Ksenija KONDALI
Aleksandra VUKOTIĆ

ksenija.kondali@ff.unsa.ba
aleksandra.vukotic@fil.bg.ac.rs

"WAY BEYOND-THE-PALE": ANNA BURNS' MILKMAN AS A GENDERED TRAUMA NARRATIVE

Faculty of Philosophy
University of Sarajevo

Faculty of Philology
University of Belgrade

Abstract: Informed by trauma theorists, including Cathy Caruth and Laurie Vickroy, this paper interrogates how the 2018 novel *Milkman* by Anna Burns, set in the polarized and violent context of Northern Ireland and the 1970s Troubles, portrays the gendered trauma experience and its counter-discursive dimension. This paper aims to bring together two strands of interpretation which situate the novelistic discourse in its historical and socio-political context, while investigating the textual strategies employed by the protagonist who doubles as narrator, as she seeks coping mechanisms amid terrorist retaliation, sexual abuse, objectification, and social exclusion due to tribalism. The present study establishes that the structure of traumatic experiences, the victim/survivor response to them and the resulting resistance signify a type of counter-narrative against the dominant political and social forces which traumatize the heroine, whose destiny and narrative style highlight the position of disempowered members in any society.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, gender, trauma, sexual harassment, Anna Burns, counter-narrative, herstory

Introduction

As an author born in Belfast in the post-1950s political conflict, Anna Burns (b. 1962) might naturally be expected to write about her birthplace and the weighty past of Northern Ireland. Her latest novel, *Milkman*, published in 2018, does more than meet such anticipations – it depicts a harrowing time in her homeland, burdened with cultural and political tensions in an imaginative and witty narrative which has attracted a wide readership, considerable critical response, and prestigious awards.[1] Burns thus joins a growing number of Northern Irish writers who "provide intense critiques of nation and partition, national identity, and Northern subjectivity" (Ruprecht Fadem 2015: 2), as *Milkman* continues her thematic focus on violence and political turmoil.[2] Despite the fact that the names of the characters and or locations are not stated, the novel provides sufficient contextual elements of "the great Seventies hatred" (*Milkman* 84) for an intimate insight into living in two radically split societies plagued

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1 *Milkman* reaped the following awards: 2018 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, 2018 Man Booker Prize, 2019 Orwell Prize, 2020 Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize 2018/2019, and 2020 International Dublin Literary Award. See more at https://www.faber.co.uk/tutors/anna-burns/.

2 For a critical perspective on Burns' first novel *No Bones* (2001) see Ruprecht Fadem (2015: 137–179), and Cordner (2014: 196–240).

by pervasive and deadly sectarian violence. This "tale of tribalism and hope" (Kilroy 2018: n. p.) is a powerful portrayal of people caught in the daily traumatization of war, evidently set in the Catholic community of Belfast during the Troubles, although words such as "Catholic" or "Protestant" are never mentioned. However, the references to the oppressive patriarchal and related pressures, segregation, religion, mechanisms of general suspicion and constant fear, with people uncompromisingly categorized and marked as "renouncers-of-the-state" and "defenders-of-the-state", imply the Northern Ireland situation. Although the Troubles are of no interest to the protagonist of this novel (who doubles as narrator), an eighteen-year-old girl, also unnamed, and referred to only as "middle sister" or "middle daughter", she cannot disassociate herself from the traumatic events, which shape her fate and sense of self in profound ways.

This analysis focuses on the intersection of trauma, violence, gender, and the narrative modes of their textual representations in this novel, cognizant of their correlation with history, memory, and identity in providing us with a new understanding of the Troubles. In this context, both the novel and our approach confirm that there is "a case for the value of trauma studies in casting new light on a number of contemporary Irish novels, as well as in illuminating present-day attitudes to the historical past" (Del Río Alvaro 2010: 3). In other words, the paper recognizes the relevance and power of trauma as a critically and culturally important method for this novel specifically, and for Irish literary production in general. Critical opinion has widely acknowledged that "the growing field of trauma studies […] had concrete implications for Irish literature", while "Irish authors have also evolved in their response to, and literary uses of, trauma" (Costello-Sullivan 2018: 3). Building on trauma theory, and particularly the concepts of survivor narratives and coping strategies, the present study approaches Burns' *Milkman* through the traumatic nature of Irish history and its effects on the individual and collective identities of women in abusive cultures. The protagonist's experiences show the necessity for the articulation of untold or occluded histories to debunk the crippling metanarratives of the past[3] and thus strive to resist the cultures of inequities, silence, collusion and submission. Simultaneously, the power of novelistic storytelling to raise awareness and affect the wider social matrix and structural discrimination also indicates the specific potential of this novel as a counter-narrative as well as the cogency of using trauma studies as an analytical framework.

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3 The ubiquity of trauma studies in reconsidering the Irish past has risen since the Peace Process of the 1990s. Since then, as Emilie Pine points out, the representation of the past in "Irish culture has undergone a major shift [that] has resulted in traumatic memory becoming the dominant way of seeing, of understanding, and of communicating, the Irish past" (2011: 5).

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Gendered Trauma: Some Notes on Theoretical Approaches

We propose to read *Milkman* as a gendered trauma narrative by following Laurie Vickroy's definition of novels which "internalize the rhythms, processes and uncertainties of traumatic experience" within their composition (2002: 3), and because the novel deals with the female victim of sexual abuse in a masculinist society. Sexual and political violence lies at the core of Burns' novel, and due to the confessional mode of storytelling and other narrative strategies, *Milkman* is discussed as a "trauma novel" or "trauma fiction".[4] While "trauma fiction" refers to literary texts which can be categorized as describing a harmful experience that shatters the character's sense of self and identity, the concept of the "trauma novel", initiated by Laurie Vickroy (2002) and Anne Whitehead (2004),[5] is defined by Michelle Balaev (2008) as follows:

> a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels. A defining feature of the trauma novel is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world. The external event that elicits an extreme response from the protagonist is not necessarily bound to a collective human or natural disaster such as war or tsunamis. The event may include, for example, the intimately personal experience of female sexual violence. (2008: 150)

