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LANGUAGE, BEING AND THE BODY IN EIMEAR MCBRIDE'S *A GIRL IS A HALF- FORMED THING*

Abstract

Presence and participation are key aspects in McBride's narrative; it allows the reader to access the point where thought becomes language so that it is still closely linked to the experiencing body. It tells the story of a young girl and her troublesome teenagehood filled with abuse, loneliness and the need to heal. Even if it is through the context of a literary work, the novel seeks to be taken seriously, demanding a corporeal presence from the reader. The first part of the following paper describes how the work addresses both Celtic and Post-Celtic Tiger, modernist and postmodernist challenges while creating an innovative style of its own. The second part analyses how language operates through various narrative devices in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, showing the connections with the body, aspects of the reading process itself and stylistic elements.

Key words: contemporary Irish fiction, body, narrative, experimental language

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1. Introduction

Concurrently as Ireland slowly moved away from the economic boom years of the Celtic Tiger era¹, so did its writers from a definable, dominant literary style or trend. The only valid term that can be used to capture contemporary post-Celtic Tiger Irish fiction is innovative. Experimentation and innovation are the main approaches taken by today's novelists. They challenge but also paradoxically re-invent old modes of writing stretching genre conventions. The diversity of narrative voices and structures reflect the dynamic state of Irish life and Irishness itself. Critic Claire Bracken observes that "what we see in the post-boom period is a paradox of explosive literary activity" (2017: 2). Contemporary Irish fiction is in an age of prosperity, women's fiction, in particular, is in a phase of vitality.

Eimear McBride is a contemporary Irish writer whose works reflect this surplus capacity of innovation, challenging traditional literary traditions. Her style can be described as experimental prose, operating a language that plays with both modernist and postmodern techniques. She has published three novels so far and won several prizes, including the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction in 2014. She is definitely amongst the representative voices of today's literary smorgasbord. However, it is important to highlight that her first novel, entitled *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013) went through a challenging publication process. McBride wrote the novel in 2007 and after nine years of publishers' rejections, it was finally presented to the public in 2013. Her struggle to get the work published points to several important aspects of the Irish cultural scene. During the economically prosperous years of Celtic-Tiger Ireland, consumerist policies created an atmosphere of what Bracken described as "hyper-masculinity" (2017: 1). Concurrently with the economic strength, writers and especially women writers found it hard to make their voice heard under the oppression of materialist consumerism policies. Novelist Anne Enright (Jordan 2015) described this period in an interview as a struggle: "during the Tiger times, there was a sense of 'get with the programme, you're off message'". McBride's novel was similarly 'off-message' with her peculiar, experimental language. The economic factor of investment potential also delimited publishing. Although the notion of censorship is not a working criterion anymore in Irish culture, its

¹ Celtic-Tiger is a term used to describe the Republic of Ireland's economically prosperous years from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s. A great financial collapse followed it in 2008, the Post-Celtic Tiger era refers to the period after the late 2000s.

capitalist counterpart has similarly controlling effects. Publishing houses can decide -often on personal matters- what they consider as 'sellable' material and by doing so they also have a certain power over what is being read. According to McBride, her work was rejected because "it did not fit into any niche" (Kellaway 2016). In the end the Galley Beggar Press, an independent Norwich firm published the novel in 2013.

The following paper analyses the specific narrative style of this novel, focusing on how it operates language on a challenging, new experimental level.

2. Modernist challenges

The plot of the novel is rather simple; it follows the deeds and thoughts of a girl from her childhood throughout her adolescence, stopping at the important events that shaped her as a human being. Her name is not revealed, none of the places or characters' names are, but they all inhabit an unmistakably Irish environment that is yet blurred in its historical specificity. The protagonist is a product of a broken family unit: her father abandoned the family before her birth. She grows up having an emotionally distant mother and a mentally and physically ill older brother for whom she feels responsible. She is also portrayed as a product of the religious and hypocrisy filled Irish rural environment from which she continuously struggles to escape: "we're living in a country cold and wet with slugs going across the carpet every night. Now when you are seven eight. Me five. This house, green growing up the outside." (McBride 2014: 9). The narrative carefully follows the troubles and traumas of this girl who is being bullied at school, who feels abandoned while trying to keep her brother safe and who is sexually molested and raped by her uncle. The perspective itself is monolithic, the whole story is told through her eyes of the first-person narrator. The narrative is divided into five chapters that refer to the different stages of the protagonist's life: *Lambs*, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, *Land Under the Wave*, *Extreme Unction* and *The Stolen Child*. The timeline is constructed in a peculiar retrospection, the logic dictates that it is obviously built upon the re-evaluation of memories, but at the same time it is suspended through the lack of past verb forms in an eternal present. By choosing to suspend the narrative on this mythic level of continuous

presence, the novel allows entrance into the character's embodied life that is redundantly 'performed' in a suspended time of experience.

