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‘STORIES ARE A DIFFERENT KIND OF TRUE’:
GENDER AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN
CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN’S FICTION

Siân White

IN ANNA BURNS’S *Milkman* (2018), a character–narrator known as ‘middle sister’ describes her experience, decades before, of being stalked and harassed by an older, prominent republican paramilitary known as ‘milkman’. His unwanted and sinister attention had radically altered her public reputation and relationships. From the narrative present, that adult self names the offences against her, accounts for her eighteen-year-old self’s withdrawn response, and identifies the cultural forces that enabled both the harassment and the silencing as she never could have then:

[P]eople here were unused to words like ‘pursuit’ and ‘stalking’, that is, in terms of *sexual* pursuit and *sexual* stalking . . . If such a thing was entertained to go on, hardly even then would our society take it seriously. It would have been on a par with jay-walking, maybe less than jay-walking, given it was a woman’s thing . . . the Hollywood phenomenon of sexual prowling would have been overshadowed, as everything here was overshadowed, by the main topic of conversation in this place.¹

Though Burns sets *Milkman* in an unnamed place at a time dominated by ‘political problems’ – sectarian violence in what is clearly Northern Ireland during the Troubles – she compares its gender politics to ‘the Hollywood phenomenon of sexual prowling’, placing middle sister’s story among other stories of harassment, assault, abuse and rape that have ultimately surfaced with the #MeToo movement.² Amid institutional failures to hold perpetrators accountable and competing ‘he said, she said’ accounts is an increasing tendency by authorities or the public to dismiss accusers’ and survivors’ testimonies as unreliable. Such dismissals are founded in judgements about both the teller (as too damaged or suspect, or over-reacting to a ‘misunderstanding’) and the telling (as too non-linear or reliant on fallible memory). The result is the discrediting of female victims, whose very victimisation renders them and their stories unbelievable. Middle sister joins this public conversation by explicitly naming the nuanced, covert and pervasive forms of predation she experienced, and revealing how her young, experiencing self was acculturated to doubt her own perceptions: ‘I did not know intuition and repugnance counted.’³ Though powerless to control what happened to her then, she can claim authority to tell her story now.



Figure 20.1 In the narrow terraced streets built for working people every house except the last needs only three walls. Northern Ireland, 1965. Photo credit Philip Jones Griffiths/Magnum Photos, printed with permission.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, Burns does not opt for the realist mode to assert middle sister's credibility, but instead chooses a style that self-consciously calls attention to the act of narration. Middle sister presents her critique of real-world sexual politics in an often absurdly humorous manner, taunting those who might mistrust her telling, as if to say, 'I'll give you something to disbelieve . . .'. Burns's choice brings to mind other Irish women writers who use unconventional forms to portray victimised women's and children's experiences. Emma Donoghue's *Room* (2010) and Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) each uses a version of first-person present-tense narration to show how victimisation shapes the narrators' perceptions and responses to their circumstances, and to grant them telling authority.⁴ Together, these three novels demonstrate that self-conscious or experimental forms are especially suited for truth-telling and for challenging the gendering of unreliability.

Their narrative forms are not without precedent, however, and each of these novels references and modifies literary antecedents in specific ways to address the contemporary moment. In Donoghue's *Room*, the first-person narrator is five-year-old Jack, who understands little about his circumstances, living captive with his mother in her kidnapper and rapist's backyard shed (called 'Room'), somewhere in North America. The dramatic irony created by Jack's innocence recalls Henry James's experiment in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) with using a child's perspective to deliver a scathing indictment of adults' moral corruption. Whereas James depicts Maisie's perception

of divorce and adultery using a past-tense, third-person limited narration, Donoghue raises the stakes by portraying criminal sexual depravity in a first-person, present-tense form that narratologists call 'simultaneous narration', where Jack does the impossible of experiencing and narrating simultaneously.⁵ The novel begins, 'Today I'm five. I was four last night going to sleep in Wardrobe, but when I wake up in Bed in the dark I'm changed to five, abracadabra.'⁶ The juxtaposition of his innocence with the grave circumstances is more poignant because his moment-to-moment experience co-occurs with his narration.

McBride's novel similarly offers the Girl's interior experience and narrative authority, though the style and sexual circumstances are different. The novel traces the Girl's life – from fetus to her suicide in young adulthood – during which she witnesses her brother's terminal illness and suffers verbal, physical and sexual abuse by family members and strangers. The syntactically irregular style, by turns streaming and fragmented, recalls James Joyce's *Ulysses*, harnessing the unmediated and spontaneous authenticity of Molly Bloom's interior monologue and the associative fragments of Leopold Bloom's free indirect discourse. Whereas *Ulysses* frankly portrays characters' sexual lives in Molly's and Bloom's recognisably consistent styles, however, McBride's *A Girl* renders extreme, sustained sexual violence and emotional distress in an evolving style that incorporates both the inaudible mental transcript associated with internal monologue and the speaking quality of narration, which the Girl directs to her brother: 'Two me. Four you five or so. I falling. Reel table leg to stool. Grub face into her cushions. Squeal. Baby full of snot and tears. You squeeze on my sides just a bit. I retch up awful tickle gigggs.'⁷ Despite its different prose, McBride's novel resembles Donoghue's since the Girl, like Jack, experiences and narrates simultaneously. The novel shows her trauma but also lets her speak.

