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# Displacing the Nation: Performance, Style and Sex in Eimear McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians*

Gerry Smyth

Liverpool John Moores University (<G.A.Smyth@ljmu.ac.uk>)

## *Abstract:*

Eimear McBride's second novel revisits many of the stylistic practices and conceptual themes which made *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* such an important intervention within post-Tiger Irish cultural politics. By setting *The Lesser Bohemians* in London during the 1990s, however, McBride displaces both the temporal and spatial focus on the here (Ireland) and now (post-Crash) which has tended to dominate contemporary Irish fiction. The theatrical milieu within which the main characters operate, moreover, as well as the novel's emphasis on the redemptive power of sex, likewise militate against any attempt to regard it as just another Irish "trauma" narrative. By revealing the extent of Irish/British cultural interpenetration, McBride exposes the bad faith of both austerity economics and political isolationism.

*Keywords:* Eimear McBride, Modernism, Neoliberalism, Performance, Sex

## *1. Introduction*

"Ireland", the journalist Fintan O'Toole once wrote, "is something that often happens elsewhere" (1994, 27); to which I would add that one of the most important places where modern Ireland has "happened" is London. With a population roughly twice the size of the whole island, London looms dauntingly large in the Irish spatial imagination. Besides being the seat of the imperial overmasters, the great metropolis to the east is also a cultural melting pot and an economic powerhouse – *entrepôt* or final destination for generations of emigrants. Irish London, London Irish: the English city

haunts the Irish nation in ways and to an extent that, curiously, it doesn't its own regions. In this sense, London represents the Irish migrant experience writ early and writ large: it's where Paddy comes to a sense of the reality of his separation from the land, where Mary's traditional experience confronts modernity head-on, and where the relationship between ideas of "home" and "not-home" is under constant negotiation. London, in short, is (like Paris and New York, although for different reasons) one of the key co-ordinates of the modern Irish diasporic imagination – a place whose presence (actual or implicit) may be felt in every "Irish" cultural encounter.

Over the years, London has acted as a kind of Irish unconscious – a place where issues too traumatic to confront in "reality" may be (literally) displaced and, once in that "other" place, either rationalised or repressed entirely. Levels of poor mental health amongst the Irish in Britain have always been distressingly high (Leavey 1999); what no researcher has even been able to answer satisfactorily is whether this is a result of the emigrant experience – the trauma of separation from home – or whether it's something that emigrants bring with them. In Ireland, as a seemingly endless series of reports and revelations since the 1990s has revealed, that "something" tends in one disturbing direction: abuse – much of the time, abuse perpetrated upon children.

One high-profile contemporary text in which these discourses coalesce is *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), the second novel by the Irish writer Eimear McBride, which is set in London in 1994/95 and tells the story of a love affair between an eighteen-year-old Irish woman named Eily and an older English actor named Stephen (although we don't learn the characters' names until late into the text). Eily has come from rural Ireland to train as an actress at a well-known drama college; Stephen, twenty years older, is already an established actor of modest standing, who we learn grew up in Sheffield in the 1960s to an Irish mother and an English stepfather. The heavily sexualised relationship is played out against the backdrop of central north London – Camden Town, Regents Park, Primrose Hill – in the months just after the IRA ceasefire of August 1994, a development which precipitated the peace process later in the decade, which in turn contributed to the normalisation of relations between the two islands<sup>1</sup>.

Eily and Stephen, we learn, are deeply damaged individuals; in each case, moreover, the damage relates to abuse they suffered as children. Eily, as narrator, is not particularly forthcoming about the kind or extent of the abuse she experienced aged five at the hands of a family "friend" – only that it was painful and systematic, and has left her an emotionally crippled teenager.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, this "normalisation" is under threat from the political process known as Brexit, a subject about which McBride has written passionately. See her article "Brexit has Disfigured the Britain I've Known" (2016).

Part of the retained pain derives from the suspicion that her mother knew the abuser's reputation, yet still allowed him unmonitored access to her daughter. In a long section in the book's third quarter, Stephen tells (more frankly) of the abuse he suffered at the hands of his Irish mother, and how it too led to lacerating self-hatred which, in his case, eventuated in drug addiction. It was only the love of a homosexual friend, and his fortunate discovery of acting as a technique for processing emotion, that enabled Stephen to learn to cope with the trauma. "Coping" is about all that each character appears to be doing when we first encounter them, however, until their stumbling love affair provides each with a means to move beyond victimhood.