In an interview McBride stated that her main ambition when constructing the language of her novel was to show how a person is feeling or reacting, what they're feeling about the feeling (...) what other thoughts are going through their heads and their gut reactions and physical sensations (Cochrane 2014).

There is no direct speech type communication in the novel, it operates in a flow, and everything follows the non-coherent workings of memory. The dialogues are constructed reflexively: rather than following an utterance, they follow the visceral reactions that the spoken and heard words produce. McBride creates a genuinely experimental prose that, as Gorra (2016) argues: "attempts to get under the readers' skin of thought, indeed to find the point at which thought and physical sensation prove inseparable." In the main character's psychological quest there is a gloomy and implicit depiction of a future that reiterates generational faults and sins. The plot ends in an ambiguous tone, implying that the Girl possibly commits suicide. This can be seen both an escapist move, suggesting that the physical world cannot provide a safe, sheltered existence, but at the same time, it is also a protest for change: "The coldest water. Deepest mirror of the past and in it I am. (...) and we are very clean here like when we wash our hands." (McBride 2014: 202).

The Girl² refers nostalgically to a past that was "clean", yet it was full of trauma, loneliness, and betrayal. She self-deceivingly wishes for the past to be changed, thereby suggesting that one can only achieve a livable present and presence by changing the past itself because there is no future redemption. There is no possibility of a religious salvation in a context where some of the traumas spring from the unrecognized falsity of that very system. The Girl learns at an early age that "there is no Christ here" (McBride 2014: 58) and that the female body is something that presents a threat to the religious society, something that is meant to be hidden and is often abused. The only possible hope towards change is the re-evaluation of the past, starting on an individual level: "What if. I could. I could make. A whole other world a whole civilization in this city that is not home (...) no one cares. And no one's falling into hell." (McBride 2014: 88). The lonesome quest for a meaningful existence creates a strong feeling

² Due to the anonymity of the protagonist, the capitalized 'Girl' is used in this essay to denote the main character.

of isolation. The Girl can never be sure that her pain is acknowledged. Language often acts as a barrier, as an impervious tool for uttering what is going on inside the body.

This distrust of the past and the need for a future that is both hopeful and dangerous can be seen as a modernist preoccupation. Anne Fogarty termed the novel one of those narratives that shows “that the modernist project is not complete; its quest ‘to make it new’ lives on in a present-day Ireland marked by its formidable commitment to nostalgia, to memory, to commemoration” (2016: 4). There have been several debates around the validity and time-span of modernism. Certain critics suggest that modernism did not end in the mid-twentieth century but that its practices and forms continued. Susan Friedman points out that modernism is not a fixed temporary phenomenon but a “multiple, polycentric and recurrent” (2006: 425) one. The core of it being rooted in the quest to value the present while seeking to find new modes of expression that can make that meaningful. Modernism, in this sense, can be re-assessed through contemporary writers’ challenging new forms and practices. McBride’s novel carries elements of this recurrent modernism. It attempts to stretch the language and dismantle syntax while giving direct access to the character’s consciousness and visceral experiences. It fixates the plot into a recurring present, which is valued as the only possible path, but continuously shows how memories and effects of the past permeate every moment of the character’s life. The narrative experiments with language and its power but it doesn’t lose faith in it. At the same time, the novel’s techniques make use of postmodern perspectives too. There is a constant questioning of ‘being’ as a fixed construction. The value and substance of language is a significant concern of the plot, and the reader is viewed as an active participant and possessor of the fictional world. It is a style that transcends and also fulfills modernism, being termed by some reviewers as “astoundingly innovative” (Cahill 2017: 159).