Middle sister's narrative self-consciousness in *Milkman* has eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antecedents. Her digressions recall Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, as critics have noted, where the 'homodiegetic' Shandy – a witness and teller of others' stories – openly admits to how little he knows, undermining the conventional omniscience of the narrator. Middle sister's digressive and meandering style likewise undercuts her authority, but with greater irony because her narration is 'autodiegetic': she tells her own story,⁸ like the narrator of a fictional autobiography such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Both *Jane Eyre* and middle sister explicitly reference the narrating process, but middle sister's metanarrativity goes beyond direct reader address. Her self-consciousness and intertextual references playfully question the relationship between representational form and reality. In different ways, then, these contemporary women novelists adapt their literary precursors' techniques and preoccupations to expose realities of gendered power – where victims are feminised and therefore deemed unreliable – which contemporary society has failed to address.

By using narrators who speak in unexpected ways with unexpected agency, these novels challenge the association of femininity with an unreliability based in incapacity or incompetence, an association as dominant in the Anglophone literary tradition as in current discourses surrounding sexual predation. Novels like Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* or Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* focus on protagonists that, by today's standards, are predatory; taken on their own narrative terms, though, the novels privilege and even invite sympathy for those protagonists.⁹ Meanwhile feminine narrators – whose

authority is qualified or even discounted – are deemed unreliable (because, for example, of incapacity, as with Benji in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*), and unreliable narrators, especially those who broadcast their narrative incompetence, read as feminised (like the cuckolded John Dowell in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*). By contrast, these women writers undermine that consensus by embracing the paradox of the narrator's political marginalisation and narrative empowerment, and challenging a binary of 'victim or agent' by allowing the narrating protagonists to tell their stories as both. In the process, the writers expose extreme but seemingly pervasive sexual depravity and demonstrate that non-mimetic or experimental fiction is particularly ideal for conveying and legitimising victims' stories.

'Stories are a different kind of true': Narrating the Real

In Donoghue's *Room*, narratives and narration are central to Jack's subjecthood and agency. His worldview is shaped by both his youth and his confinement to the windowless shed that 'Old Nick' has constructed and where Jack was conceived and born. The narration remains limited to his understanding, even as he and his mother adjust to life outside Room after Jack enables their escape midway through the novel. The language hews to Jack's idiosyncratic syntax – what Fintan O'Toole calls 'elaborate baby talk'¹⁰ – which moves between conventionally marked direct speech and indirect thought. While some critics liken its form to the modernist interior monologue because of its fidelity to Jack's perspective, the novel is clearly a narration.¹¹ Unlike James's Maisie, whose perspective is privileged but merely shown, Jack as narrator has the editorial authority to compress time, respond to immediate events and reflect upon his experiences, showcasing his intellectual development. His innocent portrayal of horrific circumstances stands in tension with that narrative authority.

Though Jack cannot present directly what he cannot understand, neither can he be dismissed as unreliable. After all, he effectively reports details and events of his world, providing enough information, for example, for the reader to infer the almost-nightly rapes of his mother from his metonymic rendering through counting the bedspring creaks.¹² Though his reports are descriptively accurate, his narrow frame of reference limits his ability to interpret and evaluate what he perceives¹³:

I'm not actually sure if [Old Nick] is real for real. Maybe half? He brings groceries and Sundaytreat and disappears the trash, but he's not human like us. He only happens in the night, like bats. Maybe Door makes him up with a *beep beep* and the air changes. I think Ma doesn't like to talk about him in case he gets realer.¹⁴

He perceives Ma's attitude correctly without comprehending the context or its significance for her. Yet his reasoning, based on what he knows, is sound and he regularly revises his understanding as he learns more. That competence and tenacity bolster his authority as a narrator.

At the same time, such authority stems primarily from his facility with narrative, which many representational modes have modelled for him. Having been immersed in visual and narrative texts throughout his life – television shows, drawings, paintings, books, the mirror and Ma's oral tales – he is comfortable with their fictional elements without perceiving fictionality as unreal. His 'real' includes the cartoon character Dora,

the book character Alice (in Wonderland), the Baby Jesus, living things like Spider, Mouse and Plant, and anthropomorphised objects like Jeep and Remote. All are equally his friends:

Dora is a drawing in TV but she's my real friend, that's confusing. Jeep is actually real, I can feel him with my fingers. Superman is just TV. Trees are TV but Plant is real . . . Skateboards are TV and so are girls and boys except Ma says they're actual, how can that be when they're so flat?¹⁵

He perceives their visual and tactile differences but does not initially understand the relative realness of visually flat or round figures, or of two-dimensional screens or drawings compared with three-dimensional objects, despite Ma's explanations: 'Lots of TV is made-up pictures – like, Dora's just a drawing – but the other people, the ones with faces that look like you and me, they're real.'¹⁶ His conception of 'real' lies not only in what he sees, but in how he relates to them. He builds his community from a social instinct that is foundational to his role as narrator.

