-simplify), the twenty-first century Irish Modernist novel seeks to characterise those men and women, in Berman's terms, who are most clearly *objects* of twenty-first century modernity. This fits with Berman's broader historical survey of modernity, particularly his observation that 'modernism is preoccupied with the dangerous impulses that go by the name of "sensation of the abyss" [...] modernism seeks a way into the abyss, but also a way out, or rather a way through' (266). The abyss, in this sense, is the crisis of Irish national identity engendered by the transition from an almost doctrinal insistence upon optimism and self-congratulation during the most prosperous

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<sup>13</sup> Anderson himself believes that 'Modernism is the emptiest of all cultural categories' (1984, 112), and opposes Berman's work as incompatible with utopian Marxism, but gives inadequate justification to connect these propositions; Berman is justified in retorting that Anderson's review 'is so appreciative and generous at the beginning, so dismissive and scornful at the end—not merely toward my book, but toward contemporary life itself. What happens in the middle? I can't figure it out' (Berman, 'The Signs in the Street', 1984)

<sup>14</sup> A more minor strand of the same phenomenon may be noted in post-crash British literature too, with perhaps greater influence from the late-twentieth century poetics of Scottish authors James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, in texts such as Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (2010).

years of the Celtic Tiger, to the doomier public discourse which accompanied the sudden onset of the financial crash.

The *compatibility* of Berman's model with a trend towards Modernist novels of damaged consciousnesses does not (yet) constitute a rationale for this trend. As Rabinow, via McCarthy, writes, we can reject periodization yet still 'pose the question of the difference' between different sites of modernity. This particular difference of focus, towards the mentally a-normative, is reflective of the newly impoverished social circumstances of Ireland in the aftermath of the financial crash, and the newly honest admission of the social injustices which already obtained in Celtic Tiger Ireland, but which it was, at the time, unfashionable to acknowledge. In a characteristic fusillade of imagery, Berman writes that Modernist protest must 'open up our society's inner wounds, to show that they were still there, that they were spreading and festering, that unless they were faced fast they would get worse' (328). The previous chapter displayed the changing context from Tiger to Crash: this chapter takes a more narratological angle to examine the attendant shift *from* Realism *to* Modernism which occurred across this economic paradigm shift. Through the lens of Anakana Schofield's novels *Malarky* and *Martin John*, I will attempt a meta-diagnosis, one step removed, of those societal wounds as perceived by the Irish Modernist novelists of this thesis' own contemporary *epoch*; and, specifically, *how* contemporary authors use Modernist narratological aesthetics to perceive and 'open up' these wounds. I turn first to *Malarky* as a 'partially Modernist' novel which provides a good example of how Modernist aesthetics can disrupt an otherwise safely Realist narrative schema, and secondly to *Martin John* in which Schofield abandons Realist prose styles altogether, to powerful effect.

## 2: Poetics of grieving in *Malarky*

Anakana Schofield is an 'English born author, who identifies as Irish-Canadian' (Quill and Quire), but her first novel, *Malarky*, is firmly Irish in setting, and in stylistic lineage: press reviews invoke Irish forebears Joyce and Beckett (Shilling) and Schofield's Irish contemporaries such as Kevin Barry and Donal Ryan (Ní Dhuibhne), although one Canadian article also notes the influence of Vancouver 'social-realist writing [of] the 1960s and 70s' (Quill and Quire). The novel's narrative perspective inhabits the mind of Our Woman, a farmer's wife in the west of Ireland, whose security in her conventional rural/small-town lifestyle is first shaken by her son Jimmy's homosexuality and the apparent discovery of her husband's infidelity, then dismantled entirely by her husband's death on his way (as she believes) to meet his lover, and finally Jimmy's death while serving with the US military. The order of these events can be difficult to track, as the novel is ordered as a series of fragmented segments, separated by asterisks and ranging from a couple of words—'All incidental' (135)—to several pages (e.g. p20-p25) in length. These fragments are compiled into 20 'episodes'—chapters—of approximate thematic coherence, but the ordering of the fragments themselves is chronologically non-linear. Our Woman's grief, rather than strict linear chronology, dictates the novel's ordering: in Virginia Woolf's terminology, *Malarky* runs according to 'time in the mind' rather than 'time on the clock' (Woolf 1928, 95).

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan identifies 'three aspects of narrative fiction' (2), translating '[Gerard] Genette's distinction between "*histoire*", "*récit*" and "*narration*"' (3) into the English terms 'story', 'text' and 'narration' (3). In this schema, 'story' is the narrated events themselves, an abstracted succession of (in a fictional text) imagined incidents, conversations and internal states. 'Text' is what we read—the book, essay, or film. Finally, 'narration' is the 'act or process of production'. To summarise: reading the *text*, the reader acquires knowledge of the *story* via the *narration*. The mental damage—specifically, grief—which Our Woman experiences manifests itself formally in *Malarky* as a damaged poetics: the chronological ordering of the *story* is disrupted at the level of *narration* by the focalising character's mental a-normativity: in first episode Our Woman

speaks to her counsellor after Jimmy's death (1), in the second she speaks to Jimmy some time previously (10), and so on. An interesting parallel in recent British writing is Max Porter's 2015 novel *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, which has a more flamboyantly magical-realist story involving a giant crow who personifies the other characters' mourning, but similarly uses the psychological rhythms of grieving to order the narration. Rimmon-Kenan notes that of her three 'aspects', 'the text is the only one directly available to the reader. It is through the text that he or she acquires knowledge of the story [...] and of the narration' (4). In *Malarky*, although there are significant Realist aspects to the prose style, this knowledge is acquired in a fashion which begins to be non-compliant with the norms of Realist fiction (such as chronological linearity and reliable external narration): the distance between the text and these two other aspects, or 'metonymies of the text' (Rimmon-Kenan, 4), is exacerbated. This exacerbation creates a novel which, like a Brechtian performance, involves an act of imaginative creation by its reader/audience, who must actively interpret the relationship between text and story to make sense of the fractured narration. A reader of *Malarky* or *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* must divine for themselves the 'trick' (more clearly signposted in Porter's novel than Schofield's) of reading the narration as ordered by the focalising character(s) grief, if they are to coherently translate the text into story. Although the medium here is prose fiction rather than dramatic performance, it is a clear expression of Brecht's call, as expressed by Terry Eagleton, for art 'that is formally uneven, interrupted, discontinuous, juxtaposing its scenes in ways which disrupt conventional expectations' (Eagleton 1976, 65).

The 'fragments' of *Malarky's* narration are internally consistent: singular in narrative perspective and linear in chronology. The 'episodes' are not: some episodes consist only of fragments from a single event (or a linear, causal series of events) in the narrative, while other episodes contain fragments from multiple events. Our Woman's perspective is either first-person retrospective narration, as in 'I wondered amid all this clutter how long he'd be staying?' (66), or a focalised, third-person free indirect style: 'Every few days Jimmy asked her for money and she obliged him out the housekeeping money her husband gave her. She'd tell him the prices have gone up and see would he give her more' (66). As the identical page references suggest, these two different narrative

events, though in separate fragments, are from a single episode, demonstrating *Malarky's* refusal to cohere into an intuitive Realist narrative.

The terminology used here—of focalisation and free indirect style—is vital to the analyses which follow. Thus, before undertaking a close reading of *Malarky*, I will divert into narratology to elucidate these terms, and where such definitions are contentious (as they often are), to specify which versions of narratological terminology this thesis employs.

## Free Indirect Discourse and Uncle Charles

The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* entry for 'Free Indirect Discourse', written by Brian McHale, defines this frequent trope of Modernist prose in comparison to 'direct discourse' and 'indirect discourse', 'though whether it can be derived in any rigorous way from these other forms is controversial' (188)—indeed he notes that 'Nothing about FID is uncontroversial' (188). As the term 'discourse' here suggests, the terminology in question has its origins in a taxonomy of speech representation, although it is often seamlessly transposed onto thought representation simply by treating thought as an uncomplicated monovocalic 'inner speech'. 'Direct discourse' here refers to the mimetic quotation of characters' speech (in English this conventionally involves the speech being bracketed between paired quotation marks). *Indirect* (but unfree) discourse is a summary of that speech using the governing narratorial voice. McHale illustrates these differentiations using variations on a para-quotation from Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916):

1. Direct Discourse: He said, 'I will retire to the outhouse'.
2. Indirect Discourse: He said that he would retire to the outhouse.
3. FID: He would retire to the outhouse. (189)

McHale suggests that 'FID is "indirect" because it conforms in person and tense to the template of indirect discourse, but "free" because it is not subordinated grammatically to a verb of saying or thinking' (189). The third-person quotation from *Malarky*, 'She'd tell him the prices have gone up', is an internal utterance by Our Woman which meets these

criteria for FID: if it were Direct Discourse, it might read “‘I’ll tell him the prices have gone up,’ she thought.’ In (unfree) Indirect Discourse, it could be rendered as: ‘*She thought* that he would tell him the prices have gone up.’ The first-person statement also quoted, by contrast, is standard indirect discourse: ‘*I wondered* amid all this clutter how long he’d be staying’.

Catherine Belsey, whose Brechtian aesthetics I began to explore in the first chapter, writes that Realist prose is characterised by a ‘hierarchy [that] works above all by means of a privileged voice which places as subordinate all the utterances that are literally or figuratively between inverted commas.’ (1980, 65). FID troubles this hierarchy through its elision of obvious frame-markers to separate the novel’s governing narration from the character’s thought or speech, such as the quotation marks which Joyce famously called ‘perverted commas’ because, as Maud Ellman writes, ‘they insinuate a spurious hierarchy’ between narration and character and ‘impose boundaries between speakers, implying that their speech is private property’ (60). FID therefore, troubles hierarchical narrative frames: as Rimmon-Kenan writes, it ‘dramatizes the problematic relationship between any utterance and its origin’ (113). Here we begin to get a sense of the compatibility of FID with a Modernist aesthetic which creates a critical distance between reader and text to demand active interpretation, and fracture Realist hierarchies. But FID can still be used to render speech rather than thought, without recourse to a character’s inner speech, and without any specifically Modernist approach to that speech. Dorrit Cohn, who prefers the term ‘Narrated Monologue’ ‘as an English equivalent for *style indirect libre* and *erlebte Rede*’ (109), cites the versatility of FID to refute that it is ‘a mark of modernity’ (115): she writes that narrated monologue is as characteristic of ‘the novelists of our [20<sup>th</sup>] century who are most conservative in matters of form (Thomas Wolfe, Mauriac, or Lawrence)’ (115) as it is of Modernist experimentation. A further point to add here is that there is certainly scope for investigating such writers’ work to examine whether writing Modernist techniques *into* Realist texts represents a neutering-by-assimilation of Modernist protest, in what

Raymond Williams would refer to as the incorporation of the emergent by the dominant<sup>15</sup>. It is not FID itself, but the combination of FID with *focalization* through a mediating ‘third-person centre of consciousness’ (Rimmon-Kenan, 73) which produces the sort of subjectivist prose that Commissar Lukács was so keen to oppose. As Rimmon-Kenan writes, ‘focalization and narration are distinct activities [...] However, focalization and narration may sometimes be combined’ (73). To this end, McHale’s selection of ‘he would retire to the outhouse’ as his exemplar sentence is pointed, as it directly references a critical intervention by Hugh Kenner which outlines how Modernist prose uses focalization to reject fixed hierarchies of narrative framing. Kenner named this intervention the ‘Uncle Charles Principle’.

Kenner, in his 1978 work *Joyce’s Voices*, quotes the phrase ‘uncle Charles repaired to his outhouse’ from Joyce’s *A Portrait*. Wyndham Lewis had previously cited this phrase to exemplify incompetence on Joyce’s part: Lewis wrote that ‘People *repair* to places in works of fiction of the humblest order’ (qtd. in Kenner, 17)—as Kenner puts it, Lewis ‘was characterizing Joyce as a humble scrivener’ prone to lapses into cliché. Kenner’s insight is to realise that uncle Charles’ ‘notions of semantic elegance’ (17) in fact inform the word choice: the pretentious verb choice is not Joyce’s pretension, but his character’s: “‘Repaired’ wears invisible quotation marks’ (17). This is the Uncle Charles Principle: ‘*the narrative idiom need not be the narrator’s*’ (Kenner 18, emphasis Kenner’s). The prose is focalised through the character’s perspective, not only epistemologically (so that the narrator knows no more than the character, as in standard first-person narration), but also *idiomatically*: ‘The narrative idiom [is] bent by a person’s proximity as a star defined by Einstein will bend passing light’ (Kenner 71). Cohn describes the same technique less poetically but with more technical precision, as ‘the technique for rendering a character’s thought in his own idiom while maintaining the third-person reference and the basic tense of narration’ (100). An intriguing tension between Kenner and Cohn’s analyses of this technique in Joyce is that while Kenner finds that ‘a general truth about Joyce’s method’ is ‘that his fictions tend not to have a detached narrator, though they

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<sup>15</sup> See chapter 6 for more on Williams’ model of emergent, dominant and residual cultural modes.

seem to have' (16), Cohn finds in *Ulysses* that 'a narrator is distinctly present', whose 'burlesque of sentimental *kitsch*' provides 'the common denominator between his narration and [the character's] thoughts' (121).

In a more recent intervention into this narratological discourse, Luke Gibbons has noted, like Cohn, that the deployment of free indirect discourse is not in itself either Modernist or even deliberately political:

there is nothing inherently emancipatory in the deployment of [FID] [...] it was often used to put down marginal or dissident voices [...] In these cases, the authority of the master narrative(s) eventually prevails. (2015, 101)

However, the Modernist deployment of FID, as practiced by Joyce, politicises it. Observing that Modernism is not about subjectivity *per se* but about 'socially contested linguistic domains' (2015, 83), Gibbons describes Joycean FID in explicitly political, egalitarian terms: '[Joyce's] uses of the technique set out not to denigrate demotic speech, but to enable previously silenced voices to break into, or upstage, dominant or consensual narrative forms' (2015, 101). Gibbons' clarification of the specific ways in which Joyce deploys FID clearly align the narratological taxonomy of Modernist technique presented by McHale, Rimmon-Kenan, Cohn and Kenner with the political project of emancipatory Modernism outlined by Berman, Adorno, Bloch and Brecht. As Gibbons makes clear, subversion and style are combined in Joyce to political effect: 'it is this rejection of due deference [...] that is worked back into Joyce's politics of style' (2015, 101)

The Uncle Charles Principle (henceforth, UCP), can be seen in this politicised form in *Malarky*, in both the first- and third-person fragments, showing that whilst Schofield's work does not have so obvious a Joycean affinity as McBride's *Girl*, it can still be located within the continuum of Irish modernist prose. Our Woman's idiolect influences the seemingly 'narrated' prose of *Malarky*, and the *damaged* nature of her inner speech causes 'damage' to the text, forcing the reader into an act of creative reconstitution—one might even say healing—in order to understand the events being narrated. These effects are demonstrated in the following analysis.

## Our Woman's Mind

Late in the text of *Malarky*—in the 15<sup>th</sup> episode of 20—Our Woman visits a shopping mall in Dublin. She has recently learned of her son Jimmy's death while serving abroad with the American military, her second bereavement in quick succession after her husband's car accident: 'What did surprise her was how angry she became at her husband, who by virtue of his own inconvenient death had absented himself from this final chapter' (152). She is also still affected by her spell in a psychiatric hospital: 'In her mind [Jimmy's death] was all old news [...] she'd known all this since that time Himself had taken her to the hospital' (151). Understandably destabilised by this relentless litany of mentally traumatising events, she travels to Dublin. At the novel's beginning, 'Himself' exhorted her to 'go in to the town, have a look at the shops' (19). She then considered this an unsympathetic dismissal: 'The shops, to the male, ever the solution to the glowering female' (19). Now, with the two males in her family deceased, she self-medicates with her husband's prescription: 'a day's shopping, the solution her dead husband prescribed. She smiles to think she's begun listening to him now he's passed on.' (157)

While dully browsing a department store, Our Woman becomes disoriented. A rambling train of thought leads her from wondering whether black shoppers have experienced similar bereavements to her own—'They might have dead children, especially the Africans' (158)—to an attempt to reconstruct the geography of the Middle East, where Jimmy died, in her mind: 'Maybe it was at the vests, the packets of two vests she became confused about Iran—what language do they speak there? Iranian?' (159). Her mind thus 'confused', she accidentally shoplifts some tea towels and is apprehended by security guards. They are kind and let her go, but the experience humiliates her, and she starts to cry:

She tries to imagine saying it's my son, my son's been killed but it doesn't sound right, my son's been killed and you are all out shopping she wants to say, but corrects herself, she too, is out shopping. (160)

Though there is a partial discourse marker offered by the initial statement 'she tries to imagine saying', the absence of any subsequent quotation marks make it difficult to tell which sentences are transcribing Our Woman's inner speech (that is, the words she tries

to imagine saying), and which are external narration. It is not so much the word choice which performs the role of UCP here, as Schofield's use of punctuation: the lack of a comma after 'killed', the missing full stop (or colon) after 'sound right', and the disorienting use of a comma after 'corrects herself' contribute to a distortion of the rules governing the conventional Realist thought transcription which obtains elsewhere in the novel. Both external narration ('she tries') and inner speech transcription ('it's my son, my son's been killed') are in use here, but the elision of clear punctuation to delineate the transition between these modes allows Our Woman's fragmented, repetitive internal monologue to disrupt any clear hierarchy of narrative framing. As Our Woman's distress mounts, this fragmentation and repetition both intensify. Seeing 'the two brass statues of the women shopping' (160) on Lower Liffey Street, she feels an overwhelming resentment towards her own psychological state:

[...] she longs to be a woman who sits and talks to another like her about shopping instead of this flustering that's taken her over and has her eyes evacuating themselves in public. She cannot be certain if the grief is worse than the fear of humiliation. She's let herself go, she's let herself go, in public, continuously roil around her head like the belt of a generator. Beirut, Beirut and you've let yourself go, you daft woman, eventually meet on a loop of Beirut and let go, Beirut and let go. (161)

As with the previous example, this passage opens with a direct discourse marker which is *not* characteristic of FID: 'she longs'. This sentence, and the next, describe Our Woman's condition with a lucidity of which one might expect her to be incapable: while 'eyes evacuating themselves' is consistent with Our Woman's usual articulate, idiosyncratic idiom, the diagnostic precision of 'she cannot be certain if the grief is worse than the fear of humiliation' seems more like a summary offered by a detached observer, suggesting the intervention of the 'reliable' external narrator of Realist convention. The formal grammar of this sentence does not betray any evidence of UCP. However without an overt marker, the next sentence suddenly shifts into a narrative idiom which clearly is *not* that detached narrator's: if it were, one would expect either quotation marks (in direct discourse) or (in unfree indirect discourse) a discourse marker such as '*this phrase continuously roiled*'. The lack of a tense marking *-s* or *-ed* suffix to the words 'roil' likewise disrupts any attempt to schematise the passage: if it read *roiled*, then one could assert simply that the phrases which are obviously Our Woman's own 'wear invisible quotation

marks': 'She's let herself go', 'she's let herself go, in public', 'Beirut, Beirut', 'you've let yourself go, you daft woman' and 'Beirut and let go, Beirut and let go'. But the insertion of these quotation marks are discordant with the word *roil*, which imparts both a tense (present) and number (plural) onto Our Woman's inner speech that sit at odds with the past-tense narrative prose of the previous sentence, and with the singularity of her mantra-like thoughts implied by the word 'continuously'. UCP is in effect through both vocabulary and grammar here, projecting the character's disorientation onto the text itself.

Simultaneously, the repetition in this passage, like the repetition of 'my son's been killed' discussed above, uses FID to communicate the deadening obstinacy of these repetitions in Our Woman's mind. The passage opens with lucid interjections from the governing narration, but is taken over by phrases which thrum 'like the belt of a generator' until the paragraph, like Our Woman's mind, coheres into a single ostinato repetition: 'Beirut and let go, Beirut and let go'. Schofield's use of UCP and FID, particularly with regard to sentence structure, communicates Our Woman's mental distress directly to the audience, without subordinating it to the 'sanity' of a grammatically conventional narrator.

This is not to claim that *Malarky* is a particularly startling break in literary form; a major reason why *Malarky* is a good introductory example of twenty-first century Irish Modernism is its simplicity, and its *partial* adherence to Realist prose convention. Analysing the emergent use of Modernist techniques in *Malarky* provides a foundation upon which analyses of more thoroughly Modernist texts, such as Schofield's own *Martin John*, below, may be built. What *Malarky* does evidence capably is the importance of characters with a-normative consciousnesses to the contemporary Modernist text. It is the intensification of distress, in response to the trauma of her grief, that catalyses Schofield's need for the Modernist intensification of *Malarky*'s prose style (as the other chapters of this thesis demonstrate, other forms of 'damage' such as drug use or social exclusion provide this catalyst for other texts; a-normative consciousnesses are not necessarily grieving; perhaps not even necessarily traumatised, at least not by a singular originating event). Conversely, when Our Woman feels in control of a situation, *Malarky* proceeds using standard Realist grammar: conducting a tryst with a stranger (in an effort

to understand her husband's own alleged infidelity), she becomes frustrated at the stranger's lack of sexual directness:

She counted thirty seconds of his faffing and then undid her neat cardigan in a practical and deliberate manner, opened her blouse, removed it and laid it out, so it would not sustain wrinkles' (49).

Although the UCP is still deployed here—the fussiness of the terms 'faffing' and 'neat' reflect Our Woman's fastidious detachment from a sexual encounter she regards as a necessary chore—there is no further troubling of narrative hierarchy in this context, as it is a context in which Our Woman's subjective experience of her situation is assured, even dominant. Similarly, the novel's very last sentence, 'Occasionally it makes sense, just for a moment' (217), has an aphoristic quality surprisingly redolent of Belsey's definition of 'that form of closure which in classic realism is also disclosure' (1980, 84). When the world 'makes sense' to Our Woman's troubled mind, *Malarky* is very close to a conventional, Realist novel. *Malarky* becomes Modernist when the text is taken over by mourning. This recalls Gibbons' observation regarding Joyce, that it is not FID itself which is Modernist (similarly, as we have just seen, *Malarky* uses the Uncle Charles Principle even in its non-Modernist passages), but its use 'to enable previously silenced voices to break into, or upstage, dominant or consensual narrative forms' (2015, 101).

The more damaged Our Woman's mind, the more fully she is reduced to 'object' status (as evidenced by her intermittent commitment to a psychiatric ward), and the more fully the narration expresses a modernist aesthetic. *Malarky* thus constitutes a paradigmatic case-study of Berman's aforementioned claim that Modernism constitutes an attempt 'to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization' (16). An additional implication might easily be assumed, given the Marxist ideology of this thesis' theoretical background sources, the status of McBride's Girl as a survivor of horrific abuse, and the tragic causes of Our Woman's grief: that contemporary Modernism's representations of damaged consciousnesses function as an emancipatory offer of cultural representation for morally upright subjects who are victimised by an immoral society. While this holds true (to varying degrees) in *Malarky* and *Girl*, it is not a necessary corollary of either Berman's claims or those of this thesis. Modernist subjectivism can portray minds objectified by modernity *without* considering them to be needful of

emancipation; if Modernism shows us society's festering 'inner wounds', it would be curious if those wounds were entirely free of infection. Acknowledging this does complicate a simplistic Marxist defence of the avant-garde. A good example of these complications comes from reading Schofield's second novel, *Martin John*, in which the relationship between the damaging potential of modernity and the psychologically damaged protagonist is not as straightforward as with the grief-stricken character of *Malarky's* Our Woman.

### 3: Anakana Schofield: *Martin John*

György Lukács, as established in my introductory chapter, opposed Modernist 'distortion' because of Realism's supposed pre-eminent ability to access a knowable social totality. In his account *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, he characterises modernism as espousing an 'obsession with morbidity' (1962, 29)<sup>16</sup>. *Malarky* might be vulnerable to such an assessment due to the a-normativity of both Our Woman's mental states and sexual actions, which —including both infidelity and attempts to recreate her son's relations with male lovers— would certainly be deemed 'perverse' by a monogamist and/or heteronormative culture, which her rural Irish community certainly is. This is exemplified by her own initial reaction to Jimmy's homosexuality: 'He's done for. He must be gone from this country, this country where there is no forgiveness for such a thing' (17). However it is easy to see that *Malarky* can be defended against Lukács' accusations of 'morbidity' by arguing that it is innately a moral text, showing a virtuous character undone by external circumstances. Our Woman is innately a good citizen, unfortunately destabilised by trauma. *Martin John*, however, might seem far more likely to justify Lukács' accusations.

The eponymous protagonist of Schofield's second novel not only lives on the margins of normative society, but also perpetrates a range of sexual crimes: Martin is most commonly a flasher and a frotteur, but has committed at least one violent sexual

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<sup>16</sup> All Lukács references in this chapter are to this text

assault. His actions, therefore, are not only those of a marginalised individual, but are actions which marginalise others—mainly vulnerable young women not dissimilar to the McBride's traumatised Girl, as discussed in the previous chapter. Lukács' claim that 'modernist writing [...] leads straight to a glorification of the abnormal' (32) is a particularly stern test for Schofield's second novel: while McBride's *Girl* or Schofield's own *Malarky* might evidence the position that the 'abnormal' are victims, rendered 'objects' rather than 'subjects' by violent trauma, Martin's reprehensible actions cannot be affirmed in such terms, and thus *Martin John* necessitates a more thorough questioning of Lukács' implied premise: that a portrayal of the 'overtly perverse' (as Lukács finds in Beckett (31, 32)) is necessarily a 'glorification' of the perverse individual.

## Aggression and transgression

*Martin John*, published in 2015, is a novel-length 'footnote' to *Malarky*, which takes as its protagonist Our Woman's fellow patient during her stay in the psychiatric hospital. Our Woman, who names her ward-mate 'Beirut' after his sole topic of conversation (this is the origin of the words 'Beirut, Beirut' in Our Woman's thoughts quoted above), is surprised when 'Beirut' receives a visitor: 'A squat woman, wearing a headscarf [...] she calls him Martin John\* and Our Woman decides it's not a good name for him' (175). The asterisk leads to a footnote which reads: 'See Martin John: a footnote novel' (175).

The resultant 320-page 'footnote' is a disconnected, dissociative novel which operates (mostly) from Martin John Gaffney's (Beirut's) focalized third-person perspective. Martin's mother (his visitor in *Malarky*, referred to as 'mam') has sent him to live alone in London after his deviant conduct, culminating in a violent sexual assault in a dentist's waiting room, began to attract too much attention in his small Irish hometown. Just as *Malarky* follows the rhythmical structures of Our Woman's grief, *Martin John* operates according to Martin's own internal states, not the normative grammars of the state and social apparatuses from which he is excluded. Those internal states, however, are far more troubling in *Martin John*. Martin, far from being a blameless victim of patriarchal or capitalist hegemony, is himself an agent of sexual violence: an *Irish*

*Examiner* review glibly diagnoses Martin as 'a man with psycho-sexual problems and obsessive compulsive disorder' (Sheridan, par.11). As McBride herself writes in her review of *Martin John* in *The New York Times*:

Schofield's frequently hilarious, and distinctly modernist, linguistic games are always gainfully employed in the uneasy, indelicate task of placing her reader nose to nose with the humanity of a sex offender. (McBride 2015)

Jon Day, writing for the *Irish Times*<sup>17</sup>, also notes the difficult moral position into which Schofield triangulates her readers, calling *Martin John* 'a novel which extends our notion of empathy without ever asking us to condone or even to understand Martin John's behaviour' (Day). However Day's additional claim that Martin emerges 'if not as a sympathetic character, [then] as a person you want to spend time with' (Day) seems an extravagant reaction to Martin's occasional fleeting exhibition of more endearing idiosyncrasies.

As *Martin John*'s mind is undoubtedly more damaged than *Our Woman*'s, it makes sense within Schofield's narratology that his depiction is still further displaced from Realist norms: whereas *Malarky* provides something of a bridge between the Realist novels dominant in the previous epoch (in both the dictionary's sense of the term and Paul Rabinow's) and the post-crash school of truly interrogative Irish Modernism, *Martin John* belongs wholeheartedly to the latter, and is probably the most truly 'experimental' of all of the novels surveyed in this thesis. Lukács recognises that such narratological 'exaggerated concern with formal criteria' (17) is fundamental to Modernist literature. Faux-generously putting aside the 'striking difference in intellectual quality' (18) which he observes between the Modernist Joyce and the 'true realist' Thomas Mann, Lukács perceives that:

with Joyce the stream-of-consciousness technique is no mere stylistic device; it is itself the formative principle governing the narrative pattern and the presentation of character. Technique here is something absolute; it is part and parcel of the aesthetic ambition informing *Ulysses*. With Thomas Mann, on the other hand, the

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<sup>17</sup> Full disclosure: this highly positive Jon Day review is to some extent a self-selected critique, as it was recommended to me by Schofield via her Twitter account on 4 December 2016: <https://twitter.com/AnakanaSchofiel/status/805439096147492864>

*monologue intérieur* is simply a technical device, allowing the author to explore aspects of Goethe's work which would not have been otherwise available. (18)

Theodor Adorno wryly observes of this comparison that Lukács 'plays [Mann] off against Joyce with a fulsome flattery that would have nauseated the great chronicler of decay' (171). Nonetheless, taking this excerpt on its own merits, Lukács' insights are sound. Indeed, they dovetail neatly with Dorrit Cohn's observation that a given text's use of narratological devices which may be considered 'Modernist' (in Cohn's quotation, free indirect discourse, in Lukács', '*monologue intérieur*' or stream of consciousness) does not necessarily indicate that a Modernist ethos underpins the text. Just as D. H. Lawrence can use FID to create a formally 'conservative' novel, so Thomas Mann can deploy interior monologue in support of a Realist ethos: Lukács and Cohn's shared evaluation is, almost tautologically, that Modernist texts are those which take Modernist technique as a 'formative principle'. Lukács then imposes a qualitative judgement onto this distinction which transforms his taxonomy into a polemic: to demonstrate Realism's political superiority to Modernism, he categorises this 'formative principle' as a 'dogma' involving 'a measure of sophistry' to 'belittle historicity' and promote the 'negation of history' (21), ignoring the obvious counter-argument that Realist styles, too, take their *own* contingent formal and stylistic techniques as a formative principle of *Realist* aesthetics.

Lukács moves to considering Modernist depiction of troubled subjectivities, and his distaste escalates into invective. He identifies 'the problem, central to all modernist literature, of the significance of psycho-pathology' (28) in the early twentieth-century work of Austrian writer Robert Musil. At this stage, he is prepared to grant that with Musil and his Naturalist forebears this 'interest in psychopathology sprang from an aesthetic need', enacting 'a moral protest against capitalism' (29)—a compatible observation with Berman's remarks about Modernism's ambitions to locate a way through the 'abyss' of modernity. However for Lukács this protest is misguided from the beginning. He characterises it as a psycho-pathology in itself: an 'obsession with morbidity' (29), an 'obsession with the pathological' (30), and a 'fascination with morbid eccentricity' (31)—one cannot avoid observing that after a few of these comments Lukács himself begins to sound obsessed. His contention is a cruelly normative one; that by focusing on characters displaying 'eccentricity' (31), 'sexual perversity' (32) or, in the case of Beckett's *Molloy*,

‘an idiot’s vegetative existence’ (32), Modernism reduces itself to perversion: to ‘a glorification of the abnormal and to an undisguised anti-humanism’ (32).

Adorno again rebuts Lukács’ attempts to cast Modernism as anti-humanist decadence or distortion, approaching instead a more emancipatory political understanding of Modernism which subsequent critics, including Berman and Gibbons, and Belsey and Colin MacCabe (explored below), have been able to build upon. When Lukács claims that Modernism’s recurrent theme of loneliness (and Martin John is certainly lonely) represents a turn away from social totality towards a ‘negation of history’, Adorno replies that acknowledging loneliness under modernity *is* a social diagnosis. ‘As someone who claims to think in radically historical terms’, Adorno notes, ‘Lukács of all people ought to know that in an individualistic society loneliness is socially mediated and so possesses a significant historical content’ (158). With specific regard to Lukács’ remarks on psychopathology, Adorno notes that such direct condemnation of all aesthetic representations of the mentally a-normative can only depend on a repressively normative argumentation. Lukács, Adorno writes, operates:

with a truly ‘immediate’, wholly uncritical concept of normality, complementing it with the idea of pathological disturbance that naturally accompanies it. [...] Any form of social criticism which does not blush to go on talking about the normal and the perverted, is itself still under the spell of the very ideas it claims to have superseded. (170)

Adorno’s comments, like Lukács’ own fleeting remark concerning Musil’s ‘moral protest against capitalism’, here point beyond simply rejecting a-normative consciousnesses as *unfit* subjects for Modernist writing, and towards the stronger claim that such consciousnesses are a *vital* subject for Modernist writing. An ‘aesthetic ambition’ of ‘distortion’ is not a disavowal of social totality, it is a necessary form of literary engagement with modernity. Perry Anderson and Adorno however, rightly note that Lukács is excited to ‘a plainly over-generalized notion of “decadence”’ (Anderson 1984, 104) by ‘the moralism that colours all of Lukács’ critical concepts’ (Adorno 169). This over-generalization and moralism lead Lukács to reject *all* portrayals of immoral subjects as unethical, and, furthermore, to reject all modes of portrayal which (according to a fairly tortured definition of complicity) are non-complicit with ethical norms.

It is at this extreme of Lukács' distaste, at a Modernist juncture of 'psychopathology', 'the adoption of perversion and idiocy' and an 'aesthetic ambition' of 'distortion', that we can locate Schofield's *Martin John*, as I will demonstrate below. Like *Malarky*, its structure is fragmented; however in *Martin John* the fragmentation is not neatly ordered by 'episodes', but disordered into several structural frameworks, which all fail to cohere as a single ordering device—just as Martin himself attempts to delimit his own predatory tendencies using repetitive psychological frameworks. He fails, as McBride writes in her review,

to keep himself out of trouble while remaining at liberty to pursue his private passions, namely collating information on the Eurovision Song Contest and fulfilling the many onerous requirements of his chronic obsessive-compulsive disorder: walking circuits of Euston Station, avoiding words beginning with "P" (like "pervert") and trying to touch up women surreptitiously on the Tube. (McBride 2015)

These 'failed' structural frameworks are, firstly, five 'refrains' introduced in an 'index' at the novel's beginning:

1. Martin John has made many mistakes.
2. Check my card.
3. Rain will fall.
4. Harm was done.
5. *It put me in the Chair.* (9)

And, secondly, the bold-type phrases '**WHAT THEY KNOW**' and '**WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW**', which recur throughout the novel, either isolated as on page 13 which simply reads '**WHAT THEY KNOW**', or (more frequently) used as a heading for a single concept such as '**WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW: Martin John wants to touch your leg**' (143). As Day writes: 'The rhythms of the novel—broken and disordered, yet possessed of a deep internal logic—are those of Martin John's own mind: his refrains become the circuits of the novel' (Day).

Day further observes that 'The fragmentary nature of the narrative isn't really mimetic, in that it doesn't seem to aspire to present us with a vision of what it might be like to think like Martin John' (Day). This is accurate: *Martin John* is ordered according to Martin's mind but it is not a facsimile of it: this is not, that is to say, a Psychological Realist text. The transcription of Martin's thoughts is persistently interrupted by other

perspectives: either of characters such as Martin's timid, neurotic mam (eg p290-293), his victim in the dentist's waiting room (p182-186) and a woman called Mary who intervenes when Martin climbs onto the train tracks at Euston Station (296-307); or that of a knowing, extra-diegetic authorial tone which remarks on the structure of the novel itself. These remarks are either simple explanations of this structure like 'The index tells us there will be five refrains' (32); acknowledgements of that structure's limitation such as 'there are simply going to be things we don't know. It's how it is. As it is in life must it be unto the page' (32); or straightforward disavowals of Martin's (and therefore the novel's) attempts to impose order through arbitrary schematics of behaviour or narratology: 'Rules have already been broken in this book' (58); 'the Index does not tell us' (124); 'There's no refrain called I have no clue. This is an interruption. Martin John does not like interruptions' (33).