3. Presence, language, and the body

Presence and participation are key aspects of McBride’s narrative. At certain moments in the plot the language functions as the direct expression of the physical reactions, as if it would be generated by the visceral. Sounds and tactile experiences that apply to the senses feature strongly in the

plot. The novel seeks to be read both with the mind and the body: “Lungs heave up blood they would if I. (...) Eyes burn with thud through arteries and eyeball veins.” (McBride 2014: 19). Contemporary neuroscientist Michael S. Gazzaniga highlights that our emotions and the physical reactions in our body precede conscious thought, “feelings happen before we are consciously aware of them – and most of them are the results of nonconscious processes” (2016: 78). McBride’s novel can be interpreted as an experiment to go back to this pre-thought state and capture the gut reactions. At the same time even when language delimits the expression of pain, the body always keeps the score. When the physical sensations are the strongest, the words of the Girl dismantle into a semi-conscious mumbling of sounds:

Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos the fuck the fuckink slatch in me. Scream. Kracks. Done fuk me open he dine done on me. Done done Til he hye happy fucky shoves upo comes ui. Kom shitting ut h mith fking kmg I’m fking cmin up you. Retch I. Retch I. (McBride 2014: 149)

The text does not use grammatical order, nor does it apply syntactic relief from statement or question, yet, it is still comprehensible. Anne Enright (2013) suggests that this prose is an experiment of a “pre-verbal state” and as such, it is not only a story of the Girl, but a philosophical linguistic experiment.

The characters are not given a name so that the primary signifier that could denote fixation and identity is ripped out of the plot. According to contemporary philosopher, Jean Luc-Nancy words are comprehensible through the body and are essentially linked to what the body experiences (2008: 15-16). At the same time, as he sustains, body as materiality is a complex “open space” and not a “filled space,” it is a “place of existence” that is not settled but is in a constant flow (Nancy 2008: 15). If bodies are “places of existence” (Nancy 2008: 15) then they also are spaces of interchange, where “events of the body: rejoicing, suffering, thinking, dying, sexing, laughing, sneezing, trembling, weeping, forgetting” (Nancy 2008: 17) unfold. There are no actual bodies in the literary text, but it can be suggested that this body-space can be opened up and occupied through the process of reading. As Nancy describes, “writing is thinking addressed, thinking sent to the body (...) the writing ‘I’ is being from bodies to bodies” (2008: 19). Literary works can have the power to carry

their readers into this act of possessing a 'body-space' by allowing entry into characters' experiences, so that through reading our "emotional and cognitive repertoire expands" (Mahon 2017: 103).

The Girl goes through the laborious denouncement and repossession of her body and identity. After being raped by her uncle, the sense of ownership over her body and her sense of self are flummoxed. As a mantra and 'healing' process, she paradoxically starts to hurt her body and gets involved in various sexual encounters as if to regain control over her embodied life. It is a quest of repossessing that can be best described with Nancy's words as the "constant, silent assertion of lone presence" (2008: 154). By the act of reading the individual reader is also invited to step into this presence and possess it. The "for you" addressing at the beginning of the narrative is also an invitation for the reader to inhabit this fictional world that permeates body.

The performative aspect of both plot and narrative embedded into the experimental language, create a genuinely new type of *Bildungs* genre. Anne Enright (2013) termed it "an account of Irish girlhood," but it is more than that, it is also an authentic account of an individual embodied existence. "For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say." (McBride 2014: 3). These are the introductory words of the novel. They carry an *in medias res* type of guidance into a complex fictional world, but they constitute a point of address and access as well. The narrative mechanism and the linguistic strata of the text are in a complex mingling. The plot is rather simple: it follows the unnamed Girl's deeds and experiences from her pre-birth state up to her adolescence. Chronologically it sustains linearity, but the perspective only allows glimpses into selected events meaningful to the main character. There are no past verb forms, thereby emphasizing the present moment's value, bringing the experience closer in a repeated framework of happening.

In the first part of the novel, the "I" as a locus of individuality is blended into a plural one. The Girl 'speaks' from the womb so that her existence is still physically linked to the mother's body. Her experiences are felt and created in a multidimensional location. The dialogues also blur the meaning of the pronouns, because they occur within the text's flow. However, the narrator signals the difference in the positions "she says, she saw"; as if also suggesting that even from the womb she already has a space of her own "I" that can comprehend and form thoughts:

In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your name. Mammy me?
Yes you. Bounce the bed I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then
lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and a day. (...)
I want, she says. I want to see my son. (...) I know. The thing
wrong. It's a. It is called. (McBride 2014: 3)

The first "I" here is the Girl's pronoun, whereas all the others are the mother's. The Girl sees through the mother's eyes: she sees his brother falling from the stairs, being taken to hospital and getting diagnosed with the incurable disease. She also feels the worry and anxiety of the mother, who senses the seriousness of the situation. The mother's cognitive and physical state also affects her directly; there are verbal indices: "She praying in a coat until I am froze. Hard chapel-kneelers bare-kneeled real repents. She does. And our father was. Where? Somewhere there. I think. (...) Jesus in her blood that minute." (McBride 2014: 4).