His observation of their flatness, though, signals his burgeoning awareness that form dictates content: an object's representation determines what seems real and what does not, and what makes an artist's – or narrator's – rendered reality credible. E. M. Forster's classification in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) of caricatured, unidimensional characters as 'flat' and the more credibly complex, fleshed-out characters as 'round' resembles the contrast in visual art between the flat, undifferentiated figures in early Christian art and the mimetic depictions of physical roundness by Renaissance artists.¹⁷ By contrast, Jack's ideas of flatness and roundness echo an abstract, modernist understanding, where two- and three-dimensionality have no necessary relation to mimetic 'realness'. The visual art in their makeshift gallery – including work by Leonardo da Vinci, Claude Monet and Pablo Picasso from the cereal box 'Great Masterpieces of Western Art' series – showcases how artists' formal innovations emphasise different perspectives, and together they illustrate how form produces meaning. Jack recognises the 'truth' conveyed in Pablo Picasso's abstract and political Cubist painting *Guernica* (1937), to which his narration gives the most attention. Its critique of political circumstances – in which Nazi Germany, in collusion with Francisco Franco, bombed a Basque town – by portraying the event's horrific impact on powerless people and animals essentially tells Jack's story back to him. The painting's presentation of multiple perspectives simultaneously produces flat, iconic figures of mother and child, whose uncanniness Ma recognises:

Ma thinks *Guernica* is the best masterpiece because it's realest, but actually it's all mixed up, the horse is screaming with lots of teeth because there's a spear stabbed in him, plus a bull and a woman holding a floppy kid with his head upside down and a lamp like an eye, and the worst is the big bulgy foot in the corner, I always think it's going to stamp on me.¹⁸

Though his 'but' suggests he disagrees with his mother's 'realest' assessment, he considers the depicted subjects identifiable, though 'mixed up', and his concern that the bulgy foot can literally breach its two-dimensional frame indicates that he understands these flat figures as equally real to round figures. He perceives the visual difference, but

his judgements about realness do not assume that mimetic form is realer than abstract form. His intuition that the painting resembles his and Ma's aberrant life implies that the painting's content has impacted him, its estranging portrayal expressing a truth. By demonstrating that representation can convey something true, even if it does not look 'real', the visual art primes him to understand the implications of fictional stories for his real life, and to use narration to think, act and make meaning.

Jack's understanding of himself relative to his perceptions and what is 'real' – an understanding that ultimately enables him to act and to narrate – crystallises through Ma's own representational efforts. Her drawing of him while sleeping, a mimetic rendering created while he was not consciously present and from a perspective he cannot see, is one of several representations indicating that things exist beyond his perception. Ma uses stories to entertain and educate him, habituating him to accept fictionality. Stories, she says, are neither literally true nor fake: 'Stories are a different kind of true.'¹⁹ Her storytelling expands his frame of reference about their circumstances: a stolen mermaid story illustrates the concept of kidnapping and the *The Count of Monte Cristo* introduces the possibility of escape.²⁰ Her narratives reveal storytelling to be an effective instrument for communicating what exists beyond his perceptions, enabling him to conceptualise a larger reality and narrate it into existence.

His authority as a perceiver thus develops into his authorship as a narrator, which simultaneous narration showcases. Narrativising reflects Jack's current, subjective understanding of reality and also leads him to new questions and realisations, which in turn revise his understanding and produce a new narrative. This process recurs throughout the novel, marked by deictics (*italics added*) that signal the order of events and realisations:

Whenever I think of a thing *now* like skis or fireworks or islands or elevators or yo-yos, I have to remember they're real, they're actually happening in Outside all together. It makes my head tired . . .

Before I didn't even know to be mad that we can't open Door, my head was too small to have Outside in it. *When* I was a little kid I thought like a little kid, but *now* I'm five I know everything . . .

When I was four I thought everything in TV was just TV, *then* I was five and Ma unlied about lots of it being pictures of real and Outside being totally real. *Now* I'm in Outside but it turns out lots of it isn't real at all . . .