## MacCabe, Belsey and the interrogative text

Day differs from my own analysis in taking such departures from mimesis to mean that *Martin John* is *not* a Modernist text. For Day, 'Modernism has become something of a classical mode', consisting of a fixed set of 'conventions' which 'depended [...] on the idea that consciousness can be transcribed' (Day). My position, on the contrary, is that if *Martin John* were entirely mimetic, it could be more easily considered a work of Psychological Realism. Its innovation upon the narratologies of its Modernist forebears is a necessary part of what makes *Martin John* a Modernist text: consider again Berman's characterisation of modernity as 'a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' (15), and Ruth Gilligan's summary of Modernism as definitionally 'a living, breathing impulse; a source of inspiration and reformulation' (2018, 780). Day's remarks also summarise Schofield's 'apparent [Modernist] predecessors' (Day) inaccurately. He writes as though High Modernist writers wrote only unremitting mimetic verisimilitude:

The narrative techniques often associated with modernist fiction—the stream of consciousness, free indirect discourse, interior monologue—presupposed a stable world and stable minds to behold it. (Day)

In fact, it is entirely in keeping with the example of Joyce, Woolf and Beckett that *Martin John's* 'distinct power' should come 'from the way form and content come together to alienate and fascinate in equal measure' (Day). What Day describes—and what Lukács ignores—is the 'distinct power' of Modernist writing, through a combination of the subjectivist portrayal of damaged consciousnesses and a discontinuous narrative style which continually highlights the narrative's textuality, to create and maintain a critical distance from the reality it emanates from and depicts. This creates what Belsey refers to as the 'interrogative text':

The world represented in the interrogative text includes what Althusser calls 'an internal distance' from the ideology in which it is held, which permits the reader to construct from within the text a critique of this ideology [...] it therefore refuses the hierarchy of voices of classic realism, and no authorial or authoritative voice points to a single position which is the place of the coherence of meaning (1980, 85)

There is no better example of this interrogative text than the 'archetypical modernist book' (Berman 1983, 31) itself, *Ulysses*. Colin MacCabe's monograph *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, a recurrent source for this thesis, writes that 'Joyce's texts refuse the very category of meta-language' (14). By meta-language, MacCabe means the narration outside the 'perverted commas' denoting speech and thought in direct discourse: 'A meta-language regards its object discourses [those in quotation marks] as material but itself as transparent' (14). Like Belsey, MacCabe treats 'classic realism' as the mode which most fully capitulates to this deceit of neutrality: he writes that 'the meta-language within a realist text refuses to acknowledge its own status as writing [...] the narrative discourse functions simply as a window on reality' (15). Realism perceives itself as an *abandonment* of form—'the narrative as pure representation' (19). The interrogative writing of Joyce, however, 'involves ever greater attempts to abolish this distance' between text and reader, and therefore offers no 'point of insertion for our own discourses within an agreed hierarchy of dominance' (28). There is an apparent tension here: whereas Belsey sees Realist meta-language as refusing 'critical distance' between text and reader, MacCabe sees it as *creating* a 'distance' which Joycean syntactic techniques 'abolish'. Counterintuitively, these opposite uses of the word 'distance' make a similar point; that Classic Realism seeks to be identical with its governing ideology (and

thus for MacCabe is ‘distant’ from the reader’s potentially disruptive viewpoint of that ideology), whereas Modernism does not (and thus for Belsey is ‘distant’ from the ideology itself). The difference between a ‘classic’ Realist novel and a Modernist one, for both theorists, is the ‘contrast between a text which determines its own reading and a text which demands an *activity* of reading’ (MacCabe 28).

As with Joyce—in this specific regard—so with *Martin John Malarky* offers a gradation between Realist meta-language and Modernist ‘textual materiality’, suggesting that in *Our Woman’s* more disoriented moments her psyche cannot be adequately represented by a meta-language. It does, however, return to the meta-language as a governing or at least preferable mode, as indicated by the cadence of closure in that final sentence: ‘Occasionally it makes sense, just for a moment’ (218). *Martin John* has no such safety-net of meta-language; in stark contrast to *Malarky*, its last sentence, on a page by itself, fervently rejects closure: ‘*It* is never been defined’ (320), it tells us. This is a reminder that Martin’s final refrain, ‘*It* put me in the chair’, has been a cipher throughout. ‘The chair’ is a chair into which Martin’s mam straps him to control his impulses: ‘in the Chair not much can go wrong’ (317). *It*, however, is indeed ‘never defined’. *It* occurs in recurrences of the ‘*It* put me in the chair’ refrain (221), and in intermittent FID sentences from Martin’s perspective. Sometimes, *it* appears to be a compulsive action, such as ‘I had it in my mind to do *it* and I did it’ (123), ‘mam said he hadn’t done *it*, right?’ (85), or ‘he knows he cannot stop it. Stop doing *it*’ (281). Elsewhere, *it* is a noun: ‘the many times he does the thing to the women’s legs and feet or has his trousers undone and *it* out he will be seen’. Elsewhere, *it* is an occurrence rather than an action: ‘[he was] on his way home from visiting her when *it* happened’ (242).

These quotations clearly link the term *it* to Martin’s deviant sexuality, but Schofield never allows the referent of *it* to settle into any more settled definition than this: as with Rabinow’s definitions of the Contemporary, *it* in *Martin John* indicates a ‘site of enquiry’ rather than a precise referent. The closest we come to a definition is a fragment headed ‘(From the doctor’s notes:)', which reads: ‘The patient believes external forces are putting him in the chair’ (124), recasting the refrain ‘*It* put me in the chair’:

however even the vague summary of ‘external forces’ sits imperfectly with the internal nature of ‘I had it in my mind to do *it*’.

The italicisation of *it* makes it obvious when this specific use of the word is being employed, rather than a ‘normal’ use of ‘it’, such as ‘She had cluttered up the bin. Thoughtless. He only emptied it every few weeks’ (75). The refusal of the italicised *it* to fulfil a consistent grammatical role (pronoun or pro-verb; object, internal urge or ‘external forces’) means that reading *Martin John* is repeatedly interrupted by necessary acts of active interpretation. The reader may determine a specific term which *it* is substituting, but only for any given instance—in the third sentence quoted above, *it* seems to refer explicitly to Martin’s penis, whereas in others it seems to refer more vaguely to the onset of Martin’s sexual urges, or to one of his specific sexual aggressions, such as rubbing himself against women on public transport. By asserting that ‘*It* is never defined’ as the novel ends, Schofield reminds us of these hermeneutic acts, and ensures that reading *Martin John* itself concludes with a hermeneutic act, as the reader puzzles again on whether *it* is a simple substitution for a given term or concept. In direct contrast to *Malarky*’s late gesture towards closure, *Martin John*’s conclusion reaffirms its refutation of any consistent meta-language, and thus reasserts its own textuality.

## Krafft-Ebing, diagnosis and the question of sympathy

A certain authoritative perspective, however, *is* intermittently present amongst *Martin John*’s contradictory non-hierarchy of perspectives: the authority of medical diagnosis. On one occasion, as though momentarily adopting the omniscient objectivity of a Realist narrator to highlight that objectivity’s absence elsewhere, a typological assessment of Martin’s sexual aggressions surfaces. It comes directly after a paragraph of FID focalized through Martin’s perspective, and before one of the ‘**WHAT THEY KNOW**’ pages which interrupt this FID. The diagnosis reads:

**Inadequate:** the inadequate molester is the sex offender who least resembles social and behavioural norms. He is characterized as a social misfit, an isolate, who appears unusual or eccentric. He may be mentally ill and prefers non-threatening sexual partners. (162)

Schofield has most probably sourced this uncredited quotation from a support website for 'Mothers of Sexually Abused Children', which displays it prominently ('Types of Sex Offenders'). The MOSAC website appears to credit the quotation in turn to Patricia Wiklund's *Sleeping with a Stranger* (1995); the definition in turn paraphrases an American FBI typology of sex offenders. The quotation's origin from a support website could indicate Martin's mam's desperation as she looks for help to understand her son's proclivities (although it would make more sense for the mothers of Martin's victims, rather than his own mother, to read this website). However as the source is uncredited, its chief effect in the novel is not to highlight its origin, but to convey a suggestion of reliable authority. While the novel adopts Martin's perspective it is frequently unclear whether other characters, such as Martin's lodger Baldy Conscience, are 'real' or projections of his own paranoia. By contrast, this intrusion of terse diagnostic certainty offers something like the ontological reassurance of a meta-language.

This authoritative certainty echoes that of Dr Richard Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (originally published 1886), a diagnostic manual of 'deviant' sexuality. This work is not only dry, but intentionally inaccessible; Joseph LoPiccolo notes that Krafft-Ebing's 'concern about possible prurient interest in the book caused him to publish the original editions with the case material in Latin to prevent the general public from reading it' (ix). Schofield has repeatedly acknowledged the influence of *Psychopathia Sexualis* on *Martin John*, including in the 'Acknowledgements' in *Martin John's* endmatter (323), in correspondence mentioned by Day (Day), and in a 2016 interview:

I wrote to [forensic psychiatrist] Dr. Paul Fedoroff at one point because I was really struggling with the idea that these men have no sense of remorse. He referred me to this excellent book, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. It was written in the late 1800s, and it was written by a doctor who compiled every possible perversion. When I read those case studies, people were absolutely filled with remorse. That helped me to carry on because I had become kind of fond of Martin John, and yet I'd keep saying to myself 'No, no, no, this man is a deviant and you must go back to that. And you must not write around the dirty stuff [...]' (Rogers)

The medical insights in Krafft-Ebing's nineteenth-century taxonomy of deviance, Schofield here acknowledges, allowed her to navigate the tension between becoming 'fond' of Martin and confronting his 'deviant' nature. Literature, she says, 'must look at the darkness and humility in humanity' (Rogers).

The relevant passages in Krafft-Ebing's work come from a section on 'OFFENSE AGAINST MORALITY IN THE FORM OF EXHIBITION' (337), particularly four case studies which Krafft-Ebing classifies as 'the so-called *frotteurs* (those who rub up against others)' (349). Krafft-Ebing, with the same diagnostic assurance as *MOSAC's* definition of the 'Inadequate Molester', writes that 'presumption of a psycho-pathological element necessarily arises when *public* decency is coarsely offended' (337). He attributes this 'act which offends public morals, and is thus punishable' (351) to masculine anxiety: he writes that '*frottage* is a masturbatorial act of a hypersexual individual who is uncertain about his virility in the presence of women' (351). As Schofield says, the case studies display both the 'darkness and humility' of such offenders, soberly listing the 'loathesome [sic] impulse' leading to transgressions 'which offends public morals' (351), while also noting, with equal clinical detachment, how one *frotteur* 'begged for pardon, for nothing but suicide remained for him' (350). Schofield never writes Martin into such an extreme thirst for absolution, but instead hints that he avoids remorse by a process of denial about his guilt: 'Harm was done said aloud is as far as he'll go until you ask him to go further. Who will ask him?' (177), and the deliberate steps he takes to perpetuate this denial, to channel his compulsions away from sexual desire: 'Martin John has routines' (246) including walking 'circuits' of Euston Station, and 'if a circuit is lost he must calculate the probable impact of this. BAD THINGS MAY HAPPEN' (247).

As Schofield has stated, Krafft-Ebing's diagnoses debunked, for her, the unhelpful myth of mentally ill sex offenders as categorically incapable of remorse. However what is most interesting is that *Psychopathia Sexualis* influences the novel at all. *Psychopathia Sexualis* is not a nakedly subjective source such as the memoirs of a sex offender. It is a dry, methodological assessment of sexual deviancy by an eminent doctor—a nineteenth-century equivalent of the FBI-approved advice on the *MOSAC* website.

This foundation of expert authority in the medical sources for Schofield's writing is echoed in the portrayal of state and medical apparatuses in the novel itself. Nurses, firemen, and 'the oppressive forces of police and observant railway workers' (244) provide testimony which differs from Martin's (and his mam's, in its own way equally unreliable), and thereby function as arbiters of reality. We see Our Woman's encounter

with Martin in the hospital again, this time from 'Beirut's' perspective, to find that Martin has hallucinated Our Woman joining him in his hospital bed:

- Nurse, nurse, she's in my bed, he shouts. Get her out.
- What are you shouting about? the nurse says.
- Get her out, he says.
- There's no-one in your bed. Stop, would you, before you wake the other patients.

The nurse says if he isn't going to go to sleep, she's going to have to put him to sleep. Or did he mishear her? (268)

The nurse provides the reader with a Krafft-Ebing-like authoritative voice to depend upon; if, as readers, we are uncertain whether Our Woman is 'actually' in Martin's bed (certainly Our Woman made no mention of this in *Malarky*, although we may also doubt *her* dependability), the nurse reassures us. Indeed, the nurse's certainty is enough to shake Martin's own belief in his senses: 'did he mishear her?', he wonders (268). The nurse punctures Martin's perspective in a way that not even his mam can: when mam snaps in frustration that his claims to have spent time in Beirut are false—'*You've never been anywhere, except Noanie's!*' (136)—he does not listen:

She is wrong.  
Martin John has been to Beirut.  
He just can't prove it. The way they can't prove anything about him either. (136)

Another example of 'objective' voices of authority providing critical distance from Martin John in *Martin John* comes when Martin burns down his own house. Martin does this to get rid of his lodger, 'Baldy Conscience', who he is convinced is persecuting him. Throughout this narrative, Martin's descriptions of Baldy provoke incredulity in the reader, beginning with the lodger's antic, Bunyanesque name, and reaching its apex in paranoid diatribes in capital letters: 'THEY DON'T KNOW THAT BALDY CONSCIENCE IS AFTER HIM FULL-TIME. HE IS ON THE RUN FROM BALDY CONSCIENCE EVEN IN HIS OWN HOME [...]' (103); 'HE IS CONVINCED THAT BALDY CONSCIENCE WANTS TO SHOOT HIM, PROBABLY AT EUSTON STATION' (157). Martin is clearly delusional, but to what extent he exaggerates a genuine situation—a domineering lodger—the reader is left attempting to reconstruct from unreliable fragments. It is the imposition of the Lewisham Fire Brigade which provides an ontological anchor: Martin attempts to burn down the house, and the Fire Brigade rescue him. Their 'paper report' with 'two paper clips [...]' speculated that The

Occupant would have suffocated if he hadn't been rescued' (214-15). Later, for 'the camera and the newspaper quotes', one fireman recalls that 'We were ready to give up until [another fireman] remained convinced there might be someone in there' (217). The structure of the text does not privilege the firemen's voices; they are interwoven with Martin's objections to their version of events and his compulsive fixation on the firemen's sexual impulses. Nonetheless, the authority of firemen, and of official reports—the epistemic claim, that is, made by institutions of the state formation—suffices to inform the reader that Baldy Conscience, if he was ever based on a real lodger, is no longer a resident at a house where 'The Occupant' is identified in the singular. *Martin John* does not narratologically elevate the nurse's or firemen's opinions above Martin's through a *textual* meta-language; if anything their views are textually subordinated to Martin's own. But the implied authority of the nurse and the firemen—and indeed Martin's own decision to distrust them, when we have so much evidence of his own paranoia—permits us, as Belsey says, 'to construct from within the text a critique of [his] ideology' (1980, 85).

*Martin John* thus provides a polysemous 'interrogative' perspective, which investigates the internal states of a disturbed modern subject such as Martin John in a manner reminiscent of Lukács' comments that Modernist representations of psychopathology attempt a moral protest against capitalism. While *Ulysses'* Leopold Bloom can certainly be examined in terms of 'perversion', in the sexual proclivities that he displays, Martin John is a pervert in the vernacular, pejorative sense: his sexual activities are ethically abhorrent. In this sense *Martin John* provides a stern test for this thesis' rebuttal of Lukács' moral conservatism, as one could hardly engineer a text better to fit Lukács' linkage of Modernism with immorality. However the text's irreducibility to a position of sympathy with Martin's deviance ultimately disproves Lukács' concomitant insistence that representations such as Schofield's representation of Martin John Gaffney are a 'glorification', or evidence of an innate moral sickness in all Modernist literature.

#### 4: Locating Schofield as a contemporary modernist novelist

*Malarky's* negotiated interpolation of Realist prose with FID exemplifies the attraction of Modernist techniques to contemporary authors who wish to portray damaged consciousnesses, but who find classic Realism inadequate for this purpose. *Martin John* goes much further, creating a genuine 'interrogative text' which demonstrates the importance of portrayals of a-normative consciousnesses for contemporary Modernism. The figure of Martin, and the text's decentering of any hierarchy of narrative authority in his portrayal, 'looks into the abyss' of sexual violence and mental illness in twenty-first century Western modernity, exploring that modernity's condition. As Marshall Berman writes, 'the modernist imaginative vision [...] is vitally concerned to explore the human contexts—the psychological, ethical and political contexts—from which sensations of the abyss arise' (266).

Taken as a body of work (in progress; a third linked novel, *Bina* (2019), has at the time of writing been published only in Canada) Schofield's work evidences the continuing existence, and relevance, of the Modernist novel in Ireland in the twenty-first century. The debates surrounding Realism and Modernism, both those contemporaneous with High Modernism (Lukács, Adorno) and those subsequent to it (MacCabe, Belsey, Berman), are apposite to the formal politics of Schofield's representations of damaged consciousnesses in *Malarky* and *Martin John*.

Several questions need to be addressed to contextualise this: *why* twenty-first century modernity demands a Modernist response, and whether this constitutes a revival of a submerged Modernism or a continuation of an everpresent one. It is also important to investigate, in fuller detail than the brief quotations from Krafft-Ebing's work in this chapter, psychological research into the functioning of modern minds, to refute or substantiate the proposition that Modernist subjectivism is reducible to Psychological Realism. As we have seen in the previous chapter, these questions which are raised by Schofield's writing in *Martin John* and *Malarky* are not only relevant but recurrent in *Irish* writing in particular, and there is compelling reason to connect this directly to the dominance of Realist narrative poetics during the Celtic Tiger, and to the subsequent refutation of Celtic Tiger ideology in a country severely damaged by the 2008-9 banking collapse. These questions as explored in the previous chapter, and this chapter's initial outlay of the narratological terminology which is at stake in this debate, regarding

Modernist prose techniques and the rejection of a Realist meta-language, will be synthesised in the subsequent chapters on the work of Kevin Barry (chapter 4) and Mike McCormack (chapter 5). Taken together, these four case study chapters' findings, combined with the introduction's literature review of Modernist aesthetic theory, will seek to cumulatively comprise a comprehensive analysis of the state, cause and purpose of Modernist writing in twenty-first century, post-crash Irish literature.

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## CHAPTER 4

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### This is a Movement: Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone*

#### 1: The afterpostmodernist moment

Whither, then, 'Postmodernism'? This thesis has thus far largely elided discussion of the movement which, nomenclature would suggest, succeeded 'Modernism' when the time period associated with the latter came to an end—whether by continuation or schism depends on one's theoretical alignments. This elision is, of course, largely attributable to my rejection of totalising periodisation overall (by which I here mean, in extremis, the simple attribution of start- and end-dates to movements such as Modernism and Postmodernism). Such totalising periodisation may have overdeveloped from a comfort with British monarchic periodising terminology: when literature is habitually packaged into such regimented categories as 'Elizabethan', 'Restoration', 'Victorian' and 'Edwardian', there is a completionist urge to plug the gaps. So the terms 'Modernism' and 'Postmodernism' are arrogated to this schema—as, interestingly, is the earlier term 'Romanticism' (despite the terminological awkwardness of assigning terms derived from 'modern' to a fixed and ever-more distant calendrical period, given its dual currency, as noted in a previous chapter, as a synonym of 'recent'). This impulse to divide the timeline of literature into manageable portions should not necessarily be resisted, nor should the abandonment of monarchic categories: there is certainly room for intelligent discussion of 'interwar' and 'postwar' literature, and the period between 'postwar' and the millennium might benefit from subdivision into named periods based upon political or economic events. This thesis itself has made frequent use of the phrase 'twenty-first century', which has the benefit, at the time of writing, of referring to a concise nineteen-year period. 'Post-crash' and, in the Irish context, 'Celtic Tiger' and 'post-Tiger' are also periodisations which assist the expression of my claims (in chapter 6 I also discuss the

salience or otherwise of the term ‘Celtic Phoenix’ to describe the mid-2010s recovery of the crashed Irish economy).

‘Modernist’, and ‘Postmodernist’, however, are both insufficient as periodisations. Monarchs’ reigns start on specific days, and monarchs die on specific days. Something similar can be said of wars and centuries. Even when such terms are used with a degree of fluidity—in ‘the long 18<sup>th</sup> century’, and so forth—this fluidity exists as a margin of error surrounding a set calendrical point or window. Aesthetic tendencies have no such fixed setting. They emerge incoherently, re-submerge intermittently, and may be only lying dormant when the physicians of humanities departments declare them expired. However it may be true to state that a particular aesthetic tendency is particularly relevant or prominent at a particular historical moment, or particularly intertwined with that moment. Indeed, such a claim is central to my thesis, which although it rejects a *totalising* periodisation of ‘Modernism’ to mean ‘all literature produced between 1890-1940’, wholeheartedly accepts that there was an extraordinary strength of Modernist literary expression in the 1920s and 30s (the ‘early interwar’ period, perhaps?), and positions a particular strand of post-Tiger Irish writing as a slight return of this Modernist fecundity. The difference is between totalising claims—which in the case of Modernism-as-chronological-period leads *reductio ad absurdum* to what Chris Baldick calls ‘the expansion of the canon beyond credibility’ (399); the recruitment of, for example, H. G. Wells and E. M. Forster as Joyce and Woolf’s fellow Modernists—and historicising observations. Taken as the latter, Fredric Jameson’s famous identification of Postmodernism as ‘the cultural logic of late capitalism’ is a work of great acuity. Although Jameson *does* frame his hypothesis as totalising, his ‘totality’ is a remarkably nuanced one, which makes allowance for submerged counter-currents. Jameson positions late-twentieth century Postmodernism as ‘a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate features’ (1984, 55).

It is, therefore, on a Jamesonian basis that this chapter will proceed to link the current project, which identifies a post-crash resurgence of Irish literary Modernism, to the late-capitalist cultural prominence of ‘Postmodernism’: Jameson, as will be articulated at greater length below, argued *for* ‘a periodizing hypothesis’ (1984, 55) of ‘periodizing in

dominance' (57) despite writing, in his words, 'at a moment [that is, 1984] in which the very conception of historical periodization has come to seem most problematical indeed' (55). The linkage in question will be facilitated by Timothy Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's own twenty-first century advancement upon this Jamesonian thesis, 'Metamodernism', and the link itself is Kevin Barry's 2015 novel *Beatlebone*. This novel, which operates in large part from the perspective of a fictionalised John Lennon, has certain characteristics which enable it to be categorised alongside other contemporary Irish Modernist texts such as *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, *Solar Bones* and *Martin John*, and other characteristics which align it with oft-cited symptoms of Postmodernism in art such as metafiction, celebrity and irony. This makes Vermeulen and van den Akker's claims that Postmodernism has been 'superseded' (their approach to periodisation is not naïve or simplistic, but it is far more enthusiastic than my own) by 'Metamodernism', whose most identifiable component is an 'oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment' (2010, '2'<sup>18</sup>), a pertinent intellectual framework within which to situate Barry's contribution to contemporary literature.

However before we reach this analysis of Barry's second novel, this chapter will contextualise his work leading up to *Beatlebone*, in particular his short story collections and the circumstances of their publication. I will attempt to develop the account of post-Tiger Irish Modernism offered in chapter 2, regarding Eimear McBride's emergence at the vanguard of a post-crash school of Irish experimental writing, by looking closely at the publication of short stories in independent Irish presses after the crash. The incubation of short-form Modernist writing by these presses, most notably in the literary magazine *The Stinging Fly*, nurtured and sustained novelists such as Barry and McCormack. While *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* was sitting in publishers' slushpiles between 2003 and 2013, Barry was developing as a short-form writer in a publishing landscape that found opportunities

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<sup>18</sup>It is a quirk of some online academic journals that they are paginated not by issue, but by article, with the words 'page numbers not for citation purposes' appended to the page numbers on each digital document. However as these 'not for citation' numbers are still the most convenient means of directing a reader to the source, I will use them regardless, with 'perverted commas' around the numeral to remind the reader that this practice is in breach of the journal's commandment.

in the post-crash cracks which emerged in Historical Realism's domination of Irish publishing.

## 2: Short stories into novels

According to a 2005 interview by Shirley Kelly in *Books Ireland*, the literary magazine *The Stinging Fly* was launched in 1997 by Declan Meade and ‘a friend’, who is elsewhere named as Aoife Kavanagh, ‘who had just done a publishing course in Galway’ (Wells), and who is listed on *The Stinging Fly*’s website as a founding editor alongside Meade (*Stinging Fly*) (S. Kelly 110). This launch was low-key, low-budget, and amateur: Kelly describes it as happening ‘on a wing and a prayer’ (110). Meade and Kavanagh had been to an event where literary editor David Marcus ‘lament[ed] the lack of publishing opportunities for short fiction’ (110). With no prior experience, Meade and Kavanagh decided to make a grassroots intervention in the Irish publishing industry. As Meade told Kelly:

We thought, ‘Well, we could publish short stories’. At that time, we were mostly ignorant of the struggles faced by other literary magazines. We just dived in and hoped for the best. I had no experience of producing a magazine, I just learned how to use the technology as I went along and we progressed through trial and error. As one critic pointed out, the first issue had no date or issue number.

After the first three issues, we applied to the Arts Council for funding and got a grant of €1,000. That was cut the following year but by year three we were getting €5,000 a year and that continued until the last issue [to date]. (S. Kelly 110)

This seed of government support for a literary gamble could hardly have been less in keeping with the free-market neoliberalism of late 1990s Irish governance (as Tramp Press co-founder Sarah Davis-Goff has noted, *The Stinging Fly* was established ‘just as Ireland’s famous Celtic Tiger was sharpening her claws’ (Davis-Goff 2015)), and serves to illustrate the importance which state funding can have for a nascent artistic movement: in a 2012 interview, Meade acknowledged that ‘The type of publishing we do is always going to be reliant on subsidies of some sort’ (Wells). Indeed, given the influence which *The Stinging Fly* would go on to wield, the Arts Council of Ireland’s decision to fund it during the Tiger years at all can be seen as a potent mote of statist resistance against a dominant ideology of state-shrinking privatisation.

The wing and the prayer proved sufficient for success, and *The Stinging Fly* became the leading light for a post-Tiger generation of Irish small presses: Julian Gough, the novelist quoted at length in chapter 2 for his excoriation of Tiger-era fiction, credits

*The Stinging Fly* for having successfully undertaken the Herculean task of ‘changing the landscape of Irish fiction, issue by issue, book by book’ (qtd. in Jordan 2015). In the same interview quoted above, David Meade details the process by which this change has been enacted—and, as a result, the process by which the government-subsidised publication of short stories has catalysed the emergence of commercially independent and culturally visible novelists. These novelists, as I will detail, are very frequently experimental—and in some cases explicitly Modernist—authors who would certainly have found their novels hard to publish during the peak-Tiger trend for Historical Realism (John B. Thompson points out that fostering ‘more marginal and offbeat’ books is a common feature of small press publishing; see below). The middle step of this process, between publishing writers’ individual submissions in *The Stinging Fly* magazine and these same writers emerging as innovative novelists at larger publishers, is *The Stinging Fly*’s decision to elevate magazine contributors into published book-authors through publishing their short stories in anthology format at *The Stinging Fly*’s imprint Stinging Fly Press, founded in 2005 (Gilligan 2015). As Meade says:

The anthologies have proved to be a step up from publication in the magazine for our writers. People do seem to take stories more seriously if they’re in a book. Our anthologies have been fairly widely reviewed, while the material in the magazine gets very little critical attention. Then obviously the single-author collections are important because there are so few publishers willing to take on short story collections by first-time authors. (Wells)

One author who has followed this career trajectory exactly is Kevin Barry: from short story publications in magazines including *The Stinging Fly*, through the publication of his first anthology *There Are Little Kingdoms* (2007) by Stinging Fly Press, to the publication of his first novel, *City of Bohane* (2011) and his second story collection *Dark Lies the Island* (2012), by Jonathan Cape (initially) and Vintage, both imprints of major publisher Random House, now Penguin Random House. The Vintage edition of *City of Bohane* carries an acknowledgment in its frontmatter of ‘the support of the Arts Council of Ireland’ (*City of Bohane*, np). In 2014, Canongate books signed Barry on a three-book deal, the first of which was *Beatlebone* in 2015—the second was originally announced to be a *City of Bohane* sequel (Farrington 2014), but in the event was the standalone novel *Night Boat to Tangier* (2019). This initial chapter of Barry’s career is neatly bookended by the re-publication by Canongate, in 2017, of *There Are Little Kingdoms*. As Michael Caines notes

in the *Times Literary Supplement*, reprinting this initially government-subsidised collection from a small press had become simple commercial good sense, given Barry's rise to comparative prominence: 'this debut [has been] now cannily reissued by Canongate after a decade during which Barry has won both acclaim and a readership' (Caines 35). This acclaim, at least, is substantiated by a 2018 poll of critics by the *Times Literary Supplement* to find 'the best British and Irish novelists writing today', in which Barry was the thirteenth most-cited author (McBride was fifth, and Claire-Louise Bennett joint-seventeenth. Experimental/Modernist British authors were also well-represented, with Ali Smith 'winning' the poll and Nicola Barker, Jon McGregor and Tom McCarthy in the top twenty) (Clark, 'The Best British and Irish novelists today', 2018). Another indication that post-Crash Irish modernism has reached commercial viability is the admission by Donal Ryan—an author often categorised alongside McBride and Barry as a leading light of the new school, though I have reservations that Ryan's writing may be more lyrical Realist sentimentality varnished with cod-Joycean narrative technique than anything truly formally innovative—that he pursued the genre out of financial self-interest: "I thought how can I make some extra money [...] Cynically I thought, what's the gap in the market now?" (qtd. in Jordan 2018, 23).

Canongate, an independent press in publishing industry terminology (being detached from the 'big four' hegemony of Penguin Random House, Hachette, Harper Collins and Pan MacMillan<sup>19</sup>), but far from a 'small' press in the sense of Stinging Fly Press, have also elected to purchase the rights to Mike McCormack's previously published collection *Getting it in the Head* (1996) and novels *Notes From a Coma* (2005) and *Solar Bones* (2016) (which will be the focus of this thesis' final case study, in the next chapter)

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<sup>19</sup> Other sources refer to a 'big five' including Simon & Schuster; however these are largely US-centric sources. I follow a 2018 article in UK trade publication *The Bookseller* which refers to the 'big four' here cited as having a 46.8% share of the UK publishing market (with combined 2017 sales of £744.8m). Simon & Schuster are the seventh largest UK publisher according to this source. Canongate are listed as a member of the 'Faber Independent Alliance' which would be the fifth biggest publisher if counted as a single company. Canongate is the fourth largest publisher within this alliance, with 2017 sales of £6.9 million (making it too small to count as a 'medium' press according to Thompson, which he defines as a publisher with annual revenues in the range £10-100m (174)). These figures use Nielsen BookScan data, which is widely acknowledged as a best-available but incomplete methodology. (Tivnan)

(Onwuemezi). *Solar Bones* was initially published by Tramp Press, who like *The Stinging Fly* are an Arts Council-supported small Irish press with a proclivity for publishing experimental fiction. Tramp, founded in 2014, are clear beneficiaries of *The Stinging Fly*'s trailblazing; Ruth Gilligan's 2015 *Irish Independent* review of Clare-Louise Bennett's *Pond* (2015) names Tramp Press alongside *gorse* [sic], Doire Press, *The Penny Dreadful* and the London-based *White Review* as small presses and journals influenced by *The Stinging Fly* (Gilligan 2015). Gilligan has since emphasised the similarity of these emergent small Irish presses to the role played by 'small, newly-established publishers' in Irish High Modernism (Gilligan 2018, 781), noting that '*Gorse* in particular explicitly identifies with its early twentieth-century equivalents' (Gilligan 2018, 784).

Tramp Press's co-founders Sarah Davis-Goff and Lisa Coen both previously worked at Lilliput—another small publishing house, although a long-established one—where Davis-Goff was among the first readers of Donal Ryan's original submission *The Thing About December* (Bartlett). One of Tramp Press's first publications was *Dubliners 100* (2014), which 'challenged 15 Irish writers' including Eimear McBride 'to respond to' Joyce's *Dubliners* on the centenary of its publication (Power). This book in itself is a one-volume distillation of the new Irish publishing scene which this chapter describes: it was conceived and edited by Thomas Morris, an editor for *The Stinging Fly*; it was published by Tramp Press; it showcases the short story, and it combines explicit influence from Irish 20<sup>th</sup>-century High Modernism with a demand for 21<sup>st</sup>-century contemporaneity. This 'scene' overall—tight-knit, experimental and ultimately dependent upon the 'support structures' of the Arts Council—is bombastically referred to by Tramp Press's Davis-Goff as 'The Movement':

I try to talk about 'The Movement.' It has been obvious for several years now that something very exciting is going on with literary fiction in Ireland. Even the dogs in the street know it. After I clench my sweaty fist, and say what I have to say—that Sara [Baume]'s work is exciting, that it's coming on the crest of a wave of brilliant new work, and that THIS IS A MOVEMENT—I sit down. (Davis-Goff 2015).

The 'Sara' whom Davis-Goff here refers to is another Tramp author, Sara Baume. Baume had her second Tramp Press novel *A Line Made by Walking* (2017) reprinted by William Heinemann, yet another Penguin Random House imprint, and subsequently shortlisted in 2017 for the Goldsmiths Prize for 'fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities

of the novel form'; a prize also won by *A Girl is Half-formed Thing* (in 2013, its inaugural year), *Beatlebone* in 2015 and *Solar Bones* in 2016. (Anakana Schofield's *Martin John*, shortlisted in 2016, is published by And Other Stories, 'a not-for-profit organisation that relies on Arts Council funding in the UK' (Gleeson)). The overall picture which emerges is that experimental Irish authors, helped considerably by Goldsmiths Prize publicity, are achieving mainstream publication in the post-crash era, but only at the end of a process which is reliant upon their initial support from small, Arts Council-supported presses. As John B. Thompson has written, a 'countercultural' stance of publishing commercially unpromising books is not uncommon amongst small publishers, who are more likely than larger publishing houses to put financial considerations secondary to the ethos of the works they are publishing. Thompson writes:

Most small presses tend to be strongly editorially driven and to publish books about which the founder-owner(s) feel passionate. This is a world in which passion, commitment and belief play a crucial role—whether it is political commitment, countercultural beliefs or a passion for certain kinds of writing and literature. That the books taken on should sell and make money matters, of course, but this is rarely the most important consideration [...] And the fact that commercial success is generally a secondary concern gives the small presses a leeway to experiment with what might be seen as small, more marginal and offbeat books in a way that the large houses are less likely to do. (160-161)

A further issue, notwithstanding the laudable promotion of experimental authors by Canongate and other medium or large presses which take authors such as Barry and McCormack on after their original 'discovery' by small presses, is: would it not be preferable if the small presses themselves could be the ultimate beneficiaries of their bold decisions, rather than a larger press? And Other Stories' founder Stefan Tobler has argued as much, writing in an online comment<sup>20</sup> that:

When the big publishers swoop in the small presses lose their bestselling authors and lose the opportunity to grow a more sustainable business in the long-term with a strongly selling backlist. The large publishers make much of their money from the sales of those perennial favourites. (Tobler)

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<sup>20</sup> The authorship of this comment, posted under the username 'StefanTobler', was confirmed by Tobler on his Twitter account (@stefantobler)

Thompson also notes this as a recurrent problem for small publishers: their meagre cash reserves mean that once an author becomes hot property, the small presses are often compelled to

back out of the competitive situation and allow the author to go elsewhere. This makes it very difficult for small houses to hold on to authors and to build their careers in the way that larger houses can, and therefore makes it difficult for them to reap the long-term rewards of their willingness to take risks at the beginning of an author's career. (166)

The small presses' initial publication of these authors' work can, as with McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, come in the form of eventual small-press publication<sup>21</sup> of a debut novel which is that author's first published work, with no prior short story publications. But more frequently, particularly within Irish publishing, the debut novel arrives after a protracted process of name-building support for the author's short story writing: as well as Barry, experimental writers such as Baume and Claire-Louise Bennett were published in *The Stinging Fly* and other small-press magazines prior to their debut books being published by either Stinging Fly press (who published Barry and Bennett) or Tramp Press (who published Baume). McCormack's writing career also began with a short story collection, *Getting it in the Head* (1996), although his story is a somewhat different one: he began publication before even *The Stinging Fly* existed, but by the time that writers such as Barry were emerging McCormack's career had foundered, with McCormack having been dropped by Jonathan Cape a decade earlier (Leonard). Tramp's publication of *Solar Bones* effectively catalysed his re-emergence as a writer, and enabled his participation in this wider revival of Irish experimental writing, resulting in *Solar Bones'* subsequent Goldsmiths Prize award, 2017 Booker Prize longlisting<sup>22</sup>, and 2017 re-publication by Canongate. As one might expect of a 'Movement', there is also a sense of collegiality among these writers: in a 2018 *Irish Times* article in which writers were invited

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<sup>21</sup> The importance of state funding applies to British, as well as Irish, small presses: the owners of Norwich-based Galley Beggar Press, McBride's original publisher, said in 2016 that the company was only still 'surviving' because of Arts Council funding (Kirkbride), further evidencing these small presses' financial precarity, and the effects of this as described by Thompson.

<sup>22</sup> *Solar Bones* was ineligible for the Booker Prize in 2016 due to being published only by an Irish publisher. It became eligible the following year after Canongate bought the rights, and was longlisted. In 2018 the Booker's submissions guidelines were changed to allow novels published by Irish publishers. Tramp Press have been credited with 'lobbying for the change' (Wood).

to select a book which ‘capture[s] the Ireland of now’, Eimear McBride chose Barry’s *Beatlebone*, Claire Kilroy chose McCormack’s *Solar Bones*, and Sara Baume chose Schofield’s *Martin John* (Doyle), and as we have previously seen McBride’s *New York Times* review of Schofield’s *Martin John* endorses it enthusiastically (McBride 2015).