The "I" here is that of the Girl's. On an experimental level it is really interesting how the Girl also feels the touch of his brother, who is a constant presence in her life from her pre-natal existence: "poke belly of baby that's kicking is me. Full in myself (...) And I loved swimming to your touch." (McBride 2014: 5). The brother is the bearer of the first and the last "you" of the novel. He is the one who is promised the right of name-giving at the beginning and he is the one with whom the Girl wishes to unite just moments before her death. His function is more than that of a sibling; some critics term him as "a lost twin and an alter-ego" (Fogarty 2015: 24). At an early age, he is diagnosed with cancer and suffers severe brain damage after his operations. He is a silent character in the narrative: his voice is never audible through the mediated language of the Girl, but it can be suggested that he is the primary addressee: "for you" (McBride 2014: 3). This recommendation or offering can also be interpreted as being the mother's. She talks to the older brother, preparing him for his sister's birth: "you'll give her name" (McBride 2014: 3). Thus the Girl's whole existence is "offered" to "you", to the brother, by the act of name giving. However, it can also be the Girl's voice, who directs her retrospection towards her beloved brother. The Girl is 'half-formed' because her other half is her brother, and with his death she loses all hope for 'full-formedness' and balance. The narrative ends soon after the brother's death with the Girl's suspected suicide, described by Fogarty as "an effort to re-unite with her brother who now has become a kind of succubus luring her to death"

(2015: 23). There is a desperate outburst just after the brother's death, when the Girl asks hopelessly: "who am I talking to? Who am I talking to now?" (McBride 2014: 189). On the textual meta-level, this moment is the ending of the main narrative itself, the narrator questions the viability of her utterance after the death of the main addressee. However, she does not stop communicating and even in her last goodbye, before she drowns herself, she clings onto the "listening brother":

And under water lungs grow. Flowing in. Like fire torch. Like air is. That choke of. Eyes and nose and throat. Where uncle did. No. Gone away. Where mother speak. Is deaf my ears. Hold tight to me. I. Will I say? For you to hear? (McBride 2014: 203)

The mother's "speech" here is not comprehended, it falls on "deaf" ears, but the brother is imagined as receptive, the one who will "hear". The narrative can also be interpreted as a story told within the story. The Girl remembers her past, paradoxically reiterating everything in a stream of consciousness utterance that is tied to the present. The memories are vivid and relived in this metafictional level, where she 'talks' to the brother, creating a story within the story, while the whole plot is held together through the consciousness of her actual, temporal 'now'. By choosing to relive the painful memories vividly, she also suggests that the past permeates every moment of her present consciousness.

It is interesting that the Girl's internal language is meant to be received by a character that cannot master language and cannot use it as a tool for communication. The brother has trouble learning and is constantly bullied in school. The Girl tries to be protective, but gradually gives up hope of his brother's salvation.

There is a continuous and gradual dehiscing and estrangement in the Girl's life: from religious comfort, from family ties, from her own body, from her own language, and yet her whole narrative is built upon the wish to be heard, perceived and accepted. Áine Mahon suggests that the language of the first-person narrator in the novel is meant to be understood even if it is syntactically broken (2017: 111). The Girl addresses both her brother and herself with the desired aim of being heard and acknowledged. She seems to be speaking to herself, but she uses this inner language as a tool of connection. As Mahon sustains, she "can never be sure that her pain is acknowledged or appreciated by others around her" (2017: 111), but she secretly always hopes to be heard. This also accentuates the peculiar

character of language itself: though the narrative follows the inner, pre-verbal state of language, it still is – even in its most privatized moment – a tool condemned to be directed and understood by others. Even pain that is believed unutterable at times finds its ways through language to seek acknowledgment and sympathy from others.