When I was four I didn't know about the world, or I thought it was only stories. *Then* Ma told me about it for real and I thought I knowed everything. But *now* I'm in the world all the time, I actually don't know much, I'm always confused.²¹

Jack uses narrative chronology to reconcile his previous understanding with new information. Though his certainty wanes, his repeated returns to global summaries – 'now I'm five I know everything' or 'now I'm in the world all the time, I actually don't know much' – suggest he understands narrativising as a tool for meaning-making, not just reflecting but actually bringing a reality into existence. He implicitly understands, however, that producing reality requires an opportunity to tell and an audience to listen. Throughout his life he has occupied the audience position, brought into the wider culture through stories and with his social world populated largely by fictional characters. When Ma explains their captivity in terms of a story – 'We're like people in

a book, and he won't let anybody else read it'²² – she activates Jack's intuition that narrative's capacity to produce reality depends on a crucial, fundamentally social contract between teller and audience. A story's truth is actualised only when expressed and received. In preventing their story from being read, Old Nick denies them their chance at existence. Jack's agency as a story-world actor and narrator stems from the implied conclusion that he must escape and then narrate so they can exist. Donoghue's novel thus demonstrates that fictionality is essential to conveying truth: fictional narratives tell Jack the truth about his victimhood and subsequent power, while the novel's non-mimetic narrative situation tells Jack's different kind of true.

'Forgive me brother for I have sinned': Narrating for Redemption

Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* exposes a degeneracy hiding in contemporary Ireland through the Girl's particular experience with an escalating cycle of incest, abuse, promiscuity, rape and violence that spans her lifetime. The other characters are referenced only by their roles relative to her (brother, mother, grandfather, uncle), which makes the family an archetype while also limiting the frame to her perspective. The novel claims its place in an Irish tradition by incorporating the Irish language and religious, folkloric and literary discourses – four section titles, for example, reference the religious symbol 'Lambs', folklore's 'Land Under the Wave', the Catholic rite 'Extreme Unction' and W. B. Yeats's 'The Stolen Child' – while its evocations of Joyce's experimental form lend it particular cultural weight. McBride juxtaposes these references to a romanticised Irish culture – where even Joyce's transgressive novel has been canonised – with real, ongoing and unaddressed sexual violence and depravity. The novel's narrating features, meanwhile, complicate the Girl's status as a mere victim and the novel's status as a typical interior monologue. The hybrid form lends her authority and credibility by showing her experience of violence and also letting her tell her story, for her reasons.

To acknowledge the novel as a telling is to legitimise her claims to acting and narrating with purpose. She answers her powerlessness over significant people and events – her abusive and strictly religious mother, her rape at thirteen by her uncle, and the removal and return of her brother's tumour that disables and then kills him – with actions to reclaim power: in her ongoing relationship with her uncle, in seeking out sex with strangers, and even in her suicide. While still a teenager, she converts her victimisation into fantasies of reciprocity and omnipotence, implicitly taking responsibility for actions that she understands as assertions of agency. During her uncle's visit when she is thirteen, before the rape, she interprets his predatory grooming as welcome mutual attraction:

How much secret pleasure to stare at uncle in my mind's eye. Think of him come across the room. I have him . . . What's in me? There's something twist. Must move or shake him. Uncle. Think I must give him some surprise . . . What. Is lust it? That's it. The first splinter. I. Give in scared. If I would. Stop. Him. Oh God. Is a mortal mortal sin . . . I am. Going to the bad. To the somewhere new.²³

She does not perceive her uncle as dangerous but instead connects their mutual attraction to her own emerging sexual awareness and sinful desire. Even during the rape itself, the grammar presents her action – scratching his face – as a comparable assault

on his body: 'Done and done to. Doing. I'll do all of this . . . He is digging into me and me to him . . . And his cheek. My nail my nail. That's it. I've done to him. What's done in me.'²⁴ Despite the evident disparity between what each is doing to the other – she has marked him for a week, while he has marked her for life – her language imagines them as an equivalency. The discrepancy between her interpretation and what is clearly child rape produces a dramatic irony akin to Jack's, though the older Girl understands enough to value imagining herself as an active participant rather than a victim. When, as a young adult, she confronts her uncle about the rape and he apologises,²⁵ they initiate an ongoing relationship, and her participation expresses both her response to trauma and her claim to selfhood. Even as the relationship becomes more violent, she believes she chooses and benefits from it. Though the causes and consequences of her behaviour are important and suggest that her capacity to make good choices is compromised, what she reports and how she interprets her experiences are equally legitimate.

Her declared purpose for her sexual and narrative agency is her close identification with her brother, whose disability and death position him as a Jesus figure, a sacrificial son with the ability to redeem. She also believes, however, that he requires her protection, and she uses promiscuity to defend and avenge him: 'He was the first off. Worst off. I begin. Now I know full well what I can do. For me and for you.'²⁶ She discovers 'Saying yes is the best of powers,'²⁷ and her aggressive call to sexual activity echoes an invitation to battle: 'There is no Jesus here these days just Come all you fucking lads. I'll have you every one any day. Breakfast dinner lunch and tea.'²⁸ Though such encounters grow increasingly violent, she reaffirms her determination, once proclaiming, 'My will be done.'²⁹ In replacing God's possessive pronoun with her own, she implies her omnipotence by co-opting and revising internalised religious discourses for her narrative.