In a 2016 article promoting the Goldsmiths Prize, for which he was then a judge, the English author Blake Morrison deftly combines several of this chapter’s chief contentions: the importance of small presses in the ‘literary landscape’ of contemporary experimental fiction, the prominence of Irish fiction in that landscape, and the influence on these writers and presses of Arts Council funding on an economic level, and Irish High Modernism on an aesthetic level. He writes:

The role played by small publishers in encouraging new fiction is one obvious story of the Goldsmiths prize: without Tramp Press, Lilliput, And Other Stories, Cassava Republic, Galley Beggar and Unbound our literary landscape would be much the poorer. The predominance of Irish presses, and Irish novelists, is another story: three out of four winners of the Goldsmiths prize; three out of six on this year’s shortlist. Socioeconomic factors are involved here (Ireland offers generous state funding and tax breaks for writers), as well as the example set by Joyce, Beckett and Flann O’Brien, who redefined what fiction can do.

Yet neither the small presses of *The Stinging Fly* and Tramp Press, nor the hovering influence of Joyce, Beckett and O’Brien, wrote these contemporary stories or novels themselves. In R. F. Foster’s 2007 history *Luck and the Irish: a brief history of change, 1970-2000*, he entitles the chapter on culture ‘How the Short Stories Became Novels’. Foster’s intention is to show how the ‘confidence, originality and bravura’ (169) of Colm Tóibín and Dermot Bolger’s late-twentieth century Historical Realism moved Irish writing beyond a mid-century torpor in which ‘the Irish excelled at the Checkhovian short story’ (167). Oddly, ‘excelled’ seems to be here a term of denigration, as though the primary implication of excellent short stories is a ‘psychological reluctance’ to sit down and write a proper Realist novel. In Foster’s account, ‘the only contemporary Irish novelists to succeed’ were those who deigned to lower themselves to ‘experiment, fracture, and evasion’ (163). For the subsequent alleged renaissance of order and continuity, Foster credits Ireland’s increasing prosperity: ‘There is even a case for arguing that the transformations of the late twentieth century actually enabled the Irish novel formally to transcend the inhibitions that had restricted it until then’ (167). This chapter could carry

a similar title to Foster's, but its point is rather different: that the short story writers of Celtic Tiger Ireland have themselves become novelists, and that they have brought all of the 'experiment, fracture and evasion' from one form into the other; not to undermine their novelistic work's integrity, but to sharpen its edge.

This section has outlined one half of this contention, by following the post-crash development of state-subsidised small presses in Ireland. The following section will turn from these short stories' material circumstances to their literary content and signification, and focus its lens upon the process by which a short story becomes a novel. To do so, it will chronicle how the figurehead High Modernist novel, *Ulysses*, grew from a short story about an advertising salesman named Alfred Henry Hunter—and, in parallel, how the seeds of Kevin Barry's Metamodernist (as I will argue thereafter) novel *Beatlebone* can be observed in a short story entitled 'Dark Lies the Island', from Barry's collection of the same title.

### 3: 'Dark Lies the Island' into *Beatlebone*

In his study of the Irish short story, *The Lonely Voice* (a study otherwise noteworthy for its vile misogyny and homophobia towards Katherine Mansfield, not to mention some decidedly anti-Semitic asides regarding Isaac Babel<sup>23</sup>), the storywriter Frank O'Connor explains that Joyce's *Ulysses* was originally intended to be a short story in *Dubliners* (123). O'Connor calls this story 'Mr Hunter's Day', although by other accounts the story was always intended to be entitled 'Ulysses' (Killeen 2008, 47) or 'Ulysses in Dublin' (Borach and Prescott, 325). To distinguish between the unborn 1906 short-story 'Ulysses' and the eventual 1922 novel *Ulysses*, I will refer to the short story by the full title 'Ulysses in Dublin', which Joyce himself used, according to his student Georges Borach. Borach's quotation of Joyce, 'When I was writing *Dubliners*, I first wished to choose the title *Ulysses in Dublin*', suggests that this was the original intended title for the collection *Dubliners* overall, perhaps as well as for this specific story within it (Borach and Prescott, 325).

Joyce scholar Terence Killeen has in recent years researched the real Mr Alfred H. Hunter. He notes that the source most often cited regarding Hunter's identity is Richard Ellman's account of his correspondence with Joyce's brother Stanislaus, in which Ellman speculates about Joyce's announced intention (in Joyce's own letters to Stanislaus), in

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<sup>23</sup> Regarding Mansfield, O'Connor writes that:

Most of her work seems to me that of a clever, spoiled, malicious woman. Though I know nothing that would suggest she had any homosexual experiences, the assertiveness, malice, and even destructiveness in her life and work make me wonder whether she hadn't. [...] the idea of "experience" by which she justified [her love affairs—note that O'Connor is forgiving of other, male writers' philandering in earlier chapters] is a typical expedient of the woman with a homosexual streak who envies men and attributes their imaginary superiority to the greater freedom with which they are supposed to be able to satisfy their sexual appetite (126-7).

He also writes that Mansfield 'spoils' stories 'by her assertiveness', (130) and is 'girlishly overdramatic' (131), has an 'assertive, masculine streak' *and* (somehow) a 'girlish effusiveness' and 'coarseness' (138). Regarding Babel, he writes that 'when a Jew turns vicious he turns very vicious indeed' (182), which makes one wonder via what mental gymnastics he was able to consider the very Jewish Leopold Bloom 'heroic'.

September 1906, 'to write a story, to be called "Ulysses" that was to feature a "Mr Hunter" as its hero' (Killeen 2008, 47):

There has been much debate about the identity of 'Mr Hunter' and the nature of his involvement with Joyce. Richard Ellmann, who talked to Stanislaus Joyce about this, says in the first edition of his biography that Hunter was 'a dark-complexioned Dublin Jew [...] who was rumoured to be a cuckold'. In the second edition, he declares 'Hunter was rumoured to be Jewish and to have an unfaithful wife.' (Killeen 2008, 47)

Ellman later removes the word 'rumoured', in an afterword to the first paperback edition of *Ulysses* in 1968. This afterword 'includes an account of a fracas in June 1904 after which, Ellmann states, Joyce "'was dusted off and taken home by a man named Alfred Hunter"' (Killeen 2008, 47-8). However Killeen notes that Hugh Kenner has debunked the reliability of Ellman's claims, revealing them to be reliant upon the oral testimony of Joyce's father's associate W. P. D'Arcy—whose information, Killeen describes, was 'none of it very well substantiated' (2008, 48). Killeen thereafter undertakes more empirical research, using census, death and property records, into the existence of Alfred Henry Hunter. In a 2010 paper he concludes (after an entertaining false trail involving a second Dublin resident of the same name and middle initial; Alfred Hiram Hunter) that although Hunter was 'Belfast Presbyterian (and not Jewish, as had been rumoured)', and although 'the report that he had once rescued Joyce from a fracas was based on such slender evidence, being almost certainly a "back-formation" from *Ulysses*, that it is best disregarded' (2010, 148), there are nonetheless some remarkable similarities between the real-world Alfred H. Hunter and the Leopold Bloom of *Ulysses*. Hunter was also an advertising canvasser by occupation, his wife was called Marion (the full first name of Molly Bloom), and Marion was from a musical/theatrical family and may have been a performer like Molly. As Killeen summarises: 'Alfred Henry Hunter and Leopold Bloom have the same occupation and their wives have the same first name. This can scarcely be due to coincidence' (2010, 149). Certainly, it seems sufficient to conclude that the Hunter-based proto-Bloom of 'Ulysses in Dublin' did indeed become the Leopold Bloom of *Ulysses* more than a decade later.

O'Connor speculates that 'Mr Hunter's Day' ('Ulysses in Dublin'), had it indeed been written, would be:

I assume [...] a mock-heroic description of a day in the life of a Dublin salesman [...] with all its petty disasters and triumphs, and [I] would guess that it ended exultantly with an order for twenty pounds' worth of hardware or office equipment. (123)

Somewhere, of course, this tale flooded its banks, and we ended up not with this one-note riff of classically-trained cleverness, but with the category-defining masterpiece of the Modernist novel. According to O'Connor, this is because the character of Hunter became too 'heroic' and therefore universal, no longer recognisable as and archetypal of a 'submerged population group': 'But Mr. Bloom in *Ulysses* is no Mr. Hunter. He is not a member of any submerged population, Irish or Jewish [...] In fact, he is Ulysses, and can achieve anything his great precursor achieved' (123-124). A modesty and lightness of touch had been exchanged for 'spiritual grandeur' (O'Connor 124), and so Joyce became a novelist.

Something similar may have occurred in the creation of Barry's *Beatlebone*, although Barry's equivalent of 'Ulysses in Dublin' achieved publication. Nonetheless, there is enough of 'Dark Lies the Island' in *Beatlebone* for the comparison to bear merit, especially considering that the greatest difference between Barry's short story and his eventual novel is, as O'Connor observes in Joyce, the exchange of an 'everyday' character for a 'heroic' one (or, perhaps, the exchange of a *merely* everyday character for an everyday-and-also-heroic one). The notion that a 'heroic' character is incompatible with the formal requirements of the short story, but characteristic of the formal possibility of the novel, is extensive of O'Connor's theorisation of the short story overall. He writes of 'my own view of the difference between novel and story as one between characters regarded as representative figures and characters regarded as outcasts, lonely individuals' (53). The short story, for O'Connor, 'has never had a hero. What it has instead is a submerged population group' (17). There is an echo here of R. F. Foster's assumption that Irish prosperity is necessary for the Irish to begin writing novels unfettered by 'experiment, fracture and evasion'; Foster quotes Colm Tóibín's view that:

'The novel explores psychology, sociology, the individual consciousness; the novel finds a form and a language for these explorations. We require an accepted world for the novel to flourish, a shared sense of time and place.' (qtd. In Foster 163)

My view, which *celebrates* 'experiment, fracture and evasion' and regards Foster/Tóibín's supposed *description* of the novel as an ideologically Realist *prescription*, is that O'Connor has grossly underestimated the extent to which *Ulysses*, too, is a novel of the 'submerged population group'. In its characterisation—its privileging of Jewish and female internal states—and particularly in its interrogative textual politics, *Ulysses* is more representative of both O'Connor and Foster's views of the Irish short story than of either of their characterisations of the novel. This may indeed be the aspect in which *Beatlebone*'s germination from 'Dark Lies the Island' is most comparable to *Ulysses*' germination from 'Ulysses in Dublin': that both novels' Modernist aspects owe something to their original inhabitation of the short story form, and the ideological incompatibility with the Realist novel that they carry over as a result. Such a theory would certainly fit with the observation that the current school of Irish experimental writers tend to have been inculcated as short-story authors prior to their novelistic debuts.

#### 4: 'Anxiety?'

'Dark Lies the Island', unlike *Beatlebone*, has a contemporary setting. Like *Beatlebone*, that setting is Clew Bay, on the west coast of Ireland: 'This was Clew Bay, in County Mayo, and hundreds of tiny islands were strewn down there' (162). *Beatlebone* concerns John Lennon's ownership of Dorinish, one of those tiny islands—a fact which is less central, but not inconsequential, to the narrative of 'Dark Lies the Island'. Sara, the short story's protagonist, knows of Lennon's possession:

She knew that John bought an island in Clew Bay, in the 1960s, but there were three hundred and sixty-five islands down there, and she could not say which one. Dorinish Island—her father claimed to know it, by sight, he said you could see it from a high vantage beside the house. (167)

This knowledge is the turning point of Sara's story: her train of thought regarding the nearby island, which comes when she plays a Beatles record (167), instigates a seemingly supernatural connection to the Beatles' music (170) which persuades her against an act of self-mutilation (170-171). This is the other key thematic intersection between *Beatlebone* and 'Dark Lies the Island', and indeed between *Beatlebone*, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, *Solar Bones* and *Malarky* and *Martin John*: the portrayal of a damaged consciousness. Sara is a young woman who has recently finished school. Her father is 'a radical architect who had reinterrogated the concept of walls', and Sara has decided to stay alone for a "'year out'" in the new-built house, 'all glass and angles', which her father 'had designed for family summers' (161), rather than go to university. The implication is that this 'year out' is an attempt to exorcise Sara's mental illness: although her father tells her "'You're not mad, Sara. You're just addicted to the fucking internet'" (166), she disagrees: this pithy diagnosis

did not explain the clutching at her throat or the gleam of menace from cut-steel door-handles or the faces at the windows or the medication; it did not explain all of the medication. (167)

Elsewhere there are other description of Sara's mental distress: 'Her brain was moving so fast it was losing weight' (160), 'She hadn't slept right in months' (161), 'Her brain was moving so fast it was out the other side of town already and looking back' (161). This distress leads Sara to self-harm frequently:

Her skin was flawless but for the scarring on the insides of her wrists, but for the scarring on the insides of her thighs, but for the scarred remains of the smiley she had carved one night on the inside of the left ankle. (161)

The narrative action of 'Dark Lies the Island' concerns whether Sara will self-harm while staying at Clew Bay. She visits an internet café to visit an online forum on which other self-harmers offer a bewildering mix of censure ('*Why now Sara [...] is the med changed/weakened by your head doc?*'), empathy ('*it is your call to make*') and sexually charged encouragement ('*you cut tonite you photo n show me you hot fucken bitch*') (159-160). Through this fog, together with hints at the difficulty of Sara's relationships with each of her separated parents ('Her mother's voice she could no longer bear to hear' (168-9), and, as for her father, after he calls her from Granada she caustically envisions him 'thoughtfully sipping a Fino by the darkwood barrels as he texted, and thinking, I'm just so not like other dads?' (166)), the Beatles eventually prevail. Considering Dorinish Island, lying darkly in Clew Bay, Sara finds herself playing the Beatles' music and, instead of taking up a kitchen knife to self-harm, she instead hurls the knives one by one into the garden where they will not tempt her. After she does so:

the cloudbank shifted, a fraction, as though cued by a smiling choreographer, and light fell from the quarter-moon and picked out a single island—a low, oblong shape—and it was lit for a moment's slow reveal. She took a step that was a step outside, yet again, as though from a chrysalis, or trap (171)

This respite from her damaged internal states, catalysed by playing the Beatles music, is now embodied by the languid calm with which Barry describes Lennon's island, Dorinish, peacefully revealing itself to Sara. There is a strong suggestion of the supernatural, or at least hypernormal, in the way that the Beatles' music comes to save her: she listens to the Beatles song 'For No One' eight times, then hears it by chance for a ninth when it is played on a television advertisement. This is what she takes as the signal to throw her knives away: she has 'feelings about the dark significance of the number nine' (167). This, as well as the larger theme of quelling anxiety is another clear thread between 'Dark Lies the Island' and *Beatlebone*: in the latter, John envisions writing his greatest ever album, which he determines must contain nine songs (164).

*Beatlebone* is not an expansion of 'Dark Lies the Island' in the way that *Ulysses* appears to be the final, banks-flooded expansion of 'Ulysses in Dublin'. But the theme of

mental distress remains, as do the concrete facts of Clew Bay, John Lennon, and Dorinish island. And, just as *Ulysses* is an innovative, interrogative novel apparently germinated from the seed of a textually conventional short story, *Beatlebone* is far more aesthetically unusual—far more Modernist—than the mostly conventional Realist prose of ‘Dark Lies the Island’. Both ‘Dark Lies the Island’ and (putatively, in O’Connor’s guesswork) ‘Ulysses in Dublin’ are much more textually conventional than the novels they became: in the O’Connor or Foster/Tóibín model of ‘heroic’ novels replacing ‘fractured’ short stories, the direction of travel from convention to innovation would flow in the opposite direction.

Another parallel may here be observed, to the Anakana Schofield texts analysed in chapter 3: in Schofield’s *Malarky*, the prose becomes more ‘Modernist’ when Our Woman’s grief trauma is affecting her; by her second novel, *Martin John*, Schofield had taken these more experimental moments and accelerated them, creating an entire Modernist novel structured by the protagonist’s mental damage. In ‘Dark Lies the Island’, it is similarly the moments where Sara’s mental damage surfaces in her mind that the prose begins to form less conventional sentences: see the breathless metre of the two longer sentences quoted above, formed by the compulsive repetition of words such as ‘medication’ and ‘but for the scarring’. Like Schofield, Barry seems to have drawn his impetus from these initial forays away from Realist prose, and, as McCormack said of McBride’s Joycean influence, ‘ran with it’. *Beatlebone*’s rhythms are those of a damaged mind; not a perverse and predatory mind like Martin John’s, but an anxious, drug-dependent, frustrated artist’s mind. ‘Dark Lies the Island’ describes Sara’s anxiety, whereas *Beatlebone* inhabits John Lennon’s.

While Lennon, or the myth of Lennon, was an offstage, healing presence in ‘Dark Lies the Island’, in *Beatlebone* he is placed centre stage. Sara’s occasional twitchiness of internal monologue is upgraded to an existential twitchiness, which permeates John’s perspective—indeed it *is* John’s perspective—throughout (except for *Beatlebone*’s Part Six, as discussed below). The novel is set in 1978, two years before the real Lennon died. In *Beatlebone*, he travels across Ireland in search of his island, where he plans to spend three days in isolation, practising the ‘primal scream’ self-therapy techniques taught to him by the cult-figure Californian psychotherapist Arthur Janov:

He started to Scream with Dr Janov in California. He was worked up one-on-one. He was worked up fucking hard. He sat there for hours, and for months, and he went deep [...] What had stirred and made and deformed him. What had down all the years deranged him. He was angry as hell [...] He had a shadow beneath the skin and he was so very fucking weak. (21)

John has a belief that the West of Ireland will be the perfect place to study such psychological healing techniques:

Dr Janov said he should Scream, and often, and he saw at once an island in his mind.

Windfucked, seabateen.

The west of Ireland—the place of the old blood

A place to Scream. (p22)

This screaming, he hopes, will remove the writer's block which is preventing him from writing another great record.

The plot of *Beatlebone*, following from this premise, is effectively a caper: John employs a local fixer called Cornelius O'Grady to get him to the island. However, the press get wind of John's whereabouts, and Cornelius ends up hiding him in a variety of darkly eccentric rural locations—Cornelius' house, a debaucherous local gig, and a near-deserted hotel where a manipulative 'Tinpot guru' (147), Joe Director, has his own abusive methods of 'healing' trauma, which he attempts to inflict upon John. After these various locations have rolled episodically past, Cornelius finally gets John to the Island, where the journalists at last corner him, and John (now drained of any inclination to Scream, and wanting only to return home to Liverpool) gives them a playfully messianic address: 'I think we should all love and ravish each other but I'm holding out no great hopes' (223). In between leaving the Amethyst Hotel and arriving at Dorinish, however, John has had an epiphanic experience in a sea cave, where he has imagined the album he intends to record. 'It will contain nine fucking songs, and it will fucking cohere, and it will be the greatest fucking thing he will ever fucking do,' he thinks (164), which as noted above again echoes 'Dark Lies the Island', and Sara's 'feelings about the dark significance of the number nine' (167). John also comes up with the title 'Beatlebone'—rendered as '*b e a t l e b o n e*'—while in the cave (164). After the island, he returns to Liverpool, and the novel's penultimate part, entitled 'the great lost Beatlebone tape' (225), takes the form

of a script, in which John and his studio engineer Charlie attempt to create the record which John has envisaged. John's initial epiphanic vision is proving difficult to translate into recorded music, and John resorts to recording a monologue of freely associated or disassociated sentence fragments into the microphone (243-8). The novel then ends with a return to the main narrative, after John has left the island, as he waits with Cornelius for their car to be fixed so that John can return home. There is a suggestion that John has found some level of respite from his anxiety:

The examined life turns out to be a pain in the stones. The only escape from yourself is to scream and fuck and make and do. He will not go back any more to the old places. He will not go back any more to Sefton Park. (258)

This seemingly optimistic resolution is then tempered as the novel ends, as indeed a novel about a long-dead rock'n'roll singer has been all along, in nostalgia: John remembers walking together down Bold Street in Liverpool with an old girlfriend, Julia, when they were young.

The prose throughout those chapters of *Beatlebone* which operate from John's perspective, as some of the above extracts will indicate, are third-person, past-tense, and almost entirely focalised through John's mind. This focalisation is realised in descriptive prose such as 'The seabirds hover watchfully with their mad eyes, all wing-span and homicide. He doesn't know the name for the birds. Which is neither here nor there' (84), in which John's wry humour pervades the narration. The Uncle Charles Principle, as outlined in chapter 3, is in full effect. Another example of this, also involving birds, comes early in the novel when John sees a heron standing 'greyly and still and what's-the-fucking-word'—clearly the inarticulacy here is John's, and not Barry's. As with *Malarky* or *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, this focalised use of the Uncle Charles Principle results in grammatical conventions being abandoned when John's internal monologue is less lucid. The 'Beatlebone transcript' from the recording studio incident is an obvious example of this, but perhaps a bad one, as it is not *internal* monologue but a 'recording' of words which John speaks aloud. But a similar effect can be found throughout the novel, for example in the following scene, which comes from the Amethyst Hotel section of the novel. Cornelius has gone out to find a means of getting John to the island, and John feels his anxiety rising as he rests on Joe Director's unreliable, manipulative hospitality. When

John's memories of living in New York surface in his mind, the narratological techniques which Barry deploys illustrate this anxiety:

[...] and for a while it feels like his very own town and place and maybe he can work again and breathe again and write again, and not be locked to the fucking past—that he might play again—not locked to the past—that he can write again—not locked to the past and its same old song—[...] (122)

The compulsive repetitions here, of 'not locked to the past', recall the similar ostinato rhythms of 'Beirut and let go, Beirut and let go' in Malarky (see chapter 3) or 'but for the scarring' in 'Dark Lie the Island', above. In his use of stream of consciousness techniques to depict John's anxiety—and John often thinks the term himself, as a question: 'anxiety?' (3)—Barry's text is congruent with other contemporary Irish Modernists.

However, the parallels drawn in this section, firstly between *Beatlebone* and the High Modernism of Joyce, and secondly between *Beatlebone* and the post-crash Modernism of Schofield and McBride, are rendered partial by the presence of a disruptive irony permeating *Beatlebone* which can be regarded as 'Postmodernist' rather than 'Modernist'. This Postmodernist effect is most notable in the Part Six of *Beatlebone*, where the narrative is interrupted (just after John has had his epiphany in the cave, and before he reaches Dorinish) by a chapter of textbook Postmodernist self-awareness.

## 5: Historiographic Metafiction

All the other sections of *Beatlebone*, as described above, operate from John Lennon's focalised perspective, apart from this Part Six, 'Eleven Eleven Eleven Dakota', and Part Eight, the 'Great Lost Beatlebone Tape' chapter which, like the 'Circe' episode of *Ulysses*, takes the form of a play script as it describes John's attempts to record his album. Part Six, however, is set outside the entire conceit of an imagined late-seventies 'John Lennon': it takes place in the early 2010s, and takes the form of a memoir about the writing of *Beatlebone*, operating from the first-person perspective of, presumably, Kevin Barry himself—or, rather, 'Kevin Barry' in fictionalised avatar.

This 'Postmodernist' Part Six of *Beatlebone* fits with Linda Hutcheon's seminal argument that 'historiographic metafiction' in the novel is a key tenet of Postmodern writing, as put forward in Hutcheon's 1988 work *Poetics of Postmodernism*. Historiographic metafiction, Hutcheon writes, is 'selfconsciously as well as inherently referential' (228). Interestingly, and displaying considerably more restraint than many gatekeepers of literary movements are wont to do, Hutcheon advocates for political potentials of Postmodernist writing without seeking to claim that it is the *only* or *superlative* political form. Postmodernism 'does change irrevocably any simple notions of Realism or reference by directly confronting the discourse of art with the discourse of history' (20), she writes, but also lists various 'late modernist' art movements, and acknowledges that they are:

all more radical in form than postmodern novels, which are more compromised, if you like, in their paradoxical inscribing and contesting of these same conventions. Historiographic metafiction's somewhat different strategy subverts, but only through irony, not through rejection. Problematizing replaces exploding. (xii)

Part Six of *Beatlebone* could be a custom-built exemplar for the 'selfconsciously as well as inherently referential' capacities of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon uses this term to mean 'novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages', and she explicitly claims this as a subcategory of the Postmodern (5). *Beatlebone* as a whole, with its 'laying claim' to the internal states of John

Lennon in 1978, fits the latter part of this description, and Part 6 in particular provides the self-reflexivity.

In ‘Eleven Eleven Eleven Dakota’, the first-person narrator (who I will refer to as ‘The Writer’ to avoid confusion with the actual Kevin Barry, behind and beyond his avatar, paring his fingernails) researches John Lennon’s life, voice and mannerisms for a novel to be called *beatlebone* [sic]. In the process, he comes to the same decision that John comes to in the actual novel: ‘If I was going to make *beatlebone* everything it should be, I needed to get to the island’ (176).

Part Six alternates between diary entries describing The Writer’s travels around the locations which would become the settings for *Beatlebone*, including an inserted photograph of the Amethyst Hotel, and reflections on John Lennon’s life and character, a brief history of primal scream therapy (‘Its ambition was to free the subject from the buried pain of childhood trauma’ (180-181)), and observations on ‘the as yet unwritten radical history of the west of Ireland’, where Barry describes how many alternative movements put down roots in the Irish west—such as primal scream practitioners and a New Age commune called ‘the Diggers’ who lived for a year on Dorinish island itself: their leader, Sid Rawle, known as the ‘King of the Hippies’, was given custodianship of the island by Lennon (189-90).

It is important to note that Part Six should not be read naively as a non-fiction documentary, but, in Hutcheon’s term, as a metafiction: one explicit example of this is that while The Writer has to be rescued from Dorinish Island ‘in a state of distress’ after a psychologically disturbing ‘day and a half’ (196), Barry himself cheerfully admits—in an interview with *Irish America*, not in Part Six itself—to having scouted the location far more briefly:

I think I claim in the essay to have spent a day and a half there—I didn’t, really. I made it an hour and a half. But it’s beautiful. The terns nest on it and they lay these enormous, surreal-looking eggs around the rocks. And they don’t like humans to be on the island—they kind of dive-bomb you and it’s really loud—the last place on earth you’d want to build a meditative retreat. (Brodsky)

Even outside of such externally-admitted fictionalisation, Part Six does not read as an attempt to deceive the reader: its very placement, appearing unexpectedly in the middle

of the fictional narrative, is not that of an extra-diegetic Foreword or Epilogue. Nor does it contain any framing devices or name its first-person narrator as 'Kevin Barry'. Even while becoming absorbed in the (clearly at least partially factual) account of Lennon's life and the *Beatlebone* writing process, the reader awaits the return of John and Cornelius to find out what happens next in the novel's central narrative. The result is an effect of distrust, and—to use a term strongly associated with the discourse of Postmodernism—of playfulness.

In the same 2016 *Irish America* interview as his admission about his stay on Dorinish, Barry makes clear that Part Six is not *entirely* fictional, either; it was written, originally, out of an attempt to collate his research notes for *Beatlebone*, which were 'everywhere: on the backs of envelopes, on the backs of beer mats, on my phone' (Brodsky), and these research notes do express non-fictional truths of Barry's own lived experience:

And I found myself talking about my mother's early death in that. I totally wasn't expecting this material to show up in my John Lennon novel, but it struck me as absolutely right for the material; this is one of my ways into the character because he has a similar circumstance. (Brodsky)

The mediating effect of fictionality in Part Six, therefore, is extant (the length of 'The Writer's' stay on Dorinish is an invention: it is art) but partial (the reflection on Barry's mother's death is directly autobiographical: it is history), and even a reader who has not read interviews with Barry on the subject will have a sense of this semi-factuality, this incitement to distrustfulness. This matches Hutcheon's explication of 'historiographic metafiction', when she writes that

historiographic metafiction—like postmodern painting, sculpture, and photography—inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world. It does not reject it (cf. Graff 1979); nor does it merely accept it (cf. Butler 1980, 93; A. Wilde 1981, 170). But it does change irrevocably any simple notions of realism or reference by directly confronting the discourse of art with the discourse of history. (20, references Hutcheon's own)

*Beatlebone* is full of such self-effacement. It highlights not only its textuality but its fictionality: by the metafictional Part Six, and also simply by giving us a character who is not fictional, it calls to attention the falsity of a fictional character's thoughts. We know Lennon didn't think exactly what John thinks in *Beatlebone*, simply because we know that *Beatlebone* is a work of fiction. But *Beatlebone* also sincerely attempts to represent the

anxious mind and to make affective comment on ways in which a human psyche may be damaged by childhood trauma, how this damage may manifest in adulthood, and how remedial processes and medical professionals both well-intentioned and ill-intentioned may attempt to soothe it. This would seem to baldly exclude it from another of Jameson's description of the 'cultural dominant' of Postmodernism: *Beatlebone* is a sincere commentary upon anxiety and alienation, while for Jameson, 'anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as in [Munch's] *The Scream*) are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern' (1984, 63). Furthermore, it performs this commentary using focalised, subjectivist prose techniques—stream of consciousness in the broader, categorical sense—which bring to attention the textuality of the narration, which as I have argued elsewhere (particularly with reference to Schofield's novels in chapter 3) are defining characteristics of Modernist fiction.

This alternation of Postmodernist 'historiographic metafiction' with Modernist sincerity and prose techniques makes *Beatlebone* resistant to categorisation either as a Modernist text or a Postmodernist text (of the major case studies in this thesis, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, *Malarky*, *Martin John*, *Beatlebone*, *Solar Bones* and Anna Burns' *Milkman*, it is the only one for which I believe the former categorisation is not broadly satisfactory, other than *Malarky* which sits on a Realist-Modernist cusp. Sally Rooney's *Normal People* is examined in chapter 6 specifically as a Realist counterexample). But by virtue of this alternation, it fits extremely well with a more contemporary school of thought, which takes inspiration from Hutcheon, Jameson and Raymond Williams, to claim that literature (and culture more broadly) in the twenty-first century is characterised by just such alternation: or, as its founding fathers prefer it, 'oscillation'. The name given to this alleged new school of artistic thought is 'Metamodernism', and it was first codified in 2010 by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, whose periodising claim addresses

the alleged demise of "the" postmodern and the apparent rise of another modernism. We will argue that this modernism is characterized by the oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment. We will call this structure of feeling *metamodernism*. (2010, "2")

## 6: Oscillating into Metamodernism

Vermeulen and van den Akker first theorised Metamodernism in the 2010 article quoted above, entitled 'Notes on Metamodernism'. This article, by their own later admission, was first conceived during a discussion, 'not entirely sober,' talking about 'the financial crisis, the rise of populism and New Romanticism' while they were PhD students ('Misunderstandings and Clarifications', 2015, par. 1). All three of these points will be relevant to my application of Metamodernism to *Beatlebone*, but so too is the admitted immaturity—indeed, insobriety—of Metamodernism as a thesis. Like many 'breakthroughs' in critical thought, it announced itself with great bombast and a reach which perhaps over-extended its grasp. In the following paragraphs I will first seek to describe the theory of 'Metamodernism', from Vermeulen and van den Akker's original claims for the term to subsequent developments by the artist Luke Turner, Seth Abramson and others, to Vermeulen and van den Akker's own later refinements on their original paper. I will contest certain claims and developments amongst this list, most notably the arguments that Metamodernism constitutes a totalising periodisation, or a 'cultural dominant'. However I will, I hope without contradiction, also argue that *Beatlebone* is an emblematically 'Metamodernist' text, drawing on the literary theorists David James and Umilla Seshagiri's own engagement with this movement, and that Barry's work can be positioned on a wing of the contemporary Irish Modernist resurgence for which 'Metamodernism' is a useful and enlightening title.

The term 'structure of feeling' in the quotation which concludes the previous section is taken, via Jameson, from Raymond Williams. As Vermeulen and van den Akker write,

Jameson described postmodernism as a hegemonic 'structure of feeling' characterized by senses of an end—of History, social class, art, the subject, etc. We conceive of metamodernism as structure of feeling [sic] typified by the return of many of these debates, foremost among them History, the grand narrative, *Bildung* and the agent. The notion of the 'structure of feeling' is borrowed from the British cultural theorist Raymond Williams. (2010, 55)

Williams' own definition of 'structure of feeling' follows: it is a lengthy quotation for a concept which is here primarily relevant for the way in which it was later appropriated by first Jameson and subsequently Vermeulen and van den Akker, but this reflects the

looseness of the term. Not that Williams' conception is sloppy: he very succinctly defines an inexact concept which constellates a number of inexact and 'in process' elements. Williams writes that, when we use his phrase 'structures of feeling',

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure', as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. (1977, 132)

As Vermeulen and van den Akker note, this 'interrelating continuity' is a useful elucidating concept in understanding Jameson's attempt to define Postmodernism as the cultural dominant of third-stage, or Late, capitalism. While Hutcheon foregrounds the aesthetic tendencies which dominate and define Postmodern writing, Jameson's view of Postmodernism is defined by its economic context; indeed, he concludes that the economic context and the cultural style are inextricable. Following Ernest Mandel, he uses the term 'Late Capitalism' to summarise post-war 'consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society or "high tech", and the like' as various ways of expressing a 'new social formation' that 'no longer obeys the laws of classical capitalism' but is instead 'a *purier* stage of capitalism than any of the moments which preceded it' (1984, 55). Late Capitalism incorporates aesthetic production into the capitalist supply chain: even art's most shocking tendencies have, as of 1984, 'become institutionalized and are at one with the official culture of Western society [...] aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally' (1984, 56). This, for Jameson, is Postmodernism: shorn of autonomy from the economic system which produces it, 'every position on postmodernism in culture'—and every position taken *by* Postmodernism in culture—is, 'whether apologia or stigmatization' (1984, 55) nothing more or less than 'The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' (1984, 53). The result is that the "'semi-autonomy" of the cultural sphere [...] has been destroyed by the logic of late capitalism', taking the form of a diffuse 'expansion of culture throughout the social realm' (1984, 87).

However, although Jameson pitches his model as a totalising one, he does not claim that, because Late Capitalists own the means of (aesthetic) production, whatever art Late Capitalism produces, no matter how heterogenous (or no matter how Modernist or Realist), would equate to Postmodernism:

I am very far from feeling that all cultural production today is 'postmodern' in the broad sense I will be conferring on this term. The postmodern is however the force field in which very different kinds of cultural impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed 'residual' and 'emergent' forms of cultural production—must make their way. If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable. (1984, 57)

Not all art produced in 1984, in other words, is necessarily alike in style, but it all inevitably bears the effects of the 'force field' in which heterogenous artistic impulses are expressed. This 'force field', therefore, simultaneously imparts identifying characteristics onto the culture which it produces: 'a new depthlessness', 'a weakening of historicity', an 'emotional ground tone' related to sublimity, and a relation to new (i.e. post-war) technologies (58). The result is 'a cultural dominant', 'a new systemic cultural norm' (1984, 57)—or, in Williams' words, 'a social experience which is still in process [...] which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics' (1977, 132): a structure of feeling.

Vermeulen and van den Akker draw on Hutcheon's work as well as Jameson's: not only for her diagnostic assessment of Postmodernism's identifying tendencies as outlined in the previous section on 'historiographic metafiction', but also for the death-knell which she sounded for the movement which she chronicled. They quote her 2002 epilogue to *The Politics of Postmodernity*, which proclaims that 'The postmodern moment has passed', and lays down this gauntlet to the periodising schema Realism→Modernism→Postmodernism: *what comes next?* 'Post-postmodernism', Hutcheon writes, 'needs a new label of its own' (181).

As repeatedly stated, this rigid approach to aesthetic periodisation is not one which I find productive, although the 'structures of feeling' approach, and Jameson's related description of Postmodernism as a Late Capitalist 'force field', conceptualise totalising periodisation in sufficiently flexible ways to be compatible with this thesis' own

charting of Modernist submersion and re-emergence. Regardless: Hutcheon's challenge is one which Vermeulen and van den Akker take on, and their response is that the Postmodern moment has been supplanted by the Metamodernist one.

Vermeulen and van den Akker write that 'the postmodern years of plenty, pastiche, and parataxis are over [...] they have been over for quite a while now' (2010, '2'). My second chapter described the collapse of the Celtic Tiger as one of many historical events which has debunked Francis Fukuyama's 1989 claim that history had 'ended'; Vermeulen and van den Akker also cite Fukuyama's rhetoric as a casualty of Postmodernism's demise: 'To be sure, history never ended. When postmodern thinkers declared it to have come to a conclusion, they were referring to a very particular conception of history—Hegel's "positive" idealism' (2010, '5').