It is not only the Girl's language that has seemingly lost its connective, communicative value. The other characters are also unable to express and utter their thoughts and emotions meaningfully. They all inhabit a world of estrangement: no functional relationships survive in this landscape. There is no authentic mother-daughter bond, although the Girl longs for it: "Is Mammy with you? Ah no of course. Ach she's not able. She said that alright before." (McBride 2014: 11). The mother is authoritative and she also carries the weight of generational hurt. When the grandfather visits, the dialogue transmitted through the Girl's first-person utterance is emptied of communicative elements. It is more the monologue of the grandfather who is not compassionate and who uses language to express her disappointment and blame: "And when I went to have that eye test you never called. (...) But sure what's the point. It's like talking to that brick wall." (McBride 2014: 15). This powerless and submissive mother is the only female role model available to the Girl. This general circumstance approximates to the image portrayed by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman of our contemporary European society, suffering because of moral insensitivity, "compassionless and heartless type of behavior (...) an indifferent posture manifested towards other people's trials and tribulations" (2013: 13). Bauman also questions the dynamic of "human togetherness" (2013: 13), of the human communities. Nevertheless, as it is shown in McBride's novel, everyone seeks to be heard, to be addressed, to be listened to, to be connected.

There are several types of social micro-communities captured in the novel: the family, the sibling cohesion, the mother-daughter-cohesion, the school, the church, the little town, and the culture as well. Thus, on a multi-layered structure, it portrays different social groupings throughout an individual's life, making it a universal (her)story and a nation's microhistory. The Girl always refers to her parents from the plural of the "our,": "our mother, our father." Nevertheless, as a physical presence, it is only the mother who stays in their life; the father is the "empty space" (McBride 2014: 3). He leaves the family before the Girl's birth. The coined expression "our father" denotes both the paternal figure and the transcendental entity, God. The Girl's language keeps reiterating religious phraseology, ripping

words out from their context thus giving them new power. The prayers and sermon quotes should function as tools of deprecation and purification for her, but they become mere 'empty spaces' as well. The mother continually prays, and the Girl overhears it as early as from the womb: "Gethsemane dear Lord hear our prayer our. Please. (...) Please God don't take. Our Holy Mother of all, humbly we beseech thee." (McBride 2014: 4).

The Girl and her brother are taken to church regularly. One of the main prayer that is continuously overheard in the novel is "Our Father," its rhythmical mumbling lingers around the Girl's life. From the moment of her birth, she is promised this prayer: "For this grant of Nurse I will. Learning you Our Fathers art. And when you slept I lulled in joyful mysteries glorious until I kingdom come." (McBride 2014: 5).

It can be suggested that "Our Father" acts as a performative word in the religious context, being able to act and achieve divine presence by its pure utterance. For the Girl, there is no performative capacity behind it, only the lack of presence. She attends church and mass from a young age, but as it is revealed from later scenes, she does not find safety in the religious spirit. It is rather seen as a desperately needed, but eventually meaningless ingredient to her identity that could never offer real guidance.

It is very telling when the grandfather visits them (the Girl is already five) and quarrels with the mother about the lack of 'religiousness' of the kids. He argues that they don't know the prayers well enough:

And that child only made his communion a year ago and he can't even his Hail Mary. Have you no morals? I mean what kind of way is that to rear you son? (...) And look at that one. What way is that to rear a girl? Look at her. Forward rolls in a skirt. It's disgusting. It is perverted. (...) How's she supposed to be a child of Mary? (McBride 2014: 15-16)

The Catholic atmosphere of the novel is one of the indices that point towards an Irish context, but there is no direct reference to a place. The setting is blurred in its geographical specificity. Other suspected Irish 'elements' include: focus on a small, enclosed community (probably in the West of Ireland as some critics speculated [Fogarty, 2015]), the Catholic Church as an overarching presence in the lives of the characters, revealing the hypocrisies underlining it, conflictual family ties, absent father. Nonetheless, behind these Irish connotations there is a need to universalize: the main philosophical queries evoked and the existential