That act of revision is one of several ways in which she claims her authority as a narrator and the novel as a telling. Another is that she directs her second-person 'You' to her brother throughout the novel, from the womb until even after he dies. That death registers in her narration as a lone paragraph: 'Who am I talking to? Who am I talking to now?'³⁰ As her designated audience, he provides both the impetus for her narration and the purpose for her actions. She positions him as a priest, audience to her explanatory and defensive apologia, and witness to her confessional atonement:

I can do myself. Damage. That's it if I would. Do you hear me? Is it ever time for you to understand. . . . Forgive. Forgive me that that I didn't see. Look out my eyes. That I didn't know what I was doing though I did though I did. Oh do you love me. Can you love me. Do you love me still. My sins. My grievous. Woe my wrong. I went out to him and said do what you will if you want. If you're able will you save me from that . . . If I knew what I do. I don't so by the way I'm telling you. I'm warning now what a monster I have become . . . Wash oh yes that's it wash away. My. Sin. . . . Can you love me even after that? Even now. I won't ask and I won't say that inside myself or ever out again. Forgive me brother. I know not what I do. Forgive me brother for I have sinned.³¹

By substituting 'brother' for 'Father' in the final prayer, and begging him to understand, love, save and forgive her, she signals her perceived responsibility for what she

has done and endured. The ongoing use of second person and her references to his hearing and her telling affirm her status as a first-person narrator.

Significantly, the dominant present tense signals that, like Jack, the Girl narrates as she experiences. Her emotional, mental and bodily responses register at the sentence level, as when, for example, excessive punctuation disrupts conventional syntax:

I thought was nothing left. Now you've. How he knows it. He knows it is there for the beating the stealing the. I. Some place around that. No. I am there. Now you've. I. What's it like in the silence when. You. I. 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.³²

The repeated grammatical subject 'I', and its isolation from a predicate by full stops, simultaneously convey the Girl's first-person narrative status and her hesitation about how to articulate herself as a subject. While the fragmentation might seem to scramble the pronouns 'I', 'he' and 'you', evacuating them of context or meaning, throughout the novel the narrative stays engaged with the Girl's direct experiences with events and people, and her pronoun referents correspond with the immediate context at almost every stage. The unconventional prose presents the violence and trauma of any given event without devolving into nonsensical jibberish. Other typographical irregularities – the abnormal use of capitalised or lower-case lettering, the transposition of letters and the omission of spaces – depict her emotional experience of a chaotic moment by speeding up or slowing down the prose: 'There he does it. Says come on now it's what's good you and us. Stick it ionthedon'tinside wwherhtewaterisswimming hthroughmynoseandmouth throughmysense myorgands sthroughmythrough. That. A. My brain. He. Like. Now.'³³ Unlike dynamic but consistent stream-of-consciousness forms such as Molly Bloom's, the grammatical irregularities in *A Girl* increase and change as the violence and emotional distress increase:

Garble lotof. Don't I come all mouth of blood of choking of he there bitch there bithc there there stranlge me strangle how you like it how you think it is fun grouged breth sacld my lungs til I. Puk blodd over me frum. In the next but. Let me air. Soon I'n dead I'm sre. Loose. Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. CleaR. He stopS up gETs. Stands uP.³⁴

These visual distortions of language render violence and rape on the page, conveying the immediate impact of violence on the body and mind. The chosen formal effects recall modernist typographical experiments, like those of Ezra Pound and Guillaume Apollinaire. Like its modernist precursors, the novel demonstrates that the written or visual text can portray what a mediating external narrator and grammatically conventional prose do not. McBride's novel combines the effects of internal monologue (where a breathless stream can express emotional urgency and authenticity in the moment) and visually experimental form (where effects can be shown on the page) with the empowerment implicit in first-person narration. The experimental first-person, present-tense form enables a direct and unsanitised depiction of sexual violence without undermining the Girl's credibility as a purposeful teller of her story.

How we interpret the novel's form is entirely linked to how we interpret the Girl's agency as a subject. Critical responses largely treat the novel as an internal monologue

or a stream of consciousness, what Dorrit Cohn calls a ‘simulation of an unwritten, inaudible language’ being overheard or instantly transcribed rather than spoken.³⁵ Those critics who do refer to a ‘narrator’ do not attend carefully to the differences between internal monologue and narration. Many insist that syntactic and typographical irregularities indicate that the Girl lacks coherent subjecthood or consciousness, and that the form mimetically represents her psychic disintegration into madness. Some call the form ‘pre-conscious’,³⁶ as if the Girl’s narrative comes from a foetal or semiotic state. These approaches reduce her to a victim whose subsequent actions stem entirely from unconscious compulsions, as if she lacks capacity to make choices. They discount the power she explicitly claims and undermine her narrative credibility.