Although not as well regarded as *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), *The Lesser Bohemians* represents a clear development out of and beyond McBride's debut insofar as the common theme of abuse is modulated and mutated with reference to the theme of displacement – the idea that if, as O'Toole suggested, Ireland is something that often happens elsewhere, then such is true also of the trauma consequent upon an Irish childhood. Departure from the land, physical displacement and emotional disinheritance – these are the traditional causes of the emigrant's pain; but pain now has a different name, and it is: abuse. Where there is understanding, however, there can also be redemption; and London, so often the nightmare landscape of the Irish cultural imagination, becomes in McBride's discourse a place where the process of healing may at least be broached.

## 2. *Abusing the Irish child*

After her first term in London, Eily travels home on 9 December 1994. Precisely one week later, the Irish government (a coalition of TDs from the Fianna Fáil and Labour parties) fell as a result of the scandal arising from the case of Father Brendan Smyth. Smyth was a Catholic priest from Belfast who took refuge in the Republic to evade charges of child abuse going back over forty years and encompassing more than 100 victims. It soon became clear that the Catholic Church had colluded deeply and extensively in Smyth's horrific career; and if the affair signalled the commencement in earnest of a process (ongoing) of judicial investigation, it may also be regarded as a decisive step in the precipitous decline of that particular institution's influence in modern Irish life.

We have no way of knowing if Eily "really" encountered the Smyth case when she was back in Ireland over Christmas 1994. McBride makes no reference to it, so in some senses it's irrelevant; in one important sense, however, it remains a crucial question that goes to the heart of modern Irish experience – home and away, on and off the Island. It may be that Eily makes no mention of the Smyth case because she is not (apparently) particularly politicised, and simply too immersed in her relationship with Stephen. Indeed,

her time in Ireland between terms (at Christmas and Easter) is passed over in each case with barely a glance: “So happy home to London” (77) she thinks when she returns to the city in January 1995, in a clear indication that her emotional centre has already relocated<sup>2</sup>. But it’s not only her youth or the distraction of her London love that prevents Eily from engaging with such a high-profile scandal “at home”.

Eily and Stephen each meet the definition of child sexual abuse that was in place for the Irish Child Care Services in 1994: “the involvement of dependent, developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities which they do not truly comprehend, to which they are unable to give informed consent or that violate the social taboos of family roles” (Gilligan 1991, 63). They are also typical insofar as each experiences a variety of “enduring psychological symptoms that reliably occur in reaction to a highly distressing, psychically disruptive event” (Briere 1992, 20). These symptoms include guilt, low self-esteem and self-blame, as well as anxiety, defensiveness and depression; in extreme cases, the subject can also experience hysterical responses tending towards paralysis and mutism. “The ultimate avoidance strategy”, Briere goes on to say, “may be suicide” (1992, 61). We must be free to speculate that Eily doesn’t mention the Smyth case because it’s linked to frightening and deeply painful feelings that she wishes to avoid. In this respect, she’s an emblematic figure in modern Irish life – not only in respect of her spatial displacement from “real” Ireland, but also in respect of her possession of a “voice” whose ability to articulate has been compromised by a traumatic childhood event.

The experiences of Eily and Stephen come into focus in relation to a model of childhood trauma associated with dissident writers such as Jeffrey Masson and Alice Miller. In his book *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory*, Masson claimed that Freud deliberately suppressed the reality of childhood abuse at the hands of adults (on which he published an early paper) under pressure from the patriarchal bourgeoisie that was his principal audience. Successive generations of therapists colluded in this suppression, according to Masson, denying the initial “act of cruelty and violence which wounds the child in every aspect of her being” (1985, 3), and replacing it with a series of improbable ideas relating to spontaneous childhood sexuality and the theory of the drives. At more or less the same time, the Swiss psychologist Alice Miller was researching and publishing a series of studies focused on the seminal impact of childhood abuse in the perpetuation of social violence. Her work culminated in *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware: Society’s Betrayal of the Child* (1981), in which she (like Masson) indicted Freudian-

<sup>2</sup> In his review of the novel Fintan O’Toole wrote: “Eily is at home in London, exiled when she has to go home to Ireland for the holidays” (2016).

ism for what she regarded as its implicit vindication of adult (much of the time, incestuous) abuse of children. “When a patient who has been sexually abused as a child enters analysis”, she writes,

she will be told that it is her fantasies and desires that she is relating, because in reality she dreamed as a child of seducing her own father. Thus, with the aid of the invention of the concept of “infantile sexuality,” which was a figment of Freud’s imagination, the absurd childhood situation is repeated: the patient is dissuaded from recognizing the truth the same way the child was once dissuaded from recognizing her perceptions. (1985, 324)

A complacent establishment institution in pursuit of its own agenda, refusing to countenance an other’s narrative of abuse: such an image cannot fail to resonate in relation to modern Irish history. It resonates also in relation to the experience of the two principal characters in *The Lesser Bohemians*, each of whom stands as the latest link in a chain of abuse emerging from an unknowable past, each of whom must negotiate an array of negative emotions linked to this inheritance. Eily awakens from a distressing dream of her father, and rejects Stephen’s attempt to comfort her:

You must miss him. But that miss is already making chain with the weight of my heart, then the body it hates. Blind in revulsion at what it did. On a floor. In a half-thought. It should spit itself out not to mingle with memory or become what I might. I hate it. I fucking hate it. What? All of myself. Take it easy, he says. All my fucking skin. I’d rip it off if I could. I’d start again. I wouldn’t be this. (112)

In passages such as this we observe Eily struggling on a number of fronts: to confirm, in the face of “normality”, the reality of what has happened to her; to manage the anger generated by this reality; to resist the temptation to accept her designated role as perpetual victim; and, most testing of all, to imagine a different narrative which a new “Eily” can inhabit.

Contemporary Irish cultural criticism has processed the traumatised subject in a variety of ways. In his essay “A Race Bashed in the Face: Imagining Ireland as a Damaged Child” (1999), Richard Haslam traces a strand of Irish cultural-critical discourse emerging from the work of figures such as Patrick Pearse, Roddy Doyle, William Trevor, Sinéad O’Connor, John Waters, Terry Eagleton and Luke Gibbons. The image of Ireland as a traumatised child has its roots in colonial culture, Haslam claims, but was still being invoked as part of a range of discourses (competing and over-lapping) when, during the 1990s, it was overtaken by reality itself in the form of the emerging abuse scandals.

At this point, Haslam deviates into a consideration of style and media – important issues to which I shall return in the next section; in the meantime, the question of Irish “traumaculture” is taken up by Conor Carville with ref-

erence to a strand of contemporary Irish writing focused on “exploring the significance of childhood ordeal in the formation of adult identity” (2011, 24). One characteristic strategy of “pathography” (as this form of writing is sometimes referred to) is to imply a parallel “between personal histories bedevilled by the secrets and violence of childhood and the history of the nation as a whole” (25). Carville contends that such a literary strategy remains problematical because of the deeply compromised model of subjectivity on which it is predicated<sup>3</sup>. The high-profile abuse scandals emerging since the 1990s, he goes on to suggest, have embedded “traumaculture” in Irish literary and cultural studies, with the effect of obscuring or denying alternative temporalities and alternative modes of being.

Carville exposes an Irish critical discourse which is thoroughly infused with patriarchal values, and whose typical gesture is to mitigate an historical act of abuse by the restoration of the coherent (normative) subject in the present. This point resonates in contemporary feminist theory also, where there is a concern with the persistence of traditional gender relations behind the illusion of a contemporary female subject who is apparently free and empowered (McRobbie 2009). From a sociological perspective, Debbie Ging argues that child abuse has been processed in Ireland in ways that cement rather than challenge gender differences, and that feed “a highly lucrative future market of adult men and women who understand themselves as polarised, incompatible and unable to communicate” (2009, 64). And Geraldine Meaney has pointed out that apparently radical reconfigurations of Irish gender politics (such as Joyce’s widely commended depiction of Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*) can actually work to reinstate “a myth of the feminine” in other, less familiar, terms<sup>4</sup>.

Such hesitations overshadow traumaculture, and (to coin a phrase) “traumacriticism” of the kind with which I am concerned here. Both Eily and Stephen are indeed “bedevilled by the secrets and violence of childhood”; and it is indeed possible to infer parallels between their experience and “the history of the nation as a whole”. Which is to say: both Eily and Stephen embody the figure of the abused child theorised by both Masson and Miller as in some senses the absent centre of Freudianism (and its many offshoots and applications). As (part-) Irish subjects, moreover, they come clearly into fo-

<sup>3</sup> Carville cites a number of influential texts as being indicative of the “pathographical” turn in Irish writing, including *Angela’s Ashes* (1996) by Frank McCourt, *Are You Somebody?* (1996) by Nuala O’Faolain, *Reading in the Dark* by Seamus Deane (1996), *Paddy Clarke* by Roddy Doyle (1993), *The Speckled People* (2003) by Hugo Hamilton, *The Bend for Home* (1996) by Dermot Healy, and *The Gathering* (2007) by Anne Enright (2011, 24-25).

<sup>4</sup> It should also be remembered that the abuse scandals unfolded against the backdrop of an economic disaster overseen by an egregious, self-perpetuating political class characterised (in equal measure) by stupidity and complacency.

cus in relation to the image of abuse that featured so powerfully within the national narrative towards the century's end. At the same time, McBride's characters are susceptible also to the hesitations voiced above, insofar as their pursuit of an authentic identity, *beyond* or *after* trauma, might be regarded as locking them into normative subject roles within a conventional narrative underpinned and thoroughly informed by the conjoined ideological twins of neoliberalism and patriarchy.