Regarding this in the light of the Jamesonian model which Vermeulen and van den Akker follow, the implication is that as Jameson (following Mandel) assigned the aesthetic movements of Realism, Modernism and Postmodernism to market, monopoly and multinational (Late) capitalism respectively, then for 'Metamodernism' to replace Postmodernism, we must have entered a new economic phase. The defining characteristic of this fourth-stage capitalism, Vermeulen and van den Akker write, is crisis: 'The threefold "threat" of the credit crunch, a collapsed center, and climate change [...] infuses doubt, inspires reflection, and incites a move forward out of the postmodern and into the metamodern' (2010, '5'). This phrase, 'fourth-stage capitalism', is redolent of the work of Anatole Kaletsky on 'Capitalism 4.0': Kaletsky has suggested that

we can see the events of 2007-09 in a new light: as the fourth systemic transformation of capitalism, comparable to the transformations that followed the inflationary crisis of the 1970s, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the Napoleonic Wars of 1803-15. The emerging politico-economic system can therefore be described as 'Capitalism 4.0.' (23)

Vermeulen and van den Akker themselves suggest<sup>24</sup> Kaletsky's work as a means of theorizing the link between metamodernism and global economics ('Misunderstandings',

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<sup>24</sup> In their 2015 article 'misunderstandings and clarifications', a follow-up which engages with both critiques and perceived misreadings of their original article 'Notes on Metamodernism'.

2015, par 22), although with a caution, perhaps nervousness, which is characteristic of their engagement with other contemporary scholars: despite their Jamesonian influence, they are in the final instance less content than Jameson to acknowledge artistic-economic linkages as *total*, and link Metamodernism to Kaletsky's work only with the caveat that Metamodernism *can* be autonomous of the 'interests' of capitalist structures, even if it *often* intertwines with them ('Misunderstandings', 2015, par 22).

It is easy, however, to announce that an ageing orthodoxy has passed, and that you have found a name for the new one. Vermeulen and van den Akker acknowledge as much, listing several previous attempts to name the Thing After Postmodernism: Gilles Lipovetsky's 'hypermodern', Alan Kirby's 'digimodernism and/or pseudomodernism', Robert Samuels' 'automodernism', and finally and most interestingly Nicholas Bourriard's 'altermodernism' (2010, '3'). Bourriard's 'altermodernism' is to some degree reminiscent of Susan Stanford Friedman's work on 'planetary Modernisms', in that it centres upon a broadening of scope: as Friedman extends 'Modernism' to non-western countries, so Bourriard, in Vermeulen and van den Akker's view, rests his conception of 'altermodernism' on 'an incorporation and/or affirmation of otherness as much as in the exploration of elsewheres' (2010, '3'). However they also find his approach 'evasive; it is as precise in its observations as it is vague in its argumentation' (2010, '4'). This is something of which Vermeulen and van den Akker cannot be accused: much as Hutcheon did with Postmodernism, they identify and define precise aesthetic tendencies of the Metamodernist artwork. The central concept in their diagnosis is 'oscillation': the Metamodernist artwork is one which

acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it *as if* it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility. (2010, '5')

This focus on 'oscillation' between Modernist and Postmodernist aesthetics caught the zeitgeist. In the way of boldly-stated ideas whose time has come, Vermeulen and van den Akker's website, set up in May 2009 and also called 'Notes on Metamodernism', quickly attracted adherents. Interestingly, these came from both within academia and without; most notable among the latter was the English artist Luke Turner, who reconceptualised Metamodernism from a descriptive assessment to a prescriptive manifesto: while

Vermeulen and van den Akker insist repeatedly that ‘metamodernism is the description of a structure of feeling—and not, to state it again, a programme’ (‘Misunderstandings’, 2015, par 22), Turner is wholeheartedly programmatic, writing an eight-point ‘Metamodernist Manifesto’, which has gathered its own disciples including the Hollywood actor turned celebrity performance artist Shia LeBouef (Tsjeng). The Manifesto opens with

1. We recognise oscillation to be the natural order of the world. (2011, np)

And concludes by saying that

metamodernism shall be defined as the mercurial condition between and beyond irony and sincerity, naivety and knowingness, relativism and truth, optimism and doubt, in pursuit of a plurality of disparate and elusive horizons. We must go forth and oscillate! (2011, np)

Turner and LeBouef’s deliberately ‘Metamodernist’ work therefore calls upon the same principle as Vermeulen and van den Akker’s diagnosis: that of oscillation or alternation between Modernist and Postmodernist aesthetics. The structure is reminiscent of a Hegelian dialectic, but the output being argued for is not so much a synthesis of the Modern and the Postmodern, but a contradictory continuation of both at once, resulting in artworks where Modernist sincerity and Postmodern irony jostle for bandwidth. However there is a fundamental schism between the descriptive and prescriptive forms of Metamodernism: given that Vermeulen and van den Akker argue for Metamodernism as the new cultural dominant, Turner, in *exhorting* artists to ‘go forth and oscillate’, demonstrates that no such domination has come to pass (a contradiction Turner himself either ignores or embraces; he too has written of Metamodernism as ‘today’s dominant cultural mode’ (2015)). My sympathies, in this schism, lie with Turner’s manifesto: convincing arguments have been made for individual artworks or oeuvres as Metamodernist examples, but that this ‘structure of feeling’ is a ‘cultural dominant’ is less well attested. A good example is *Huffington Post* journalist Seth Abramson’s recruitment for Metamodernism of the films of Wes Anderson: Abramson’s contention that ‘Wes Anderson films are metamodern because one can’t tell if the somewhat artificial, somewhat cloyingly earnest worlds they create are fundamentally “sincere” or “ironic.” Answer: they’re both!’ (par 32) rings true; his clunky contextualisation of Metamodernism as a cultural philosophy is less so, and depends upon treating monarchical periodisations

such as 'Victorianism (1840-1900)' and aesthetic trends such as 'postmodernism (1945-2005)' as equivalent and equally fixed (par 15).

Vermeulen and van den Akker themselves have likewise convincingly identified case studies of Metamodernism in their 2015 article 'Utopia, sort of: A Case Study in Metamodernism'. Here they demonstrate how Young British Artist David Thorpe and Icelandic performance artist Ragnar Kjartansson both use 'techniques and tropes associated with the postmodern precisely in order to surpass the postmodern' ('Utopia, sort of', 2015, 62): they bring the Postmodern into the realm of the Modern and drag the Modern into the realm of the Postmodern. However Vermeulen and van den Akker's selection of case studies undermines their claim for Metamodernism's cultural dominance: neither David Thorpe or Ragnar Kjartansson, nor their other case study Paula Doepfner, nor Abramson's example of Wes Anderson (although Anderson is at least highly culturally visible), nor Turner and his collaborators LeBouef and (Finnish artist) Nastja Säde Rönkkö, whatever their merits, can be considered culturally dominant artists. Indeed, Anderson aside, the more visible artists/artworks which various critics have claimed for 'Metamodernism' tend to be those whose connection to Metamodernist oscillation is the most tenuous: Gry Rustad's argument that various popular TV sitcoms (*Community*, *Parks and Recreation*) are Metamodernist is solely founded on the observation that they contain both 'pop culture spoofs' and 'human warmth' ('The Joke that Wasn't Funny Anymore...', 2011). Elsewhere, similarly, Turner lists American television drama *Breaking Bad* (2008-13), a genuinely dominant recent fictional text in terms of both cultural penetration and critical acclaim, among a list of Metamodernist artworks (2015, par 7), but makes no attempt to justify its inclusion, and indeed another Rustad article<sup>25</sup> ('"Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Can't Lose!"', 2011) offers *Breaking Bad* as an example of exactly what Metamodernism is not. One thing which Metamodernism certainly is not is an all-pervading Jamesonian cultural 'force field'. Rather, like Surrealism or Futurism in the early twentieth century, Metamodernism is an excellent descriptor for

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<sup>25</sup> Both Rustad articles are hosted on the 'Notes on Metamodernism' website, which consists in large part of journalistic pieces which claim various cultural artefacts or movements for metamodernism, to varying degrees of philosophical rigour.

a select artistic movement, which is one among many, but which certainly counts many intriguing artworks, performances and works of fiction amongst its corpus. One of these works is *Beatlebone*.

## 7: Metamodernist Literature

Stephen Knudsen, a painter and visual art critic, offers an articulate summary of Vermeulen and van den Akker's claims for the identifying aesthetics of Metamodernism. He writes:

metamodernism allows the possibility of staying sympathetic to the poststructuralist deconstruction of subjectivity and the self—Lyotard's teasing of everything into intertextual fragments—and yet it still encourages genuine protagonists and creators and the recouping of some of modernism's virtues. (par.27)

This summary could have been written to describe Barry's novel. John's subjectivity is, as mentioned above, almost pre-deconstructed by the reader's awareness of the real, deceased John Lennon, and their attendant awareness that Barry's version of him is fictional: the aura of celebrity surrounding the original Lennon means that, as with Andy Warhol's screen prints of Marilyn Monroe, Barry's 'John Lennon' is constantly mediated by the viewer's knowledge that this aura (to use Walter Benjamin's terminology) is missing; or, rather, is present only in facsimile. Jameson relates this use of celebrity 'stars' in Warhol's imagery to the commodification of Late Capitalism more widely: 'Warhol's human subjects, stars—like Marilyn Monroe [...] are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images' (1984, 61), and this applies equally to the image of Lennon. And, of course, Part Six, with its integration of Barry's research notes into a historiographic metafiction, foregrounds no shortage of 'intertextual fragments', including reference to Zola (175) and Larkin (177), and reflections on Lennon's own two published books and his prose style's similarity, 'at its very occasional best', to 'Spike Milligan as shot through with Dylan Thomas or James Joyce' (193). And yet Barry's facsimile of John Lennon is also a 'genuine' protagonist in the sense that his psychology is portrayed 'as if' genuine, with the form and content of the novel united in an affective portrayal of anxiety, frustration and the working-through of trauma, with none of what Jameson calls 'the waning of affect in postmodern culture' (1984, 61).

As the previous section displays (and the Warhol analogy continues), much of the work surrounding 'Metamodernism' has taken for its case studies pieces of visual art,

television, film or performance art. There has been some thinking about Metamodernist literature, however: Luke Turner finds (but does not evidence) ‘the metamodernist sensibility’ in Zadie Smith, David Foster Wallace and Roberto Bolaño (2015, par 7), and Knudsen also cites Foster Wallace, more interestingly, as a harbinger of Metamodernism to come: Knudsen identifies Wallace’s 1993 essay *E Pluribus Unum* as an early canary in the Postmodernist coalmine, suggesting that ‘perhaps what had made postmodernism vital—such as irony, appropriation and obsessive intertextuality—was beginning to fizzle’ (par 2). Foster Wallace himself, Knudsen suggests, then wrote one of the earliest post-fizzle novels with *Infinite Jest*, which in its ‘genuine selfhood and authentic, sincere point of view’ (par 2) began to illuminate what the novel might become once Postmodernism’s cultural dominance was over. This, of course, is not in itself sufficient to make *Infinite Jest* a work of Metamodernism *avant la lettre*: rumination of authenticity and sincerity of description sounds considerably more like what Knudsen calls ‘modern attachment’ (or, indeed, Realism) than ‘postmodern detachment’ or any oscillation between the two (par 5). Knudsen then leaves literature behind, to take his examples of contemporary Metamodernism from his own sphere, visual art. But contemporary literary Metamodernism is taken up at greater length in a 2014 article by David James<sup>26</sup> and Urmila Seshagiri, entitled ‘Metamodernism: narratives of continuity and revolution’.

James and Seshagiri offer a précis of the conventional academic narrative of early-twentieth-century Modernism, which drolly implies that the purpose of the First World War was to inspire literary experimentation (87)<sup>27</sup>. Then, whisking the curtain away, they reveal their criticism of this standard model, making two important points: firstly, that this

mythos of Western metropolitan modernism [...] has in recent years been supplanted by a more nuanced, historically balanced, and demographically diverse understanding of cultural production in the early twentieth century. (87)

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<sup>26</sup> Whose writing on the ‘Legacies of Modernism’ I have also drawn upon in chapter 1.

<sup>27</sup> Compare Sally Rooney’s observation, as quoted in chapter 6, that she ‘is wary of sounding as though “[the crash] was all worth it because we got some good books out of it”’ (Clark, ‘Conversations with Sally Rooney’, 2018)

And secondly, like this thesis, they address the ‘surprisingly persistent legacy of this very mythos in twenty-first-century arts and letters’ (87). They identify

A growing number of contemporary novelists—among them Julian Barnes, J. M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan, Cynthia Ozick, Will Self, and Zadie Smith— [who] place a conception of modernism as revolution at the heart of their fictions, styling their twenty-first-century literary innovations as explicit engagements with the innovations of early-twentieth-century writing (87).

James and Seshagiri subsequently treat the concepts ‘Contemporary Modernist’ and ‘Metamodernist’ as interchangeable. They defend periodisation (despite the sense that it is ‘unfashionable’; my thesis is delighted to discover itself to be all the rage), arguing that ‘treating realism, Romanticism and modernism as historically portable modes’ (of which this thesis is cheerfully guilty) is disrespectful to contemporary literary studies, creating a ‘reductive, presentist conception of contemporary literature as a mere branch of modernism studies rather than a domain whose aesthetic, historical, and political particulars merit their own forms of intellectual inquiry.’ (88)

Although James and Seshagiri’s argument for the importance of contemporary (i.e. twenty-first century) literature is trenchant and valuable, the terms on which they construct this particular defence elide Metamodernism’s unique credentials as well as Modernism’s own transperiodicity. Usurping the term ‘Metamodernist’ to mean ‘twenty-first century Modernism’ simply reduces the precision of the critical vocabulary available to us. Whereas, if we treat ‘Modernism’ and ‘Metamodernism’ as transperiodical, we can make finer distinctions: a text can be Modernist and twenty-first century but *not* Metamodernist (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*), or it can be from the twentieth century *and* Modernist but *not* Metamodernist (*Ulysses*), or it can be from the twenty-first century *and* Metamodernist and therefore *also-but-not-wholly* Modernist (*Beatlebone*), or it can be from the twentieth century and the same (Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), as I will argue below, might fill this final slot on the matrix). James and Seshagiri identify Eric Hayot, Susan Stanford Friedman and Raymond Williams as critics who expand the concept of Modernism beyond useful periodical boundaries, and rebut them by pointing out that all three ultimately use examples from the early twentieth century to illustrate what they mean by Modernism:

the decades between 1890 and 1940 repeatedly emerge as the chrysalis for modern literature's form-breaking work [...] Modernism [...] tends still to be recognized through its affinities with the twentieth century arts. (91)

This, as an observed tendency, is certainly correct<sup>28</sup>, and once more this chapter and thesis, with its frequent reference to Joyce in particular, fits the mould of the positions which James and Seshagiri critique. But, if I may offer a counter-rebuttal (and, for the purposes of analogy, borrow examples from outside the Modernist-Postmodernist debate): matters of degree—both in strong terms like 'culturally dominant' and weaker terms such as 'at its peak' or 'a popular genre' or 'an extraordinary period of modernist creativity'—*are relevant*. Non-periodisation does not mean that all genres are and were equally culturally dominant and relevant at all moments in history. J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) and Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946, 1950, 1959) were highly influential fantasy novels published in England in 1945-60, but this does not make 1945-60 The Fantastic Period; it does make it something of a golden age for English fantasy literature, with which subsequent fantasy writing is inevitably in dialogue. Style can be characteristic of an era without being synonymous with it. To cast our net even wider: a composer can write contemporary baroque music in 2019 and (just as importantly) a composer of 1700 could write non-baroque music in 1700 (folk music, for example). I can acknowledge that 1700 is a period when baroque was a dominant genre in western composition, and draw all my examples of baroque canonicity from 1700, without treating 1700 as either synonymous with baroque music or baroque music as synonymous with 1700. Albeit more cautiously, this is what James and Seshagiri risk with their claim that

We dull modernism's particular brilliance when we dissolve it into a collective of techniques comparable with what other writers have practiced at other points in history, and to characterize modernism as a feature common to centuries of interlocking modernities is to risk depriving works such as *To the Lighthouse* of the formal and temporal inventiveness unique to their era. (92)

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<sup>28</sup> Although there are exceptions to the tendency, notably Marshall Berman who treats Goethe and Baudelaire as Modernists emerging from eighteenth and nineteenth century chrysalises respectively (Berman 39, 88).

I do not think it dulls the brilliance of either *To the Lighthouse* (1927) or *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* to say that they are both brilliant, and both Modernist: nor, in the final analysis, do James and Seshagiri find it difficult to type the words 'early-twentieth-century modernism' when they accurately observe that: 'some of the most daring and original contemporary novels are enacted under the rubrics—implicit or explicit—of early-twentieth-century-modernism' (93). But, paying scant regard to Vermeulen and van den Akker's emphasis on 'oscillation', the novels which James and Seshagiri claim for 'Metamodernism' are either simply (but not merely) this: daring and original contemporary Modernisms, such as Will Self's *Umbrella* (2012) and Ali Smith's *There But for The* (2011), or they are canonical works of Postmodernism such as Ian McEwan's historiographic metafiction *Atonement* (2001). The chief exception is the work of Tom McCarthy, which they do not cite explicitly in terms of 'oscillation', but do acknowledge both its modernist (specifically, Wyndham Lewisite) 'lineage' and how it 'emphasizes hard surfaces over streams of consciousness' (94), which could be seen as closer to a Postmodernist aesthetic, in keeping with Hutcheon's observation that (according to a particular 'radical break' model of Postmodernism) 'on the formal level, postmodern surface is opposed to modernist depth' (Hutcheon, 50). McCarthy's novels and McEwan's *Atonement* aside, James and Seshagiri are justified in writing that their 'metamodernist' authors' writing 'reactivates the [modernist] movement's strategies' (96) as it 'incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of [high modernism]' (93), but offer little sense of the other pole to which, according to Vermeulen and van den Akker's conception of Metamodernism, these texts must oscillate: the Postmodern.

By contrast *Beatlebone* fits by turns with James and Seshagiri's claims, as its heavily focalised use of free indirect discourse to inhabit the inner workings of a damaged consciousness certainly fits their description of contemporary Modernisms, and demonstrates 'the political and ethical efficacy that contemporary writing attains by remobilizing [high] modernist procedures' (95). But, also as demonstrated above, *Beatlebone* also fits intermittently with Hutcheon's description of the aesthetics of Postmodernism. It is this both-but-neither quality in *Beatlebone*, when measured against the identifying characteristics of both Modernist and Postmodernist writing, which makes

it a perfect example of what Vermeulen and van den Akker set out to describe as a 'Metamodernist' text; and which also makes it a perfect example of why the term 'Metamodernist' is a useful one, as a descriptor for a particular aesthetic movement and particular texts within that movement, even if not, as Vermeulen and van den Akker's original thesis would claim, as a 'cultural dominant' on an even footing with Fredric Jameson's more convincing diagnosis of Postmodernism as such in the 1980s.

Another aspect of Vermeulen and van den Akker's original article *Notes on Metamodernism*—indeed, of their original stated motivation in writing the article—which is perfectly exemplified in *Beatlebone*, is their statement that 'metamodernism appears to find its clearest expression in an emergent Neoromantic sensibility' (2010, '8'). They extend this link to suggest that a key tenet of Romanticism is, effectively, its Metamodernism:

Romanticism is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized [...] for our purposes, this general idea of the Romantic as oscillating between attempt and failure, or as Schlegel wrote, between 'enthusiasm and irony', or in [Jos] de Mul's words, between a 'modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony', is sufficient. (2010, '8'-'9')

They would later heavily caveat this relationship between Metamodernism and Neoromanticism, warning that although 'Metamodernism' was indeed first conceived with reference to a re-emergent Romanticism, they intended to say 'not that metamodernism can be reduced to New Romanticism, nor that what is generally referred to as New Romanticism is exclusive to the metamodernist structure of feeling', but only that 'a number of works recognized as New Romanticism exemplified the metamodern structure of feeling' ('Misunderstandings', 2015, par 21). Caveat notwithstanding, *Beatlebone* is amongst this number of works: as Eimear McBride has written, one of the lasting images of *Beatlebone* is its portrayal of the Irish west coast, which is suffused with awe at the character of this particular, remote landscape—or, as a scholar of the Romantic might phrase it, of sublimity: 'Barry captures the utter strangeness of the west,' writes McBride, '[...] these people clinging to a rock at the end of the world soaked by the rain and drenched in the most glorious language' (qtd. in Doyle). One of most exquisite lines in *Beatlebone*, yet again from Part Six, perfectly summarises how this 'sentimental'

Neoromanticism has resulted from the push and pull of Modernist sincerity and Postmodernist fear of that sincerity:

Whatever it is that you're most scared of surfacing in your work, you can be sure that it's nearby.

I have always been both repelled by and drawn to sentimental forces. (191)

The result, in *Beatlebone*, is sublimity that cocks a snook at sublimity, but is sublimity for all that. *Beatlebone* is a Modernist stream-of-consciousness novel with a Postmodernist irony which does not efface its sincerity. It is, to use Vermeulen and van den Akker's very useful insight, a Metamodernist novel, which exists (perhaps comprises) the Metamodernist flank of the current rejuvenation of the Irish Modernist novel of damaged consciousness.

This chapter has sought to justify the inclusion of *Beatlebone* in a Metamodernist canon, and also to justify the usefulness of that canon in a discussion of aesthetic modes in contemporary writing, while raising certain doubts about the over-extension of Metamodernism into a simple periodising term. Before concluding, I hope to show that this detachment from periodisation also *extends* the reach of Metamodernism in another respect: by treating the mode which Vermeulen and van den Akker have identified as (in James and Seshagiri's term) a 'historically portable mode', we can see how Metamodernism was, in a sense, present *all along* as a variant of Postmodernism which *never* entirely disavowed Modernist principles. The following, concluding section will attempt to do this, and to once more exemplify the relevance of *Beatlebone* to this discourse, by making a direct comparison, between Barry's work and that of his major acknowledged influence, Flann O'Brien.

## 8: A Third Way

In the *Irish America* interview cited previously, Barry claims, not without mischief, that Beckett's 'protestant' severity contrasts against the 'Catholic' excess of Joyce's writing. He then positions the writing of Flann O'Brien<sup>29</sup> as a 'third way' which cuts across the need to choose between these opposing approaches:

Irish writing has this wonderful reputation, and so much of it is built on the work of three writers: Beckett and Joyce and Flann O'Brien in the first half of the 20th century.

There are two traditions in Irish writing, and it sounds a bit pat, but there's Catholic writing and Protestant writing. It's Beckett and Joyce. One is stained glass windows—ornate, ostentatious, and fuckin' beautiful. And the other is take everything out—austere and beautiful in that way. I think for a lot of the second half of the 20th century, Irish writers were really caught about which direction to go. I do always admire that kind of third way—Flann O'Brien—taking the piss out of it all. (Brodsky)

This is not necessarily a watertight summary of Irish literary aesthetics: one might consider, as a counterexample, the 'style of scrupulous meanness' in which Joyce wrote *Dubliners* to be more aligned with the allegedly Beckettian 'protestant' approach than with the 'stained glass windows' of *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake* ('Dubliners'). But it does interestingly set Barry's work as continuous of O'Brien's within the context of a 'third way' alternative, existing outside an existing binary of modes of Irish literary writing. In Barry's claim this binary is a matter of austerity versus ostentation; but there is another way in which O'Brien's work, like Barry's, operates as a 'third way' in relation to an existing binary: O'Brien's work, like Barry's, can reasonably be seen as an artefact of Metamodernist 'oscillation' between Modernist and Postmodernist aesthetics – a diagnosis pre-empted by Rónán McDonald and Julian Murphet, who write that 'Whereas 20 years ago O'Brien seemed the quintessential postmodern writer, now his relationship

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<sup>29</sup> Flann O'Brien's real name was Brian O'Nolan, although this analysis will stick to the *nom de plume* 'Flann O'Brien', under which the analysis' subject, the novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), was published.

to modernism is in pressing need of reassessment' (3). I enact my own fleeting contribution to this reassessment under the rubric of Metamodernism, for the purpose of further evidencing my contention that all of these aesthetic categories—Modernism, Postmodernism and the smaller category of Metamodernism—can be most effectively treated as 'historically portable modes'.

In O'Brien's 1939 novel *At Swim-Two Birds*, there is an evident Postmodern sensibility at play; certainly more so than in *Beatlebone* (outside of Part Six). This is signalled from the very outset; on the title page, a sardonic disclaimer carries all of the characteristic hallmarks of historiographic metafiction: irony, play, self-effacement and a foregrounding of the novel's own irreducible textuality:

*All the characters represented in this book, including the first person singular, are entirely fictitious and bear no relation to any person living or dead.* (np)

This emblematically Postmodern style is insistent and recurrent throughout the entire novel, which involves layers of frame narrative and constant reminders that this is all a story, or rather an uneasy collection of stories which interject, cancel and interrupt each other incessantly. At one of many such instances, the prose (already comprising a rambling interjection from the *previous* section) is interrupted by a 'Note to Reader' which, as Hutcheon writes, 'subverts' the novel's 'mimetic engagement with the world.' (20):

*Note to Reader before proceeding further:* Before proceeding further, the Reader is respectfully advised to refer to the Synopsis or Summary of the Argument on Page 85. (145)

Page 85—in my copy, the pagination is updated to reflect the reader's edition of *At Swim-Two Birds*—does indeed contain a '*Synopsis, being a summary of what has gone before, FOR THE BENEFIT OF NEW READERS*' (85). The reader is invited to flick back and forth between the pages of the physical book in their hand, cross-referencing self-referential asides on literary production in a manner which, as is typical of a Postmodern aesthetic, not only reminds the reader that the book is only a fiction but suggests the attendant argument that the reader's own reality might be on an equally unstable ontological footing.

And yet there are moments when a sincere Modernist 'naivety' is allowed, almost begrudgingly, to enter this Postmodernist carnival of 'knowingness'. Stephen Abblitt summarises this sharply when he writes that 'despite the endless parodies and put-downs, Joyce [...] and his literary modernism remains an essential element of O'Brien's own art' (66). The '*first person singular*' narrative mentioned on *At Swim-Two-Birds*' title page, which tells the tale of a lazy student who lives with his uncle, is just one of this novel's many recurrent narrative voices, but it is affectively deeper than the others. And although it is not a stream-of-consciousness, there is a vaguely Joycean narratological schema detectable in its narrative style: there are no inverted commas to denote hierarchies of speech representation, and a catechismic structure sometimes enters reminiscent of *Ulysses*' 'Ithaca' episode, such as when the uncle accuses the narrator of not really studying when he is alone in his room:

I denied this

*Nature of denial: inarticulate, of gesture. (13)*

These more Modernist sections are never entirely allowed free reign. Much like Colin MacCabe's identification of a meta-language governing Realist aesthetics, there is a type of Postmodern meta-language governing *At Swim-Two-Birds*: the final section of first-person-singular narration is undermined at its outset by the heading '*Biographical reminiscence part the final*' (301). But the 'reminiscence' itself expresses a heartfelt turn of emotion in its narrator which troubles his, and the text's, attempts at Postmodern archness or evasion:

I went slowly up the stairs to my room. My uncle had evinced unsuspected traits of character and had induced in me an emotion of surprise and contrition extremely difficult of literary rendition or description. My steps faltered to some extent on the stairs. (312)

There is an admission here that the novel's archly detached register is simply incommensurate with the emotional depth which O'Brien wishes to portray at the climax of the first-person-singular narrative. The second sentence, with its 'evinced' and its continued obsession upon what is 'literary', shows the smart, hyperarticulate narrator still clinging to his idiom. But he does not find it *impossible* to express such emotion: he finds it *difficult*. And in the timorous, unresolved cadence of the next sentence, 'My steps

faltered to some extent on the stairs', O'Brien finds the requisite sincerity—the requisite belief in the representational capacities of language, if only for a moment—to overcome that difficulty, and speak. As Abblitt puts it, O'Brien is 'a reluctant modernist' (66) writing 'ironic modernism' (65). *At Swim-Two-Birds* can be accurately deemed a Postmodernist text, doubtless, but it *also* contains the 'oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment' (Vermeulen and Van den Akker 2010, '2') that characterises Metamodernism. Maebh Long notes that *At Swim-Two-Birds* has been claimed by various critics as either 'exemplary of postmodernism', 'a late modernist text' or 'the perfect text with which to conclude [the] Routledge guide to Modernism' (9), and that it can be read as containing 'a post-modern refusal of metanarratives', but also, in direct contradiction, 'a Marxist denunciation of capitalist commodity fetish' (13). These clashing diagnoses speak to the tension—indeed, the oscillation—between Modernism and Postmodernism in the text, and also to the relevance of 'Metamodernism' as a transperiodical category to delimit and taxonomise it.

This is not a claim that texts such as *At Swim-Two-Birds* have been wrongly considered Postmodern, but a suggestion that Metamodernism has been present all along as a subcategory of that which has previously been theorised as Postmodern. Indeed one of the most canonical, and poetic, descriptions of the Postmodern reads far better as a description of the Metamodernist impulse than as a diagnosis of the same phenomenon which Linda Hutcheon identifies as 'historiographic metafiction', or Jameson's 'waning of affect in postmodern culture' (1984, 61). That is the description by Italian novelist and critic Umberto Eco, who, in his 1985 book *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, writes that

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently. I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by [English romance novelist] Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two

speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love. (1985, 67)

Note that this passage turns and depends on the phrase 'As Barbara Cartland would put it', just as Vermeulen and van den Akker's *Metamodernism* turns and depends on the phrase 'as if', when they write that:

The current, metamodern discourse also acknowledges that history's purpose will never be fulfilled because it does not exist. Critically, however, it nevertheless takes toward it *as if* it does exist. Inspired by a modern naïveté yet informed by postmodern skepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility (2010, '5')

As so readers of *Metamodernism*, like the woman in Eco's parable, are left with our response to the text dangling by the conditional dependent clause: '*if* the woman goes along with this'. Barry's *Beatlebone*, like Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* long before it, commits itself to the impossible possibility of undermining its own 'naïveté'—or, more accurately, its own *story*—in order to strengthen that story's claim to offer representation to the world. *Beatlebone*, *if we go along with it*, succeeds in speaking: of love, yes; but firstly and most deeply of anxiety.

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## CHAPTER 5

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### Conclusion: Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* and the stream of post-consciousness

#### 1: Post-Crash

When I began this doctoral project, in early September of 2016, Mike McCormack was probably the most obscure of the four authors who have become its central objects of study (certainly Eimear McBride and Kevin Barry's stars shone far brighter in the firmament of public opinion, and Anakana Schofield's *Martin John* had in January of the same year been lavishly praised by McBride in the *New York Times*). Only two years later, by September of 2018, McCormack could credibly claim to be the most fêted of these writers—or, at least, to be drawing level in this regard with McBride. As detailed in the previous chapter, McCormack had first had, and then lost, a major publishing deal with Jonathan Cape some years before, and it was the then-fledgling independent publisher Tramp Press who took a chance on his resurrection by printing his first book in a decade, *Solar Bones*. Since then, his re-ascendance has been meteoric. First *Solar Bones* was shortlisted (alongside *Martin John*) for the Goldsmith's Prize in September 2016, which it then won in November. Then Canongate took the book on from Tramp, making it eligible for the world's most prestigious literary award, the Man Booker, for which it was duly long-listed in 2017. In May 2018 McCormack was appointed to the Aosdána, an Arts Council-funded, peer-nominated association of Irish artists whose membership is limited to 250, and includes many establishment-favoured writers such as Edna O'Brien, Sebastian Barry and Colm Tóibín. Less than a month after his appointment to the Aosdána, McCormack was awarded the International Dublin literary award (formerly the IMPAC), a prestigious and lucrative award.

This has been, then, a vertiginous ascension to establishment status, academic scrutiny<sup>30</sup> and financial comfort: to supplement the €100,000 International Dublin award, McCormack is entitled to draw an annual stipend of €17,180 for five years from the Aosdána, making him quite literally a state-salaried writer. Whether his new loftiness of perch softens the radicalism of McCormack's output remains to be seen: that his predecessors as International Dublin / IMPAC winners include Kevin Barry (for *City of Bohane* in 2013) and Jon McGregor (for *Even the Dogs* in 2012) provides a precedent to demonstrate that it need not do so. Barry and McGregor have both continued to write convention-testing Modernist novels since the award.

*Solar Bones* is a post-crash novel in more ways than one: the narrative action takes place after the financial crash, but also after a car-crash-cum-heart-attack ends the life of its narrator, Marcus Conway. This single-sentence (so-called: see below), single-thread novel occupies the psychological vantage-point of a recently deceased middle-aged Irish engineer, permitted to return to his home—while empty, his wife and children out of shot—for an hour, across which he reminisces on a life spent in the service of repressing anxiety and trying to contribute to the civic infrastructure of County Mayo. An infidelity, his marriage, his youthful awe of his father, his later frustration with his father, corrupt local and national politics, a daughter establishing herself as an experimental artist, a drifting son finding himself fruit-picking in Queensland, a public health scandal in Galway and his wife's attendant illness: these themes pepper a firmly post-Tiger West-of-Ireland novel. McCormack has spoken of *Solar Bones*' socio-political context, and the influence which the financial collapse had upon Irish writing more widely, in an interview with *Writing.ie*:

The collapse of the Celtic Tiger was a dramatic and surreal event which was both physically tangible and a collapse of abstract values. Therefore it seems likely

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<sup>30</sup> At a 2018 conference on 'Innovation and Experimentation in Contemporary Irish Fiction' (at which I presented a paper based on the previous chapter's analysis of *Beatlebone*), a panel was devoted to McCormack's work, with all three papers focusing on *Solar Bones*: the only other authors with a panel to themselves were the long-established Anne Enright and John Banville (who was scheduled to attend the conference in person).

those fictions which would deal with it would have to step outside the bounds of the realist novel. (qtd. in Derek Flynn<sup>31</sup>)

As McCormack indicates here, *Solar Bones* firmly rejects the tradition of Celtic Tiger Historical Realism, as addressed in previous chapters. Deirdre Flynn relates the form of *Solar Bones* to its status as a novel of the Celtic Tiger's aftermath:

The stream of consciousness style mirrors the landscape that Marcus moves through, mirroring the economic fragmentation around him [...] From the very beginning, all convention is lost, there is no capital letter, no full stop, the sentence does not end for another 223 pages. (42)

The particular nature of *Solar Bones*' non-Realism, however, has to some extent been ill-portrayed. I referred to *Solar Bones* as a 'so-called' single-sentence novel above because although technically correct, the connotations of this designation might be misleading. Critics such as Deirdre Flynn refer to it as 'this 223-page, one-sentence novel' (45), and this conceit has dominated marketing and reception of the novel. However, emphasising *Solar Bones*' 'single sentence' within the context of Irish Modernist prose unavoidably evokes the precedent of Joyce, particularly the lengthy sentences of Molly Bloom's soliloquy in the 'Penelope' episode of *Ulysses*. 'Penelope' is often described in terms of an unpunctuated torrent. For example, in John Shea's description:

The final chapter of *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom's interior monologue, consists of only eight paragraphs, without even punctuation marks; the consciousness is indeed a stream, recognizing little in the way of formal or logical structures or barriers. (299)

Derek Attridge has comprehensively surveyed this tendency: he notes the ubiquity of liquid terminology in critical assessments of 'Penelope', citing no fewer than fifteen separate examples of critics who use 'metaphors of rivers, streams, and liquids—and of the barriers they pour over [...] to characterize the style of the episode' (544). Not only is

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<sup>31</sup> As this chapter quotes from both Derek Flynn's interview and Deirdre Flynn's criticism, as well as analysing McCormack's portrayal of the politician Pádraig Flynn, all Flynn's will be referred to by both fore and surname throughout, except where it is clear from the context which Flynn is being cited.

Molly's soliloquy a 'flow'—a metaphor no doubt encouraged by the widespread adoption of William James' phrase 'stream of consciousness' to describe Joycean interior monologue—but it is an *overflow*, transgressing conventional boundaries of linearity and clarity.