The textual signals that the novel is a narration – that is, the Girl’s insistence that she narrates to a specific audience for a specific purpose – suggest instead that formal irregularities serve to convey her immediate experience. After all, modernists like Virginia Woolf and James Joyce normalised the idea of ordinary consciousness as flowing or fragmented. Their innovations disrupted an assumed link between healthy or coherent consciousness and syntactic wholeness or grammatical conventionality. McBride herself resists that association, describing the novel’s form as ‘trying to make language cope and more fully describe that part of life that is destroyed once it begins to get put into straightforward grammatical language’.³⁷ For McBride and her modernist precursors, formal experimentation signals not mental illness or damage but consciousness itself. While the form directly conveys the experience of victimisation, the Girl’s assertions of power cannot be dismissed. She is a victim who nevertheless is able and has the right to make choices, even though it means she bears some responsibility for the harm she suffers. Denying the agency she claims as an actor and narrator compounds the disempowering and violent acts committed against her. McBride’s novel thus brings a politics of gender and sexuality together with a politics of narration to challenge assumptions about who has the capacity and right to act and speak.

‘I’m not making this up’: Narrating in Retrospect

In Burns’s *Milkman*, middle sister’s sometimes absurd narration spans several weeks, from milkman’s first contact to his execution by state authorities, and depicts the terror of living under paramilitary rule in a mainly Catholic, nationalist district in late 1970s Belfast. She never explicitly names the place and refers to most characters by their relationships to her, as with ‘maybe-boyfriend’, ‘third brother-in-law’ and ‘longest friend’.³⁸ Such indirection communicates her subjective view but, more importantly, depicts recognisable and tacitly understood circumstances in which naming can raise suspicions of informing, an offence often punished by merciless torture and execution. Her narrative illuminates the entrenched social behaviour and prejudices that undergird the political conflict, where tribal unity depends on strict conformity to traditional gender performances and to dominance by hypermasculine men. Such conformity is enforced as much by social surveillance, gossip and shaming as by violence or threats of violence; it discourages honest emotional expression, and marginalises non-normative individuals, called ‘beyond the pales’, who are mentally ill or defy gender or sexual norms. In a community that mistrusts police, hospitals and modern telephones, any efforts to address women’s ‘issues’ are meagre and oversimplified. The kangaroo court, for example, categorises crimes against women as degrees of rape; it

does not penalise Somebody McSomebody for punching middle sister, but convicts him of '1/4 rape' for entering the women's bathroom to find her. Middle sister's narrative implicitly blames this pervasive misogyny and repression for her harassment and her inability to act or speak in her defence.

Her present-day narrative agency contrasts that lack of agency in the story-world. Reviewers of *Milkman* consistently mischaracterise the voice as a teenager's, overlooking its significance as a retrospective narration.³⁹ Though composed of layers of subjective experience and mediated by memory over time, such retrospection is shaped, in content and form, by the narrator's authority. Her digressive style certainly demonstrates her terror and obsession then, but she never loses her place in the story entirely, indicating her narrative self-possession now. She can claim informed credibility because of both her decades of hindsight and her comic and self-referential style. For example, sometimes her special names for others, like 'maybe-boyfriend' or 'Somebody McSomebody', appear in other characters' speech. In another instance, a working-class neighbour uses a rhetoric and vocabulary too formal for the informality of the moment to express thinly veiled threats to maybe-boyfriend for acquiring part of a British-made car.⁴⁰ She often depicts characters in comically ironic terms – like her preternaturally intelligent and curious 'wee sisters', whose delight in having Thomas Hardy, Franz Kafka and Joseph Conrad read to them is unexpected because of their age and presumed level of education – without undermining the overarching circumstances' plausibility. Her rendering of repressive, often terrifying circumstances lends her authority, not despite such self-consciousness but because of it.

The self-consciousness includes direct references to the act of telling. After summarising her community's attempts to address 'women's issues' as 'Rape and all that jazz was practically what it was called', she asserts, 'I'm not making this up,'⁴¹ acknowledging an audience that might either share her incredulity or disbelieve her story. She also emphasises the story as a written account, where visual textual elements can convey meaning. When longest friend references milkman and middle sister says 'she gave him a capital letter',⁴² the capitalisation indirectly and concisely communicates milkman's elevated community status. But middle sister does not just alter typography – she narrates about altering it. Similarly, she later presents her sister's swearing not by directly quoting her, by declaring that she swears, or even by deploying the visual symbols (*%#&^\$, called 'grawlfixes') often used to censor swearing, but by writing those symbols out: the sister 'exploded into advanced asterisks, into percentage marks, crossword symbol signs, ampersands, circumflexes, hash keys, dollar signs, all that "If You See Kay" blue french language'.⁴³ The narrative enacts multiple conversions – with words on the page substituted for symbols that themselves stand in visually for swear words (as in the F-U-C-K example, too) – that evoke without explicitly naming the expletives. In these examples, the multiple layers of mediation do signifying work for her, signalling her narrative as a version that is both plausible and cleverly constructed.