In the case of *Milkman*, the protagonist recollects events from the past, when she was exposed to tormenting pressures and fright on different planes, following gendered threats and abuse by a person of power, a sexual predator, which destabilized her selfhood. Because of the repressive, repetitive, and dissociative character of trauma, victims of trauma, according to Laurie Vickroy, "typically engage in self-defeating, defensive, and repetitive behaviors," and their reactions "may seem overly passive and emotionally paralyzed, unreliable and overly defensive, unheroic and even unethical—failures that are manifestations of trauma" (2013: 256). This explanation contributes to the salience of trauma in literary texts and the narrative possibilities in recounting such traumatic event(s). According to Cathy Caruth, "the [traumatic] event is not assimilated or

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4 For the history of the concept of trauma and the ties between fields of trauma studies and literary criticism see Balaev 2014. For the origin and development of contemporary trauma studies, as well as the categorisation and elucidation of "trauma fiction" see Whitehead 2004, and Vickroy 2002. For the "trauma paradigm" in contemporary post-industrial societies and confessional culture see Luckhurst 2008.

5 According to Anne Whitehead, there is a correlation between the emergence of trauma fiction and theoretical explorations of trauma: "[T]rauma fiction is influenced and informed by recent developments in trauma theory concerning the nature of traumatic experience itself, the role and function of testimony, and the relation between trauma and place" (2004: 161). Thus, such interaction between trauma and fiction, given also "the affective turn", indicates that "the rethinking of trauma has been absorbed into the current ideologies of history and memory" (Whitehead 2004: 161).

experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (1995: 4). Burns' novel exemplifies the damaging effects of traumatic experiences on individuals, whose capacity to express them is seriously challenged. Since traumatic suffering characteristically eludes representation, it illustrates what Anne Whitehead highlights as the contradiction and absurdity of trauma fiction: "If trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how can it then be narrativised in fiction?" (2004: 3). As the novel's narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that a particular and precarious testimony is offered to the readers, a recollection of a distinct trauma aesthetic, one that corresponds to the novel's features and their capacity to mirror the traumatic imprint in the protagonist, presented through her memories. For Vickroy, in trauma narratives, memories of traumatic experiences are "explored through affective and unconscious associations" (2002: 3). *Milkman* functions like other trauma narratives which "go beyond presenting trauma as a subject matter or in characterization; they also incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of trauma within the consciousness and structures of these works" (Vickroy 2002: xiv).

The novel's characteristics, including voice, language, themes and symbols, but above all the insistence on the absurd and the grotesque, as well as strong narratological fragmentation, constitute instruments in recalling, communicating and negotiating the traumatic experience. Judith Herman writes that the survivor faces "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" (1993: 1), and advocates the process of recalling events of an extreme nature at both individual and collective levels: "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (Herman 1993: 1). In the context of the protagonist's narrative, the wider social matrix and oppressive cultures of silence, collusion and misogynistic bias inform the difficulty and necessity of articulating the traumatic impact. Circumscribed by these socio-cultural and political determinants, for the victim/survivor, as Herman points out, "the traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory which breaks spontaneously into consciousness", and adds that traumatic memories are "encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (1993: 37–38).

The complexity of such a process should also be evaluated against the fact that, as Caruth states, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (1996: 4). The victim/survivor initially fails to comprehend or make sense of the traumatic experience, and strives to endure both its damaging effects and irrationality. The victim/survivor is overwhelmed in multiple ways and the traumatic

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occurrence is thus made even more agonising. Caruth's explanation of this state maintains that trauma cannot be located merely in the "brutal facts which reappear unexpectedly, but more profoundly in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension" (1995: 153). At the same time, the novelistic trauma narrative serves to revisit and reconsider traumatic experiences for the wider community (such as that of Northern Ireland in *Milkman*), and its decades of sectarian violence. To deal with such a traumatic memory in literature also requires tackling a narrative that is subject to socially constructed silences, structural inequities and challenging political realities of the present which are still occluded. Sonya Andermahr and Silvia Pellicer-Ortin argue that "[o]ne of the main goals of 'writing through' a traumatic experience would be, then, to articulate an unbearable psychic wound that the subject or group is not able to communicate or exteriorise, that is to say, what cannot be spoken may be at least represented and mediated through cultural practices" (2013: 3). However, critical opinion has also established that the various representations of female experiences of suffering and trauma, such as that of sexual abuse, "make evident the existence of trauma in orthodox versions of history, which had been silenced on the grounds of lack of reliability and objectivity" (Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortin 2013: 4). The function of trauma narratives/trauma fiction in general, and of *Milkman* specifically, is to focus the readers' attention and consciousness on the past, and demonstrate how, in Caruth's terms, literary language makes us aware of the indirect referentiality of both history and the past (1996: 18). In presenting us with the traumatic memories of *Milkman*'s protagonist, Burns describes a distinct social and cultural context, which despite being based on nameless locations and characters, remains unquestionably recognizable. This feature ties in with the argument that "the protagonist carries out a significant component of trauma in fiction by demonstrating the ways that the experience and remembrance of trauma are situated in relation to a specific culture and place" (Balaev 2008: 156).[6] This claim about the "primacy of place in the representations of trauma" is founded upon the premise that place "anchors the individual experience within a larger cultural context […] that shape the meaning and remembrance of trauma" (Balaev 2008: 160). In a similar vein, Vickroy stresses the im-

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6 In terms of the Irish cultural context, the novel abounds with (inter)literary references, most of them related to seminal Irish literary texts; although they are not essential to this paper's topic, a brief overview is warranted, as this feature underscores the novel's specific effects: *Milkman* evokes James Joyce's protagonist of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and his final pronouncement of giving his homeland Ireland and its society his treatment of "silence, exile and cunning", while the protagonist's psyche in *Milkman* resembles that in Joyce's wandering city novel *Ulysses*. The silent mode is reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's well-known poem "Whatever you say, say nothing", as well as of Samuel Beckett's use of silence. Beckett's influence may further be traced in its cadence and the interaction of the logical with the absurd. The novel's authorial narrative recalls Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, as mentioned by the narrator. It also calls to mind Derek Mahon's poem "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford". For an interesting exploration of the link between the poetics of Northern Irish literature and the work of Samuel Beckett see Ruprecht Fadem 2015.

portance of social environment as a decisive factor in trauma (2014: 132), as trauma fiction is understood to develop from the context of specific identity politics. Informed by this theoretical-critical understanding, the following section investigates instances of traumatized gender experience and its mark on the protagonist's female self.