*Solar Bones*, however, is not the Penelopesque cascade of overlapping thoughts, memories and sense memories which the categorisation 'single sentence' thus suggests, as indeed Deirdre Flynn's above observation indicates, by emphasising the *fragmentary* effect of McCormack's 'stream'—although, as I will demonstrate, the prose is certainly not fragmentary in the manner of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* or *Martin John*. Instead, there is a sober lucidity to the way in which Marcus' posthumous voice describes the world: in McCormack's own apt description, it is 'continuously scrolling'. The phrase 'single sentence' is true inasmuch as there are no full stops or question marks to divide *Solar Bones*' 223 pages into sentences—moreover, McCormack has noted that it is properly speaking a sentence fragment rather than a single sentence, as it neither begins with a capital letter nor ends with a full stop (Harris). But it *is* divided, frequently, by line breaks, which McCormack deploys like a poet, to manipulate the rhythms of *Solar Bones* through enjambment and caesurae:

[...] a giddiness drawing me  
 through the house  
 door by door  
 room by room  
 up and down the hall  
 like a mad thing  
 bedrooms, bathroom, sitting room and  
 back again to the kitchen where  
 Christ  
 such a frantic burst  
 Christ (10)

As this quotation indicates, each new line begins with an indentation, like a new paragraph of prose in a conventional novel. Sharae Deckard, whose *Irish Times* review of *Solar Bones* characterises the novel as 'limpid, lyrical realism', notes the stylistic importance of these indentations and paragraph breaks to gesture at the connection between Marcus' damaged, post-car-crash mind and the damaged, post-financial-crash Irish economic order:

The indented lines act like structural seams and joints in the architecture of his memory, opening cracks that deepen as he recognises his impending dematerialisation, even as the Irish economy dissolves around him. (Deckard)

Although many of *Solar Bones*' front-indented paragraphs are longer than the brief utterances in the previous example, and are occasionally longer than a page (e.g. 197-199), the punctuation which the line breaks provide means that the effect of McCormack's 'unbroken' prose is not information-dense in the fashion of Molly Bloom's famous 4391-word sentence in the Penelope episode of *Ulysses*, but is temperate and measured, each unit of information surrounded by ample white space on the page. This space affects the cadences of Marcus' narration, as may again be demonstrated by reference to Penelope<sup>32</sup>. Derek Attridge has written that Molly Bloom's 'long' sentences are in fact composed of 'fairly short sentences whose boundaries are signaled [sic] not by graphic marks but by syntax' (551). Attridge therefore claims that the impression of 'overflow' in Molly's soliloquy has less to do with the particular content of Molly's thoughts, than with the manner in which they are presented on the page, as long unbroken rectangular blocks of text:

The actual experience of reading a text printed in this way is one of working to recover its lost signs—punctuation marks and upper-case letters—in order to make sense of it; a sequence of guesses, backtrackings, and corrections that renders onward progress much less smooth than we are accustomed to, even in this novel's linguistic carnival, and that no doubt gives rise to the feeling that its language is especially deviant. [...] If, then, the sentences seem to run on without a pause, it is not because we have seized the qualities of Molly's thought that their

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<sup>32</sup> This of course applies only to visual, and perhaps most particularly to print, readings of *Solar Bones*. It is unsurprising that, at the time of writing, the top-rated review of *Solar Bones* on the audiobook website Audible begins 'Maybe this book loses something in the listening' (Jones). The same caveat may be applied to all of this thesis' analyses, particularly concerning the single-page sentences in Schofield's *Martin John*.

un-punctuatedness represents but because we have failed to seize—thanks to Joyce's mode of visual presentation—the syntactic articulations she may be assumed to be using. (548)

In *Solar Bones*, unlike 'Penelope', the boundaries between Marcus's many 'sentences', long and short, are signalled by the clear visual intervention of line breaks. As noted above, these line breaks sometimes play the role of caesurae, adding an intermediary pause into an otherwise grammatical clause (as in 'that detail about how / this whole area is a glaciated valley' (216)), but elsewhere the line breaks *replace* conventional punctuation, and are used to delineate what, as Attridge notes in *Penelope*, would be a conventional sentence if bracketed with conventional grammar—as for example where the fully grammatical sentence (save for the lack of a full stop) 'I remember this pain' is given a line of its own (217). The effect is the reverse of *Penelope*: rather than 'running on without a pause', pauses are regularly introduced to slow the reader's experience of Marcus' stream of consciousness, which is neither a torrent nor a trickle but a moderately-paced canal, regulated to an even flow by the lock-gates of line-breaks. McCormack claims that this insistent but unhurried style is germane to *Solar Bones*' deceased narrator. It creates the conceit that, in the wake of his death, Marcus sees and can remember things more clearly than in life (in this respect *Solar Bones* echoes its International Dublin-winning forebear, McGregor's *Even the Dogs*, which is narrated in part by a similarly lucid Greek chorus of posthumous homeless souls, more patient and objective in their analyses of the social formation of urban England in death than they are in the sections of the novel which delve into their individual, highly damaged psyches whilst still alive). McCormack, with something of a flourish, has named this 'continuously scrolling' style a 'stream of post-consciousness', portraying:

the way a ghost would think...continuous, never stopping for fear that, as a ghost, he might dissipate or falter. This is not, as some critics have commented, a stream of consciousness—it is far too continuously scrolling for that; I always understood the style to be more in the nature of a stream of post-consciousness. (qtd. in Derek Flynn)

A good demonstration, both of the effect of this conceit and of the inevitability with which a 'single-sentence' novel will be compared to 'Penelope', is The *New York Times* reviewer Martin Riker's comparison between Marcus Conway's lucidity with Molly's overflow. Riker argues (as a caveat in a broadly positive review) that 'Sticklers for verisimilitude might

rightly point out that nobody really “thinks” in such articulate well-cadenced paragraphs (Molly Bloom’s mind is a rat’s nest by comparison)’ (Riker). He is correct to identify Conway’s steadily articulate cadence, but verisimilitude is not the battleground upon which *Solar Bones*’ stylistic ethos is encamped. There is no way to naturalistically evoke a posthumous consciousness: such things do not exist, and can only ever be portrayed by acts of imaginative creation such as McCormack’s ‘stream of post-consciousness’: McCormack’s decision is to create the exact effect which Riker observes, that of a mind which is *more than* naturalistically ordered.

This ‘stream of post-consciousness’, in extreme contrast to the visceral immediacy of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, drifts constantly. Its setting is nominally the present-tense scene upon which the book opens: Marcus standing, not doing anything, in the kitchen of his empty home. But his thoughts—to pinch a phrase from Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* (passim)—are unstuck in time, drifting incessantly backwards and forwards to describe various incidents or recurring themes from Marcus’s life. The order in which these episodes occur to Marcus is not strictly chronological—Marcus remembers his extramarital affair at an engineering conference in Prague (22-23) immediately before recalling an episode from his childhood which occurred decades earlier (24). But there is a teleological logic to the chronology of Marcus’ reminiscence, which drifts forwards and backwards in time but always with an underlying magnetic creep towards the moment of Marcus’ death, the precise description of which forms the novel’s climax: ‘the vast harmonic of my whole being was undone and I came apart in sheets and waves, torrential and ever falling’ (220).

## 2: All the Faithful Departed

As *Solar Bones* slowly circles Marcus' mortal coil, approaching in non-linear increments his climactic shuffling-off—a death with a very different potency to the narrator's suicide at the end of *Girl*, framed as it is as the catalyst of a resurrection as well as the extinguishing of a human life—the text inhabits its protagonist's mind. As with other contemporary Irish Modernist novels, the prose technique is influenced by, and provokes, a particular hermeneutic attitude towards Marcus' own consciousness: the following analysis should be considered subsequent to, and based upon, the narratological principles outlined in my previous chapters. The phrase 'stream of post-consciousness' is apposite not only to Marcus' ghostly status, but also to the fact that the events narrated are largely framed retrospectively: events are not described as they *occur* to the narrator, but as they *reoccur* to him. Although the novel does have occasional forward-action in phrases such as 'standing here in this kitchen' (23), which interrupt Marcus' free-associating memories to remind the reader of the novel's nominal setting, such interruption is little more than a framing device for a stream of consciousness which is located almost entirely in memory. Marcus himself regards the sequence of his remembrances as dictated by 'a skein of connections', in which each episode he remembers appears to Marcus to be

the story of another man from another age, something remembered  
standing here in this kitchen

only because it is woven into that memorial arc which curves from  
childhood to the present moment, gathering up memories of that time with my  
father on our farm, a skein of connections I am not likely to unravel at this  
moment [...] (23).

Luke Gibbons writes, with reference to ghosts and ghostliness in Joyce, that 'the spectre emanates from an incomplete project of self-formation' (2015, xiv), which he links to the Modernist mode of expression: 'memory under modernism breaks free of romantic regression' (2015, xv). Declan Kiberd has likewise linked ghostliness to Irish Modernism: he notes quips from both Yeats ('in Ireland [...] the dead may not even know they are dead, but go on talking anyway' (2017, 45)) and Beckett ('"to have lived is not enough for

them . They have to talk about it” (2017, 46)), and also a more intriguing generic categorisation: ‘the poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill has described Gaelic modernism itself as “the corpse which sits up and speaks”’ (2017, 46). Gibbons explains such links between posthumous speech and Irish Modernism by claiming that for the Modernist text (for Gibbons, here, quite straightforwardly a product of Ireland’s ‘late colonial’ status (2015, xiv)—see the discussion of Irish post-coloniality in this thesis’ introductory chapter), loss (or death) is not resolved but held on to, maintaining ‘an open-ended *relation* with the lost object that offers a presentiment of hope’ (2015, xv, emphasis Gibbons’). This again reiterates the difference between Modernist and Realist textual ethics: as Catherine Belsey writes, ‘Classic realism is characterised by *illusionism*, narrative which leads to *closure*, and a *hierarchy of voices* which establishes the “truth” of the story’ (1980, 64, emphases Belsey’s). To recast Gibbons’ aphoristic phrase, memory under Modernism rejects Realist resolution.

Gibbons’ analysis of Joyce’s open-ended ghostliness can equally be applied to *Solar Bones*, in which the spectral narrator does not appear to seek resolution to any particular trauma. Instead, Marcus’ apparition is calmly reflective, spending the allotted hour of its re-awakening in ‘killing these couple of hours before my wife and kids return, trying to shrug off this sense that all things around me are unstable’ (222). Nor does Marcus’ return to haunt his kitchen lead to closure in the form of any conclusive reunion with his family: before they return to the house, his hour is up: ‘my body drawing its soul in its wake or vice versa’ (223), he is removed from his resurrection into an undefined plane of ‘vast oblivion’ (223).

It is part of the novel’s conceit—and a surprising link to Catholic-licensed superstition, if not quite Catholic orthodoxy—that it is set on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2009, which as Ian Sansom’s review notes is ‘All Souls’ Day, the Day of the Dead, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed’ in Catholicism (Sansom): known more widely internationally in its Mexican incarnation, *Día de Muertos*. Like *Día de Muertos*, All Souls’ Day is a Catholic appropriation of a pre-existing indigenous folkloric belief in an annual communion with deceased ancestors and relatives, reminding one of Terry Eagleton’s observation (made with reference to British rule in Ireland) that ‘To achieve hegemony, colonial rule must be refracted through the traditions of those it governs, miming their cultural gestures and

conforming itself to their customs' (1995, 41). *Solar Bones*' original publishers' marketing copy distils these refracted traditions to a glib premise: 'Once a year, on All Souls' Day, it is said in Ireland that the dead may return. *Solar Bones* is the story of one such visit' (Tramp Press). As the tone of 'one such visit' suggests, there is no theological telos to Marcus' undead experience: once Marcus' 'visit' is done, he is offered not eternal rest or damnation, but a continuation of Gibbons' open-ended relation: in the 'vast unbroken commonage of space and time' where Marcus' twice-deceased being returns,

there is nothing else for it but to keep going, one foot in front of the other  
the head down and keep going  
keep going  
keep going to fuck (223)

These are the novel's concluding words. Note again that it does not conclude with a full stop: the final sentence, like Marcus, simply continues into the 'brimming absence' of a blank page (223). No indication is offered, as Marcus is torn away from his revisitation at the novel's unpunctuated end, whether or not he will be offered another such return on November 2<sup>nd</sup> in 2010, or ever again. The visit and the novel end, but the brimming absence of closure is total.

Slavoj Žižek has written that 'the return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization' (23): Žižek is speaking in the somewhat different context of horror films such as *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980) and *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) (22) and Stephen King's novel *Pet Sematary* (1983)(25), but the insight also bears relevance to the 'corpse which sits up and speaks' in Irish Modernism. Žižek writes that:

the funeral rite exemplifies symbolization at its purest: through it, the dead are inscribed in the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will 'continue to live' in the memory of the community. The 'return of the living dead' is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition. (23)

Žižek's analysis, which situates the return of the dead in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis, suggests a division between funerary tradition, in which the dead are laid to rest in the

symbolic order, and the zombie narrative in which the dead violate this tradition. Marcus' quiet presence in *Solar Bones*, licensed in its own way by the symbolism of All Souls Day, falls between the two branches of this dialectic. At the ending of *Pet Sematary*, Žižek notes, its protagonist 'sits alone in his kitchen, playing patience and waiting for [his dead wife's] return' (25). The similarity with *Solar Bones*' Marcus, who spends the entire novel sitting in his kitchen waiting for his wife to return, is obvious. But the difference in *Solar Bones* is that Marcus' return is not vengeful, like the Wendigo-haunted zombies of *Pet Sematary*, and is ultimately not witnessed: here, it is the ghost himself who sits and waits in the kitchen, and he will be gone into the 'brimming absence' before his (presumably still-living) wife returns home—although he is, as we will see, troubled by the presence (the haunting presence, in a sense) of his own unshakeable anxiety. *Solar Bones* offers us a troubled intermediary position between a forthright Žižekian rupture of the symbolic order and the consolation of a funeral rite: its transgression is that it cannot be reduced to simple transgression.

This once again returns us to the role of style in the Modernist aesthetic. Marcus' anxious mind, and his anxious status as a returned-yet-unreturned corpse, exist in the interstices of a prose narrative with no firm position of narrative authority (whether Marcus' reappearance is corporeal is never quite established: he seems to be able to read a newspaper and eat a sandwich, but the sandwich has more than a hint of the apparition about it too: Marcus does not notice it at first and when he does, it is introduced with the unexplained repetition 'looking at it now / looking at it now' which seems suggestive of some glitch in reality (34)). Colin MacCabe, in *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, observed that 'The classic realist text starts from an incoherence between word and world but this incoherence will be resolved and, furthermore, it has always already been resolved in advance' (46). The Joycean answer to this—creating what Belsey would term 'the interrogative text'—is to maintain some degree of incoherence through the use of Modernist prose techniques (it might be truer to say 'through the use of Joycean prose techniques, which have subsequently been categorised as 'Modernist'): as MacCabe has it, 'Indirect free style is nothing more than this refusal of agreement between text and reader' (30).

MacCabe, like many others, takes Joyce's refusal of quotation marks to delineate dialogue (the phrase 'perverted commas' must now be wearisomely familiar to any reader of this thesis) as a starting-point to demonstrate his non-conformity with Realist convention: 'A meta-language regards its object discourses [those in quotation marks] as material but itself as transparent' (14). For MacCabe, these conventions are not simply a means of codifying acceptable (and by exclusion, aberrant) aesthetic approaches of writing, but are the support network of an invisible Realist master-position, which creates and maintains the entire hierarchies of dominance upon which the ethos of Realism is dependent. MacCabe calls this network a 'meta-language', and illustrates it, with reference to Joyce, in a manner which is also applicable to *Solar Bones*.

In this analysis, quotation marks serve to isolate a text's object discourses from its narrative discourse, which does not admit to its own contingency, but is simply presented as 'real'. MacCabe offers George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as an example of a text in which 'the meta-language reduces the object languages into a simple division between form and content and extracts the meaningful content from the useless form' (16). That is to say that in a text such as *Middlemarch* there is a surface layer of prose which does not regard itself as textual, but rather considers itself outside the hierarchy of object discourses such as speech and thought transcription, and is thus (in the world of the text) ideologically neutral and authoritative, capable of making incontrovertible ontological claims. This invisible, external narrative layer's existence is signalled by the fact that speech and thought are rendered *within* quotation marks: whatever is outside them is the meta-language. A Joycean/interrogative/Modernist text, by contrast, will 'refuse the very category of meta-language' (14)—on the most basic level, by not putting thoughts and speech within the safe fence of quotation marks. Although MacCabe acknowledges the possibility of a non-compliant reading of a Realist text, reading 'against' the meta-language, he finds that such resistance is not required when interpreting Joyce, as no pretence of neutrality—no effacement of the text's own textuality—is being offered in the first place:

whereas we have to read against the meta-language in a realist text, Joyce's texts, without inverted commas, lack any final and privileged discourse within them which dominates the others through its claims of access to the real. (27)

*Solar Bones* is, likewise, without inverted commas. As noted above, it is also without full stops, question marks, exclamation points and even a sentence-initial capital letter to start it all off. The absence of such punctuation marks could at many points in the text be seen a simple selection of one convention (a post-Joycean abandonment of quotation marks) over another (the Realist convention of surrounding dialogue with inverted commas). For example, in one remembered exchange between Marcus and his father, line breaks and commas effectively perform the role of quotation marks, resulting in a dialogue which can be read without any overlap or indistinctness of boundary between thought, speech and description:

[...] all he had to do was sign his name, but would he sign  
 would he fuck sign  
 I will in my fuck sign, he said, from inside the gate,  
 I'll sign fuck all or put an X on anything either, he roared [...]

The reader need only imagine—in a few punctuation marks to translate this passage into Realist convention: a question mark after ‘would he sign’, full stops after ‘would he fuck sign’ and ‘inside the gate’ and ‘he roared’, and of course quotation marks surrounding Marcus’ father’s two verbal utterances. Indeed, in an early ‘work in progress’ publication of this same episode, published in 2011 as part of the anthology *Shine On: Irish Writers for Shine*, McCormack uses a very Joycean convention indeed: a long dash preceding each line of dialogue:

[...] all he had to do was sign his name, but would he sign  
 would he fuck sign  
 —I will in my fuck sign  
 he said, from inside the gate  
 —I'll sign fuck all or put an X on anything either  
 he roared  
 —coming here with your fucking forms [...] (168)

This is on the whole a fairly straightforward illustration of the minor changes that writers make when redrafting their work: the relocation of ‘he roared’ from its own line in the *Shine On* version to the body of the paragraph in the published novel, for example. But the presence and subsequent removal of the long dashes indicates that this particular extract in *Solar Bones* is, as Attridge noted regarding Penelope, syntactically fairly

conventional provided one ‘imagines in’ the relevant punctuation. As demonstrated in chapter 3 with reference to Schofield’s *Malarky*, these moments when the text is at its most reducible are inversely correlated with the novel’s central theme of its narrator’s mental damage and propensity for mental distress. When Marcus’s thoughts are not so certain as they are when factually relaying what was said in a heated conversation with his father, a less stable prose aesthetic, which is not simply a matter of omitted punctuation, is used. It may be coincidental that McCormack’s work in progress was published in an anthology for *Shine*, a mental health charity, but it is certainly apposite to a text which can only be cogently read by taking a sympathetic approach to the effects and subjective experience of recurrent mental distress.

As previously noted in this thesis (see the section entitled ‘Free Indirect Discourse and Uncle Charles’, in chapter 3), free indirect discourse has the capacity to trouble the hierarchy of voices which enable a Classic Realist text to pre-resolve its incoherences, in MacCabe’s view. In the following section, I will return to the narratological mode of analysis put forward in chapter 3, in order to illustrate *Solar Bones*’ aesthetic connection to Modernism. This may be somewhat repetitive of the same exercise as previously performed with reference to Schofield’s *Malarky* and *Martin John*, but it is, after all, an essential premise on which the subsequent discussions of *Solar Bones*’ Modernist depictions of (firstly) mental distress and (secondly) the post-crash West of Ireland rely.

Another caveat may be offered before proceeding to illustrate the interrogative potentials of McCormack’s use of stream of consciousness: that stream of consciousness is not *innately* or *necessarily* interrogative. I have previously acknowledged Gibbons’ observation that ‘there is nothing inherently emancipatory in the deployment [of FID]’ (2015, 101), and this can be extended to non-Realist narratological techniques as a whole, particularly since writers such as Joyce have become major figures in an accepted literary canon. Julian Gough’s intemperate observation that Irish Realism of the Celtic Tiger era consisted predominantly of ‘grittily realistic, slightly depressing descriptions of events that aren’t very interesting’ carries the coda that ‘to be fair, sometimes it’s sub-Joycean, slightly depressing descriptions of events that aren’t very interesting’ (Gough 2010). A dryer rephrasing of Gough’s fusillade might be: although Realism is the dominant mode by which a conformist literary ethos is disseminated, an aesthetic approximation of

Joycean Modernism is sometimes used to this same end. A brief example will suffice: as noted in the previous chapter, the author Donal Ryan has stated that he decided to write his first novel, *The Spinning Heart* (2012), as a calculated (and highly perceptive) judgement that writing around the collapse of the Celtic Tiger represented ‘the gap in the market’ (Jordan 2018). *The Spinning Heart* thus, unsurprisingly, has a facile similarity to the post-crash Modernist novels of McBride and McCormack, but none of their interrogative rigour. Where a novel such as *Solar Bones* abandons Realist punctuation in the pursuit of a non-Realist ethos, *The Spinning Heart* abandons the stylistic baggage of Realism while retaining its ethos, and adopts instead the stylistic baggage of ‘sub-Joycean’ punctuation. The following quotation, in which the character Frank is beaten by his father, exemplifies this:

[...] my father had a length of Wavin pipe in his hand that he used to use to shcoo-up the cattle along the yard and it was going swish, *whack*, swish, *whack*, swish, *whack* against my scrawny little body [...] my father was roaring: You. Know. NOTTEN. You. Know. NOTTEN. (2012, 144)

This text and extract have a great deal superficially in common with a text such as *Solar Bones*, and indeed there are many contexts in which the two can accurately be grouped together. Frank is also speaking from beyond the grave; he is also a considerably mentally damaged character; this extract like the rest of *The Spinning Heart* eschews quotation marks; it was initially published by the small Irish press Lilliput (in his acknowledgements for *The Spinning Heart* Ryan thanks Sara Davis-Goff ‘at the Lilliput Press’ (2012, 159): Davis-Goff would later co-found Tramp Press and publish *Solar Bones*); and, as mentioned above, *The Spinning Heart* is also a specifically post-Tiger novel. Indeed, being published in 2012, it had that status before even *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, which was not published until the following year. However from a strictly narratological point of view, this section shows that *The Spinning Heart* may be more accurately considered a variation on Celtic Tiger Realism than a Modernist text. Frank is being beaten with a length of plastic piping, the sort of distressing circumstance which would cause an intensification of narratological damage to the orderliness of the prose in a work such as *Malarky*, *Girl* or *Solar Bones*. But Ryan’s prose remains soberly descriptive: as with the conversation between Marcus and his father, you can simply pop Realist punctuation into place and the prose reads as textbook Realism: ‘my father was roaring: “You. Know. NOTTEN. You.

Know. NOTTEN.” (2012, 144). The onomatopoeic ‘switch, *whack*’ uses commas and italics to clearly delineate it from the surrounding prose, leaving only a smattering of colloquialism (‘shcoo-up’) and phonetic spellings (‘Notten’, which serves to parody Frank’s father’s rural idiom as much as to represent demotic speech) to differentiate Ryan’s prose from the strictest normative conventions. While McCormack’s prose is similarly reducible to a Case of the Missing Quotation Marks in the conversation above, there are many other sections in *Solar Bones* (but none in *The Spinning Heart*) where the prose adopts not only a patina of Modernist convention, but a genuinely interrogative Modernist ethos. Indeed this variation in prose style, between *more* and *less* Modernist prose depending on the focalising character’s level of mental distress, is itself an interrogative aspect of the text, creating additional layers of hermeneutic nuance for the reader to navigate (compared to the experience of reading a text such as *Solar Bones* or *Girl* if the entire text were written in its most ‘distressed’, most stylistically aberrant mode).

The following section will demonstrate these Modernist prose styles of *Solar Bones*, and the centrality to those styles of Marcus’ ‘anxious worry about the world’ (25), with regard to a key episode in *Solar Bones*, where Marcus’ anxiety overwhelms him as he has his first serious encounter with the trauma of his own death. As with the above section, this continues on from analyses offered in previous chapters, in particular the negotiation of definitions such as ‘stream of consciousness’, ‘free indirect discourse’ (FID) and the ‘Uncle Charles Principle’ which I discussed with reference to *Malarky* and *Martin John*.

### 3: This is How the Mind Unravels

In the episode in question, Marcus' wandering thoughts are jolted back to the 'present' setting of the novel, and he experiences a kind of posthumous anxiety attack as he is troubled by the burgeoning awareness that this is no ordinary day. The phrase which opens the episode is apparently external: 'a change in the light now' (147), although this may be a form of causal pathetic fallacy, as Marcus' perception of the light is altered by the onset of his anxiety. Immediately before the 'change in the light', Marcus is thinking about his son, Darragh, who suddenly announced that he has saved up the money for a round-the-world trip through saving his wages from a job 'making medical components'. Darragh represents a form of continuity with McCormack's previous writing: his work making medical components echoes McCormack's 1998 novel *Crowe's Requiem*, whose existentially conflicted young protagonist earns money to pay off his girlfriend's debt by working as an experimental research subject in a mysterious medical facility. Darragh is also mentioned as having obsessively researched—then never completed—a project 'on the 1981 Republican hunger strike as a strategy video game'. This revisits McCormack's short story 'There is a Game Out There', from his 2012 collection *Forensic Songs* (also published by Lilliput press), in which a prisoner is hauled from their cell to act as a quality control play-tester on just such a Long Kesh-themed videogame. This can be read as extensive of McCormack's interest in constantly re-visiting already trodden ground—as we will see below, almost all of his fiction is to some extent set in the same small town of Louisburgh, Co Mayo., and his first short story collection *Getting it in the Head* (1996) compulsively recounted the titular theme of violent blows to various characters' crania. McCormack wrote in the Afterword to this collection that

I have always loved writers who've written the same books over and over again—Ballard, Beckett, Kafka and so on—these visionaries circling the same lodestone but somehow making something new of the return journey. (254)

However there is also a gestural significance to McCormack's shifting of these themes onto *Solar Bones'* protagonist's son. Where *Crowe's Requiem* in particular delights in the

youthful anger and pretension of its narrator, Marcus is shown as a mature and reflective character: with reference to the reflection on the Irish Modernist *Bildungsroman* in chapter 2, it might be said that Marcus' own *Bildung* occurred before the financial crash, enabling him to achieve the form of socialised maturity which concludes classical *Bildungsromane*, and that it is only now in the aftermath of his own crash and Ireland's that he finds his development arrested. Thinking of his beloved son Darragh, who has not yet attained such acceptance of the world, Marcus experiences the anxiety which jolts him back into the present:

Christ

I weary of my son sometimes

even from the other side of the world he has this psychic ability to reach across latitudes and time zones and lay his twitchy hand on my heart and squeeze it which sets me to worrying about him all over again, the thought of him enough to dampen my mood and

a change in the light now (147)

In these thoughts, before Marcus' heart attack has (re)occurred to him, he directly analogises his anxiety, mentioned directly throughout the novel in phrases such as 'the waves of anxiety that gripped me' (25), 'soul sick with an anxiety' (25), 'the anxious feeling running through me now' (34) and 'a wave of anxiety to course through my entire body' (186) with a 'squeeze' on his heart. The anxiety not only returns his thoughts abruptly to the present moment, but heightens his awareness to the point where he almost realises that he is not alive: 'how strange this day is' (147), Marcus thinks, for the first time since thinking 'there is something strange about all this' (10) at the novel's very outset. But at that outset he consoled himself against the strangeness, soothing himself with the thought that he is only alone in the house because it is a weekday. This time, his anxiety will not let him rest: he repeats the thought that he is 'waiting for my wife and kids to return to this kitchen' (147) but he also notices minor details amiss, such as a white tablecloth 'normally never used except at Christmas' which has been laid on the kitchen table—possibly at some event to mourn Marcus' passing, such as his month's mind mass (although this would entail the tablecloth having been left out for over six months). This feeds the 'anxious feeling that everything around me has settled into places and patterns

unknown to me' (147), and Marcus' stream of consciousness becomes likewise more agitated. Whereas in the examples proffered earlier McCormack's line breaks introduce calm pauses at logical moments in Marcus' narration, here a jagged element of gasping repetition enters the prose: Marcus imagines shattering a chair which has distressed him by being placed against the wall instead of at the table. It could be that, like Leopold Bloom at the end of *Ulysses*, he is detecting the presence of a new lover of his wife's by the unusual arrangement of furniture in his home: perhaps more likely the chair is simply not needed at the table since Marcus died. A final possibility is that Mairead herself did not survive Marcus' death and the house is no longer home to its previous furniture-arrangers: when Marcus dies he is bringing home medication which she needs to aid her recovery from an illness brought on by Galway's 2007-8 *cryptosporidium* outbreak. When Marcus imagines breaking the chair, his imagining reads as though lived: 'seeing myself rise' (148), he feels 'the shock of it through my arms' in tandem with 'this anxiety cutting through me like referred pain or interference' (148). He recognises, however, that the source of his anxiety is something greater than the placement of chairs and tablecloths, and it is the anxiety-fuelled and anxiety-heightening power of this recognition that causes the prose to sunder further: Marcus knows that the source of the anxiety is:

[...] something which will not allow me to rest in the here and now on

this day

this fucking day

that has done nothing but drive me deeper into a grating dread which seems so determined to conceal its proper cause and which is all the more worrying since there is no doubt whatsoever of its reality or that it is underwritten in some imminent catastrophe

for me

or upon me

or through me

this fear which is

the whole mood of my vigil at this table for however long it's been since the Angelus bell struck so that [...] (148)

Like John in Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone*, Marcus renders his narration anxious through his own anxious thought patterns: as with all of the Irish Modernist texts in this study, his own mental damage is incarnated as a damaged poetics. Here once again we can recognise that this effect is created by McCormack's use of a stream of consciousness, but also that this stream of consciousness is not reducible to Psychological Realism: where elsewhere Marcus' 'stream of post-consciousness' exhibited a hyper-rationality which caused the reviewer Martin Riker to note its lack of 'verisimilitude' because 'nobody really "thinks" in such articulate well-cadenced paragraphs' (Riker), here the cadence is irregular like ragged breathing. Marcus concludes his anxiety attack by recognising it (his self-diagnosis is adept throughout) and forcing his thoughts to slow down until they find another memory in which to lose himself. His thoughts first become gabbling in a hypersensitive identification with birds suffering avian flu, before he forces himself to 'stop':

[...] God's creatures bound together in a common suffering, our aches and pains one and the same as those of the fuck and the turkey and the chicken and

stop

mother of Jesus stop

this is how the mind unravels in nonsense and rubbish

if given its head

the mind in repose, unspooling to infinity [...] (149)

So, refusing to give the mind its head, Marcus returns deliberately to the act of *thinking*; that is, coherent narrative remembrance of an anecdote concerning his own father. He guides himself to this act of deliberate thought, dispelling 'mental echoes which reverb with our anxiety' (149) by narrating a quick trio of two almost sing-song common phrases including variations of the word 'think', which transmute finally into the sentence 'now being thought', which again contains an unresolved hint that Marcus' entire *now* is located in consciousness rather than in material substance: not a *now being lived* but a *now being thought*:

come to think of it

thinking of it now

now being thought (149)

And then he is off again, remembering his father's last years after Marcus' mother died.

Just like *Beatlebone's* John, *Solar Bones'* Marcus continually self-identifies specifically as *anxious*, rather than, for example, as depressed or traumatised. According to the standard diagnostic textbook of mental illness, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5):

The essential feature of generalized anxiety disorder is excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation) about a number of events or activities. The intensity, duration, or frequency of the anxiety and worry is out of proportion to the actual likelihood or impact of the anticipated event. (American Psychiatric Association, 222)

It is in the *out of proportion* nature of this anxiety that its narratological role exceeds the bounds of Psychological Realism: we are aware, in reading the damaged poetics of John or Marcus' stream of consciousness during the intensification of their anxiety that they are becoming less able to represent the world coherently, and we are also aware that this is not proportionate to their lived circumstances. The inconsistent relation of descriptive reference (the stream of consciousness) to the described world (the novel's settings and characters other than its narrator) *forces* the reader into an interrogative position through use of the Uncle Charles Principle, where the reader must assess the mental damage of the character using only the evidence provided by the mentally damaged character. In *Solar Bones*, this is additionally complicated by the stream of *post*-consciousness: Marcus is presented as preternaturally (and supernaturally) assured and lucid when *not* in the grip of anxiety—but as the above quotation demonstrates, his posthumous status does not preclude him from the deleterious effect of anxiety upon his consciousness' logical coherence. Reader and character must both navigate the inconsistent relation of the character's mind to the real world—a Lacanian such as Žižek might speak of the distance between the Real and the Imaginary Order—through the mediating influence of anxiety as represented by stream of consciousness prose techniques: in particular, as demonstrated in chapter 3 with regard to a very different type of mental damage (although not one

devoid of anxiety itself) in *Martin John*, through the combination of free indirect discourse with the Uncle Charles Principle.

Given how frequently all of this thesis' close readings rest upon a particular reading of stream of consciousness—and one which rejects the most straightforward interpretation of that term, that stream of consciousness is a naturalistic portrayal of a subject's thoughts, rendered into prose—it is worth returning to an argument from the introductory chapter, and considering the *rejection* of the term 'stream of consciousness' by the critic David Lloyd, particularly with reference to the Irish context more widely, and the Joycean (and by extension post-Joycean) context more specifically. As previously noted, Lloyd writes that:

The most familiar stylistic term used in Joyce criticism used to describe the representation of subjective interiority is 'stream of consciousness', which implies a certain consistency within the representation as well as a relative transparency and evenness among the elements. As such, the term is largely inadequate (104).

Lloyd proposes a different term instead: 'Joyce's procedures are dictated by adulteration'. Lloyd writes this in the context of 'assimilating the Irish language to Irish identity (105), and the context of *adultery* in *Ulysses* (as has been mentioned, the theme of infidelity is also present in *Solar Bones*, but it could not easily be argued to constitute an organising principle). Nonetheless, there is a relevance to Lloyd's concept of *adulteration* to both *Solar Bones*' and *Beatlebone*'s uses of an anxiety-damaged stream of consciousness, perhaps particularly if one thinks of adulteration less in terms of its near-homonym adultery, but more narrowly as damage caused by the introduction of an inconsistent element—as in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, 'the practice or process of making something poorer in quality or unusable for its original purpose by the addition of another substance' ('adulteration, n.').

Texts such as *Solar Bones* and *Beatlebone* are not *Ulysses*. These two twenty-first century texts each have a single narrator (with the exception of *Beatlebone*'s Part 6 and its closing 'transcript'), and have less of the 'stylistic hybridization' which Lloyd locates in the 'Cyclops' episode of *Ulysses* (106). They also offer a more consistent normative baseline—the coherent first-person interior monologue of their narrators at their most stable—from which their less conformist passages deviate, and so Lloyd's claims for

'Cyclops', that it refuses to offer any normative mode of representation, do not wholly apply to these less deviant texts. However they are nonetheless adulterated by the intrusion of anxiety into their mode of representation, and thus Lloyd's 'adulteration of discourses' (107) is still present in these texts, and moreover, an on-line awareness of this is necessary in order to read these texts. Lloyd himself (via Colin MacCabe) acknowledges the presence of 'particular discourses' which 'attain dominance' at times in 'Cyclops' ('and indeed through the work [*Ulysses*] as a whole' (109)), and observes that nonetheless its 'continual modulations [...] preclude any discursive mode from occupying a position from which the order of probability that structures mimetic verisimilitude could be stabilized' (109). The comparatively partial adulteration of Marcus' stream of post-consciousness, ordered by a *more than* coherent lucidity which itself destabilises the mimetic conception of stream of consciousness as Psychological Realism (or verisimilitude) is further adulterated by the damage done to the text during passages of anxiety. Lloyd writes that 'Adulteration as a stylistic principle institutes a multiplication of possibility' (109). *Solar Bones* is less adulterated and less adulterous than *Ulysses*, but a *sotto voce* version of Lloydian adulteration persists throughout McCormack's textual aesthetics, leading to a work which is undermined and therefore opened up by the damage it contains: damage which therefore forces the reader into an interrogative relationship to Marcus' stream of consciousness, and suggests that an equally interrogative approach can be taken to Marcus' defining circumstances, particularly his remembered situation as a civic engineer trying to make sense of another seemingly 'stable formation of legitimate and authentic identities' (Lloyd 109)—the culture of national economic optimism proliferated throughout Celtic Tiger Ireland.

## 4: The Light and the Lens

Marcus frames his critique of Celtic Tiger wastefulness specifically in terms of ‘hindsight’ (30), contextualising not only his own criticisms of Irish political behaviour during the boom years, but also providing a convincing argument for why Irish literature needed ‘the disaster itself’ in order to take its post-crash interrogative turn. It is, Marcus thinks:

as if every toppled edifice creates both the light and lens through which the disaster itself can properly be seen, the ashes and vacated space becoming the imaginative standpoint from which the whole thing is now clearly visible for those with eyes to see because up to the moment the whole thing came down it was never clear to me

or anyone else

what was happening (30)

This analysis’ pertinence to the currents of Irish literary fiction are, hopefully, by this point clear: during the Tiger years, before ‘the whole thing came down’, Irish literary writers and publishers largely produced works of Historical Realism (as demonstrated in chapter 2): however in the wake of ‘the disaster itself’, the ashes and the vacated space left by these genres’ post-crash loss of confidence has become the imaginative standpoint from which Irish authors can newly assert an interrogative, political aesthetic. Some authors, admittedly, were *writing* Modernist novels such as McBride’s *Girl* and McCormack’s *Notes From a Coma* during the Tiger itself, but while it was unclear (to Marcus ‘or anyone else’, meaning readers and publishers alike) that such novels were apposite, they found themselves either unpublished (*Girl*), or published but largely unread (*Notes*). To depict this failure of the Irish national imagination to realise the dangers they were in during the Tiger itself, Marcus portrays a conservative financial elite issuing only ‘a tremulous bleating, the voices of men hedging their bets’, when ‘what was needed’ was

our prophets deranged

and coming towards us wild-eyed and smeared with shit (14)

These much-needed prophets would have come offering not ‘that cautionary note which in the end proved wholly inadequate to the coming disaster’, but instead the stark warning that

we're fucked  
well and truly fucked (14).