Her references to cultural texts do similar work. An early encounter with a pornographic magazine prefigures her later use of high and low cultural forms to represent story-world events and her resulting realisations. At the end of the first chapter, moments after an unwanted encounter with milkman, she slips on a discarded centrefold, 'a double-page spread of a woman with long dark, unruly hair, wearing stockings, suspenders, something too, black and lacy',⁴⁴ and glimpses the misogynist sexualisation that will dominate her subsequent experiences. Again, though, she

describes without naming the object, leaving its significance inexplicit. The pictured woman and the implied sex act are doubly depersonalised: she is dressed to perform desire and consent for an implied sexual encounter that is delinked from the emotional, relational component of intimacy. Moreover, she performs for a camera, distanced from other people, so her image can be reproduced and distributed publicly for countless anonymous spectators. Middle sister stumbles unwittingly into spectatorship, becoming equally implicated in the exploitation: 'She was smiling out at me, leaning back and opening up for me, which was when I skidded and lost balance, catching full view of her monosyllable as I fell down on the path.' The narrator uses 'monosyllable' (which is ironically polysyllabic) to euphemise 'cunt', evoking its multiple colloquial connotations and the image of its genital referent without using the actual word. She also describes the woman's actions as aimed specifically at her: the woman opens up 'for me' and directs 'at me' that phony performance of a come-on, the centrefold's smile. The pictured woman seems to invite, not force, middle sister to identify with her and to participate, too – as looker or, perhaps, co-performer. That middle sister skids just after recognising the invitation, however, instead implicates the pictured woman in her own exploitation, and suggests that she is soliciting middle sister to participate in a misogynist and sexually dangerous culture. The implicit pressure of a visual offer that middle sister cannot refuse foreshadows both the communal pressure to be milkman's girl and her powerlessness over others' perceptions about her involvement with him. Her slip on the magazine, then, is a slip into a social reality that sexualises her against her will and where women are complicit in their own objectification. She only catches the full, real view as she goes down.

That view reveals the misogynist community to be rigid and repressed, a condition that middle sister's extra-textual references confront and illustrate. Rare moments of authentic desire and love draw her attention. Twice she witnesses genuinely passionate kisses – between her brother and his former girlfriend, and between maybe-boyfriend and his best friend, 'chef' – but uses a perfume advert to describe them. She calls them 'Jean Paul Gaultier kiss[es]', 'one of those "you'll never be kissed like this until you smell like this" Christmas French perfume advertisements'.⁴⁵ The 2012 perfume ad campaign she references offers video lessons on *The Art of the French Kiss*, where consumers choose their fragrance and create a personalised video to be shared on social media. In claiming mastery of the French kiss genre, the ad peddles not just perfume (by French *haute couture* designer, Gaultier) but also specialised kissing skills and, implicitly, the underlying passion. The ad campaign commodifies human connection and appeals to a consumer culture that values public broadcast over private, genuine experience. Middle sister produces irony by evoking this cultural cliché to describe kisses that she clearly recognises as profound and genuinely loving, contrasting the rare, real-world referents – the kisses – with the cultural repression and commodification of authentic love.

Her capacity for irony has roots in certain realisations she had at the time. Milkman's harassment coincides with her burgeoning ability to see outside the behaviour and prejudices to which she had been acculturated. Accordingly, she connects her community's norms about gender and sex with their entrenched epistemological beliefs about what they know and how they recognise it. The entrenchment is rooted in fear, which leads them to mistrust anything new or non-normative, whether sexual agency or an alternate perspective. When her French teacher at the adult learning college suggests her students

observe a sunset's colours, they collectively refuse to acknowledge the sky could be other than the 'official' blue or the 'unofficial' blue, black and white:

If what [the teacher] was saying was true, that the sky – out there – not out there – whatever – could be any colour, that meant anything could be any colour, that anything could be anything . . . So no. After generation upon generation, fathers upon forefathers, mothers upon foremothers, centuries and millennia of being one colour officially and three colours unofficially, a colourful sky, just like that, could not be allowed to be.⁴⁶

That the received wisdom could be wrong introduces a potentially destabilising relativity where 'anything could be anything'. When middle sister herself actually looks at the sunset, she sees a multicoloured and constantly changing impressionist canvas of all colours except blue, but her community cannot perceive beyond already accepted terms. They do not merely forbid deviation, but cannot even imagine it. Her incipient critical distance, however, sets her apart from them and informs her future narration.