Several factors in McBride's discourse militate against this indictment, the most significant of which (as pointed out in the introduction) is the text's status as an "Irish" story that is not actually set in Ireland. This spatial displacement extends to the level of style – McBride's so-called return to or rechanneling of modernism, but it is prefigured also in the principal discursive milieu wherein Eily and Stephen operate – theatre and the discourse of acting. There is, moreover, the question of sex – its heightened conceptual significance in relation to the recovering adult, certainly, but also the challenges attending its effective literary representation (and its subsequent critical engagement). The remainder of this essay examines these issues in a little more detail.

### 3. *Irish modernism – the return of the repressed*

Masson and Miller suggest that Freud may have deliberately repressed his own encounter with widespread, systematic child abuse in Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century. If so, his subsequent theorisation of repression as a fundamental psychological mechanism represents a classic instance of displacement, whereby the original experience is retained but relocated to a different discourse – in this instance, the pseudo-scientific discourse of psychoanalysis. "Repression" enters the general cultural-critical lexicon as a means for thinking about the ways in which the subject operates with regard to their own past – what they choose to remember and refashion for their own ends, and what, because of association with a raft of negative emotions such as pain, guilt and shame, they cannot openly countenance. Freud himself was happy to shift analytical gear from the individual to the social in relation to repression; and sometimes it can be useful to think about what different societies choose to remember and, perhaps more tellingly, what they choose to forget.

One of the most intriguing developments in recent Irish cultural criticism has been the proposition that contemporary Irish fiction has reconnected with the spirit of modernism from a century ago. In an *Irish Independent* review of *The Lesser Bohemians*, the critic J.P. O'Malley claimed that the author "revives Irish modernism":

McBride is a daring writer who is not afraid to mess with language, displaying its malleability, randomness and irregular rhythms in equal measure. Words and



phrases often go back to front and scenes are pieced together almost like an impressionist painting through fragments, hazy images and a blur of uncertainty [...] McBride has a rare gift as a writer: she combines high modernism, page-turning plot and melodrama into a narrative that will appeal to mainstream audiences and fans of literary *avant garde*. (2016)

There's a similar assessment in a *New Statesman* review entitled "Bedad he Revives: Why *Solar Bones* is a Resurrection for Irish Modernism" (2016), in which Stephanie Boland offers this assessment of the tradition within which writers like McBride and Mike McCormack are working:

It has become something of a truism recently to note the resurgence of the experimental Irish novel. Not without justification: if Ireland's twentieth-century literary output is often feted as one which inaugurated a new strain of literary modernism, of which James Joyce's *Ulysses* is the most cited example, closely followed by Samuel Beckett and, increasingly, Flann O'Brien, then recent novels like Eimear McBride's acclaimed *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, markedly influenced by her reading of Joyce, have been widely seen as marking a return to (radical) form [...] McCormack's writing is the latest in a growing canon of literature which draws self-consciously on an Irish modernist heritage to tackle contemporary concerns.

The terms within which such a "revival" has been invoked are far from straightforward, as we shall presently observe. Nevertheless, it's interesting to consider what a reheated modernism might portend for an understanding of post-crash Irish culture; especially intriguing from my perspective here is McBride's designated role as in some senses the spearhead of twenty-first-century Irish modernism.

The inference of a modernist aesthetic abroad within contemporary Irish literary discourse is problematic, but not entirely unwarranted in McBride's case. Insofar as her moral, emotional and artistic centre appears to be dispersed between Ireland and Britain, McBride instantiates the "displacement" that is one of the hallmarks of modernists such as Joyce and Beckett for whom Ireland came to exist primarily as a memory increasingly distant in time and space<sup>5</sup>. Her insistence on the centrality of sex to human experience likewise implicates her in a modernist discourse which was itself in revolt against bourgeois denial (in the Irish case, Catholic demonization) of the body. And there is of course the key issue of style: McBride's celebrated attempt to deploy language in the service of "real" experience – or at least the "real" experiences of two first-person narrators who are young, female, Irish and profoundly damaged.

<sup>5</sup> The Joycean influence was explored further in McBride's version of "Ivy Day at the Committee Room", her contribution to a book entitled *Dubliners 100: Fifteen New Stories Inspired by the Original* (2014, 153-164), edited by Thomas Morris.

Eily's appears initially to be somewhat less traumatised than the unnamed narrator of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, something reflected by the language in which she relates her story. Nevertheless, the readerly contract is similar in each case:

I move. Cars move. Stock, it bends light. City opening itself behind. Here's to be for its life is the bite and would be start of mine. (3)

From the outset, we are intended to be "in" the narrator's mind, seeing as they see, thinking as they think. Grammar, syntax, punctuation and (present) tense still apparently exist, but they do so within a discourse that also features an array of linguistic effects intended to replicate or in some senses encapsulate the personality of the narrator – effects (as described by O'Malley) such as malleability, randomness, irregularity, fragmentation, haziness, and uncertainty. Such, it might be argued, represents an appropriate discourse for these half- or part-formed narrators – characters who barely manage to maintain an outer appearance of (grammatical) control while struggling with the internalised demons of residual trauma.