struggle of the Girl is mainly a human one. The author admitted that there was an inescapable Irish perspective at work, but she also wanted every reader “to feel they were her and that what was happening to her and inside her was also happening within themselves” (McBride 2016). Regarding the theme of girlhood, Anne Fogarty argues that the novel’s *Bildungsroman* quality is a form embedded in Irish tradition: “Narratives focusing on the child and adolescent are nothing new and have always featured centrally in the European novel and formed an especially vital and distinctive vein in Irish fiction.” (Fogarty 2015: 13). She also sustains that this type of *Bildungsroman* is still viable, “paradoxically it survives as a mode, because many of its characteristics are inverted or suspended especially by modernist authors” (Fogarty 2015: 14). McBride’s novel can thus be termed a modernist Irish *Bildungsroman* that focuses on the refusal of embracing social norms and a refusal to grow up. Refusal is a crucial element of the Girl’s existence. It is not always a conscious denial, but rather incapacity. From the moment of her birth, she regrets the bodily separation from the mother. This can be seen as the acknowledgment that the reality of the world cannot offer her a graspable and livable presence:

A vinegar world I smelled. There now a girleen isn’t she great.
Bawling. Oh Ho. Now you’re safe. But I saw less with these flesh
eyes. Outside almost without sight. (...) Dividing from the sweet
mother flesh that could not take me in again. (McBride 2014: 5)

She continually fails to inhabit this world and her body while striving to take control and ownership. This quest is further eschewed after the rape committed by her uncle. That particular event in the Girl’s life is portrayed by her as something willed and rejected at the same time. This creates an ethical imbalance in the plot and a total loss of moral balance in the character’s life. She wants to be in charge of her own sexuality with the paradoxical desire for the rape, but she also seeks the victim’s role:

I am lying. I am not I am. By the cold rage in my white drip shirt.
Caught me. Went about me tooth and claw that I wanted. Felt
within the time has come. No Christ here in the kitchen floor.
(...) Oh God. It hurts me take it out. (...) No. Take me down
under. (...) I must be almost I am dying when he does it (...)
My nail my nail. That’s it. I’ve done to him. What’s done in me.
(McBride 2014: 57–58)

The language describing the rape is the least articulate as if to suggest that when the experience is too strong, the body cannot utter it into comprehensive language. On the other hand, the impressionistic, terse sentences communicate far more authentically what she experiences physically than a more polished, controlled narration. This is also the moment of an inverted epiphany, she loses her body, her control and her own being in a way, “who turned the sound back on? (...) my eyes back” (McBride 2014: 59) a moment of total blindness and insanity “I am laughing all the way up the stairs.” (McBride 2014: 59). She drags herself into the illusion that this was the moment of her rebirth, of the total possession of her body. Later on, she seeks to relive this moment by an “enraged and disaffected take on her sexual body” (Fogarty 2015: 23). She involves herself mercilessly in several sexual encounters throughout her school years. As a university student, she invites the uncle to her house, asking him to beat her while having sex with him. She implicitly craves the affection and motherly care that she lacked as a child. The abusive connection is the only meaningful one that she knows and by inviting the uncle she can also seemingly regain control while swirling deeper into self-loathe: “Well I’m here doing what you want. Put yourself on me then, in me. (...) Do whatever you want. The answer to every single question is Fuck. Save me from all this” (McBride 2014: 131). Even when horrible things are happening to her, she wants to regain agency: “Saying yes is the best of powers.” (McBride 2014: 71). Anne Fogarty describes this as a constant “restaging of the primary scene that has defined not just her sexuality, but her vey Being” (2015: 23).

Jean Luc Nancy (2008) sustains that the character of human existence and knowledge is essentially embodied and not abstract. At the same time being means possession of this embodiment:

In truth “my body” indicates a possession, not a property. In other words, an appropriation without legitimation. I possess my body (it) however in its own turn possesses me: it pulls or holds me back, offends me, stops me, pushes me away. We’re both possessed, a pair of demonic dancers. (Nancy 2008: 154)

All damage taken on the body is bared by the “I” too, who is the ultimate possessor and thus the body itself. The Girl can never separate herself from the body that she abuses and offers up for mistreatment. She is

seeking control and wishing for purity, pretending that she can cleanse and repossess.

With its symbolic subtitles the structure of the novel reflects this gradual loosening and invasion of the body/being. It is divided into five parts, all carrying a distinctive title. The first one is entitled 'Lambs', signals the purity and vulnerability of the body, freshly ripped of the mother's corpus. The second that contains the traumatic encounter with the uncle is: 'A Girl is a Half-formed Thing', as if signaling that there is no chance of a full formation, of a controlled presence from this moment onwards. The body becomes a tool that cannot be possessed by the "I": it is continuously claimed by other bodies, and it is invaded and taken over. The focalized viewpoint changes in this part to a narrator who lives the illusion of being in the locus of presence and possession, while remaining only a failed and damaged outsider. It is also important to note the significant cover of the novel that pictures an apple. This could suggest the connection to the biblical storyline of Adam and Eve, and the woman as being "half-formed" from her very existence, as being formed from the rib of Adam. It also points to the woman as the bearer and initiator of the first sin. The image of womanhood is thus that of a space of sin, as something built upon a rupture of totality.