"beyond-the-pale": Gendered Trauma in *Milkman*

The novel opens with the main character's recollection of a traumatic experience she endured two decades before, which germinated from a rumour about her liaison with an older married man, a senior local paramilitary figure, the so-called milkman, "a befouler of young girls and a depraved, fraud milkman who gives bad names to people who are really milkmen" (*Milkman* 208). His unwanted sexual interest in the eighteen-year-old protagonist, mostly referred to as "middle sister", marked her as his property, thus generating individual trauma and ruptured selfhood. From the very beginning of the novel her recollection draws us into the cultural climate of insecurity and anxiety, fraught with political and social violence, political harassment, and verbal and sexual intimidation: "The day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman died" (*Milkman* 7). The awkward, practically casual matter-of-fact style of recounting the event that constitutes the end of her abuser's life, but also marks a period of extreme contentment, reflects the confusion and distress of the narrator as she strives to disassociate herself from the past. It also signifies the process of engaging with that traumatic experience from another angle so as to understand how the whole society, as a community and individually— Milkman, her "ma", the neighbours, paramilitaries, the state forces, the whole nation—oppressed and disrupted her sense of self. Although she is intent on staying out of politics and the dominant social practices that are strongly gendered, she nevertheless finds herself labelled as "interesting" and "beyond-the-pale". As Milkman starts "with his unstoppable predations" (*Milkman* 208), stalking and frightening her, the narrator reveals the disturbance and dislocation his behaviour causes for her, indicating both the physical and psychological manifestation of her traumatic state:

> there was confusion, too much of being startled. It seemed a shock, yes, but shock over something that must be too small, unimportant, even too normal to be really truly shocked over. Because of it though, it was only hours later when back home that I was able to take in he knew about my work. I didn't remember how I got home either […] because I was lapsing in attention, because I was confused, because I wasn't being truthful, I slipped […] I skidded and lost balance, […] I fell down on the path. (*Milkman* 14)

Milkman's menacing dominance and sexual intimidation are not the only source of such trauma for the narrator, but he is a representative of the male authority and abusive practices in that society, rendering women

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victims of persistent repression and terror: "This was the 'I'm male and you're female' territory. […] This was certain girls not being tolerated if it was deemed they did not defer to males, did not acknowledge the superiority of males" (*Milkman* 12). The gendered trauma in the masculinist cultured society, and the feeling of pursuit and entrapment can further be attributed to the ideology of tribalism in Northern Ireland's society: "the predations upon me by the community and by Milkman" (*Milkman* 289).

It is important to underscore that the gendered differences in depicting trauma are established both through the novel's themes and language, following Vickroy's understanding of narratives which internalize traumatic experience in the novel's organization (see Vickroy 2002). From the opening of the novel, we are greeted with a disruptive style of writing that defies literary conventions, since its first sentence reveals the ending or resolution of the novel. Throughout *Milkman*, the narrator engages a style of expression that assumes the self-soothing and protective dimension of voice, humour and resistance, noticeable in the unusual lexical elements and expressiveness, at times absurd yet logical, realistic yet surreal, dark and disturbing yet comical, giving us "affective and unconscious associations" (Vickroy 2002: 3).[7] These baffling features communicate the protagonist's discomfort and destabilization of the self, especially as she becomes progressively conscious of Milkman's intrusive and alarming practices. Another instance of this feature is her use of the word "maybe" (such as "near-maybe-boyfriend"), which becomes totemic of the context where humour may serve as one of her coping mechanisms. Examples are provided in the novel in the form of lists or catalogues, near-manual instructions, about names and affiliations of diverse types carrying political statements, albeit unintentionally:

> It was the spirit of the community going back in time that deemed which names were allowed and which were not. [...] The names not allowed were not allowed for the reason they were too much of the country 'over the water' [...] The banned names were understood to have become infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict [...] (*Milkman* 25).

The retrieving of the past records and the absurd regulation of names considered appropriate seem to echo Cathy Caruth's cautioning that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we were implicated in each other's traumas" (1996: 24). Another instance offers further illustration of the prevalent state of reasoning the trauma victim reports and simultaneously fails to grasp (see Caruth 1995):

> As regards this psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed, matters didn't stop at 'their names' and at 'our names', at 'us' and 'them', at 'our community' and

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7 This response exemplifies the representation of trauma victims' behaviour and reactions, according to Vickroy (see 2013), and adds: "[F]iction that depicts trauma incorporates varied responses and survival behaviours within the characterization of survivors" (Vickroy 2014: 130).

'their community', at 'over the road', 'over the water' and 'over the border'. [...] There were neutral television programmes which could hail from 'over the water' or from 'over the border' yet be watched by everyone 'this side of the road' as well as 'that side of the road' without causing disloyalty in either community. [...] There was food and drink. The right butter. The wrong butter. The tea of allegiance. The tea of betrayal. There were 'our shops' and 'their shops'. Placenames. What school you went to. What prayers you said. What hymns you sang. [...] There was the fact that you created a political statement everywhere you went, and with everything you did, even if you didn't want to. (*Milkman* 26)

The above quotation illustrates multiple concerns in the protagonist's daily regimen, in which the boundaries, both spatial and mental, determine her consciousness, even in the details of everyday occurrences, such as food. It is told in a near-stream-of-consciousness method, listing the numerous aspects of her world and times, resembling a catalogue of highly volatile aspects charged with political affiliation. The narrator also frequently engages in repetitions and variations of a concept, highlighting the urgency and distress she experiences:[8] "[T]hese were paranoid times. These were knife-edge times, primal times, with everybody suspicious of everybody" (*Milkman* 28). The life she lives is one of relentless insinuation and manipulation manifested in different forms of hegemony and violence—general, physical, sectarian, political, and gender-related—all causing her constant unease and requiring the narrator's transformation and "an extreme response", as stated by Balaev (see 2008) about trauma novels.