If there is a sense (associated with critics such as Luke Gibbons and David Lloyd) in which twentieth-century Irish modernism is prefigured in the colonialist culture of the nineteenth century, then it may also be the case that the kinds of discursive displacement associated with high modernism extend easily to the depiction of contemporary characters whose sense of self is in constant danger of dissolution. In each case, moreover, the experience of trauma lies at the root of all: the trauma of the mid-nineteenth-century Great Famine, on the one hand, and the trauma of the late twentieth-century abuse scandals, on the other.

This being so, it is interesting that McBride decided to render Stephen's confession, extended over nearly seventy pages (148-217), in a much more straightforward, much less "modernist", style. There are still no "perverted commas", few reporting clauses, and still some stylistic markers (such as extra spaces between words) by means of which the author attempts to recreate the rhythms of "real" conversation. By and large, however, Stephen narrates the story of his abuse at the hands of his mother, and the emotional and sexual dysfunction to which it led, clearly and accessibly. Eily's interjections during this section, likewise, become less fragmented and more coherent, as if influenced by or responding to Stephen's more controlled discourse:

We all shared a room and got on fairly well but we had to stick together back then.

When I ask What was she like? he gives a weird smile.

Intelligent and very angry. (149)

Why is Stephen's narrative less disjointed than Eily's? Is it because he's a man? This is unlikely, given the author's sensitivity towards gender politics, particularly in relation to matters of voice and style. My impression, rather, is that it's because he's not the principal focaliser, and that Stephen's discourse represents in this regard a technical problem which McBride struggles to overcome. In fact, the narrative structure gets extremely complicated towards the end of the text; and in order to expedite the plot, the author is obliged to abandon temporarily the style of "modernist" discourse associated with her main character. Consider the following sentence, for example:

She said While I was watching him I realised I didn't love his father any more and that he was a fool for not caring about his son. (286)

Here, in conversation with Eily in the present (London, 1995), Stephen is quoting his ex-girlfriend Marianne, who is quoting Stephen's stepfather, who in turn quotes Stephen's mother ("She", then "I"); behind her, moreover, there's the echo of still another voice – Stephen's father, at some unspecified time in the past, saying or doing something which communicated the impression that he did "not [care] about his son".

Such passages expose McBride's deployment of "modernist" style to a charge of mannerism. Joyce deploys stream of consciousness as one amongst many styles; and he does so not merely to foreground "style" as the means whereby linguistic communication occurs, but in order to signal it as the embodiment, the very principle, of both subjective and national experience. McBride, however, seems to associate stream of consciousness with Eily as a direct function of her traumatised state. It is *her* essential style; it *belongs* to her in a way that it does not *belong* to Stephen Dedalus – being merely the sympathetic style that Joyce has chosen in order to convey aspects of Stephen's brittle personality. Joyce's modernism, in other words, represents a life-long meditation on style as the conduit between experience and expression; McBride has opted for a style "appropriate" to her main character, and that style prevails so long as Eily remains (so to speak) centre stage. This is a love story, however, and love demands another, an *other*, with whom the speaking voice will perforce engage and, at some point, identify. The question then becomes: what is to be the other's style? How is *their* voice to be articulated, *their* identity to be expressed, *their* story to be told? That is the technical challenge which McBride confronts (and struggles to overcome) in *The Lesser Bohemians*.

#### 4. Neoliberalism and the continuous present

This critique extends to the subject of narrative tense which, as we saw in relation to the earlier quotations, is in the present throughout *The Lesser*

*Bohemians*. Mary McGlynn has suggested that the widespread use of the present tense in contemporary Irish fiction represents a stylistic trace “of the neoliberal moment” (2017, 35) – that is to say: besides its traditional function (which writers have long exploited) of creating an impression of immediacy and urgency, the consistent use of the present tense in post-Tiger Irish fiction reflects a paradoxical perspective simultaneously opposed to, and underpinned by, neoliberal discourse. The latter is characterised by an array of practices and attitudes that have their political origins, as Sean Phelan writes,

in the transformation of the global political economy that has taken place since the 1970s and its (immediate) theoretical origins in the influence of seminal thinkers like Hayek and Friedman. (2009, 75-76)

As a political/economic system, neoliberalism is predicated upon the twin pillars of competitive self-interest and extreme individualism; as a highly flexible ideological effect it penetrates all areas of society from education to mental health, from high politics to popular music. Although born of the political and economic fallout from the Second World War, neoliberalism appears to have found its optimum moment in the opening decades of the new millennium with the advent of smart technology, the internet and the phenomenon of social media. Despite its name, it also represents a fundamental assault upon traditional liberal values – in particular, the latter’s faith in a continuity of interest between the individual subject, the community and the democratic process. And nowhere has its influence been felt more profoundly than in Ireland where, consequent upon the crash of 2008, a fundamental change in the cultural landscape was precipitated by the political class’s insistence on the need to re-orient the relationship between state, multinational industry and the individual.