Indeed it is worth recollecting that those ‘begrudgers’ who did metaphorically smear themselves and offer this warning—most visibly the journalist Fintan O’Toole—were for the historian R. F. Foster and others provably incorrect as late as 2007 (188). Declan Kiberd, noting that ‘most people were astounded by the immensity of the crash when it came’, disparages how commentators ‘insisted, in their innocence, that nobody had alerted them to the dire underlying abuses’ (2017, 3). After all, Kiberd writes, ‘this was not so. In every decade after independence, writers and artists had given warnings about these things’ (2017, 3). Kiberd may be correct that such shit-smeared prophets could always be found in artistic and literary circles, but this does not change the fact that for the secure, middle-class Marcus Conways of Ireland, the collapse ‘happened without offering any forewarning of itself’ (14). Kiberd, after all, is likewise dependent on hindsight for his begrudgerism: as discussed at greater length in chapter 2, he declaimed as recently as 2003 that ‘The current affluence, far from threatening art, imperilling identity or killing the Celtic soul, is a great opportunity for a second national flowering’ (2003, 287).

Gerry Smyth, in a 2012 lecture at John Moores University subsequently published in *Estudios Irlandeses*, endorses the ‘begrudger’ position: of course, as with this thesis’ own analyses, this is easily done in the wake of the crash, when the position taken by the ‘prophets deranged’ can clearly be seen to be supported by economic reality. Smyth’s summary of the Celtic Tiger’s aftermath displays a note of weariness at how obvious the Celtic Tiger’s vulnerability is, as Marcus observes, now that its consequences have played out upon the global stage: ‘We all know what happened next: Credit Crunch leading to Financial Crisis leading to Global Recession’ (Smyth 133).

To that vast majority of the Irish population who were *not* shit-stained prophets (or listening to them), then, how was it that the appearance of prosperity was maintained

and believed in? Smyth argues that during the Celtic Tiger, Ireland as a nation ‘mistook cash for wealth’:

there seemed to be plenty of cash around: the preponderance of transnational export industries and the rampant inflation of property prices made for a heady atmosphere [...] In fact, Celtic Tiger Ireland remained in some key respects a deeply under-developed country. Both the physical and the socio-intellectual infrastructures remained in a parlous condition. Low unemployment, low taxation and high wages contributed to the impression of prosperity; in fact, the cost of living and the expense attached to education, health care, home ownership and so on, for example, vitiated the apparent cash bonanza. (136)

This cash/wealth mistake can be seen in a 1998 paper by the economist Jonathan Haughton, who writes with a hauteur perhaps born of nominative determinism that ‘the Irish penchant for begrudgery [...] is fading fast with the realisation that it is possible for everyone to get rich together’ (28). Possible, perhaps, but such a possibility was never actualised: while Haughton celebrates Irish Gross Domestic Product (GDP) rising faster than first the UK’s, then western Europe’s, culminating triumphantly in ‘a survey in June 1997 [which] found Irish workers to be the happiest, healthiest and hardest-working in Europe’ (Haughton 28-29), others even at the time were, at least, offering what McCormack’s Marcus Conway would later dismiss as a ‘cautionary note’. In the same 1998 anthology as Haughton’s paper, Niamh Hardiman warns that Ireland’s strong GDP masked a deeply unequal distribution of income, noting that ‘the growth in average per capita GDP clearly outstripped the progress made in reducing inequalities’ (130). Despite GDP rises, ‘the numbers experiencing poverty did not fall between the 1980s and the 1990s. On the contrary—they either remained static or rose’ (128). As Smyth would summarise in the aftermath of the crash, ‘So long as GDP remained the principal criterion for the definition of wealth, so long did the myth of wealthy Ireland survive’ (136). This lesson has taken some time to learn: in 2016, the prominent American economist Paul Krugman (somewhat insultingly, but the insult may not have been unwarranted) dubbed the publication of growth figures by the Central Statistics Office ‘Leprechaun economics’. The CSI figures showed a 26% increase in growth ‘underpinned by the relocation of €300 billion in capital assets to Ireland by multinationals [...] amid a global clampdown on multinational tax avoidance’ (Burke-Kennedy), which was obviously inconsistent with the *Irish* experience of the Irish economy. Krugman’s despairing tweet, ‘why are these in

GDP?’ (@paulkrugman) did what several decades of cautionary notes and shit-smeared prophets alike could not manage, and pressured the CSO into no longer using GDP as its criterion for growth; the agency’s new metric of ‘GNI\*’ (Gross National Income\* [the asterisk is in the name, not a missing footnote to this chapter]) will allegedly ‘better capture the true level of growth in the domestic economy by stripping out the profits associated with so called “redomiciled PLCs”’ (Burke-Kennedy).

During the Tiger years, however, warnings such as Hardiman’s, as Marcus laments, would go unheeded: David E. Schmitt’s editorial conclusion to the 1998 volume which publishes Hardiman and Haughton’s articles breezily acknowledges that ‘to be sure, significant problems and inequalities remain’ (222), but like Haughton, and like Kiberd in 2003 and Foster in 2007, Schmitt comes down clearly on the side of the boosters: ‘the dramatic successes of the Republic thus far suggest that it has a strong potential to manage change effectively well into the twenty-first century’ (Schmitt, 222).

Smyth goes on to observe that local government corruption played a vital role in establishing the ‘myth’ of Irish prosperity during the Tiger years. Drawing heavily on O’Toole (as do nearly all who proffer an anti-Tiger analysis; O’Toole’s now-vindicated position as the first widely-published and widely-read begrudger can hardly be overstated), Smyth writes that:

Localism and rampant clientelism are the defining characteristics of Irish political life—not ‘what you know’, but ‘who you know’; and this militates strongly against the idea of active citizens who are fully attuned to their rights and responsibilities as citizens. (135)

This ‘myth of representation’—one might almost say a myth of citizenship—prevented the truth (that Ireland was indeed briefly cash-rich for a time around the turn of the millennium) from ever matching the widespread ‘myth of wealth’ (that this cash-richness meant that Ireland could now consider long-term economic prosperity to be an inevitable and eternal national characteristic).

Smyth ends on a more hopeful note: not hopeful in terms of economic recovery, on which he does not speculate, but hopeful that the scale of ‘the disaster itself’ will allow Irish national identity to ‘rethink the meaning of Irishness’ (136). Deirdre Flynn links Smyth’s conclusion to Marcus’ confusion, noting that for Marcus, too:

the collapse is a watershed moment [...] He has lost his understanding of what it means to be Irish. The crash has caused him to question everything he knows, because the life he knew, the country he has lived in, the relationships he made are no longer built on solid foundations: the crash has damaged all he has taken for granted (39)

This sense that Ireland was, after the crash, so far gone in terms of national disillusionment that what came next had an almost liberating potential recalls Declan Kiberd's observation that for Samuel Beckett, 'France in the 1940s must have reminded Beckett of Ireland in the 1920s: blasted, inchoate, but with the potential to start all over again' (2017, 16). The same might be said for the Ireland of 2009, in which the ghost of Marcus Conway returns to his home to find the day's newspaper features a 'one year on' article about the financial collapse, which is

illustrated by a sidebar which gives some indication of just how outsized the nation's financial folly was in the years leading up to the collapse, debt piling up until it ran to tens of billions, incredible figures for a small island economy (13)

Deirdre Flynn insightfully notes that Marcus reacts to the financial crash as a matter of personal trauma:

The trauma of the crash, and his own death, creates what [Cathy] Caruth calls a 'breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world' and it is in that breach between life and death that Marcus is trying to come to terms with the trauma of loss. (40)

Flynn summarises this bluntly: 'The trauma of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, as well as Marcus's own death, causes him to turn to memory and nostalgia,' (46). Note Flynn's equation of Marcus' death with the national disaster of the financial crisis: here she shows how Marcus himself constantly equates the personal with the political. Whilst a post-Tiger reading of a text such as *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* must diagnose through analysis the text's connections to Ireland's economic circumstances, *Solar Bones* explicitly links the narrator's personal trauma to the national trauma of the financial collapse. Marcus' vocation as an engineer is central to this analogy, and the term vocation is apposite: as Marcus' son Darragh notes when he finds out that his father briefly trained for the priesthood, 'it makes sense though, explains a lot' (83). Darragh later observes that Marcus has 'turned your back on the cross to take up the theodolite' (175). As such, Marcus sees himself as deeply connected to the project of improvement. This improvement is not necessarily a project of nation-building: Ireland as a nation is explicitly

mentioned only in the context of its 'small island economy'. But it is certainly tied closely to the County of Mayo, and to local community: when Marcus first arrives in his kitchen at *Solar Bones*' outset, he wishes he would encounter a neighbour who might recognise him as 'Marcus Conway the engineer' (11), and his squabbles with local politicians, recounted later in the text, are in the capacity of a County engineer. Marcus measures his life in the coffee-spoons of 'ribbon-cutting ceremonies', where although he modestly stands 'out of shot with my hands folded across my chest' (174), he locates worth and meaning in the contribution to his community which they represent:

[...] I sometimes allow myself the belief that I have given my life to something which has been on the side of human betterment [...]

these are the things I have signed my name to, these are the things to which I have given my best energies and inspiration

these hospitals and libraries

these water treatment plants

these sewage works

*[seven more items are listed]*

the work of a civil engineer

amen (174)

Deirdre Flynn notes that the 'amen' element of this is troubled by the Tiger's collapse, which seems to undermine any sense that Marcus' works have been part of a teleological project of national 'betterment': 'As an engineer, he must [...] make sense of the failed Celtic Tiger', she writes (37). Flynn also rightly highlights Conway's perplexity at there being no-one (individually) to blame for his wife's illness when the water supply is corrupted. A national failure becomes a source of de-identification with the state apparatus as Conway seeks something to blame. Flynn writes that 'Her illness becomes a symbol for the trauma of the crash, but is also directly related to the ineptitude that symbolises the Celtic Tiger,' (48) and notes that Marcus, prior to his death, does not translate this de-identification into rage or action: it is only in the lucidity of his *post-consciousness* that Marcus can make these judgements.

In this analysis, Deirdre Flynn explicitly parallels Marcus' individual circumstances—his wife is ill but he does not assign blame—with the Irish national situation: the banks have failed but they are not blamed. Flynn writes: 'Marcus fails to turn his anger into action, to assign blame. Like the bank bailout the previous year, rather than take action, faith is maintained in the institutions responsible for the crisis' (50). And indeed *Solar Bones* itself makes continual explicit comparisons between the personal and the political, a comparison which Marcus himself believes—with a certain parochial pride—to be characteristic of his county. Thinking about a news story about a woman embarking on a hunger strike in protest at an energy consortium running a pipeline 'through her particular part of North Mayo' (14), he considers 'that dangerous confluence of the private and the political converging on this frail woman's body' (15), and expresses the belief that 'stories like this' are 'peculiar to Mayo', because it is 'a county with a unique history of people starving and mortifying themselves for higher causes and principles' (15). This recalls Kevin Barry's observation, in *Beatlebone*, that there exists the potential for an 'as yet unwritten radical history of the west of Ireland' (188). It is understandable, then, that on reflection Marcus should find himself appalled at the abandonment of any high cause or principle by the political culture of the Republic of Ireland during its boom years in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

A specific, and explicitly party-political, example of this comes from the text's treatment of the Mayo politician Pádraig Flynn. Like Darragh's evocation of *Crowe's Requiem* and 'There is a Game Out There', this is another instance of McCormack returning to a familiar theme: he previously portrayed Flynn, the TD for West Mayo between 1977 and 1994, as a corrupt figure in the story 'Heaven's Mandate', which like 'There is a Game Out There' appeared in the 2012 collection *Forensic Songs*. Flynn is not named in either 'Heaven's Mandate' or *Solar Bones*, but the identifying features are numerous, and McCormack has acknowledged the character's identity in an interview with *The Honest Ulsterman* (Mulrennan). In *Solar Bones*, Flynn appears as a 'tall man, well over six feet in a pinstripe suit' (94), who impresses the young Marcus by coming to his family home before the 1977 general election to solicit Marcus' vote and his father's. Marcus, old enough to vote for the first time, feels 'a fine sense of importance that the nation's political process had come courting me', which like his later engineering

accomplishments gives him the sense that ‘I was a citizen with a consequential stake’ (95). Flynn would go on to be elected and to enter the Dáil Éireann ‘wearing a white suit and a polka-dot tie in the manner of a lounge singer’ (98), declaring himself a man ‘with a mission to redress those decades of neglect’ (99). Marcus’ early faith in Flynn is gradually undermined as Flynn repeats this undelivered promise ‘at five year intervals’ (99), and ultimately Flynn becomes an early exemplar of Celtic Tiger cronyism and corruption, as Marcus recounts:

[...] years later, several cross party-tribunals would make adverse findings against him on planning issues and party funding, his fortune made but his reputation ruined in the end, scandal and suspicion mounting so high around him that his very real political gifts and sensitivities were completely obscured [...] (100)

McCormack, placing considerable weight on those ‘very real gifts’, expands upon his view of Flynn in the *Honest Ulsterman* interview:

all anyone will remember of him is his appearance on *The Late Late Show* in a pinstriped suit, blathering on about his money. No one will remember that he was EU Commissioner for food and he was actually good at it. No one will remember that he dealt very sensitively with Lavinia Kerwick at a time when she was very vulnerable [...] He had real gifts but he was almost Shakespearean in his hubris and cupiditas; that’s what brought him down. He really was a study in political tragedy. (Mulrennan)

Flynn’s impotence is summarised in *Solar Bones* by Marcus’ wry reflection that, ‘his money made’, Flynn retired to paint ‘sentimental watercolours depicting a Mayo landscape of rolling drumlins [...] the same topography in which he had licensed so many gravel quarries and cement works’ (100). The story of property developers is of course central to the story both of Celtic Tiger wealth and Celtic Tiger corruption: as Gerry Smyth writes,

In 2007 one Irish bank claimed that Ireland was the second richest nation in the world, after Japan. The country’s Gross Domestic Product—its GDP—outstripped those of its Eurozone neighbours such as Germany, France and the UK. It was during this time that the fate of the economy became ineluctably linked with the housing industry; construction represented over 10% of GDP and was a major employer, especially amongst the younger members of the workforce. (133)

Here, again, Marcus’ role as a civic engineer is central to the novel’s critique of the era. Marcus, as previously noted, is no ‘begrudger’ firebrand: he is portrayed as a man who has always approached sleaze and politicking with distaste, but he is also a public

employee whose career has been indirectly dependent on property development. For example, he remembers a bruising encounter with a local politician called John Moylette: Marcus, having seen two differently-branded concrete trucks arriving onto a building site which he was responsible for signing-off on, has refused to certify the foundation for a new school (166), as he knows that the two concrete mixes are of differing consistency and the foundation will warp, eventually leading to the school being closed down after four or five years (168). The concrete is supplied by two different trucks as a result of an underhand agreement between local concrete supply firms to divvy up government contracting work between them (this work having dried up significantly since the downturn began: this episode is set shortly before Marcus' death, when the economy is already in trouble) (180). Moylette, ranting that 'engineers don't make the world [...] politics and politicians make the world' (167) demands that Marcus sign—Marcus, despite knowing that his resistance will prove ineffectual, that somehow 'the cert could go missing or [...] the whole thing will go through on a nod and a wink' (169) meaning that the new school will be built on an unsteady foundation after all, refuses to sign. When he puts the phone down, he feels another of his recurrent anxiety attacks descending:

[...] I could physically feel it, the clamping pressure with that thickening of the air which always comes as

the squeeze

the fucking squeeze

with everything tightening around me [...]

This incident displays several of *Solar Bones'* central concerns: the importance of integrity both structural and personal, and the damage induced by a lack of integrity. Just as Moylette's lack of integrity will cause the school to be built on a flawed foundation, so the foundation's lack of integrity (caused by property developers' own lack of integrity) will damage the school irreparably, just as the lack of integrity of politicians such as Pádraig Flynn caused calamitous damage to the Irish economy. This lack of integrity—what one might call this *disintegrity*—is manifested to Marcus as anxiety, which has further damaging consequences to Marcus' psyche and health; his eventual heart attack can logically be linked to 'the fucking squeeze' that his anxiety attacks bring upon him. This recalls too that Marcus' worries about Darragh occur to him as a 'squeeze' upon his heart.

Finally, the damage is visited upon the prose of *Solar Bones* as a novel, as outlined in the previous section: this can be seen again in the short quotation above, where once again line breaks jolt unexpectedly across the paragraphs of Marcus' recall as he describes his anxiety attacks, with short breathless lines embellished with profanity interrupting the 'continuously scrolling' nature of Marcus' usually calm stream of post-consciousness.

As can be seen from both *Solar Bones'* treatment of Pádraig Flynn and of the minor realpolitik of County Mayo concrete-pouring, Marcus is a proudly principled man, but in life he was no revolutionary. His instincts are 'at the social democratic end of the spectrum as I understood it then' (22). The qualifying phrase 'as I understood it then' again emphasises the difference between the moderate Marcus Conway in life, and the post-conscious Marcus Conway, to whom 'it is now clear' that Celtic Tiger economics were an unsteady edifice always fated to fall: but as with Marcus' views of Pádraig Flynn, who he only saw to be corrupt after Flynn's corruption was complete, 'all this is clear only in hindsight' (30).

This illustrates the tight knot of inextricable aspects which make *Solar Bones* a perfect example of a contemporary Irish Modernist text: indeed it can be seen as the consummation of the literary moment which McBride's *Girl* led. Its formal qualities of subjectivist, experimental prose technique and narrative irresolution cannot be separated from its content: the central themes of Irish economic collapse and debilitating personal mental health issues, in this case (as with *Beatlebone*) self-diagnosed anxiety. *Solar Bones* is also an ideal light and lens through which and by which to further examine a theme which has been remarked upon (but perhaps thus far under-theorised) throughout this thesis. That is, the relevance of a heavy situatedness in the *West* of Ireland to Irishness writ large: in particular to Irish national self-perception in the early twenty-first century, and by extension this theme's importance to the re-emergence of Irish Modernist textual politics.

## 5: Return to Clew Bay

Like Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone*, and indeed its short-story progenitor 'Dark Lies the Island', *Solar Bones* takes Clew Bay as its setting. Clew Bay, in County Mayo, north-west of Galway and south-west of Sligo—and 250-odd kilometres west of Dublin—is about as far into Ireland's western hinterlands as it is possible to go. It is, however, not far at all from Eimear McBride's childhood homes of Tubbercurry (Co. Sligo) and Castlebar (Co. Mayo) (Hilliard), or from the 'childhood down in Mayo' of Anakana Schofield (McVeigh). It is just a little further—100km as the crow flies—from Kevin Barry's home (since 2006) in Ballinafad, Co. Sligo (Sligo Champion 2012, 2018). Rural Mayo also provides the setting for Schofield's *Malarky*, and therefore also the point of origin for the London-set *Martin John*, as Martin has been exiled from his native town, which may well be Ballyvary near Castlebar—in Martin John's cameo in *Malarky*, he insists that a balloon left at the end his psychiatric hospital bed by its previous occupant is in fact a gift from his daughter (Martin John has no daughter) who 'is married with children living up in Ballyvary. Ballyvary, Ballyvary, he never seems to stop saying the words' (170). Although the rural western setting of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* is kept non-specific, it seems reasonable to speculate that this novel, partially influenced by McBride's own childhood (her brother, like Girl's, died of a brain tumour), is set in a version of McBride's childhood Sligo and Mayo. If one accepts this thesis' position that these are the four writers most central to a renewed post-crash Irish Modernism, and are indeed four of the leading experimental writers in English of the 2010s, then this geographical commonality between them is startling.<sup>33</sup> It is yet more striking when one also considers how sparsely inhabited this corner of the country is: Castlebar, the largest town of those mentioned here, has a population of only 12,068 as of the 2016 census (wdc.ie). This is, however, no clarion call for Co. Mayo parochialism. It is notable that none of the four authors have a *total* biographical connection to this Mayo/Sligo crucible of experimentalism: as previously

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<sup>33</sup> This observation is not a falsifiable claim that all post-crash Irish Modernism comes from the 100-km Ballinafad-Louisburgh corridor, or that all contemporary Irish writing from this area is Modernist: if it were these claims could be falsified in turn by firstly the Modernist aspect of the works of, e.g., the Cork-based Sara Baume (see chapter 2) and the Northern Irish Anna Burns, and secondly by the existence of authors such as Sally Rooney, who like McBride spent her childhood in Castlebar (Clark, 'Conversations', 2018), but whose novels are certainly not artefacts of Modernist revivalism. These claims regarding Burns and Rooney will be substantiated in the following chapter.

noted Schofield acknowledges the influence of her Vancouver home on her work, and McBride, Barry and McCormack have all lived in various locations in the United Kingdom (and, in McBride's case, St Petersburg).

McCormack's own biographical links to this nor'-nor'-west corner of Ireland are especially strong, as he explained to the *Guardian* journalist Justine Jordan in a 2017 interview:

McCormack was born in London in 1965: his parents left Mayo to find work, met at a dance hall and started a family. For part of his childhood he lived in Ireland with his grandparents, before his mother and father moved back to the small seaside town of Louisburgh where nearly all his work is set. 'I sit down and my mind will default to it,' he explains. 'It's the one solid thing I know about. After that, anything can happen—I've no difficulty with ghosts, or penal experiments, or rare diseases. But the bedrock in which those fantastical things are cast is the place that I know most about.'

The family home was just under Croagh Patrick, Ireland's holiest mountain, and McCormack was an altar boy from the age of seven to 13: 'When I started to write I had this massive reservoir of ritual and myth. Those things are the backdrop of my imagination.' (Jordan 2017)

Louisburgh itself is on the south coast of Clew Bay (a little further west than John Lennon's Dorinish island). This location is specified very near the start of *Solar Bones*: as Marcus' ghost is emerging into his kitchen to the sound of the Angelus bell, the sound also carries across 'this parish, which lies on the edge of this known world with Sheeffry and Mweelrea to the south and the open expanse of Clew Bay to the north' (8). Marcus' familial situatedness in this parish is as strong as McCormack's literary one: 'this house outside the village of Louisburgh in the county of Mayo on the west coast of Ireland, the village in which I can trace my seed and breed back to [...] gloomy prehistory' (9). *Solar Bones* leaves no doubt as to its specific west-of-Ireland 'bedrock'.

Terry Eagleton writes that rural settings in Ireland resist romanticization of the sort to which the English countryside has been subjected. 'Ireland also witnesses a romanticizing of the countryside', he acknowledges, but without the same depoliticization of the rural: 'the English romantic opposition of Nature and society is less easy to maintain in a country where the land is visibly a question of social relations and the town more continuous with its rural surroundings' (1995, 7). Eagleton acknowledges—he could hardly ignore—that the Irish countryside has been 'moralized and sexualised' and

mythically 'transcendentalized', but maintains that writing on Irish nature has never succeeded in turning it into an aesthetic object: 'Nature in Ireland is too stubbornly social and material a category, too much a matter of rent, conacre, pigs and potatoes for it to be distanced, stylized and subjectivated in quite this way' (1995, 8).

Certainly this holds true with regard to *Solar Bones*, which is very much a 'stubbornly social and material' west of Ireland text, deeply concerned with local politics (and political corruption: see the previous section's analysis of McCormack's treatment of the politician Pádraig Flynn) and with property development: not conacre but concrete. However the Irish countryside has been romanticized plenty, if in a somewhat different way to the aestheticization of the English countryside which Eagleton identifies. Indeed the romanticization of the West of Ireland has often been *explicitly* political: as Gregory Castle notes with reference to J. M. Synge's attempts to disrupt stereotypical fantasies of the Western rural idyll, 'the West of Ireland attained a nearly iconic significance for cultural nationalists and continued to hold that significance well into the opening decades of the twentieth century' (2001, 178). Castle articulates this iconic significance well as an 'essentialist and primitivist attitude toward the West of Ireland' (2001, 186), in which the archetypal Western Irish peasant is regarded as a marker of authenticity against which any non-folkloric Irish figure may be dismissed as un-Irish. Castle offers the illustration of Gabriel in Joyce's 'The Dead', who as an 'academic caught between nationalist and colonialist interests' finds himself 'caught up in an identity crisis in which he cannot know himself without confronting the spectre of an Irish other, someone more authentic, more essential, rooted in the West of Ireland' (2001, 186).

Castle shows how William Butler Yeats, a figure little called-upon in this thesis which has focused more upon Joycean and post-Joycean (Beckett, Flann O'Brien) strands of Irish Modernism, maintained a complicated position with regard to the romanticization of the West of Ireland. On the one hand, Castle painstakingly demonstrates that Yeats was no bad-faith anthropologist: he 'took seriously his role as a folklorist', and criticised 'Anglo-Irish compilers' who he saw as having "'created the stage Irishman'" (2001, 53). However, such provisos acknowledged, it is also clear that Yeats' role in the Celtic revival was largely to create exactly that mystical Other against which metropolitan Dublin could test its own Irishness and authenticity. As Castle observes,

Where Yeats may be said to harmonize with colonial thought is in his construction of an idealised Irish peasant [...] Yeats' representations of the peasantry, then, were as imaginary as the Ireland he thought he was reviving and preserving (2001, 52).

This 'idealised Irish peasant', always associated with the rural West (at least from the Dublin perspective, and by extension from international perspectives which encounter the view from Dublin first), did not conclude in Castle's 'opening decades of the twentieth century' (2001, 178). Rather, as R. F. Foster observes, the same nostalgic, mystical principles of an unspoiled rural Ireland were relocated from an idealised pre-industrial age to an idealised 'imagined Ireland of the 1950s' (152). What remains consistent is the principles upon which this imagined Ireland is founded: 'a catalogue of abstract concepts such as kindness, gentleness, innocence and spiritual communion. Mysticism, in fact, is never very far away' (152). Foster's addendum that 'So is [sic] class-resentment and anti-urban bile' is rather more programmatic, and reads unfortunately like a defence of Foster's own socio-cultural position than an open engagement with class consciousness (152). This 'catalogue of abstract concepts', however, is accurately noted as retaining an 'emphasis on the urban-rural divide, with authenticity located firmly beyond the metropolis' (152). In this updated Celtic-hinterland romanticization, the tourist dollar is at stake. Foster—not a writer inclined to criticise Celtic Tiger commercialism—observes that the rural west became a key trope of the vision of Irish tourism which was sold internationally: 'The idea of marketing recurs,' Foster writes, 'and it is worth bearing in mind Joep Leerssen's brilliant coinage of 'auto-exoticism' for the Irish ability effortlessly to see themselves as 'other' and endlessly analyse their uniqueness (175).

This perhaps casts Leerssen's analysis as less generous than it merits. Leerssen, writing originally in the context of 'romantic Anglo-Irish fiction', coined the phrase 'auto-exoticism' to describe 'a mode of seeing, presenting and representing oneself in one's otherness' (37). This consists of an Ireland which is 'made exotic by those selfsame descriptions which purport to represent or explain Ireland (37). The text is interposed 'between reader and subject-matter' to ensure that Ireland is seen as exotic by the reader: as Leerssen entertainingly illustrates, the Irish author operates as a 'tour guide', who addresses an 'exoteric readership' with the invitation "'see how unusual Ireland is, how strange, how exotic'" (37).

Seamus Deane also notes that rural Ireland has tended to be seen in literature *as though seen from outside*. Deane writes that English colonisers envisioned the Irish as ‘a fierce, imaginative, poetic tribe’, and ‘the Irish [...] took possession of the stereotype’ (1990, 12-13). This role was then scaled up from an English envisioning to a largely American international one, with global capital slotting rather too snugly into the void left by British rule: Deane calls this ‘the concealed imperialism of the multinational’ (1990, 19). Meanwhile something similar happened within the Republic of Ireland itself, but in microcosm: Ireland was envisioned unto the world as the Irish West was envisioned unto Dublin. Even Eagleton, who believes that the Irish countryside always resisted romanticization, compares the countryside to the ‘morally corrupt, English-oriented metropolis’ (1995, 8).

Significantly, Leerssen frames this tour-guide invitation in terms of ‘westward progress towards Ireland’ (37): the auto-exotic authenticity which Leerssen identifies in nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish fiction is founded in the western Irish hinterlands: as Leerssen puts it, there is a common assumption, continued in contemporary Irish journalism, that ‘Ireland is most itself in those aspects wherein it is most un-cosmopolitan’ (38). This tendency has likewise continued in Irish fiction, and indeed it might be noted that one of the texts in this study, *Beatlebone*, is not entirely free of it: although like most aspects of *Beatlebone* the excuse of Metamodernist irony-and-also-sincerity mediates this somewhat, the folksy character of Cornelius O’Grady certainly serves as a tour guide to the west of Ireland to Barry’s English protagonist in a manner immediately recognizable from Leerssen’s analysis.

*Solar Bones*, however, is extremely bold in enacting a sweeping-away of exotification and Leerssenian auto-exotification by not even acknowledging the trope: it portrays complex, technologically capable, not noticeably primitive West of Ireland struggles as though these were illustrative not of a refined category of hyper-authenticity but simply of quotidian subjects under capitalism. While *Solar Bones*, with its deep geographical specificity, is particularly forthright in this regard, this can also be held to be a characteristic of contemporary West of Ireland Modernist texts in general. Notably, they are not signposted for the English or American ‘tourist’, but moreover, even within the Irish context they resist any suggestion of a ‘westward progress towards Ireland’. One

thing which unites *Solar Bones* not only with McCormack's previous writing but also with *Malarky* and *Beatlebone* is that they are not Dublin-set: the West has nothing in *Solar Bones* to be Other *against*. *A Girl is a Half-formed thing* is partially set in Dublin, but McBride's Dublin does not take the rural West as an idyllic or exotic escape: when Girl is in Dublin, the decidedly unromantic West, in the form of her rapist Uncle, simply comes to see her. *Martin John* likewise shows a West of Ireland figure for whom leaving the West does not entail leaving their problems behind. *Beatlebone* is, as acknowledged above, quite different, particularly given the mediating role of the archetypically loquacious and maudlin Irishman Cornelius, but Barry also enacts an inversion of auto-exotification to some extent, in that he shows the West as more complex, more situated, to a large extent less romantic than the city: John's romanticized Liverpool is here the quasi-peasant backdrop against which the tangled 'radical history of the West of Ireland' is hostile and unforgiving.

## 6: Resurrection: Keep Going to Fuck

Of the quintet of texts here outlined, which have operated as this thesis' central case studies, *Solar Bones* is the last published. *Malarky*, which I have treated as a somewhat transitional text between Celtic Tiger Realism and post-crash Modernism, was first-published, in 2012. Of the more radical other four, the corpus opens, in terms of order of publication, with the Girl's pre-birth in the 2013-published *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, and closes with Marcus' death and temporary resurrection. This can be taken as a snapshot of Irish literary history running the short gamut of 2013-16: the following and final chapter will ask whether this should be so. This thesis' repeated claims for a 're-emergent Modernism' might suggest an inevitable momentum, whereby McBride, Schofield, Barry and McCormack are the vanguard of a process which will before long result in every future Irish novel reading like *Finnegans Wake*. This will not happen. But the Irish Modernist movement of 2013-16 could conceivably lead to a pluralistic literary landscape in which the Modernist novel's re-established purchase on the publishing landscape means that we will continue to see interrogative texts build upon the achievements of such novels as *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, *Malarky*, *Martin John*, *Beatlebone* and *Solar Bones*.

On the other hand, I have closely related these texts' use of Modernist form to the bleak state of Irish socio-political affairs in the years following the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession. At the time of this thesis' writing, there is already talk of another economic boom (and of another economic bubble) in Ireland, which may suggest that the Movement which these case studies describe has already passed; that the nadir/summit of crisis-era literary experimentation in Ireland may be over, or ending, or changing. As noted at this chapter's outset, previously marginal authors such as McCormack have been brought into the fold of the academic-literary-commercial establishment. This very thesis is an artefact of that process. Can a meaningful Modernism thrive in Ireland if it does *not* come from the margins? Donal Ryan, whose sharp nose for the opportunity of publishing sub-Joycean prose in the wake of the financial crash has already been noted, seems in his latest novel *From a Low and Quiet Sea* to have moved

further towards a lyrical-Realist sentimentality more evocative of the Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid—has he again successfully detected a change in the wind, this time *away* from ‘Goldsmiths Prize’ writers such as McCormack?

The following chapter will take the previous four case studies as representative of a somewhat united front amongst Irish Modernist authors from 2013-16, and through this lens I will look at two texts published more recently in order to question the emergent influence of these authors. Most significantly, it will consider Anna Burns’ 2018 novel *The Milkman*, which went one better than *Solar Bones* in terms of literary trinkets by actually winning the Man Booker prize in its year of publication. Burns’ novel—the first *Northern* Irish novel in this thesis’ analyses, a fact which cannot go unexamined—has been widely compared to Beckett, and seems the most directly comparable Irish (in any sense) novel to the other case studies. However, I will also look at the sudden ubiquity in Irish literary conversations of Sally Rooney, a much younger novelist whose pacy, scandalised novels of complex personal relationships, *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), which have met with considerable acclaim, bear far more in common both with Celtic Tiger-era commercial romances such as Cecelia Ahern’s *P.S. I Love You* and with the ethos of Classic Realism than they do to any Joycean-influenced writing. I ask whether Burns’ textually inventive novel is indicative of a continuing and (crucially) still-evolving dynamism in the Irish Modernist novel, or whether Rooney’s work is indicative of a turning-away from Irish Modernism’s post-crash moment and a turning-towards a revanchist Realist orthodoxy instead.



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## CHAPTER 6

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### Coda: From the Ashes: Anna Burns' *Milkman* and Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

#### 1: The Celtic Phoenix

Ireland is booming again! Our debt to the IMF has been paid off! Emigrants are returning in their droves! Ghost estates are ghost estates no more! Oh, the Celtic Tiger was a wonderful thing in our lives, Ross. But the Celtic Phoenix—well, it's going to be even better. (Howard, 4)

Paul Howard's 2014 play *Breaking Dad* was not the first use of the singularly jarring phrase 'the Celtic Phoenix'. For example, a thriller novel of the same title was released (via self-publication service iUniversal) by American writer Dennis Frantsve in 2004. The author's biography on the Amazon.com sales page for the book proudly proclaims that Frantsve 'has extensively researched Celtic culture' for this novel, in which 'A radical cell of the IRA Provos [sic] launches a conspiracy to form a Celtic Nation comprised of the Celtic areas in Europe, plus Boston and Costa Rica' (Amazon).<sup>34</sup>

The phrase emerges again, this time in Ireland, in September 2008, in the title of a *Sunday Independent* society article by Barry Egan. The article is entitled 'Celtic Phoenix emerges... in lipstick and heels', and it celebrates the 'glamour on display' during a 'BT charity lunch' at the Four Seasons hotel in Ballsbridge. Egan's article is an unabashed celebration of the Celtic Tiger's excesses even at the nadir of the crisis which would end it: he joyously notes that:

if there was a credit crunch in Ireland, there was little or no evidence of it here on Friday. The only tightening of belts here was of the Gucci variety [...] it was a joy

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<sup>34</sup> It seems likely that this paragraph will be Frantsve's sole appearance in the spotlight of literary scholarship.

of sorts to behold such positivity in the face of all the recessionary rhetoric in vogue at the moment. (Egan)

Egan goes on to suggest that the ‘fabulously spirited’ women of the ‘Super Rich’ in attendance should take over the Irish government, and ends by quoting, with apparent approval, one attendee's assertion that “‘there were 250 Irish Sarah Palins in the room’” (Egan). Sarah Palin, of course, was the 2012 Republican Party vice-presidential candidate, known for her hardline right-wing agenda, and who as one critique has noted peddled the ‘favorite right-wing nonexplanation for the economic meltdown’: a spurious claim that sub-prime mortgages were only offered in the United States because the government ‘forced’ lenders to offer them (Larson and Porpora, 763): this neoconservative fantasist is Egan’s positive role-model for post-crash female Dublin socialites.<sup>35</sup>

Other phoenixes follow. Rather more wholesomely, in 2010 a Bulgarian group of Irish dance enthusiasts called ‘The Celtic Phoenix’ put their website online; they would update it five times in the following year, then never again ([celtic-phoenix.com](http://celtic-phoenix.com)): in this case the name appears not to riff on ‘The Celtic Tiger’ at all, but to be a reference to the Celtic tattoo-style avian logo chosen by the group. And in 2011, local Wicklow sculptor Thomas Flynn reached the final of a Europe-wide Arts and Crafts competition with a sculpture made from bog oak, which he entitled ‘The Celtic Phoenix’ (Stafford). I see no evidence or reason to suggest a shared etymological source for Egan, Frantsve, Flynn and the Bulgarian dance troupe’s various uses of this idiom: *The Celtic Phoenix* appears to have been a turn of phrase well-suited to early-2000s discourse, popping up independently in and around Irish culture in numerous forms before *Breaking Dad* was ever performed.