While the theme of violence is pervasive and multifarious, the particular gender bias in it looms large as the narrator is exposed to the trauma of being monitored and frightened, not only psychologically, but also physically and sexually: "there were plenty of quiet, unnoticeable people who took a bit of watching. It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the milkman" (*Milkman* 7). The pressure of having something attributed to her that she neither invited to happen nor had any responsibility for, turns her into a victim who feels violated, guilty, betrayed, and without support from either friends or family. Moreover, it sharpens her awareness in such recollections because she characterizes that part of her life as disjointed and precarious: "This was living otherwise. This was underneath the trauma and the darkness a normality trying to happen" (*Milkman* 97). The sexual pursuit by Milkman takes place in the general atmosphere of incessant surveillance and control of the individual and the community, which is also reflected in the narrative approach of evasiveness by the nameless referencing of the other characters. The protagonist is forced to navigate this harmful atmosphere in order to survive in this divided society marked by distrust and control, which her friend describes as

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8 It should be noted that the textual strategies used in *Milkman* in this sense embody features of the trauma novel since that type of fiction "conveys a diversity of extreme emotional states through an assortment of narrative innovations, such as landscape imagery, temporal fissures, silence, or narrative omission—the withholding of graphic, visceral traumatic detail" (Balaev 2008: 159).

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follows: "The whole community's a suspect community [...] Everybody's house, everybody's movements, everybody's connections constantly are checked and kept an eye on" (*Milkman* 2018: 175). The representation of this threatening environment and the character's personal experience of it suggest that the novel corresponds with Balaev's definition of trauma fiction as "a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels" (2008: 150). The damaging effects of such controlling surroundings are described by Marisol Morales-Ladrón in terms of the community acting "as a true panopticon, where people police each other, making everyone feel under constant surveillance" (2019: n. p.). The overall sense of encroachment and the specific targeting of the victim, even if there has not (yet) been any physical contact, make her feel violated and invaded, since Milkman knows all the personal and private details of her life. His sinister strategy also extends to the narrator's "maybe-boyfriend" as he threatens to kill him if she continues seeing him, filling her with terror. Typical for trauma fiction, the traumatic experience which the protagonist suffers causes a physical response that is beyond her control. Milkman's predatory practice makes the victim feel mentally and physically wrecked, and her selfhood is shattered, as stated in her recollection: "I came to understand how much I'd been closed down, how much I'd been thwarted into a carefully constructed nothingness by that man. Also by the community, by the very mental atmosphere, that minutiae of invasion" (*Milkman* 253). Her words reveal the limitations on her social power, due to hegemonic pressure and conformity, imposing constraints which impede her ability to make independent choices. In this sense, we should be reminded that "extreme experience cultivates multiple responses and values. Trauma causes a disruption and reorientation of consciousness**,** but the values attached to this experience are influenced by a variety of individual and cultural factors that change over time" (Balaev 2014: 4). The recurrent traumatic experiences triggered defensive behaviour in the protagonist as a way of handling and escaping the relations of submission and control; one of the coping and resistance strategies and means to express her traumatized gender experience is silence:[9] "[R]arely did I mention anything to anybody. Not mentioning was my way to keep safe" (*Milkman* 42). Ironically, although silence "as an architectural form of containment" (Morales-Ladrón 2019: n. p.) is supposed to keep her safe, even though the protagonist is reserved about her experiences to all, in the hope of being spared their attention, she is made to suffer for that attitude: "So I'd kept silent, I said. I'd asked no questions, answered no questions, gave no confirmation, no refutation. That way, I said, I'd hoped to maintain a border to keep my mind separate. That way, [...] I'd hoped to ground and protect myself" (*Milkman* 50). While she thinks she is elusive and thus protecting herself from the unsolicited

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9 Due to the length constraints of this paper, the other coping mechanisms—reading-while-walking, jogging, repeated bouts of memory lapses, amnesia, in the narrator's phrasing "blanking-out" and "jamais vu"—are not discussed here.

attention of both the community and Milkman, her guarded and reticent manner is widely interpreted not as an attempt at privacy in public, but as a sign of waywardness, opposition to conventions, and general disrespect for her community, which is only too eager to initiate fabrications: "That is dangerous. What you don't offer – especially in volatile times – people will make up for themselves" (*Milkman* 203). An additional dimension of her silence is its signification of the grand narrative rooted in the nationalist past and patriarchal culture toward women's selfhood, thus offering vehicle of broader reflection for the reader. As Laurie Vickroy reminds us, "silence may accompany descriptions of the survivor's experience, fiction provides multiple perspectives that allow readers to meditate on the variety of human responses in shock" (2014: 130). The trauma is thus imparted through silence, "both a virtue and an aesthetic programme capable of depicting the infinitesimal nature of great pain" (Caruth 2003: 60). As a form of regulation, this silence ultimately dulls her sensations: "Thus my feelings stopped expressing. Then they stopped existing. And now this numbance from nowhere had come so far on in its development that along with others in the area finding me inaccessible, I, too, came to find me inaccessible" (*Milkman* 151). Despite being devoid of words, silence may convey complex emotions and other content, "which adumbrates the underlying trauma. Silence is the last phase of communication, after a traumatised victim has lost his or her trust in even the expressiveness of metaphor and myth" (Onega 2012: 87–90). The protagonist's navigation of the mainstream discourse through silence further constitutes a reminder of the elided or neglected female voices and identity within the mainstream discourses, but specifically in her setting, "within the context of our intricately coiled, overly secretive, hyper-gossipy, puritanical yet indecent, totalitarian district" (*Milkman* 147), and her resistance to dominant mores and practices renders her "beyond-the-pale". The narrator's awareness of her female self in this context of rampant insecurities, insinuation, intimidation, and harassment, also of a sexual nature, communicates to the reader, in a profound, affective way, the novel *Milkman* as a gendered trauma narrative.