McBride’s work seems in some respects an obvious product of that process of change. *The Lesser Bohemians* is clearly not *about* post-Tiger Ireland in the way that novels such as *Solar Bones* or *The Spinning Heart* or *The Green Road* clearly are; that in itself doesn’t mean that it *is not* or *cannot* be informed by the version of neoliberalism to have emerged in early twenty-first-century Ireland, however. The relocation of “Irish” cultural activity to London is one clear indication of this – in particular, the radical assault presented by neoliberal aesthetics to established spatial discourses along a continuum from small and local (the house, for example), to large and international (the renegotiation of the categories of “Irish” and “non-Irish” in geo-cultural terms).

It is also represented by McBride’s deployment of the present tense in the two novels that she has published thus far (albeit in different ways and for different ends). As observed above, in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* the use of the continuous present tense and a highly disjointed narrative style seem

intended to *represent* or *express* the narrator's damaged personality. The past and the future are temporalities of fear; they implicate the narrator in a discourse of memory and anticipation where pain resides. The only way to evade that pain is to occupy the continuous present as fully as possible. Because of the physical abuse to which the narrator was subjected at such a young age, moreover, her own body becomes the preferred site of that occupation; the pattern of loveless sexual activity in the present derives from the violence of that first invasion, while the mortification of her own body distracts the narrator from having to return to the place of pain.

Similar techniques are broached in *The Lesser Bohemians*, although the effect is somewhat different. Eily's emerging personality has also been warped by sexual abuse; she too struggles with guilt, trust and self-esteem, and also has a tendency towards self-destruction. Her experience, likewise, is narrated in a continuous present, as if the reader is overhearing her part-formed thoughts from moment to moment. Whereas the narrator of McBride's debut novel eventually succumbs (through the act of suicide) to the victimhood generated by her sexual abuse, Eily manages to find resources of hope amongst the urban landscape of 1990s London. Whereas the "girl" embraces the continual present represented by death, Eily learns (in time) to live *in* time – a painful past from which she has escaped, and a hopeful future towards which she moves (even if temporarily) with Stephen. This fate (which is in some senses functions as a clear rejoinder to the relentless negativity of the first novel) is facilitated by two conjoined fields or practices, to which I wish to turn in the final section.

### 5. *Performance, sex and style*

As with her creator, Eily comes to London from rural Ireland to train as an actor at the Drama Centre London (in Kings Cross). In an interview McBride described the training she received as "hard core method school", and said that her own approach to writing was influenced by that training, with its emphasis on accessing the "truth" of any character through an extended process of emotional, psychological and sociological research. As we observed above, McBride's neo-modernism has been traced to the work of James Joyce – an influence that is both Irish and novelistic; but Nina White has linked what she describes as "the inherent theatricality of the McBride's writing" (2018, 564) to the influence of the playwright Sarah Kane – an influence which, in terms of its subject matter (trauma), its medium (theatre) and its geopolitical context (England), speaks equally readily to McBride's artistic development. I would suggest that her theatrical training impacted directly on McBride's literary practice in two principal ways, the first of which we observed in the two previous sections – that is: her deployment of a variation on the stream of consciousness technique as a means to discover

and to express the authentic inner lives of her characters. McBride uses language, she claimed, in ways that attempt “to capture the parts of life that are destroyed by conventional language ... [and] to recapture the singularity of a person’s experience”<sup>6</sup>.

Actors routinely deal with language, of course; but theirs is also a physical discipline, and part of “the method” (and of the Stanislavsky system on which it is based) focuses directly on training the body to operate sympathetically with language in order to be able to “perform” any character as fully and as authentically as possible. In the same interview in which she discussed her use of language, McBride alluded to the importance of the sexualised body in her two novels, and her struggle to find a means to represent that body authentically and sympathetically. It emerges that the two areas – language and physicality – are linked, moreover, and that McBride’s early training in a discipline which stressed their total interdependence was key to the development of her literary technique as well as her emotional imagination.