On the other hand, the novel doesn't portray men as innocent accomplice. One reviewer states that "the men are completely depicted in negative ways" (Wisker 2015: 66) in this plot. Patriarchy lurches at the core of the Girl's family: the father is absent, the grandfather is a tyrant who dominates and accuses, and the uncle is a seductive aggressor. At the funeral of the grandfather, the Girl volunteers to guard the corpse throughout the night and in that strange encounter, she feels in control, she is the possessor: "So Granda. I don't talk to the dead. So now. That's strange to see him here. Dead. I could give him a kick if I liked. But it is not worth the hassle now. I could undo his flies for shame. (...) Poke him. Squeeze out an eye. I'd lift it but. No. Better not to touch." (McBride 2014: 101).

The only woman who seemingly escapes the tyranny of men in this family is the Girl. The religious hypocrisies that restricted all of the other women in her family have no power over her. However, in the end, she also fails to cleanse herself of this patriarchal tradition and eventually chooses suicide. In this perspective, the "half-formed" aspect of womanhood portrayed here is not a given one, but an artificially sustained one. The Girl

remains a half-formed thing because the restrictions of the community and the patriarchal religious society do not allow her to have a “fully formed existence”.

The only masculine character in the novel that is not described as an invader of woman space is the brother. As the alter-ego of the narrator, the other half, he is himself also “half-formed”. The Girl struggles to grasp her body and through it to control her existence, whereas the brother is blocked of this possibility from the beginning. He is condemned to live in a body that doesn't allow possession. Being terminally ill means that his body allows him less and less control of life: “I touch your hands. I know they are going wrong. They're not doing all what they should ever should. Your eyes. Turned back.” (McBride 2014: 166).

4. Being, language, and narrative

Derrida (1997) argues that language is a constant game of exchanges, all of which leave traces endlessly, but none can be pinned down. As such, it cannot be enclosed in a structure heading for either transcendence or any final signifier. Derrida questions the concept of ‘direction’ itself – there cannot be a forward or backward movement in language that is suspended in a presence-present of de-reconstructed connections (1997: 35-37). He consciously takes away the notion of control by revealing the motion behind each sign and showing language as a space, a locus that allows the constant interchange of signifiers (Derrida 1997). It can be suggested that the right to control and the need for being to be present cannot be denied. The illusion of presence, of a certain control is an almost anthropological necessity. When one uses writing and language there has to be an allowance of assertion. Despite the knowledge that there is no final center or logos, there has to be a decision of an accepted presence, and a grasping of illusory control.

Consistently staying in the fragmented first-person position and a continuous present, McBride's novel allows the reader greater power to assert his/her presence in the fictional world. Through its body-tied language the novel directly admits its readers into the Girl's space of being. It can be suggested that the over usage of the first-person pronoun ‘I’ strengthens this ownership taking both for the readers as well as on a meta-level for the protagonist. Through the process of uttering her thoughts and

feelings, the Girl opens up her own body space to relive and examine her life. Using the 'I' repeatedly allows her temporary control over this process. She sometimes self-interrogates this body, looking for tools to inhabit it meaningfully: "Where. I. Hello. Hello. Is he are you there? Ssssss. There? I'm only here in my bones and flesh. Now you've gone away" (McBride 2014: 198). At times it seems that she is trying to get rid of her body. She is seeking to suspend her embodied being by imagining that her true self is a guest in the body that is being abused: "I learned to turn it off, the world that was not my own. Stop up ears and everything" (McBride 2014: 61). There is no escape from the corporeal though, the Girl cannot escape her space of being, unless she confronts death. The readers have more freedom: 'occupying' the body-space of the Girl through reading is a temporary cognitive exercise.