"way beyond-the-pale": *Milkman* as a Trauma Counter-narrative

We have previously shown that *Milkman* can indeed be defined as a gendered trauma narrative, with emphasis on the protagonist's coping mechanisms and self-protection strategies. Importantly enough, despite applying various techniques of dissociation, such as reading-while-walking and running, the protagonist explains that it is "because of osmosis" that she cannot avoid participating in what she calls the "psycho-political atmosphere" of the Troubles. In turn, the rule of osmosis also applies to the language in which she tells her story, as it has evidently absorbed the particular socio-political moment which it attempts to reflect, and

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Anna Burns endows her narrator/protagonist with a distinctive self-consciousness about the language in which she narrates her traumas. In order to claim the traumatic experiences as her own, she needs to find an authentic way to relate them, and this struggle for the adequate language in which a story of trauma can be told is an important theme in the novel. As we will argue in this section, it is largely through language and narrative techniques that the author boldly subverts the master narrative of the Troubles, and creates her own counter-narrative, turning history into *herstory*. At the same time, readers are invited to closely observe the subversive mechanisms of both the narrator and Burns' storytelling, to recognize an apparent complicity between the author and the reader in the creation of such a counter-narrative, and ultimately the power of fiction to challenge monolithic representations of history.

In her analysis of Anna Burns' previous two novels, *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007), Maureen Ruprecht Fadem designates Burns' work as "antinovels that fragment and bamboozle" the elements constituent to the genre, "all its generic building blocks" (2015: 31). As a fractured and fragmented narrative *Milkman* is also such a text, written perhaps paradoxically both in the luxuriant and digressive "antinovel" tradition of Laurence Sterne, and the minimalist and absurdist, self-conscious style of Samuel Beckett.[10] According to Andrea DenHoed, "the syntax never quite fits together" (2020: 14), while Beata Piątek identifies certain "linguistic anomalies" in the form of "syntactic excess, or surtaxis" (2020: 109). Indeed, the narrative style and language of the novel have invariably been defined as "highly experimental" and "alternative" (Estévez-Saá 2020: 85, 89), and even "scandalous" (Piątek 2020: 108). Appropriately enough, in her analysis of Anna Burns' *Milkman*, Beata Piątek relies on Hayden White's possibly sole use of the term "scandalous language"[11] in the sense of the Greek term *scandalion,* meaning "a stumbling block," as opposed to what she calls "transparent language". Piątek further explains that "[w]e stumble upon *Milkman*'s style and language, which attracts attention and cannot be taken for granted or passively consumed", as it is highly demanding for the reader. Even our first encounter with the text creates such a "*scandalion*" according to Piątek, as it is visually "repellent" and "uninviting to the eye" due to the unbroken sentences and pages "overcrowded" with words. This should alert the reader to the "correspondence between the traumatic experience of growing up in Ireland and the language of the text", Piątek concludes (2020: 108). Finally, the author herself has commented on the protagonist's idiosyncratic storytelling as a deliberate narrative strategy, referring to "[h]er digressions. Her digging herself into the sentence, covering herself in paragraphs" as

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10 See, for example, McWade 2020.

11 She explains that the quote comes from "personal communication during an international seminar with Hayden White organised in the Institute of English Studies of the Jagiellonian University with the support of the Visegrad Fund in 2011" (Piątek 2020: 108).

she "obsesses and worries and circles round and takes her thoughts apart to try to understand what's happening to her" (McWade 2020). "It is never so much about where it is leading. It's about the way it is said," Anna Burns explains in an interview with Sheila McWade, underlining the importance of language and narrative design in *Milkman* (McWade 2020).

Furthermore, for Beata Piątek, in its peculiar combination of "logorrhea and silence" *Milkman* is a work of "traumatic realism" (105). We may agree with this definition to a certain extent, as the novel indeed succeeds in representing the "mechanisms of insidious trauma" (Piątek 2020: 105; Brown 1995: 102) rather convincingly. However, we believe that the set of strategies which Anna Burns uses to represent the experience of trauma belongs in the postmodern rather than the realist tradition, especially due to the insistence on the constructed nature of language and reality, and the novel's incredulity toward established ideologies, which Laurie Vickroy has identified as a "postmodern influence" on trauma texts (2015: 4). Furthermore, as Vickroy explains, "[p]ostmodern fiction and trauma fiction bear witness to social and personal fragmentation, though trauma fiction shows the most painful and alienating causes and consequences". Finally, both trauma fiction and postmodern fiction are "skeptical and critical of the uses of power and its attendant discourses, and both employ similar storytelling techniques, such as fragmentation and unstable meanings" (Vickroy 2015: 4.) Here we may add that as a postmodern narrative which constantly refers to its own textual nature, *Milkman* also employs certain metafictional techniques, overlooked in many of the previous narrative explorations of this novel, which will therefore be addressed in this study.

Postmodern Strategies and Trauma Counter-narrative

In *Milkman*, Anna Burns uses postmodern strategies to unsettle the grand narrative of the Troubles and create a unique, gendered trauma counter-narrative. Here, we will focus on the elements of Burns' text which reveal a close connection between the narrator's coping strategies and the author's narrative techniques, carefully designed to underline the subversive potential of both reading and writing.