As we have seen, the Irish female body – particularly as it relates to sex – was foregrounded in *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, and this is something we find replicated in *The Lesser Bohemians*; behind these interventions, moreover, stands a long history of Irish gender politics in which that same body operated as the site of intense ideological struggles relating to “authentic” cultural experience. To write about the Irish female body – to write in particular about Irish female sexual desire – is to engage a field of experience defined and directed by an array of powerful political, religious, social and cultural discourses. It was that power bloc which, in the latter part of the twentieth century, came to identify the Irish female body as in essence a vessel for procreation – a walking womb, in effect. Irish female desire was subject to strict control; “excessive” expressions were subject to severe sanction. And it is in the image of that restricted body, and in the name of that system of control, that both the half-formed girl and Eily are inculcated.

The condition of being “half-formed” implies a fullness or repletion that is somehow absent, but which may be achieved through some combination of physical and / or emotional activity. It’s in search of that fullness that Eily comes to London; and it’s through the experience of acting, and the training that she receives at drama school, that she comes to understand the process of “formation” through which identity is attained. At her audition in March she is unsurprisingly nervous, but relaxes once she begins to recite her first piece: “I don’t know but it’s done by some switch of the brain, this fooling off the girl I am” (3). The formulation here is, I think, intentionally ambiguous: what does it mean to “fool off”? Is “the girl I am” the secret self, carrying the

<sup>6</sup> “Novelist Eimear McBride in Conversation with Jenni Murray” (2016), *Woman’s Hour*, BBC Radio 4.

pain of abuse, now hidden “by some switch of the brain” behind the identity of the assumed dramatic character? Or is “the girl I am” the authentic self, the *real* Eily who, “by some switch of the brain” is liberated from the identity she was forced to assume precisely in order to cope with the memory of abuse? Or does she move uncertainly between these possibilities, precisely as the actor is obliged to move between the role and the self who performs the role?

The use of a theatrical idiom, with its link to issues of style, performance and identity, has a long pedigree in Irish cultural discourse. Declan Kiberd has discussed this trope as part of what he described (after Timothy Brennan, 1990) as a “national longing for form” – the search for a style adequate to the representation of a nation; and engaged in different modes (in the Irish case) in the work of writers such as Wilde and Yeats – each of whom was much exercised by the idea of “the mask” as a means to understand the writer’s role in relation to society. Kiberd’s description of the dilemma facing the “national” poet resonates closely with Eily’s ambivalent status, as noted in the previous paragraph:

Whitman’s theory of poetic suggestiveness is close to the Yeatsian doctrine of “the half-said thing”. Their poems are founded on a necessary contradiction: they celebrate a nation’s soul, while at the same time insisting that it has yet to be made. (1995, 128)

Yeats’s “half-said thing” is of a piece with Eily’s “half-formed” status at the novel’s commencement; and the poet’s movement between celebration (of the already existing nation) and construction (of the as-yet unformed nation) anticipates the existential crisis facing Eily as a result of her abuse – which is to say: the rejection of one identity (the abused child) before another (the fully realised, authentic self) has been claimed. This in turn echoes the actor’s movement between the “real” self one brings to the role, and the “authentic” self one attempts to become during performance.

During their last sexual encounter before Eily returns home for Christmas, Stephen asks if they can have unprotected penetrative sex. In an era in which sexually-transmitted HIV infection was still a major concern, Eily’s acquiescence on this occasion demonstrates the power of desire to mitigate the negative feelings – guilt, distrust, unworthiness, and so forth – characterising her identity as a victim of sexual abuse. More interesting perhaps is her reaction after the act: “Am I not my own self now?” (69), she asks, rehearsing once again the movement between a pre-existent inauthenticity (then) and the achievement of an authentic self through the sexual act (now). If acting provides Eily with a discursive mode through which she may renegotiate her identity, then the “performance” of sex functions in a similar, although far riskier, way – risky in the sense of infection, certainly, but also, and much more tellingly, in the sense of her search for an authentic self beyond “the girl I am”.

One sexual act Eily finds particularly fraught. Casual adolescent fellatio was the subject of an international moral panic during the first decade of the new century (Curtis, Hunt 2007). The issue emerged in Ireland during this period in relation to the so-called “Celtic Kittens” – young middle-class women whose perceived sexual promiscuity became in some senses the symptom of a society which (in the common idiom) had lost the run of itself (Connelly 2006). Having being marginalised from the national narrative for so long, the sexualised teenage girl became the site of intense ideological debate regarding the state and the fate of a society undergoing rapid, profound change. And as mentioned above, this is the context within which the child (the half- or mal-formed Eily) approaches the adult – the woman that she feels London will allow her to be; it’s also the context within which the representation of fellatio changes emphasis from being a prurient, exploitative act (the theatrical idiom is key) to one that is intimate, tender and loving.