Nonetheless, it is Howard who should be credited with popularising the phrase in what must be regarded as its current meaning: the re-emergence of Ireland's booming ‘Celtic Tiger’ economy after a few hard post-crash years. This is the same meaning suggested by the title of Egan’s article: importantly, however, Howard has always deployed the epithet satirically. The character who voices the quote which opens this

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<sup>35</sup> At this point I would acknowledge the possibility of having been duped by an astutely-pitched spoof of Dublin gutter journalism, were it not for ample corroborative evidence of Egan's journalistic excesses, such as a ‘Daily Edge’ listicle demonstrating Egan’s addiction to the phrase ‘Love’s Young Dream’ (O’Connor)).

chapter is Charles, the father of Howard's long-running alter-ego Ross O'Carroll-Kelly. Howard has written numerous novels and plays as Ross O'Carroll-Kelly, including a regular *Irish Times* column in the character's name. O'Carroll-Kelly is a parody of arrogance and elitism amongst wealthy South Dubliners: his initials ROCK allude to the nickname of the highly privileged secondary school Blackrock College; as Adam Kelly summarises, O'Carroll-Kelly's characterisation as a former 'ROCK' schoolboy and rugby player is designed to critique how, 'Rather than serve as a civilizing force, Irish elite education simply perpetuates the social psychoses fashioned by neoliberal capitalism and class privilege' (Adam Kelly). Julian Gough, in the same angry blog post quoted repeatedly in this thesis for its damning indictment of Irish literary fiction of the Celtic Tiger years, calls O'Carroll-Kelly/Howard 'the only writer to grab the Celtic Tiger by the tail and pull hard while the tiger roared' (Gough 2010). Gough places great emphasis on Howard's *currency* during the Celtic Tiger era, claiming that 'No other writer caught it while it happened,' and comparing the incision of Howard's satirical journalism favourably to that of Flann O'Brien (Gough 2010).

Charles O'Carroll-Kelly's proclamation—'the Celtic Phoenix – well, it's going to be even better' (4)—lampoons the short-sightedness of those who would wish a return to the squalid capitalism of Tiger-era Dublin. The play is set in an imagined near-future Ireland to its 2014 audience (according to John McKeown's *Independent* review the setting is 2022 (McKeown), although this is not stated in the script (Howard)), when Tiger-era Taoiseach Bertie Ahern has returned to power, leading Charles to exult that:

And now with Fine Gael and Labour gone, it's about to get even better. You mark my words, Ross, it won't be long before we're back selling houses to each other for five times what they're actually worth. (Howard, 5)

Shortly afterwards, to underline his status as a villainous member of (south) Dublin's super-rich (of whom, one suspects, Barry Egan might write glowingly), Charles notes that one of his few points of departure from Ahern's politics is that Ahern 'doesn't agree with me that there are parts of Dublin's northside that should be simply surrendered to the sea' (6). Upon hearing the word 'egalitarian', Charles dismissively remarks that 'I'm not even sure if that's a word' (10), before exiting with the stage direction '*he turns and raises his arm in a Hitlerian salute*' (10). There can be no doubt that the herald of the 'Celtic

phoenix', in Howard's creation, is a false and corrupt prophet: the joke is that anyone could be so awful.

Latterly, however, the joke seems to be on Howard, rather than on the grotesque father of his satiric alter-ego, as Howard's/Charles' purportedly ridiculous formulation 'the Celtic Phoenix' has been unironically reclaimed into the vocabulary of apparently sober analyses of the post-post-crash Irish economy. Tanya Sweeney's measured *Independent* article of December 2014 might be considered a transitional phase. Sweeney acknowledges the phrase's satiric origin: 'the Celtic Phoenix; a phrase coined by Paul Howard as part of his Ross O'Carroll-Kelly franchise [...] To imply that the Irish economy is bouncing back, bigger and stronger than ever' (Sweeney 2014), but she also indicates that it may be applicable to the real world. Although, Sweeney asserts, 'the giddy has likely been taken out of our gallop' in terms of wanton Tigeresque spending, she believes that a new flourishing *is*, as of 2014, on its way. Moreover, this 'Celtic Phoenix' rebirth will be all the better—more stable, more mature, more *cultured*—as the lessons of the crash have been learned. Her claim that 'One of the basic tenets of economic recession is that creativity and ideas flourish in fiscally fallow times' is certainly aligned to this thesis' analysis of Irish literature, although Sweeney's examples are not Eimear McBride and Kevin Barry but the singer-songwriter Hozier, the actor Michael Fassbender and the 'recent restaurant boom' in Dublin (Sweeney 2014).

But if Howard's (semi-)coinage 'The Celtic Phoenix' is parodic, and Sweeney's appropriation of it self-aware and moderate, there are many who have taken their cue from neither of these approaches, but from the unembarrassed neoliberalism of Charles O'Carroll-Kelly's own clarion call: 'Oh, the Celtic Tiger was a wonderful thing in our lives, Ross. But the Celtic Phoenix—well, it's going to be even better' (Howard, 4). As early as November 2014, a Dublin-based recruitment agency website was proudly proclaiming that:

*The Celtic Phoenix* is a term that's been coined to describe the recent upsurge in Ireland's economy. Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the nations [sic] fortunes seem to on [sic] the upswing again. (Sherlock Recruitment)

In 2014 the *Brooklyn Journal of Corporate, Financial and Commercial Law* featured an article by Andrew P. Kummer entitled 'Pro-Business but Anti-Economy? Why Ireland's Staunch Protection of its Corporate Tax Regime is Preventing a Celtic Phoenix from Rising

from the Ashes of the Celtic Tiger'. This, however, may be a further case of convergent etymological evolution, as this article makes no reference to the phrase (which it uses only in its title and conclusion) being in currency elsewhere (Kummer). The term truly drifted free of its satiric moorings the following year, in 2015, when *The Economist* published an article entitled simply 'Celtic phoenix', which celebrates that 'less than two years since Ireland exited its humiliating bail-out, its economy is resurgent' (Economist). The 'strengths' to which the Economist credits this resurgence include: low corporate tax rates ('a low corporate-tax rate of just 12.5%') and attracting international, specifically American, capital investment:

Ireland is favoured by pharmaceutical giants such as Pfizer and has also become a magnet for tech and social-media firms. Apple continues to build up its activities in Cork; Dublin hosts the likes of Facebook and Google. (*The Economist*)

This does not sound like a 'resurgent' economy so much as a carbon copy of past mistakes. When one compares the above excerpts to Fintan O'Toole's description of the Irish tax regime in the Tiger years, the parallels are striking. O'Toole writes:

The 12.5 per cent tax rate was a little over a third of that prevailing in the US and most of Western Europe. By 2002, Ireland had become the single largest location of declared pre-tax profits for US firms. (129-130)

Even putting aside the clanging echo of Tiger-era shortsightedness, no mention is made by the *Economist* of the propensity of these saviours from across the water to avoid paying even their nominal 12.5%, or the craven assistance they have been offered in this regard by the Irish state: in 2016, the Irish government sought to *appeal against* an EU ruling that Apple owed the Irish state €13bn in tax payments, with the fear that having to pay even the taxes they were supposed to would scare off other American firms:

At the heart of the Fine Gael-led administration's objections is that it would cause Ireland reputational damage in the eyes of other mainly US multinationals thinking of establishing their European base in the Republic (Farrell and McDonald).

Ireland then simply let the January 2017 deadline to collect the €13bn pass, and has been taken to the European Court of Justice by the European Commission (Cox). Furthermore, a 2019 report by Carole Cadwalladr and Duncan Campbell in the UK *Guardian* has revealed that Facebook regarded Enda Kenny—Taoiseach at the time of the *Economist* article's

publication—as effectively a bought lobbyist for Facebook's self-interested campaign against data privacy laws, hinting at the potential social cost of this neoliberal 'resurgence' (Cadwalladr and Campbell). The Celtic Phoenix has remarkably familiar stripes.

The *Economist* article completed the respectable assimilation of the idiom 'Celtic Phoenix' into economic discourse: a 2017 article in *New Political Economy*, written by Aidan Regan and Samuel Brazys of University College Dublin, and entitled 'Celtic Phoenix or Leprechaun Economics? The politics of an FDI-led growth model in Europe'<sup>36</sup>, states in its introduction that Ireland's 'recovery from the "ashes" has been equally dramatic [as its collapse], leading to a popular rebranding of this former Celtic "Tiger" as the Celtic "Phoenix"' (Regan and Brazys). The source which Regan and Brazys cite for this 'popular rebranding' is not Ross O'Carroll-Kelly, but the (conspicuously authorless) *Economist* article of 2015. Also in 2017, an article by Patrick Collinson in the UK *Observer*, asking (commendably judiciously) whether four years of economic growth represent 'the birth of the Celtic Tiger, mark II', manages both to use the phrase 'Celtic Phoenix', and also to quote Howard's own scepticism about the seductive ideological 'nonsense' underpinning any suggestion of the Tiger's return, without joining the dots and identifying Howard as the phrase's originator or highest-profile user (Collinson). A 2018 *Irish Independent* business editorial offers an update on the 'Celtic Phoenix'. In suggesting that the recovery has already 'passed its peak', it states that 'Ireland's recovery has been dubbed the Celtic Phoenix, only half in jest', a slippery piece of revisionism which baselessly suggests that Howard's term was always intended to be semi-serious (Irish Independent).

The point of this history of a once-satiric turn of phrase is that there is a clear appetite for Celtic Tiger revivalism. This obtains to the extent that a satirical term designed to lament the short-termedness of anyone dreaming, like Charles O'Carroll-Kelly, of a return to the unsustainable boom-and-bust cycle which underpinned the pre-crash era of prosperity, has retreated into faux- (or, worse, true) naivety, and is bandied around not as a warning but as an aspiration. Another possibility is that the optimism is justified; that 'The Celtic

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<sup>36</sup> I have described the emergence of the phrase 'leprechaun economics' from its original source of Paul Krugman's Twitter account in the previous chapter

Phoenix' has been arrogated into (performatively) respectable discourse because it is a newly respectable proposition. In this version of events, the Celtic Tiger *has* been born again, but this time the centre will hold, things will fall not apart but neatly into place, and mere anarchy is debarred from entry. The task at hand for this thesis is not to comb the entrails for advance warning of the Irish economy's future trajectory—although its political priors, in the Bayesian sense, will by now be plainly apparent— but to assess what its *current* state means for the current state of Realism and Modernism in the Irish novel.

Because, after all, some time has passed. The main objects of this thesis' study are *Malarky*, published in 2012, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, published in 2013 (and, as discussed, written in 2003-4), *Martin John* and *Beatlebone*, both published in 2015, and *Solar Bones*, first published in 2016. At the time of writing it is 2019, and a slight historical distance is emerging. There is of course the question of politics in the larger Anglophone sphere: the election of Donald Trump and the United Kingdom's stuttering (and currently un-finalised) exit from the European Union have loomed large in the background of Irish public discourse since the British EU referendum and the American presidential election of 2016, which neatly coincide with the end of the publication period of the novels mentioned above. Closer to home, there is the simple fact that more time has passed since the financial crash of 2008-9. If, as I have been arguing, the re-emergence of the Irish Modernist novel via the works of McBride, McCormack, Barry and Schofield was an immediate reaction to the crash, there has now been time for a reaction to the re-emergence to begin, in turn, to emerge.

## 2: Emergence and Residue

In Raymond Williams' terms, this thesis has dealt with McBride *et al* as 'emergent' artists whose avant-gardism began to supplant the 'dominant' mode of Celtic Tiger Historical Realism. As this terminology and its attendant subtleties will inform the analysis of 'Celtic Phoenix' literature which follows, I will first offer an account of its origins and its usefulness. Williams notes in his 1973 paper 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory' that

Marxist cultural analysis [...] is usually very much better at distinguishing the large features of different epochs of society, as between feudal and bourgeois, or what might be, than at distinguishing between different phases of bourgeois society, and different moments within the phases. (1973, 8)

It may very well be that the current analysis swings too far in the other direction, and that using Williams' terminology to delineate a distinction between Irish literary fiction of the post-crash moment and Irish literary fiction of the immediately *post*-post-crash moment is a mode of analysis more nit-pickingly microscopic, and less historical (never mind *epochal*) than what Williams had in mind, or would find productive. Nevertheless, the terminology of 'dominant', 'emergent' and 'residual' which Williams offers is exceeding useful to the task at hand, and so will be shamelessly co-opted for this small-potatoes investigation.

In Williams' account, which channels the Gramscian definition of 'hegemony' as outlined in my introductory chapter, the 'dominant' is a 'central system of practices, meanings and values' which pertains 'in any particular period' (1973, 9). He carefully notes that 'dominant' is not necessarily a term of hostility, although in much Marxist criticism it must be accounted as such: the dominant is simply what is 'central'. Even an egalitarian utopia would have a cultural dominant, although it would presumably look rather different to those systems which obtain in neoliberal capitalist 21<sup>st</sup> century Ireland, either pre- or post-crash.

Abutting the cultural dominant are two types of cultural forms—that is, of 'practices, experiences, meanings, values' (1973, 10)—which it has not fully incorporated,

although it will incessantly attempt to do so. These are the 'residual' type and the 'emergent' type. Each of these can be further subdivided into incorporated and non-incorporated cultures (1973, 11), and the non-incorporated strands into 'alternative' cultural forms, which are different to the dominant and only wish to be left alone by it, and 'oppositional' cultural forms, which are different to the dominant *and* which seek to oppose and alter the dominant (1973, 10).

The 'residual' type consists of those cultural forms which 'cannot be expressed in the terms of the dominant culture, [but] are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social formation' (1973, 10). Williams offers the unspecific examples of 'certain religious values' and 'certain notions derived from a rural past': he was writing in 1970s Britain, but we might easily see current examples of residual-oppositional culture in sections of the political campaigns promoting both Donald Trump and Brexit, where revanchist fantasies of a return to a prelapsarian (and, bluntly, pre-miscegenated) America/Britain were appealed to with unambiguous appeals to a 'previous social formation': consider their emblematic slogans. 'Take *back* control'; 'Make America Great *Again*' (these, of course, were both *successful* oppositional cultures in the effect which they had upon the political dominant culture, via these respective countries' electoral/democratic procedures).

The 'emergent' type, by contrast, is not based upon a previous social formation, and Williams acknowledges a degree of uncertainty regarding where the emergent *comes from*: 'our hardest task theoretically,' he writes, 'is to find a non-metaphysical and non-subjectivist explanation of emergent cultural practice' (1973, 12). His admittance that 'part of our answer to this question bears on the process of persistence of residual practices' (1973, 12) seems compatible with this thesis' overall contention that a *residual* awareness of a previous Irish Modernism was important in catalysing the *emergent* Irish Modernism of the post-crash moment. Whatever their source, emergent cultures are 'new meanings and values, new significances and experiences,' which 'are continually being created' (1973, 11). Such emergent cultural forms are not allowed to germinate unmolested; the dominant culture will always seek to incorporate the emergent before it can become either oppositional or alternative: 'it is significant in our own period how very early this attempt is,' he notes—and I see no reason to believe that this has regressed

since the 1970s—‘how alert the dominant culture now is to anything that can be seen as emergent’ (1973, 11).

Just as the ‘dominant’ is, in theory at least, not necessarily a hostile term, it should also be noted that contemporary artistic expression is not necessarily ‘emergent’, even if much of the art that we as critics and cultural commentators seek to champion may indeed be so. Art may express residual, dominant *or* emergent values, and it is the dominant which is dominant. Therefore, in any given period the most mainstream art will reflect the hegemonic values of its historical moment; that is, the dominant. As Williams summarises:

The arts of writing and the arts of creation and performance, over their whole range, are parts of the cultural process in all the different ways, the different sectors, that I have been seeking to describe. They contribute to the effective dominant culture and are a central articulation of it. They embody residual meanings and values, not all of which are incorporated, though many are. They express also and significantly some emergent practices and meanings, yet some of these may eventually be incorporated, as they reach people and begin to move them. Thus it was very evident in the sixties, in some of the emergent arts of performance, that the dominant culture reached out to transform them or seek to transform them. In this process, of course, the dominant culture itself changes, not in its central formation, but in many of its articulated features. But then in a modern society it must always change in this way, if it is to remain dominant, if it is still to be felt as in real ways central in all our many activities and interests. (1973, 14)

The central thrust of this thesis has been to portray a self-proclaimed ‘mature’ Realism, particularly Historical Realism, as the literary expression of the *dominant* culture of Celtic Tiger Ireland. The crash then allowed for a genuinely *emergent* Irish Modernist literature (with an undoubted *residual* element in its exhuming of the seemingly-buried textual politics of Joycean high Modernism) to emerge. This chapter, which is intended to operate more as a coda to the argument outlined in the previous chapters than as a modulation or further substantiation of it, considers the possibility that within the admittedly limited scope of Irish literary fiction, McBride *et al* now look rather more like the *dominant* (Celtic Tiger Historical Realism having been rendered *residual*), and the question of the next *emergence* must be considered. Will it be a true emergent, building on the experimentalism of its immediate forebears, or a revanchist return to the residual, as Celtic Tiger literature reasserts itself alongside the apparent re-stabilisation of Irish

national prosperity (and, more importantly for the subject at hand, the accompanying re-stabilisation of Irish national optimism)?

Like my consideration of Metamodernism as an 'afterpostmodernist' theory in my chapter on *Beatlebone*, the term 'afterpostcrash' might be apt to describe this tentative observation that the first blush of the Modernist re-emergence has already passed. But however apt, 'afterpostcrash' is an awkward formulation. Therefore this 'coda' will use the term 'Celtic Phoenix' for the post-McBride/afterpostcrash/postrecessionary literature emergent from approximately 2017. It is left to the reader to determine the level of irony with which they would like to consider this nomenclature imbued.

The remainder of this chapter, which is necessarily speculative and inconclusive, diagnoses both residual and emergent currents, using as its case studies two of the most successful Irish literary fiction writers of the Phoenix era: Sally Rooney, whose second novel *Normal People* (2018) I will argue is identifiably expressive of a return to the once-and-future dominant ideology of Celtic Tiger Ireland, and Anna Burns, whose Booker prize-winning *Milkman* (2018) is clearly extensive of, and benefits from, the oppositional textual politics of McBride and McCormack's 21<sup>st</sup> century Modernism. Burns is of course a *Northern* Irish author, and the complexities of introducing a Northern Irish text at this late point in a thesis previously concerned only with texts from the Republic will not go ignored below: however it is the widely-praised Rooney to whom I wish to turn first.

### 3: Normative People: Sally Rooney

One clear example that Irish letters have entered a ‘Celtic Phoenix’ moment, as identified above, comes from Sally Rooney’s *Normal People*, published in 2018 (the same arguments are applicable to Rooney’s debut, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), which is very similar to *Normal People*, although the examples which follow are mostly taken from *Normal People*, in order to provide a more exact temporal comparison with *Milkman*, also published in 2018). The central characters of *Normal People*, Connell and Marianne, are teenagers, still in school in a west-of-Ireland small town at the novel’s beginning. The plot later follows them through an on-off romantic relationship during their years at Trinity College in Dublin. Although the novel is set during the aftermath of the financial crisis, it is clear that the crash is not *trauma* to these young characters; it is *history*. Rooney herself recognises this distinction in a 2018 *Guardian* interview. Although she decries the “cultural cheerleading” of the Celtic Tiger’s dominant culture, and identifies herself with a “period of serious social critique” which has resulted from the recession, she is also, according to the interviewer Alex Clark, ‘eager to qualify her arguments’ (Clark, ‘Conversations with Sally Rooney’, 2018): she ‘is wary of sounding as though “it was all worth it because we got some good books out of it” (a salutary wariness), and also points out that, like Connell and Marianne, she ‘was only a teenager during the years of boom and bust’ (Clark, ‘Conversations’, 2018).

This does not, of course, dictate that Rooney’s novels will reflect her personal biographical distance from the economic downturn, but in the heavily autobiographical *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* they do. The crash is held at a distance throughout: when Marianne remarks that Connell might as well study English at university despite poor job prospects as ‘the economy’s fucked anyway’ (20), it is without bitterness. Rather, it is the justifiably insouciant remark of a teenager who knows that a fucked economy is not her generation’s concern, or not yet (Connell, from a lower socio-economic class than Marianne, is equally justified in having his ear far closer to the ground regarding matters of employability: nonetheless, he overcomes this concern and chooses English as his degree subject). The crash-as-ancient-history motif returns when Connell

and Marianne visit an empty house on the 'ghost estate' (33) outside their town: the house is not only empty but long-empty, and has become a den for teenagers to hang out in: 'there were cigarette butts all over the floor and someone had dragged a mattress into the otherwise bare living room. The mattress was stained badly with damp and what looked like blood' (33). The teenagers' response to this is again differentiated by their economic class, but they are united in vagueness as to its causes: Connell asks why such empty houses cannot be given away if they cannot be sold:

[Marianne] shrugged. She didn't actually understand why.

It's something to do with capitalism, she said.

Yeah, everything is. That's the problem, isn't it? (34)

Later, a different boyfriend of Marianne's is revealed to be the son of 'one of the people who had caused the financial crisis—not figuratively, one of the actual people involved' (124). This serves to create a contrast between this new boyfriend, Jamie, and Connell, whose mother works an insecure, low-paid job as a cleaner (including for Marianne's mother). The parallel is not between Jamie and Connell, but between their parents: this distils the one-generation-removed relationship between *Normal People* and the financial crisis, and confirms it as a text not of the aftermath, but of the post-aftermath Phoenix: for *Normal People*, the crash is a problem created by, and largely speaking visited upon, its characters', author's and narrative viewpoint's *parents'* generation.

There are also hints, in the novel's latter stages, that the Phoenix in its unironic, resurgent sense is making itself felt in Connell and Marianne's world. Marianne has a part-time job at which 'she answers emails telling people that her boss is unavailable for meetings' (254). She tells her friend Joanna that she is paid for this in cash:

Joanna was shocked when she heard about that. What is he doing paying you in cash? she said. Is he like a drug dealer or something? Marianne said she thought he was some kind of property developer. Oh, said Joanna. Wow, that's much worse. (255)

The gag—that property developers are lower than criminals—would not be out of place in Howard's *Breaking Dad*, and Rooney's cynicism towards Tiger-style wheeler-dealers is clearly expressed. It is the gag's *premise* which speaks to the 'Celtic Phoenix' flavour of *Normal People's* setting: in order for Joanna's punchline to land, it must be credible in

2018 Ireland for property developers to once again constitute an arrogant, wealthy class with a predisposition towards financial opacity— ‘it’s unclear to Marianne what [her boss] really does’ (254)—and irregularity: ‘at the end of the week she is handed an envelope full of cash’ (255). Such envelopes are one of the true icons of the corruption endemic to Celtic Tiger economics. Donal Ryan’s *From a Low and Quiet Sea*, for example, uses ‘brown envelopes flying about the place’ as a shorthand for Irish local government corruption (79), while Fintan O’Toole’s anti-Tiger polemic *Ship of Fools* makes reference to ‘envelopes containing thousands of pounds’ being paid to Bertie Ahern by ‘businessmen’ as bribes (80).

What is made clear by these examples is that *Normal People* is a text of the Celtic Phoenix generation; however as it is also evident from the lattermost quotation in particular that Rooney articulates a familiar and justified anti-Tiger critique, characterising its movers and shakers as untrustworthy and even hinting—in a bored, isn’t-it-obvious fashion—at a structural critique of ‘something to do with capitalism’. This may seem contrary to my stated claim that *Normal People* represents a *residual* cultural movement. However as with the prior analyses which have comprised my interrogation of post-crash novels, my argument here is one of narrative technique and form. *Normal People* may yank at the Tiger’s tail—or the Phoenix’s tail feathers—but technically and narratively it is extensive of the Tiger’s dominant literary politics: a Realist ethos substantively derived from nineteenth-century or ‘classic’ Realism, and diametrically opposed to the ethos of interrogative Modernism represented by the emergent texts of the post-crash period.

In my second chapter, on Eimear McBride, I outlined the weight of critical consensus that Realism was the dominant literary form of the Celtic Tiger: to recapitulate just one of those critical sources, George O’Brien observed that ‘the contemporary [early-2000s] Irish novel is on the whole narrower in scope’ than its experimental forebears, characterised by ‘a comparative formal conservatism, consisting mostly of modest modifications of pre-modernist novels’ (xxiii). *Normal People* returns to this narrow scope and formal conservatism, taking as its ur-residual background not Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Beckett’s trilogy, but the nineteenth-century Realism which, in Catherine Belsey’s words, ‘create[s] the illusion while we read that what is narrated is “really” and intelligibly happening’ (1980, 47-8). Belsey writes this in reflecting upon an analysis of George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (Belsey 1980, 46), and it is George Eliot upon whom Rooney’s *Normal People*

most strikingly draws, as elucidated in a convincing analysis in Helen Charman's essayistic review of *Normal People* for the *White Review*, in which Charman observes that:

The epigraph to *Normal People* is from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and Rooney's combination of social realism and a firm narrative drive that relies upon certain familiar set-pieces seems to be in extended conversation with novels of the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Charman then notes that Rooney, in an interview conducted by Michael Nolan regarding *Conversations with Friends*, explicitly distances herself from the notion of experimentation, saying "There are a lot of experimental novels that test the boundaries of what the novel is, and *Conversations* is not one of those" (M. Nolan). Charman omits the following line from Nolan's interview, in which Rooney claims that *Conversations* is 'conventional in its structure, even though its prose style and the themes it explores and the politics that underpin it, maybe, are on the experimental side' (M. Nolan), but this omission may be justified by the shortage of evidence, either in *Conversations* or *Normal People*, for this purported thematic, prosodic and political experimentalism, beyond the omission of quotation marks to denote dialogue (each line of dialogue is still given its own line, so this does not have a defamiliarising effect after the mode of Joyce's elision of 'perverted commas'; see the analysis of how McCormack deploys line breaks to create the less disorienting passages of *Solar Bones* in the previous chapter). Somewhat more substantively, the straightforward portrayal of bisexual identities and desires in *Conversations* would admittedly be surprisingly progressive in Irish literary Realism of the early-2000s, never mind the nineteenth century—however this applies only to the 'themes' and 'politics' of Rooney's claim, not the unfounded claim of experimentalism in its 'prose style'.

As Charman argues elsewhere in her review, Rooney's adherence to Realism as a mode does not render her novels truly naturalistic: *Normal People*:

never lets the reader forget that its protagonists are extremely attractive, extremely complicated, extremely clever; their taut high-achieving neuroticism is a stylistic coup de grace, but it allows no room for other possible manifestations of value and complexity in other characters. (Charman)

It is this same unrealistic simplification of reality which Charman relates to George Eliot, by way of Raymond Williams once again. Charman quotes Williams' observation that

George Eliot treats the “‘country people’” of her novels ‘as a landscape’ rather than as ‘active bearers of personal experience’ (qtd. In Charman), and she observes that this same principle obtains in *Normal People*: ‘the affective power of the narrative depends upon the characterisation of its protagonists as exceptional’ (Charman). This creates a ‘rift [...] between the realism of the character portraits, and the mounting pressure of a narrative reaching its conclusion’ (Charman). Belsey’s characterisation of the illusionism of ‘Classic Realism’ is once again recalled: as Belsey writes:

classic realism cannot foreground contradiction. The logic of its structure—the movement towards closure—precludes the possibility of leaving the reader simply to confront the contradictions which the text may have defined. (1980, 75)

Furthermore, the specific thrust of Williams’ challenge to George Eliot—that she may write *about* class inequality but that she does so with a distant condescension towards those on the less fortunate side of the class divide—has salience when applied to *Normal People* too. In one scene we find Marianne reflecting on Jamie’s charge that Connell is ‘some milk-drinking culchie’ (149). Although Marianne does not align herself with Jamie’s derogatory tone, she notes the same ‘culchie’ (rural, unsophisticated, agricultural—as opposed to metropolitan Dublin) signifiers in Connell: ‘she has seen him drink milk directly from the carton. He plays video games with aliens in them, he has opinions about football managers. He’s wholesome like a big baby tooth’ (149). Putting milk consumption (which could have at least some tangential link to a *rural* identity in dairy-farming country) to one side, it is startling to note that Rooney regards an interest in video games and football, both extremely mainstream and cross-class (if predominantly male) pursuits in contemporary Ireland, as infantilising markers. While the opinion of Connell being put forward here is Marianne’s, not necessarily Rooney’s, there is no suggestion of an ironizing distance to suggest that the premises upon which that opinion is expressed are unique to the character of Marianne; just as one requires a ‘Phoenix’ understanding of the Irish economy to understand Joanna’s joke about property developers, Marianne’s cluster of examples—milk-drinking, football-watching and videogame-playing—is directed towards a readership who shares Marianne’s/Rooney’s dismissive approach of these cultural signifiers. I am put in mind once again of Julian Gough’s remark in 2010 that ‘I don’t get the impression many Irish writers have played Grand Theft Auto, or bought an X-Box [...] Irish literary writers have become a priestly caste, scribbling by candlelight, cut

off from the electric current of the culture' (Gough 2010). Rooney has been much lauded for her connection to just this electric current: Victoria Suchodolski notes that 'Reviewers seem to love talking about Rooney's work as exemplary of what it means to write in the technological age, touting the fluid way that she weaves text conversations and emails into her novels' (Suchodolski). 'Video games with aliens in' is of course no more or less salient as a cultural category than 'novels with love affairs in', and to offhandedly dismiss 'video games with aliens in' as the plaything of 'a big baby tooth' within the context of Connell's 'culchie' signifiers suggests that Rooney's interest in writing in 'the technological age' does not extend to technologies, or to users of technologies, whose cultural foothold is still comparatively slight within the realms of traditional highbrow cultures, any more than George Eliot's interest in 'country people' extended beyond their function as a 'landscape'.

There are many reasons why a distant summary of post-2010 Irish literature might assume Rooney's writing to be continuous with the post-crash experimental 'Movement' of McBride, McCormack, Barry and Schofield, and of other fellow-travellers (genuine, partial or apparent) such as Sara Baume, Donal Ryan, Caitriona Lally and Claire-Louise Bennett. There is her self-proclaimed 'experimental politics'. There is her hometown of Castlebar, which is in County Mayo in the north-west Republic of Ireland, at the very geographical heartland/hinterland which, as outlined in the previous chapter, connects McBride, McCormack, Barry and Schofield. There is, on a more textual level, the themes of trauma and mental damage which are central to *Normal People*. Connell suffers severe depression after the suicide of an old schoolfriend (201), while 'Marianne's childhood was marred by domestic abuse; the narrative turns on her later desire for sexual submission as something solely related to those experiences of trauma' (Charman). However this trauma is central only to the plot, never to *Normal People's* poetics. This, again, Charman astutely connects to George Eliot, noting that 'there is something curiously Victorian [...] in the narrative desire to pathologise [Marianne] in some way', to reject 'a more radical "otherness"' in favour of a kind but still normative diagnosis of Marianne's sexual deviancy as a harm from which she must be protected by a kind lover, the domestic abuse underpinning this deviancy not resolved, but no longer engaged with either, it having served its purpose as a plot point to keep Marianne and Connell apart long enough to create narrative tension, and to bring them back together in good time to create narrative

resolution. Charman's conclusion is aptly underwhelming: 'Perhaps this shouldn't come as a surprise. *Normal People* is, above all, a novel that knowingly commits to its traditional narrative structures'. What more can we expect of conventional Realism than Realist conventions?

*Normal People* is a Celtic Phoenix text in the residual sense, where the Phoenix represents not a return with a difference, but simply a return: a return to rejecting Modernism and the interrogative text, and a return to a Realist textual politics which summarises and portrays economic inequality and individual trauma, but never allows inequality or trauma into the central mechanisms by which the Realist novel is organised, maintained and presented.

In this version of events, the post-crash emergence of a Modernist tendency in Irish literature will be seen, in years to come, as a rapidly-blooming, bright-flowering, quickly-withering exception to the hegemonic norm of a dominant Realism, rather than as a sustained or even particularly influential opposition to that dominance. This version is by no means unlikely. However there is another potential path, in which the emergent-oppositional post-crash Modernism has been incorporated by the dominant in a lasting and meaningful sense, such that *newly* emergent forms are building upon and reacting to, rather than simply rewinding and recording over, the post-crash Modernist 'movement'. This alternative vision is what I will turn to next, with reference to Anna Burns' 2018 novel *Milkman*.

#### 4: Anna Burns in the Ascendant, 2018

*Milkman* is Burns' third novel, and it would be an oversimplification to claim that, like McCormack before *Solar Bones*, she was an obscure author prior to its sudden acclaim. Her first novel, *No Bones*, did make something of a splash upon its release in 2001; Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem has even called it 'highly acclaimed', noting that *No Bones* won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize and was shortlisted for the 'coveted' Orange Prize for Fiction (Fadem 137). None of which, of course, could have happened had *No Bones* not achieved publication: rather than languishing in slushpiles like *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, *No Bones* was published in the early 2000s and achieved, as Fadem notes, a certain degree of acclaim. *Girl* is probably the more 'difficult' novel in its poetics—and the question of 'difficulty' will be returned to below—but there are sections in *No Bones*, particularly a chapter entitled 'Mr Hunch in the Ascendant, 1980', which clearly display a non-Realist ethos. 'Mr Hunch in the Ascendant, 1980', indeed, fits perfectly with the themes and techniques which this thesis has taken to be characteristic of post-crash Irish Modernism. It is set from the perspective of a mentally ill character ('psychosis' and 'schizophrenia' are mentioned as possible diagnoses but also called into question (144)) named Vincent, and it uses stream-of-consciousness techniques to displace any objective narrative command of reality and rather to centre Vincent's mentally damaged perspective, in a manner which defamiliarises the text from the reader, and demands of that reader that they perform an on-line 'interpretation' of the events and narrative hierarchies of the narration.

So for all this, why was *No Bones* released into the world and onto prize shortlists when *Girl* had to wait until 2013 for an amenable publisher? One cannot speak to individual publishers' or slush-readers' motivation, but there is an obvious point of differentiation to explain this disparity; *No Bones*' status as *Northern* Irish literature, and, within that remit, as 'Troubles' literature. Troubles-lit may seem like a narrow category, but it is a salient and long-standing one, in both critical and commercial terms. It is a category of writing distinct enough to merit its own entry in *The Concise Oxford Companion to English*

*Literature* (Birch and Hooper), and Eve Patten wryly noted in 1995 that ‘Since the beginning of the [then-]current phase of conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969 fiction set in the Troubles has become one of the region’s few growth industries’ (1995, 128). *No Bones* clearly fits the ‘fiction set in the Troubles’ classification; its chapter titles, by way of illustration, include ‘Troubles, 1979’ (118), ‘The Present Conflict, 1983’ (185), and ‘A Peace Process, 1994’ (297).

This places *No Bones* firmly *outside* of the economic context which has provided the parameters for this thesis: the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent effect of the crash on the Republic of Ireland’s economy. *Milkman*, likewise, reflects on the Troubles; why then, with *No Bones* as a ‘control’ novel which—while interesting and worthy of study in its own right—I will treat as broadly *outside* of this thesis’ purview, is *Milkman* here considered relevant? The answer is as much to do with these novels’ reception, marketing and critique as to do with their content, and a simple demonstration of this is provided by the summaries which Burns’ publishers have placed on her books’ British editions’ back covers. Flamingo, the HarperCollins subsidiary who originally published *No Bones* in 2001, clearly frame it as an artefact of ‘Troubles lit’: the blurb begins ‘Russian roulette, riots and homemade bombs—and that’s just what the children are up to...’, and makes reference to rubber bullets fired by ‘the British Army’. *Milkman*, in contrast, is immediately *distanced* by its Faber & Faber marketing copy from the politicising frame of the Troubles; ‘in this unnamed city’, it begins, and it concludes not in terms of historical specifics but of universal themes: ‘*Milkman* is a tale of gossip and hearsay [...] the story of inaction with enormous consequences’. It is true that in *Milkman* Belfast is technically unnamed, but Belfast is clearly the novel’s setting; its unnamings does not function to obscure its location, but as part of a consistent theme of unnamings throughout the novel, the implications of which are analysed below.

One can extend the judging of these books by their covers (the judging of their covers by their covers, at least) to the newspaper review extracts flashed across the front covers: *No Bones* has the *Daily Mail*, a notoriously sensationalist right-wing British newspaper, highlighting the book’s ‘shocking’ qualities, a clear play to the commodification of the Troubles as a site of thrilling terrorist violence. As noted previously, Eve Patten was able in the mid-1990s to describe Troubles lit as a ‘growth industry’: which she goes on to term ‘Troubles-trash’ (1995, 129), a ‘cult phenomenon in

which hardened terrorists race across flat-roofed buildings and blow up sidewalks, misguided idealists die for Erin and lovers are caught in the crossfire' (1995, 128). Elmer Kennedy-Andrews notes that these 'trash' texts usually constitute thrillers which subordinate 'complex characterisation or moral conflict' to the sort of elements which might titillate the *Daily Mail* reader: 'suspense, excitement, exhilaration, fear' (41). *No Bones* shares little more than its setting with these 'Troubles-trash' texts, but evidently in 2001 the 'growth industry' was still healthy enough for *No Bones'* marketers to see tapping into it by implicit reference as worthwhile.