As we learn in the novel, the protagonist frequently experiences bouts of memory lapses, "blanking-out," or what she describes as episodes of "*jamais vu*" (*Milkman* 41, 60, 98, 176). Amnesia and forgetfulness have already been discussed as typical symptoms of trauma and psychological defence mechanisms, but what we will propose here is that the novel's repeated and specific reference to the characters' episodes of *jamais vu* may be of greater significance in the context of Burns' narrative design. The term *jamais vu*, which is sometimes defined as the opposite of *déjà vu*, is a French borrowing which means "never seen", and is often connected to amnesia. It is described in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a disorder

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of memory characterized by the illusion that the familiar is being encountered for the first time" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionaries Online*, n. d.). However, while the protagonist explains *jamais vu* as a feeling of unfamiliarity with her everyday surroundings, in situations when "something that should be familiar was not going to be familiar," (*Milkman* 60–61), we may see it as a metaphor for the literary technique of *defamiliarization*, which is arguably a distinctive feature of Burns' counter-narrative. The established names, landmarks and practices which the reader may recognise from the news and historical archives are all erased and renamed in an attempt to create a *re-vision* of the conflicts in Northern Ireland, representing a familiar story in a novel and unforeseen manner. Burns' narrator meticulously deletes all proper names, including the names of characters, communities, toponyms, religions and political factions, and replaces them with her own phrases, such as the "ten-minutes-area", which is defined by the time it takes to cross it, "the usual place" for the cemetery, "country over the water" and "country over the border" for England and Ireland, or simply "us" and "them". For Beata Piątek, these new names are "neutral", "universal", and "sanitized", possibly reflecting the practice of the "scrupulous" redaction of "all the names of people or places that might lead to the identification of their informants" (2020: 109). At the same time, however, we may argue that the revised names in the novel are also quite subjective and specific as they are evocative of the female experience in Northern Ireland in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and the culture of silencing and oppression imposed not only by the military and paramilitary groups, but also by the state and the church.

In this sense, we may compare the narrator's carefully "redacted" narrative about the Troubles (Ní Éigeartaigh 2020: 43) to her mother's "horror stories" about shame (*Milkman* 49, 156, 181), also told in a sanitized language in an attempt to communicate the content which is believed to be potentially traumatic or inappropriate. For example, "ma" repeatedly warns the narrator against visiting "dot dot dot places" (*Milkman* 44, 48, 51, 212, 276), the areas which in her opinion are indecent and therefore to be avoided, and she goes to great lengths to avoid using the word "pregnancy", even as she hysterically tries to elicit the reason for her daughter's sudden nausea, "Have you been fecundated by him [...] Imbued by him?' she elaborated. 'Engendered in. Breeded in. Fertilised, vexed, embarrassed, sprinkled, caused to feel regret, wished not to have happened – dear God, child, do I have to spell it out?'" (*Milkman* 188). She lists a similar string of rather cryptic synonyms for abortion: "vermifuge, squaw mint, Satan's apple, premature expulsion, being failed in the course of coming into being" (*Milkman* 188–189), but again she refrains from mentioning the actual word which the narrator has to "guess". Unlike the reader, who may lack the background knowledge about the Irish "fallen women" and the Catholic asylums where those who conceived outside of wedlock were confined, a trauma on a national scale buried beneath the trauma of the Irish colo-

nization and violent conflicts, the protagonist is quick to understand ma's riddling expressions. As Anna Burns juxtaposes the narratives of political and sexual violence, through irony and dark humour as her most powerful techniques of subversion, she essentially repeats the question asked by the feminist clinical psychologist Laura Brown, "how many layers of trauma are being peeled off by what appears initially to be only one traumatic event or process?" (1995: 110). Moreover, Brown has also famously argued that "many women who have never been raped have symptoms of rape trauma; we are hypervigilant to certain cues, avoid situations that we sense are high risk, go numb in response to overtures from men that might be friendly", and she therefore insists that post-traumatic symptoms can emerge both transgenerationally and, more importantly in this case, "laterally throughout an oppressed social group [...] when membership in that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma" (1995: 107–108). Both ma and the narrator's discourse reveal hypervigilance and avoidance as typically feminine coping strategies in this sense. However, while the mother's language clearly reflects a tradition of religious and patriarchal indoctrination, we can see that the narrator is similarly obsessed by the rules of propriety as she tries to observe all the "niceties" (*Milkman* 97), only in a different "horror story".

Occasionally, however, the narrator changes her diction, breaks the silence and abandons the "niceties", as in "I didn't know what ma meant by my knowledge of the world. My knowledge of the world consisted of fucking hell, fucking hell, fucking hell, which didn't lend itself to detail, the detail really being those words themselves" (*Milkman* 188). The imagery and word choice in this part reflect a chronic trauma induced by decades of both political and sexual violence, and thus may be seen as a more accurate (non-)description of a young woman's life in Northern Ireland than what is captured in the phrase "the Troubles", which has entered mainstream narratives. While the term itself reveals the strategies of avoidance which are both reflected and subverted in the text, in *Milkman* the definition is extended to "the sorrows, the losses, the troubles, the sadnesses" (*Milkman* 56) in an attempt to challenge both the widespread use of this euphemism and the grand narratives about the Northern Irish conflicts. The story does not belong only to the predominantly male national heroes, but also to women, "any colour, any creed, any sexual preference, any disability, mental illness or even general dislikeability, indeed, of any type of diversity", as the novel's "feminists" would say (*Milkman* 131).

In hindsight, Burns' protagonist displays some awareness of her predicament, and knows that in order to tell her own story she needs to revise the old versions, just as Anna Burns needs to challenge the dominant storytelling modes. In this sense, *jamais vu* is both a leitmotif and an important narrative principle, which allows Burns to disremember the official history in order to make room for the dissenting voices as well as those from the margins. We can hear them, more or less clearly, in the

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single voice of middle-sister, where the voices of the feminists who speak to us from the far margins are among the loudest:

> These women, constituting the nascent feminist group in our area – and exactly because of constituting it – were firmly placed in the category of those way, way beyond-the-pale. The word 'feminist' was beyond-the-pale. The word 'woman' barely escaped beyond-the-pale. Put both together, or try unsuccessfully to soften things with another word, a general word, one in disguise such as 'issues' and basically you've had it. Awful things were said about these women with the issues in our district, not just behind their backs but to their faces as well. (*Milkman* 130)

As the protagonist relates her story matter-of-factly and speaks about the blatant discrimination of "these women" who are openly and repeatedly insulted by the community, she reveals the dominant patriarchal discourse which has kept women at bay for centuries, controlled by the Catholic church and state institutions. Aoileann Ní Éigeartaigh explains that "[w]omen's experiences were widely excluded from historical accounts which privileged the nationalist narrative and marginalized any potentially disruptive voices, a decision Eavan Boland describes as 'the power of nationhood to edit the reality of womanhood'" (2020: 46). In *Milkman,* however, these women are publicly shamed due to their "audacity to come into existence" (*Milkman* 131) and organize gatherings in order to talk about their own problems rather than help the "Cause" in their typical roles of wives, sisters and nurses. The community ironically condemns them not only because they are feminists who "seemed to know a lot about gender history and sexual politics" (*Milkman* 129), but also, and even more so because they "constitute" a feminist group. The agency of these "issue women", as opposed to the expected passivity and compliance with the patriarchal rules, is particularly worrying for the community, which is quick to mark them and their grouping as "beyond-the-pale", or outside the bounds of what is considered proper behaviour. Ironically enough, the church does not allow them to gather at their "hutments", even though it has no objection to violent paramilitaries meeting regularly on their premises.