Heidegger (1996: 1) contends that there is no clear direction in language and meaning-construction, yet there is a finality determined as "Being", the ultimate end/signifier that cannot even be addressed with the classical tools of definition. He describes how being became "the most universal and emptiest concept. As such, it resists any attempt of definition. Nor does this universal and thus indefinable concept need any definition." (Heidegger 1996: 2). The possibility of 'being' has to be granted to the human in order to grasp presence and existence. Heidegger (1996) claims that being can be understood and grasped by *Dasein*, by an asserted presence conscious of its own end. This also means that being as an end signifier is intelligible for and from the standpoint of *Dasein*, which is a dynamic experience of living. This *Dasein* is a temporary possession of presence heading towards death. Heidegger doesn't name it human or individual, it is a meaningful existence in the world capable of understanding being. It is suggested though, that humans need presence, even if it is only temporary, conscious of its own end. There is an almost anthropological need for this in our everyday interactions and existence. It is also essential to step into the locus of a seemingly fixed 'being' when reading texts of literature. Even Derrida confirms later on that literature is a play of presence and absence, "a reappropriation of presence" (1997: 144), which is also effaced continuously by every new reader of the text.

Eimear McBride's novel uses a language that can sustain this game of reiterated presence and absence to its maxim capacity. With every reader, there is a new presence and assertion created, thus the flux is maintained. At the same time, since it is a language experimenting with the pre-

verbal utterance, it is closely linked to the body. The Girl's body bears the experiences that manifest themselves through the narrative's gut-reaction type language. McBride creates a written text that doesn't distance itself from the body. By focusing on the experience itself, it bears the signs of the body and its reactions. It also experiments with the readers' capacity of illusory and temporary presence and possession of both a language and a body. The novel locates the reader in this position on an experimental written sign-reading level, paradoxically showing that it also remains irrevocably removed from the experience.

5. Irish specificity or transnational togetherness?

When asked about how her Irishness features in her novels McBride stated that she does not feel the need to define that aspect as something necessarily distinct: "I'd like to set up my stall as a European writer." (Collard 2014). At the same time the spatial coordinates and certain specific topics point to an Irish context. Authenticity works on a double level in the novel, on the one hand, by connecting to an Irish reality, but at the same time by connecting to universal human experiences. This Girl is a symbolic embodiment of essentially human traumas and her story stands as a frighteningly powerful depiction of contemporary society.

Literary critic, Pieter Vermeulen (2009) points to the power of literary work to create and dismantle a community. He compares and contrasts Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) with Jean Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1986), trying to deduce what kind of community literature can sustain. While as he shows, Anderson argues that literature creates and enforces a collective identity and cohesion of a culture/community, Jean Luc Nancy "locates the sense of community not in a given substance or a specific essence (race, language, community) shared by the members of the community, but instead paradoxically in a removal at the heart of proximity and intimacy" (Vermeulen 2009: 96). Vermeulen suggests that literature can do both: "The experience of literature is not an experience of simultaneity and homogeneity, but rather of an interruption of self-presence. This illustrates literature's paradoxical capacity to give a definite shape to our removal from the finitude of the other" (Vermeulen 2009: 110).

Eimear McBride's narrative grasps this dual capacity to its finest, while being 'a neomodernist Irish account of girlhood and history' it both diminishes that identity and community, by stretching the experience to a universal togetherness and presence. It operates a complex system of cultural, narrative, stylistic and linguistic layers. It is a novel that is a product of Celtic-Tiger Ireland, reflecting the need for change and re-evaluation of past hypocrisies. The Girl's traumas and her sense of isolation reflect generational societal burdens that at the end force this protagonist to choose death as the only 'livable' alternative. At the same time, being published in the dynamic Post-Celtic Tiger era, it also stands as an expression of the newly found visibility and strength of female writers. The protagonist is an embodiment of the critique of neoliberal hopes. The Girl of the plot is in a crisis of identity, being involved in a very contemporary quest of finding her place in the material world. The narrative's language is innovative and experimental, applying to all the senses and operating on a reader-challenging rhythm. It constructs exciting new means for the reader to experience the process of reading itself from a body-tied, corporeal position. The roots of this language are nonetheless found in modernist, Joycean styles, questioning and opening up the layers of conscious and subconscious thoughts. This shows that the sharp dichotomies that seek to delineate old and new, traditional and innovative are often built on false distinctions. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2014) escapes being put into any restrictive niche. McBride invents a form that questions fixities while providing a new authentic mode of understanding trauma, abuse, the disconnectedness of our contemporary communities and the process of reading itself.

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