By contrast, *Milkman's* front cover carries two quotations which make no reference either to the Troubles or the North. There is instead a note of general approval—'Excellent ... Original [...]'—from the Irish novelist Claire Kilroy, known for her critique of Celtic Tiger excesses in the satirical *The Devil I Know* (2012), and a quote from the *Irish Times* lauding Burns as 'one of our rising literary stars'. The term 'our' could in another context be read generally to mean, say, 'the world of letters' or 'Anglophone fiction', but in its juxtaposition to the *Irish* of *Irish Times*, and to the quotation from Kilroy, the message (perhaps particularly to a British readership) is clear: Burns is to be associated with the second, not the first, word in 'Northern Ireland'. Whereas in 2001 the sensible marketing strategy for *No Bones* was to render it other, making it an exotic artefact of 'shocking' Troubles-lit, in 2018 *Milkman* could most profitably be sold by creating an association with *Irish* writing, and its recent, McBride and McCormack-associated, intellectualism, radicalism and prizewinning.

This prizewinning, of course, is a theme which *Milkman* not only continued but escalated. The post-crash 'Movement' of McBride, Schofield, Barry and McCormack was notably aided by the establishment in 2013 of the Goldsmiths Prize 'to reward fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form' ('Goldsmiths Prize'). Bret Johnson<sup>37</sup> writes that when this prize first appeared it 'went against the grain of literary prizes and framed itself as distinct from the Man Booker by awarding innovative and experimental fiction specifically', and that its subsequent establishment as an

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<sup>37</sup> To whom I am grateful for providing me with a succinct and precise overview of recent scholarship on literary prizes, and the Goldsmiths prize in particular.

'experimental' tastemaker owes much to the astute decision to make McBride's *Girl* its inaugural winner in 2013 (Johnson). Barry (2015) and McCormack (2016) also subsequently won this new award, with Schofield's *Martin John* and McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians* also shortlisted in 2016 ('Goldsmiths Prize'). Another relevant award, as previously discussed with reference to McCormack, is the International Dublin Literary Award, which McCormack won for *Solar Bones* in 2018, and Barry won for his first novel, *City of Bohane*, in 2014 ('Previous Winners'). *Milkman* then went a step further and won the world's most mainstream literary fiction award, the Man Booker Prize, in 2018. *Solar Bones* was longlisted for the Booker in 2017, which suggests a pleasingly methodical evolution for these texts in terms of prizewinning: if McBride's success in the inaugural Goldsmith's prize 'paved the way' for McCormack to grow beyond this 'nursery' prize and make the Booker longlist, then perhaps it was McCormack's entry into the Booker's peripheral vision which 'paved the way' for Burns' subsequent coronation as a Booker-winning author in 2018. The prize originally framed, as Johnson notes, as 'distinct' from the Man Booker was now influencing the Booker's judgements. The salience of this claimed 'evolution' of course depends on the reader accepting the premise that Burns' *Milkman* is extensive of the McBride-McCormack Movement, a premise which I will now substantiate.

## 5: Unfamiliar, Restful Consciousness

Burns' novel operates from the first-person perspective of a then eighteen-year-old woman whose family refer to her only as 'middle sister'<sup>38</sup>: like Belfast in this novel, and like the Girl of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (and a bit like *Malarky's 'Our Woman'*, although her name, Philomena, is revealed), the protagonist of *Milkman* goes unnamed. It is set in seventies Belfast, despite Tanya Sweeney's *Irish Independent* review, which makes the bewildering assertion that *Milkman* is set in 'a dystopian future' (Sweeney 2018). It is not: 'keep [...] in mind, too, this was the Nineteen-Seventies' (60) notes Middle Sister early in the narrative. Even Sweeney's inattentive review (she also misnames the author as 'Ann Burns'), however, sees through the conceit of *Milkman's* 'unnamed' setting: the 'dystopian future', she writes, is that of 'an unnamed city that seems very similar to a Belfast riddled with sectarian tensions' (Sweeney 2018).

The setting, then, is the Catholic community (broadly speaking) of 1970s Belfast. The plot concerns Middle Sister being aggressively courted by a man known to this community, and by extension the reader, as 'the milkman'. The milkman, *Milkman* points out, 'didn't ever deliver milk' (2), and indeed 'There was no milk about him' (2): a later fleeting reference to 'the milkcrates of ragged-up petrol bombs [...] stacked for the next district riot' (94) reveals that the nickname's provenance is more paramilitary than lactic. Although Middle Sister seeks to avoid his advances, giving up personal freedoms to do so and enlisting her brother-in-law to go running with her to fend off the milkman's unwanted attention (11), she finds that the simple fact of the milkman's desire has rendered her his 'paramilitary groupie' (125) in the eyes of her paranoid, watchful community.

The perspective which Middle Sister gives us on this community is a repetitive, caustic stream of consciousness which modulates subtly between something close to psychological interior monologue and a wickedly self-aware faux-naivety. The relevance

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<sup>38</sup> Henceforth, 'Middle Sister'

of the term 'stream of consciousness' to *Milkman* has been asserted by some critics and reviewers and disputed by others. Dwight Garner's deeply negative review in the *New York Times* calls *Milkman* a 'willfully demanding and opaque stream-of-consciousness novel' (Garner) and Tanya Sweeney's aforementioned *Irish Independent* review describes Burns' 'hectic, stream-of-consciousness writing, not dissimilar to that of Eimear McBride or Flann O'Brien' (Sweeney 2018). Others have evoked 'stream of consciousness' but have also sought to qualify it: Laura Miller in the *New Yorker*, for example, describes its style as bearing 'a rough semblance to stream of consciousness but is much easier to follow' (Miller). Mark O'Connell's review for *Slate*, meanwhile, rejects the term wholesale, saying in parenthetical response to Garner's review that '(to clear up a basic technical question, the narrative is voice-driven, but it no more employs the device of stream of consciousness than *American Psycho* or *Pale Fire*)' (O'Connell). I disagree with O'Connell's tone. Stream-of-consciousness is far too contentiously-defined a term for an assertion of a given text's stream-ness to be brusquely corrected as a 'basic technical question' without at least outlining which definition of 'stream of consciousness' one takes as basically, technically correct. For my own part I am happy with 'stream of consciousness' as a description of *Milkman*, taking 'stream' as I do as an umbrella term incorporating other subjectivist techniques such as interior monologue and free indirect discourse (when the latter is combined with focalisation as in the 'Uncle Charles Principle'). This follows Brian McHale's description of 'stream' 'not as a form but as a particular content of consciousness [...] [which] can be realized formally by first-person "autonomous" interior monologue [...] by FID [...] or indeed by a combination of means (McHale 2014, 8)). However if O'Connell regards describing *Milkman* as stream of consciousness as an aberrance on a 'basic technical' level because he takes stream of consciousness to mean Psychological Realist interior monologue, as in David Lodge's 'earphones plugged into someone's brains' (47), then his demurral (if not its manner or its presentation) is entirely reasonable. *Milkman* is not an uninterrupted interior monologue; instead, as stated above, its narrative position modulates between an internal and partially-external view of Middle Sister, whose own viewpoint modulates between a knowing faux-naïf critique of her environs and a more truly naïve immersion within them. Miller's *New Yorker* review summarises this modulation admirably:

Worst of all, the ambient paranoia penetrates even those who are determined to resist it, like middle sister herself. She presents as a familiar figure: the skeptical teen-age narrator dismantling the phoniness around her. But there are chinks in her defiance, failures of will and memory that echo the self-defeating political excesses of her neighbors. (Miller)

It is in this mode of narrative presentation that *Milkman* can be aligned with the 'movement' of post-crash Irish Modernism. Like its immediate predecessors, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, it refuses a consoling or even consistent Realist meta-language, and also refuses a straightforward 'Psychological Realist' reading which would purport to make the protagonist's consciousness wholly accessible and wholly epistemologically bound by the parameters of the text. Instead, *Milkman* operates at a *partially* subjectivist, defamiliarized distance from the reader whereby an active process of interpretation is required to parse the narrative into interior monologue, narrative prose knowingly focalised by the character through her self-aware faux-naivety, and narrative prose unknowingly focalised by the character through her own cognitive damage. Where *Milkman* may be considered to depart from the damaged consciousnesses portrayed in *Girl*, *Solar Bones*, *Malarky*, *Martin John* and *Beatlebone* is that the damage in all of those books is the personal mental damage of the focalising characters, linked to their personal traumas and manifesting in various ways including as anxiety, as incoherence, as compulsive sexual behaviours—self-destructive in *Girl*'s case, outwardly destructive in *Martin John*'s—and as simple disorientation. *Milkman* is extensive, not reduplicative of this tendency; it takes the theme and, as McCormack said of McBride's Joyceanism, runs with it. *Milkman* *develops* the characteristics of post-crash Modernism in a new direction: that of communal trauma. This is a rare point of correspondence between *Milkman* and *Normal People* as Phoenix texts: *Milkman*'s wider, less immediately psychological analysis of trauma reflects, like Rooney's protagonists' view of the financial crash, the slight historical remove between the traumatising dead hand of the financial crash and the perspective from which these texts now operate. *Milkman* is once again a text of damaged consciousness, but the damage is to a considerable extent that of Middle Sister's *community*, not her individual psyche as aberrant from that community. This will be demonstrated below by two sets of examples; first of Middle Sister as self-aware commentator upon her community' idiosyncrasies and dysfunction, and secondly of Middle Sister as expressive of that same dysfunction.

*Milkman's* faux-naivety—Miller's 'skeptical teen-age narrator dismantling the phoniness around her'—creates a different relationship of authority between its reader, writer, characters and narrative hierarchy of voices than post-crash stream of consciousness Modernism. Neither, I think, could it be considered *Metamodernist* in the same way as Barry's *Beatlebone*, as the self-awareness of the narrator does not elide into self-reflexivity on the part of the text. There is no insincerity or extradiegetic irony to Middle Sister's scepticism; this is still a sincere diegetic portrayal of a fictional consciousness. However, it is a sincere diegetic portrayal of a consciousness which often chooses to be wryly aloof. A good way to illustrate this is to return to the theme of unnamings, and to consider the reasons for it. It is not only Middle Sister who goes unnamed in Burns' novel: Middle Sister herself calls her little sisters 'wee sisters' (83), her third brother-in-law 'third brother-in-law' (15) her mother 'ma' (45) and her romantic partner, to whom she is unwilling to affix the commitment-laden label of 'boyfriend', 'maybe-boyfriend' (8). The closest any character comes to a name is a nickname: the milkman is called 'the milkman' (2) or 'Milkman' (197), and maybe-boyfriend's friend, who dreams of cookery, is nicknamed 'chef' by his friends and also by the narrative voice (32). But no forenames or surnames are present: particularly not, as Middle Sister explains, if they sound suspiciously Anglophone:

The names not allowed were not allowed for the reason they were too much of the country 'over the water', with it no matter that some of those names hadn't originated in that country but instead had been appropriated and put to use by the people of that land. The banned names were understood to have become infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict, enjoinders and resisted impositions as laid down long ago in this country by that country, with the original nationality of the name now not in the running at all. The banned names were: Nigel, Jason, Jasper, Lance, Percival, Wilbur, Wilfred, Peregrine, Norman, Alf, Reginald, Cedric, Ernest, George, Harvey, Arnold, Wilberine, Tristram, Clive, Eustace, Auberon, Felix, Peverill, Winston, Godfrey, Hector, with Hubert, a cousin of Hector, also not allowed. Nor was Lambert or Lawrence or Howard or the other Laurence or Lionel or Randolph because Randolph was like Cyril which was like Lamont which was like Meredith, Harold, Algernon and Beverley. Myles too, was not allowed. Nor was Evelyn, or Ivor, or Mortimer, or Keith, or Rodney or Roger or Earl of Rupert or Willard or Simon or Sir Mary or Zebedee or Quentin, though maybe now Quentin owing to the filmmaker making good in America that time. Or Albert. Or Troy. Or Barclay. Or Eric. Or Marcus. Or Sefton. Or Marmaduke. Or Greville. Or Edgar because all those names were not

allowed. Clifford was another name not allowed. Lesley wasn't either. Peverill was banned twice. (23)

This list is clearly comically long, rendered more so by the interjections of spurious reasoning—'Randolph was like Cyril which was like Meredith'—and of tautologous reasoning—'Or Edgar because all those names were not allowed'—and by the ostinato beat of 'Or' towards the end as Middle Sister draws seemingly to a close but finds herself thinking, repeatedly, of one more name to add to the list. This is not an attempt to persuade the reader that there was, in real and actual fact, a ban upon certain Anglophone names in the Catholic communities of 1970s Belfast, in which 'Peverill' was somehow 'banned twice'. Rather, it is the device of an arch (but, once again, wholly diegetic) narrator who wishes to hold up to scrutiny the tendency of this community to distrust anything which might be considered to have an Anglophone timbre, or anything which an individual might worry that his or her fellow individuals would consider to have an Anglophone timbre even if the individual in question is unaware of any specific English or Protestant affiliation associated with that particular name; hence Middle Sister's careful explanation, at the beginning of the extract, that etymology is not a relevant consideration in the matter of which names are 'infused with the energy' of 'the country "over the water"'. What Middle Sister does, here and elsewhere, is to relate conversations *as though* verbatim, with wide-eyed sincerity, which clearly *cannot* be verbatim due to their absurd or awkward linguistic formulations, demanding that her reader consider the absurdity of *what it would sound like if her community's unspoken prejudices were to be spoken*.

Further examples of this abound. Republicans and Unionists, for example, are never named as such either. Rather, the awkward formulations 'renouncers of the state' (7, and passim) and 'defenders of the state' (22, and passim) are deployed. The 'shock of the new' of this formulation disrupts whatever (probably reductive, and potentially inaccurate) assumptions one might have about Republicanism and Unionism—that they are ciphers for Catholicism and Protestantism, for example, and/or that they are predetermined to be violently at odds—and instead brings into scrutiny the actual locus of sectarian disagreement; the defence or renunciation of the British state apparatus.

A precedent which might be considered relevant here is Bernard Mac Laverty's 1994 short story 'Walking the Dog', in which a man and his dog are captured by paramilitaries in a car; however as the paramilitaries are unsure of the narrator's religion—he professes to be secular, his name, John Shields, is not identifiably Catholic or Protestant, and he confounds their attempt to identify him through cultural shibboleths such as his pronunciation of the letter 'H'—they cannot punish him. Finally, believing his assailants to be *IRA* paramilitaries, John decides to take a stand against them and tells the kidnappers bravely that "I hate the Provos. I hate everything you stand for" (10). Although John's 'hate' for Provos (the Provisional IRA) could be entirely a reaction to his belief that his assailants are of this identity, or could indeed be equalled by his feelings for Unionist paramilitaries, his brave statement is taken by the kidnappers as support for Unionism: in the story's twist ending, it turns out the kidnappers are Unionists themselves, their apparent Republicanism having been no more than a front. They therefore decide that John is "Another one of our persuasion" (10) and bundle John and his dog out of the car. The story ends with the 'clinking of the dog's identity disk' (12): the suggestion being that sectarian violence is dependent on the aggressors (on whichever side) being able to read the linguistic 'identity disks' worn by their enemies. *Milkman* similarly suggests, not that there is a political vacuum behind either Republicanism or Unionism (in fact the spelling-out of 'renouncers' and 'defenders' makes these political allegiances' underlying commitments explicitly clear), but that these underlying politics are enacted in a cultural battlefield which depends upon a shadow semiotics of naming; without knowing which name—be that 'Unionist' or 'Nigel'—marks a citizen out as 'over the water', Middle Sister's Republican community are left without an object for their animus, just as John's kidnappers must construct elaborate shibboleths to extract his political signifiers once the sheer banality of 'John Shields' has undermined naming's role as a sectarian signifier.

However there is also an explicit diegetic reason given for unnamings within *Milkman*, which *does* relate to personal psychological trauma. Middle Sister's father, on his deathbed, abruptly reveals to her that "I was raped many times as a boy" (55):

'Yes,' he said, 'Many times. Many, many times he did me—me, a boy, and him, in his suit and hat, opening his buttons, pulling me back to him, in that back shed, that black

shed, over and over and giving me pennies after.’ Da closed his eyes and shuddered [...] (55)

There follows a description of his tendency to forget his children’s names. Da is described as someone who ‘always had been in a state of distraction’, a state which can now clearly be linked to the trauma of his childhood sexual abuse, the fear of its recurring and his inability to express it to even his close family (55). As a result of this distraction:

As for the names of us offspring, never could he remember them, not without running through a chronological list in his head [...] Even that, though, became too much and so, after a bit, he dropped the mental catalogue, opting instead for ‘son’ or ‘daughter’ which was easier. And he was right. It was easier which was how the rest of us came to substitute ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ and so on ourselves. (55)

The reader now has a diegetic reason for the unnamings of Middle Sister’s siblings, which relates back to horrific personal sexual trauma much like the damaged consciousness of McBride’s Girl (whose final words, of course, are ‘My name is gone’ (203). However this does not perfectly or adequately explain *all* instances of unnamings in the novel, nor does it *contradict* the faux-naïf strategy of unnamings in order to highlight the political role of naming in the communal consciousness of Middle Sister’s community. Unnaming is both a sincere expression of Middle Sister’s character, inherited from her father’s historical trauma, and a self-aware expression of her close-minded community’s parochialism and paranoia, inherited from the *communal* paranoia of sectarian conflict.

This modulation between Middle Sister’s damaged stream of consciousness as a deliberate and self-aware strategy and as a sincere expression of her own damage—as Miller puts it, her ‘failures of will and memory that echo the self-defeating political excesses of her neighbors’ (Miller)—is again well illustrated in an episode where Middle Sister attends an evening French language class. The class is run by a teacher who, to its participants’ horror, refuses to acknowledge the deliberately blinkered worldview which the inhabitants of 1970s Belfast must adhere to (and thus perpetuate) in order to avoid troubling their social order. The class participants are by no means all from Middle Sister’s community: in fact, Middle Sister apart, they are a mix of Hibernophone Siobhans and Patricks with Anglophone Nigels, Jasons and Rupert of Earls (79). This list of names is not intended to give these characters’ ‘actual’ names (again, absurdity beyond credulity is

used to make this point clear: ‘Rupert of Earl’ here serves as ‘Peverill was banned twice’ did in the previous quotation) but to exemplify the types of names they might have: in this instance to signify that Middle Sister’s classmates come from more middle- and upper-class Belfast communities in which cross-denominational socialising is less taboo than in Middle Sister’s own (79). Nonetheless, they are insufficiently cosmopolitan for their free-thinking French teacher, who demands not that they rote-learn French vocabulary, but that they look at the sky and find in it colours other than the quotidian blue (71). The Faber edition of *Milkman*, as analysed above for its choices of front-cover quotation and back-cover blurb, refers pointedly to this scene by featuring a vivid pink, purple, red and yellow sunset.

Middle Sister and her fellow pupils are deeply resistant to finding colours other than blue in the sky. “‘*Le ciel est bleu!*’”, they chant. “‘What colour else can it be?’” (70). Burns quickly makes clear that this is not a parable about the pupils’ ignorance, but about their adherence to social convention:

Of course we knew really that the sky could be more than blue [...] but why should any of us admit to that? I myself have never admitted it. [...] It was the convention not to admit it, not to accept detail for this type of detail would mean choice and choice would mean responsibility and what if we failed in our responsibility? (70)

“‘My poor deprived class!’” cries the teacher, begging the communal consciousness to choose objective inputs over their socially damaged perceptual capacity which will not allow them to admit of unfamiliar truths. But she only incites resentment; and this time Middle Sister is not aloof from her community’s foibles, but entrenched among them. She too is resentful: ‘How come she was doing all this antagonising?’ Middle Sister thinks of the teacher: ‘this presenting of an anti-culture to our culture’ (72). We might return here to thinking of Williams’ hierarchy of dominant and emergent cultures: the dominant culture of Middle Sister’s community is close-mindedness, as represented by the childish insistence that ‘the sky is blue’. Seeing other colours in the sky is oppositional to this dominance, and cannot be incorporated without damaging the controlling interests—community conformity—of that dominant. And so Middle Sister stands among her peers as a co-representative of their damaged communal consciousness. The scene is interrupted by memories of a trip ‘to see the sunset’ with her maybe-boyfriend a week previously; maybe-boyfriend, we learn, shared the French teacher’s abilities to see more

colours than blue in the sky, but this is so incomprehensible to Middle Sister that she calls maybe-boyfriend's masculinity into question. Middle Sister does not understand sunsets, and feels that 'it was entirely in order that I should not understand these things' (75). Maybe-boyfriend, however, *does* understand sunsets, and this makes Middle Sister 'feel worried that maybe-boyfriend in some male way was refusing to fit in. Again this confused me for was I saying then, that I *was* ashamed of him?' (76). While maybe-boyfriend is in this instance sufficiently non-conformist to indulge in the 'beyond the pale' activity of enjoying a sunset, the formerly archly sceptical Middle Sister is unwittingly enmeshed in her community's groupthink—to the extent where she performs a gatekeeping role for that groupthink by feeling 'ashamed' of maybe-boyfriend's non-conformity, even though she herself, in more self-aware moments, resents the pressure to conform.

In this instance, however, Middle Sister is eventually able to change her view. Back in the French class, the memories of watching the (to her) pointless sunset with maybe-boyfriend blurs with her present experience and:

something out there—or something in me—then changed. It fell into place because now, instead of blue, blue and more blue—the official blue everyone understood and thought was up there—the truth hit my senses. It became clear as I gazed that there was no blue out there at all. For the first time I saw colours, just as a week later in this French class also was I seeing colours (76-77)

The moment of epiphany has occurred; Middle Sister is seeing the sunset. But this does not mean that she *wants* to. The 'subversiveness of a sunset' induces 'panic' in Middle Sister and her classmates, but drawing on her earlier experience of the sunset with maybe-boyfriend, she dismisses the 'urge to panic' (77). By 'keeping still, by not letting it overwhelm me', she finds that she can incorporate the 'shock of the sky' into her psychological state and 'get respite from what might have been, after all, a non-conforming, unfamiliar, restful consciousness' (77). This is a live description of the process by which the oppositional emergent is incorporated by the dominant culture — even as it interrogates it.

It is important for Burns' project that the non-conforming consciousness, which Middle Sister is able to subsume, is *restful*. One might expect non-conformity to be *restive* or *restless*, in contrast to the comfort of complacency. But in the 1970s working-class

Catholic Belfast of Burns' novel, conformity is bound up with the urge to anxiety, to paranoia. When the aesthetic exercise of understanding the colours of a sunset begins to soothe her, she is compelled to seek respite from the rest; to subsume healing with perpetual, socially mandated psychological damage. Her French class, this moment of restful consciousness now banished, continues denying aesthetic reality: the teacher invites them to appreciate the 'fugacious' and 'crepuscular' appearance of the trees on the street. Her pupils, 'still in their own struggle', complain that 'our town didn't have fugacity, crepuscles or street trees [...] okay, maybe we did have street trees but they must have been put in half an hour earlier as nobody here had noticed them before' (78). As with the list of Anglophone names, or the phrase 'renouncers of the state', this is clearly not to be taken as Realism or Psychological Realism. Middle Sister is not reporting on a naturalistic 1970s Belfast, but on a subjectivised interpretation of one. She is reporting what people *mean* (that their town has no surprising aesthetic counter-currents; it simply is as they have always been told that it is) but relating is *as though* recounting what these people *say*. Furthermore, she does not explain that this is what she is doing, and as demonstrated there is considerable inconsistency regarding to what extent Middle Sister herself can exert a critical distance from her fellow-pupils. So the reader must interpret *that* the narrative voice is interpreting, and must also assess *that* interpretation for ideological complicity with its subjects. The battlefield is hermeneutics and its ground is churned and muddy.

Shortly after the French classroom incident, Burns restores Middle Sister to her *faux-naif* narrative position, and from this position of restored critical distance Middle Sister offers a rare pointed summary on the causes of these communitarian displays of psychological damage, and the concomitant resistance to healing that damage at the level of the individual psyche:

Take a whole group of individuals who weren't shiny, maybe a whole community, a whole nation, or maybe just a statelet immersed long-term on the physical and energetic planes in the dark mental energies; conditioned too, through years of personal and communal suffering, personal and communal history, to be overladen with heaviness and grief and fear and anger—well, these people could not, not at the drop of a hat, be open to any bright shining button of a person stepping into their environment and shining upon them just like that [...] normality here was this constant, unacknowledged struggle to see. [...] this [...] had to do with the political problems, with the hurts that had come, the troubles

that had built [...] a mental incapacitation over which nobody seemed willing or able to prevail. (89-90)

The word 'troubles' is notable here. So, too, is the word 'statelet'. This is a very specific political diagnosis of sectarian Northern Ireland, and it is to the ends of understanding sectarian Northern Ireland that Anna Burns has deployed such a stunning, irreducibly nuanced poetics of twenty-first century Modernist prose techniques.

## 6: Difficult Difficult Lemon Difficult

The above analyses present two forms of Celtic Phoenix literature; *Normal People* which is extensive of Celtic Tiger Realism—with a shared root in nineteenth-century textual aesthetics—and *Milkman* which is extensive of post-crash Modernism. One reason to believe that it may be Rooneyesque Realism which carries the day as the newly dominant mode in Phoenix writing is the noticeable trend for *Milkman* to be categorised as ‘difficult’, even in the face of its commercial success. This implies an attempt, at least, to categorise all Modernist prose as inaccessible and thus elitist, following a long-established argument made most famously by John Carey in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (2002); Carey writes that the ‘purpose of modernist writing [...] was to exclude these newly-educated (or ‘semi-educated’) readers, and so to preserve the intellectual’s seclusion from the ‘mass’ (‘Preface’, np). However *Milkman* is, as the above quotations will demonstrate, far from hard to read. It is not my argument that Modernism cannot be difficult, or is ‘actually easy’: Joyce’s *Ulysses* or Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914), to take the lowest-hanging examples, are Modernist texts which are clearly less digestible to most readers than a standard Realist novel or lyrical poem. Among post-crash Irish Modernism, McBride is probably the most ‘difficult’ writer for her jagged, inhospitable prose style, although *Girl* will not present a reader with the same degree of difficulty in grasping its order of events as a *Ulysses*, never mind a *Finnegans Wake* (1939). *Milkman*, however, does not have this in common with *Girl*. It is chatty, humorous, sly and absorbing. It takes—and this is inevitably a somewhat subjective judgement—a little longer to get into than *Conversations with Friends* or *Normal People* which are gossipy, fast-paced novels, but once a reader has a grasp of Middle Sister’s idiom they will turn Burns’ pages just about as rapidly as Colm Tóibín’s or John Banville’s. Nevertheless, many critics treat stream of consciousness, and therefore *Milkman*, as innately arduous to read. Dwight Garner writes that ‘*Milkman* requires so much effort for so modest a result’, and James Marriott in *The Times* that:

*Milkman* is a difficult book — mainly because of its wilfully inelegant prose style. Prepare for repetition, circumlocution and paragraphs stretching over pages (plus the fact that none of the characters has a name). (Marriott)

Marriott then quotes a brief extract and retorts that ‘This could all have been said much more snappily’ (Marriott). This is the extent of his analysis: no consideration is given to the tone, theme, undercurrents or implications of his chosen quotation, which leads one to consider why *this* quotation has been selected at all. The quotation is:

‘Here seemed a sensitive, painful, microscopic depiction of ma’s view of the growth of her behind, with nothing brash or crude or dumbed-down or of popular culture in the description either. My response therefore, should be comparable to her own words, should be of like tone and weight in order to acknowledge and to respect her older status, even her originality in delineating the depth of her rear condition in relation to the chair she was speaking of.’ (qtd. In Marriott)

The most likely reason to focus on *this* extract, given Marriott’s complete inattention to its specific details in his subsequent dismissal, is because it concerns Middle Sister’s mother’s buttocks, allowing Marriott to introduce it as ‘Try this (the protagonist’s mother is worrying about the size of her backside):’. This is a censorious judgement by stealth: whilst Marriott purportedly condemns *Milkman* simply for its lack of ‘snappiness’, he slips the contextualising parentheses concerning the mother’s ‘backside’ into his article as a signal to the *Times* reader that this book might also be bodily; vulgar; wanting in prudish social values. His subsequent argument confirms the snobbishness latent in his critique: in lamenting that novels such as *Milkman* disrupt the novel’s supposedly ‘democratic’ heritage as ‘joyful, life-changing entertainments’ (a historically illiterate assessment in itself, of course, which diminishes works of fiction such as, say, *Crime and Punishment* and *The Handmaid’s Tale* to the status of a waterslide in a theme park), Marriott is actually decrying the presence of barbarians at the gates:

Nowadays, the phrase ‘literary fiction’ doesn’t mean ‘good fiction’ — it means fiction that adheres to a set of stylistic conventions designed to reassure culturally aspirational middle-class readers that they’re participating in an accepted social ritual. (Marriott)

As one might expect from the sentence-opening ‘nowadays’ (never a good sign) and the unexamined premise that “‘good fiction’” was objectively identifiable by a pre-nowadays readership, this is an act of elitist cultural gatekeeping. The words ‘middle-class’ are deployed to give the impression that Marriott is defending demotic principles of

accessibility, but it is the preceding two words which betray his true motivations: 'culturally aspirational'. We must guard against those who *aspire* to culture, lest they should come to own it, create it, and participate in it. Marriott is not afraid that *Milkman* is robbing literature of its entertainment value or snappiness, he is worried that people will read *Milkman*, and novels like it, and enjoy them.

Carey is a far more considered thinker than Marriott, and his analysis of literary snobbery in High Modernism has considerable merits, but Carey's argument, that 'The intellectuals could not, of course, actually prevent the masses from attaining literacy. But they could prevent them reading literature by making it too difficult for them to understand – and this is what they did' (16), is likewise at risk of performing the exact class-warfare gatekeeping function which it purports to decry, by asserting that the 'masses' have an inherently lower capacity for 'difficulty' than the 'intellectuals', and furthermore that non-Realist literature is *a priori* difficult. A far more egalitarian assessment of artistic 'difficulty' and social class comes, unsurprisingly, from Bertolt Brecht, who asserts that

[...] means must be questioned about the ends they serve. The people understand this. Piscator's great theatrical experiments in which conventional forms were constantly destroyed, found their greatest support in the most advanced cadres of the working class; so have my own. The workers judged everything according to the truth of its content; They welcomed every innovation which helped the representation of truth, of the real mechanism of society; they rejected everything that seemed theatrical, technical equipment that nearly worked for its own sake—That is to say, that did not yet fulfil, or no longer fulfilled, its purpose. (83)

Shortly after Marriott's article appeared, Sam Leith in *The Guardian* published a defence of 'difficulty' which, while defending 'difficult books' rather than condemning them, shares the premise that *Milkman* is a 'difficult' novel.<sup>39</sup> What is more interesting than any of the worthy but familiar tenets of Leith's argument in this regard is the unavoidable

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<sup>39</sup> Both Leith and Marriott begin their articles with a quotation from the Man Booker judge Kwame Anthony Appiah. Appiah states that "'I spend my time reading articles in the Journal of Philosophy, so by my standards [*Milkman*] is not too hard'" (Leith, Marriott), an entirely unhelpful piece of braggadocio which should perhaps have been left to warm Appiah's ego in the confines of his own skull

caveat which comes close to the end of his article 'it's notable that many of those who have enjoyed *Milkman* commend it not for being solemn or profound but for being funny'. Once again it is Laura Miller whose assessment of *Milkman* pays the closest attention to what it is actually like to read *Milkman*: as noted above, she found *Milkman* to have 'a rough semblance to stream of consciousness but [it] is much easier to follow' (Miller).

This furore about difficulty may be a death spasm of cultural gatekeeping against Modernism, a final convulsion of Realist normativity before the welcome trend towards an interrogative Irish literature continues. But it may also be the vanguard of a reassertion of pre-*Girl*, pre-Goldsmiths Prize, pre-crash critical politics, whereby the now-residual Realist ethos of the Celtic Tiger will be reasserted by texts such as *Normal People*. But if this is the case, *Milkman*'s success and acclaim at least suggests that a live counter-current of Irish Modernist writing is well-placed to continue, even if the suggestion that it was ever a cultural dominant may come in time to look like an ephemeral false dawn which flickered only briefly between the years 2013 and 2016. If we take this (to me) both more pessimistic and more likely view, that it is Rooneyesque Realism which is truly expressive of the cultural logic of the Celtic Phoenix neoliberal revival, then *Milkman*'s success *despite* this trend may be because of its Northern-ness, despite its association with Republic of Ireland post-crash Modernism. Writers, critics and readers in the Republic of Ireland are understandably keen to put the recession behind them, and a writer such as Rooney may be associated with the social liberalism which has resulted in hugely heartening referendum victories for gay marriage (2015) and increased reproductive rights for women (2018), a more positive set of national mood-markers than a continued grapple with the capitalistic excess which led to the crash. Burns' across-the-border Modernism, its proximity to Irishness but also its distance from the Republic-of-Irish economic context<sup>40</sup>, operates at a distance from the Republic's 'Phoenix' upsurge in

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<sup>40</sup> Which is not to claim that the North was unaffected by what was, after all, a global financial crisis: for example the Titanic Quarter regeneration project in Belfast, touted as 'Europe's biggest riverside regeneration project' (McDonald), stalled in 2008 after the crisis and not restarted until 2013 (Smith). However in terms of perception, national mood and the specific relations of Realism and Modernism in the Irish context, a Northern Irish text clearly has a greater distance from the narrative of the Celtic Tiger (and hence Phoenix) than one 'from' south of the border.

national optimism, while texts such as *Solar Bones* and *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing—Girl* in particular—may now look a bit like unwelcome old hat for Irish readers who once again regard the Bad Old Gloomy days as having been irreversibly laid with O’Leary in the grave.

## 7: Coda to the Coda: Speculation

It may of course be that the post-crash Modernist moment *has* expired—with *Milkman* more an exception than a rule—but that this does not necessarily mean unchallenged dominance for Realism. There are texts and traditions which reject Realist normativity and its claims to unmediated access to social truth, without being Modernist. Most notably, there is genre fiction. While much crime, fantasy and horror fiction (etc) may be seen as participating in the same cultural ethos as mainstream Realism, as with the romance writing of Cecilia Ahern during the Celtic Tiger boom years, there is also a strong tradition of dissent, defamiliarization and interrogative textual politics in these genres, perhaps particularly in the ‘speculative’ genres of fantasy, horror and science-fiction (outside of the Irish context, ‘new weird fiction’ such as Jeff VanderMeer’s ‘Southern Reach’ trilogy (2014), China Miéville’s *This Census-Taker* (2016) and Martin Maclnnes’ *Infinite Ground* (2016) are among the most genuinely interrogative texts of the 2010s; ‘new weird’, simply put, is a blending of fantasy, science fiction and the cosmic horror (although not the racist paranoia) of H. P. Lovecraft).

And so it may be to these territories, away from the Realist-vs-Modernist frontlines with which this thesis has concerned itself, that we look for the next wave of emergent alternative and hopefully oppositional Irish fiction. The merits of Mike McCormack’s *Notes from a Coma* have already been discussed in chapter 2: more recently, Julian Gough’s Nevada-set techno-thriller *Connect* (2018) and Kevin Barry’s west of Ireland gangland noir *City of Bohane* (2013) were both fairly blunt in their impact, but they may nonetheless be twitches of the barometer, indicating that more interesting work in a ‘genre’ mode may be coming. There are, after all, other ways than Joycean prose or stream-of-consciousness subjectivism to realise Susan Stanford Friedman’s definition of Modernism as ‘the creative and expressive domain within’ modernity (2006, 432), or Marshall Berman’s definition of Modernism as ‘visions and ideas that aim to make men and women the subjects as well as the objects of modernization’ (16). Barry’s third novel, *Night Boat to Tangier*, is a crime novel in topic—it deals with the lives and memories of two ageing Irish drug-runners—but in its intensely lyrical prose style is neither Modernist

nor Realist, but an interesting televisual, intensely stylised Romanticism. And new Irish work is also appearing in the speculative modes, particularly in visions of a far-future Ireland: *The Earlie King and the Kid in Yellow*, the debut novel from Cork author Danny Denton, is set in 'a fallen Ireland' (Denton, np) which is 'maybe trying to rebirth itself' after centuries of rain (Denton, 5). *The Earlie King* has been noted both for its adjacency to Modernism—its subtitle 'fragments shored against the ruins' is 'The first of many [T. S.] Eliot references' (Gilmartin)—and for its 'bardic lore' and 'epic quest' (Smart), terms clearly plucked from the vocabulary of fantasy fiction. Another debut novel comes from Tramp Press co-founder Sarah Davis-Goff, previously discussed in this thesis for her role in the publication of Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* and her identification of post-crash Irish Modernism as 'The Movement'. Her debut, *Last ones Left Alive*, is also a novel of dystopian future: in this case a zombie-ravaged Ireland in which the survivors of the apocalypse seek refuge in a promised land called—and what else could it ever be?—Phoenix City.

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<sup>42</sup> This blog post, as of April 2019, has been removed from Gough's website as part of a redevelopment to promote his 2018 novel *Connect*. The original text can still be found using the 'Wayback Machine' function of the Internet Archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20110203113418/https://www.juliangough.com/journal/2010/2/10/the-state-of-irish-literature-2010.html>

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<sup>43</sup> I am grateful to Paul Howard and to Faith O'Grady of the Lisa Richards Agency for providing me with a copy of this script.

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