At the same time, however, the community acknowledges the power of the feminine which is to be feared and contained. Even though the narrator may not be fully aware of this power, the author of the novel most certainly is, and it is against this background that we are able to recognize the subtle elements of metafiction in this passage, where Anna Burns appears to be speaking directly to her readers, laying bare the design behind the novel once again. According to Pierre Janet, remembering and telling a story implies taking action, which is the opposite of feelings of paralysis and helplessness (qtd. in Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1995: 175). Moreover, Nina Parish and Daniele Rugo argue that "memory work" is in fact "a form of activism" with a "disruptive and oppositional significance", as it "renegotiates power structures" and "challenges hegemonic

legacies" (Parish and Rugo 2021: 8). The narrator's storytelling is such an active process of re-remembering, or filling in the blanks of *jamais vu*. The very process of narration finally allows the victim of trauma to see herself as the subject of her own story rather than the "object or medium of someone else's" (Brison 1999: 39), and in this sense an attempt to recreate the trauma narrative, which implies agency, seems essential for middle sister's individuation process. Furthermore, Burns' novel itself can indeed be seen as a form of activism as understood by Parish and Rugo. If we accept the general view of *Milkman* as a distinctly feminist view of the Troubles, not least because of the remarkable juxtaposition of political and sexual violence, then this places both Anna Burns and her novel firmly in the category of "beyond-the-pales".

Finally, as readers of Anna Burns' *Milkman* we also take part in this "beyond-the-pale grouping" (*Milkman* 182). According to Laurie Vickroy, "reader engagement is unavoidable because readers are a part of the process of re-creating the text" (2015: 28), and Burns repeatedly stresses the reader's role in the deconstruction of metanarratives. Among others, Sheila McWade has emphasized the centrality of the act of reading in *Milkman*, arguing that "[m]iddle sister's 'reading-while-walking' is deemed a subversive act by the community, but is essential for middle sister's survival as well as an unwitting challenge, cheered on by the reader, to the *status quo*" (2020). Indeed, we learn that middle sister's habit of "reading-while-walking" consigns her to the "beyond-the-pale" category even before her supposed relationship with Milkman does, since the community perceives her behaviour as wholly inappropriate. The protagonist's double role as both narrator and reader seems particularly intriguing from the aspect of metafiction. Does *Milkman* suggest that fiction is above politics? Inseparable from politics? As "dangerous" as politics? Reading, of course, implies agency, and the process of reading Burns' counter-narrative is particularly demanding, as readers, like Burns' characters, also need to be alert or "hypervigilant" to the subtle cues buried in the novel's endless digressions. At the same time, as we have previously argued, the reader is forced to read a familiar story in a new way, from a different or "never seen" perspective, and this change of outlook may be profoundly unsettling.

To illustrate this point we may look at the passage in *Milkman* in which middle sister tells us about a curious experience from her adult evening French class when the teacher decides to read "a proper French book" to her students. After the teacher has read a paragraph in which the sky is not blue the students are suddenly disturbed, and they shout "*Le ciel est bleu! Le ciel est bleu!*" (*Milkman* 62). Unlike the students (including the narrator), who are extremely upset and will not admit that the sky can be any other colour than blue for fear of "seeing more than [they] could cope with" (*Milkman* 63), the teacher laughs, "which was something she did a lot", as she has "an unnerving amount of humour"

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(*Milkman* 62). While the teacher insists that the class look at the sunset outside the window and tell her about the "*colours, plural*" which they can see (italics in the original), she only confirms their "suspicions that she was none other than a beyond-the-pale person herself" (*Milkman* 63), and the narrator wonders, "How come she was doing this antagonising, this presenting of an anti-culture to our culture when she herself was of our culture" (*Milkman* 64). In the end, the teacher concludes in a more serious fashion: "There is no blue in the whole of the window [...] there's nothing out there really. But for temporal purposes please note – the sky that seems to be out there can be any colour that there is" (*Milkman* 65). Importantly enough, when most of the students turn their backs to the window, refusing to look at the sky, the teacher "marches" them into another, "*littérateurs'* classroom", and asks them to "look at the sky from this brand new perspective". Middle sister describes the change of classrooms as important for inducing a cathartic experience, as the sky "was now a mix of pink and lemon with a glow of mauve [...] Layers were mixing and blending, forming and transforming" (*Milkman* 59).

Here, again, we may identify further elements of self-conscious fiction, as the French teacher with her "unnerving amount of humour", "beyond-the-pale" insistence on the constructed nature of reality, and "antagonizing" from within, bears a striking resemblance to the author of the novel herself. Burns' cameo appearance as a French teacher in this episode lays bare the constructed nature not only of our immediate surroundings and reality, but also of history, and is symbolic of the author's revisionary style in general. Defamiliarization is the first step in challenging the constructed truths of what Leszek Drong has defined as "tribal fiction" and "the homogenising narratives of the Troubles offered by mainstream nationalist discourses" (qtd. in Piątek 2020: 112). Or, as Claude Lanzmann has suggested in a different context, "historical truth may be transmitted in some cases through the refusal of a certain framework of understanding", with the recognition of a particular "obscenity" in the very "project of understanding" (Caruth 1995: 154). In a similar fashion, Anna Burns challenges the established frameworks of storytelling and memorializing, and her own project is "obscene", in that it counters the (nationalist, male) master narratives of the Troubles by introducing competing versions, or various counter-narratives. In turn, readers are asked to emulate the author's subversive storytelling practice deliberately disclosed through a series of metafictional narrative strategies, and continually challenge the truths presented both in *Milkman* and other trauma texts.