The sexual stimulation of the penis with the lips, tongue and mouth represents arguably the most intimate physical act of which humans are capable, and it’s one that Eily wishes to share with a lover to whom she already feels deeply attached. She’s extremely nervous the first time she attempts this act, however, and insists that Stephen distract her with a recitation – he opts for the opening speech from Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Even so, she desists before his climax, so that he ends by ejaculating on her chest and hair. Afterwards:

Sorry, I say for not letting you you know in my mouth. Don’t be, he says I think it’s rude to expect. And I look all around at the mess made by our versions of sex. I’ve been naked, embarrassed, touched and kissed and brought the whole way like any woman might. So after that what is it to say When I was little someone used to and now I don’t think I can any more. And the past sits forward and the cold comes pouring in. (70)

The horrific image of the child’s oral rape by “someone” is conjured but not foregrounded; instead the reader is left to infer the intense psychological processes involved in Eily undertaking this particular sexual act when it is so negatively freighted. Nevertheless, the movement from the “little” girl she used to be in “the past” to the “woman” she becomes when engaged in sexual activity with Stephen is appreciable and in fact it is key to the process whereby Eily will overcome her half-formed status.

A second act of fellatio is described, at some length and in extensive detail, towards the end of the novel; on this occasion, however, the outcome is different:



But in a moment he says again Eily, I'm really close now. So I take him out, to say So come then. He just looks at me, tortured with want and full of feeling. I can't do that to you, he says. I want you to, I say Let's just be us today.<sup>7</sup>

What Eily is proposing here is that two vulnerable individuals come together to form a unit – an “us” – inured to the victim status attached to its constituent parts. Acceding to such a process is difficult and risky; describing it is a task for which McBride's neo-modernist style, and in particular the first-person continuous present tense, seems eminently suitable. In a discourse characterised by failure – of the individual, the family, the community, the nation, and of the forms by and through which all these agencies are routinely represented – the redemption discovered by Eily and Stephen through sex is liberating; for the performance of this particular sexual act only truly comes into focus when the full extent of the narrator-actor's vulnerability is apparent.

## 6. Conclusion

The “May to September” romance is a recurring trope within literary history. Teenager Marianne Dashwood accepts thirty-something Colonel Brandon after she is disabused of her “sensibilities”, for example, and Jane Eyre marries a depleted Mr Rochester. Happiness is available despite the age gap, it seems, so long as the characters reach a “proper” understanding of themselves, of each other's role within the relationship, and of the socio-cultural context within which the bond has been formed. The pattern is repeated in *The Lesser Bohemians*, in which the central relationship – founded on a shared history of trauma, and expressed in joyful sex – releases both Eily and Stephen from the pain of the past. “Two months Eily, he says or two years or twenty, whatever you'll give me, I'll take” (305). Thus, the text ends where the relationship may not (and where *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* certainly *did* not): in love and hope.

Clear commonalities are discernible between McBride's two novels to date – most obviously, the emphasis on the traumatised girl as a key discursive trope of the post-Tiger era, and the perception of sex, with its conjoining of physical activity and psychological effect, as in some senses *the* most important site for the rehearsal of (versions of) national identity. Key also is the

<sup>7</sup> McBride 2016, 305. Sex is notoriously difficult to render in narrative prose. On publication *The Lesser Bohemians* was in fact considered for the London *Literary Review*'s “Bad Sex Award”, which since 1993 has been highlighting questionable scenes of sexual description in otherwise good novels. The nomination is light-hearted, but even so it misses the point: sex is not merely another dimension in the unfolding of McBride's narrative but its central theme.

continued search for both a style and a form adequate (in Seamus Heaney's resonant phrase) to our predicament (1980, 56). The distressful theme of each text presents a significant challenge to the writer, and also (as I have discovered in researching and writing this article) to the critic who would engage with such matters.

The differences between the two texts are just as significant, however – in particular, the temporal (1990s) and spatial (London) displacement which, taken together, defamiliarise the standard terms within which the ongoing crisis of post-Tiger Ireland tends to be debated, while at the same time mitigating what might be regarded as something of an obsession (both artistic and critical) with the contemporary moment. Eily and Stephen are both products of the diaspora; the “Irish” identity that she embraces on the streets of north London in the 1990s is linked to the troubled identity that he assumed in his Sheffield suburb in the 1960s. Each in turn is linked to the matrix of discursive practices (including, quite centrally, exile) wherein Irishness was and continues to be negotiated throughout the modern era.

A number of hesitations persist, however, relating to the function of neo-modernism and the representation of the “girl” – of the abused Irish girl, moreover – within the postfeminist, neoliberal moment. Eily and Stephen “live” in the 1990s, so to speak, but they were made in 2010s, and at least some of their issues attending their representation have emerged from the economic, political and cultural matrix of our deeply troubled decade.

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