Conclusion

In *Milkman*, Anna Burns gives a sinister and poignant portrayal of the 1970s Northern Ireland Troubles through the recollections of a protagonist/narrator who is a victim and survivor of structural abuse and

sexual intimidation. Although the novel's subject matter is inextricable from its author's background since Burns was born in Belfast, the novel offers complex textual strategies to depict the protracted conflict and sectarian violence in this divided but also any similar oppressive community and its debilitating effects on the female self. Through nameless referencing, emblematic of the crushing atmosphere in which everything is politicised, all daily practices monitored, and gossip weaponised, the novel imparts the complexity inherent in the meanings of trauma in society and literature, specifically "the aspects of a lived experience of trauma that are both idiosyncratic and to a certain extent collective" in trauma studies and "the broadening borders of this innovative field" (Balaev 2014: 11). *Milkman* deals with the traumatic experiences of the main character, the physical and other effects of trauma related to her position as a woman in an embattled community overwhelmed by prevailing patriarchal masculinist cultural practices, and on these grounds the novel can be classified as "trauma fiction", a "trauma novel" or "trauma narrative". The relevance of the "trauma paradigm" and its critical tools for the study of (Northern) Irish fiction has been acknowledged in recent scholarship and applied in this paper to examine the connections between the traumatized individual, society, and the historical past in *Milkman*. In so doing, the paper has described how the novel brings together the multiple strands of trauma, violence, gender, and narrative methods to probe the interlocked aspects of history, memory, and identity, specifically of gender bias so as to enable a different, fresh outlook on the Troubles. And because the novel depicts a woman's traumatic experience in a society charged with sectarian strife, male dominance and female submission, it is analysed as a gendered trauma narrative. The meaning of traumatic memory and its impact on the protagonist's selfhood is tied to the intensity and pain caused by the event, which goes beyond the means to express it in customary ways, as is common with such an occurrence, "so intense that it […] disrupts time and history, breaks through the categories we use to take in the world" (Del Río Alvaro 2020: 4). The traumatic event and its ramifications for the protagonist reveal the difficulty of making sense of the absurd, even grotesque realities that impose constrictions upon her daily existence, including the political content ascribed to the choice of food items or television channels. Its unconventional narrative strategies, also featuring disjointed and repetitive language, connote the novel as a historical trauma narrative, highlighting the fragmented identity and endeavours of the protagonist to attain a voice and agency. The narrator's wit and eloquence function as both a symbol of resistance and a liberatory possibility, while her actions fail to correspond with these forms of expression. Instead, the heroine engages in coping mechanisms of silence, lapses in memory, running, and reading-while-walking, all intended to function as evasive defence strategies in her stifling and tribal environment. In this segregated community dominated by surveillance, where anything can be interpreted as a politi-

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cal statement, such unconventional behaviour, however, relegates her to a position of extreme vulnerability and designates her as "beyond the pale". Considering the elusive meanings of silence, the novelistic writing out of this trauma in *Milkman* thus redeems the previously suppressed and marginalised subjects of the Irish past and conveys a different, an(other) history of Ireland. Given the deep historical, political and social roots of an environment ruled by male dominance, tribalism and oppression, the novel signifies Burns' efforts to defamiliarize and undermine the *grand récits* of official Irish history, exemplifying how "literary language makes us aware of the indirect referentiality of history and of the past" (Caruth 1996: 18). *Milkman* further underscores the need to tackle the socio-ideological structures which produce patriarchal systems, forms of marginalisation, injustice and abuse in a "history as the history of trauma" (Caruth 1996: 60). In the debunking of silenced histories, the novel not only resists the prevailing grand narratives, but also locates liberatory potential in the power of novelistic storytelling to raise consciousness against structural pressure and practices, making this novel a counter-narrative. The transformative capacity of gendered trauma narratives, especially in challenging the traumatic histories of societies through confessional storytelling, represents a possible remedy when dealing with trauma. Rather than merely recollecting the hurtful occurrence, the traumatic narrative is invested with a therapeutic and emancipatory dimension and consequently moves away from the stifling silences of the past, transcending the inequity and absurdity of "beyond-the-pale".

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Ксенија Кондали
Александра Вукотић

„Ван сваке мере" : Млекар *Ане Бернс као феминистички наратив о трауми*

Резиме

У раду се анализирају елементи контранаратива у роману *Млекар* (2018) ауторке Ане Бернс у светлу студија трауме, као и наратолошких и културних теорија. Дубоко поларизована атмосфера сукоба у Северној Ирској током седамдесетих година прошлог века представљена је у роману кроз визуру протагонисткиње, уједно и нараторке, која је жртва системског злостављања и застрашивања – политичког и сексуалног. Кроз низ смелих и сложених приповедних поступака и решења, попут одбијања да ликовима и местима у роману додели властита имена, Ана Бернс конструише контранаратив који је супротстављен доминантним етно-националистичким представама рата

и сукоба, првенствено у Северној Ирској, али и на другим местима у свету. Онеобичавањем милитаризоване свакодневице Бернс у исти мах представља и подрива методе контроле и ограничавања слободе кроз политичку и сексуалну репресију, која се најпре очитава у дискурсу и начину приповедања трауматизоване протагонисткиње, те наглашава одговор и отпор маргинализованих чланова друштва и њихове одбрамбене механизме "ван сваке мере" друштвено-прихватљивог понашања, односно изван бинарне логике која карактерише сукобљену заједницу у роману. Скрајнуто женско искуство сукоба у Северној Ирској подразумева различите нивое трауме који се у раду анализирају у контексту историје, политике сећања, родног идентитета, и посебно приповедних и метапоетичких поступака који подривају и делегитимизују велике ратне приче.

Ksenija KONDALI
     Aleksandra VUKOTIĆ