In one episode, middle sister explicitly links their intransigent views to a particular form of representation. Near to her brother's genuine kiss, a gathering audience watches a 'strange spectacle' of two men fighting silently in the street:

They were still at it, those men, in silence, doing so too, with those cigarettes dangling. Perhaps it had been a fight too quiet, too prolonged, too puzzling, a disconcerting fight, difficult to gauge, one which worked largely perhaps by association of ideas, *some modern, stylistic art nouveau encounter*. Being a conventional audience, however, *used to chronological and traditional realism*, the majority began to doubt that those men, indeed, were fighting at all.⁴⁷

What middle sister calls a 'fight' is unsettlingly performative, even 'art nouveau'. That early twentieth-century applied arts movement, which used expressive, dynamic lines and organic asymmetry to aestheticise the ordinary or useful (like household objects or structural features of architecture) bridged the gap between utilitarian and fine arts, between aesthetic value and use value. What she calls an art nouveau fight is both aestheticised and useful. The audience, however, does not recognise it as such because of preconceived ideas about what a fight is in both form (such as sound or duration) and utility (to resolve conflicts, avenge wrongs or express anger). The spectacle they witness is too performative or stylised; they doubt the fight is real because of its form. In framing their doubt in aesthetic terms – 'chronological and traditional realism' – middle sister critiques their rigid inability to distinguish between the rendering and the rendered. But she also challenges the false promise of so-called realism, that a form can correspond directly to its content, or that a representation must be mimetic for the content to be believable. Her own narrative, by contrast, uses non-mimetic self-referentiality to convey real-world experiences. Her story-world fight example therefore signals what her own narrative is doing, cautioning her audience not to dismiss her own story as unreal because of its non-mimetic form.

In these examples, Burns's novel enacts Oscar Wilde's reversal of artistic mimesis in which life, as middle sister tells it, imitates art.⁴⁸ In her stories – about the Impressionist sunset, the stylised fighting, even the commercial facsimiles of passion and desire – art

not only illuminates but essentially invents life. She asserts her authority to craft her story and to elect its representational form, and her metanarrative style proclaims her credibility rather than undermining it. With the benefit of hindsight, she knows why stories are disbelieved, and has the language and erudition to contextualise her story in broader cultural and aesthetic traditions. Like Donoghue and McBride, Burns complicates the relationship among victimhood, personal agency and reliability by showing how a politics of gender intersects with a politics of form.

These women writers thus mount heretical challenges to orthodoxies of gendered power and of experimental, especially modernist, narrative forms. Paige Reynolds has argued that some contemporary Irish women writers use modernist form as a tool to critique patriarchy,⁴⁹ implicitly including in that critique modernists, like Joyce, who retain significant cultural power though they might have disregarded, failed to address or exacerbated gender problems. Donoghue, McBride and Burns engage their literary heritage to illuminate the darkest parts of patriarchy: the pervasive misogyny and predation, and the broader cultural forces that enable them – the ineffectual or toxic masculinity, the complicity of women and bystanders, the shaming or shunning of non-normative people and the denial of survivors' reliability. Predation, it seems, is part of our culture – normalised, often hiding in plain sight – while its victims struggle to act and speak for themselves.

The most experimental modernist narrative forms, of course, deliberately circumvented the speaking narrator in order to offer unmediated access to characters' mental interiority, to show rather than tell. The contemporary novels discussed in this chapter recuperate narrative mediation as an expression of gendered power while still preserving the intimacy of interiority. Their experimental techniques – their non-mimetic narrative situations, syntactic and typographical irregularities, and self-conscious intertextual references – challenge any association of an objectively knowable reality with omniscience and reliability, while making persuasive claims for their narrators' authority. These novels feature the seemingly least credible narrators – the innocent child, the victim of sustained violence, the ironic and self-referential teller – using narrative styles so often deemed unreliable: subjective, non-linear, fragmented, digressive or reliant on memory. As a result, paradoxically, the novels compellingly assert the legitimacy of the protagonists' experiences and abilities to convey trustworthy, though fictionalised, versions of 'real' events. Their overtly constructed representations participate in an artistic tradition with aesthetic stakes, rendering fictional worlds that starkly expose contemporary, real-world sexual politics.

Notes

1. Burns, *Milkman*, pp. 182–3. Italics in the original.
2. Burns finished the novel in 2014 but, in a 2018 interview, notes 'the publication was very timely, in terms of the sexual scandal and abuse issues, and whether you're believed or not' in an interview by Tom Gatti. See also Smith, 'Open Secret', who reviews it as a #MeToo novel, and reviews by Wills, 'The Unnameable'; Kilroy, 'Creepy Invention'; Leith, 'Pretentious'; Miller, 'Coming of Age'.
3. Burns, *Milkman*, p. 6.
4. Donoghue, *Room*; McBride, *Girl*. See critical responses to the novels by Fogarty, 'Like a baby'; Bracken and Harney-Mahajan, 'Recessionary Imaginings'; Cahill, 'Girlhood';

- O'Toole, 'Rape of the Narrator'; Enright, 'A Girl – Review'; and Abdel-Rahman Téllez, 'Embodied Subjectivity'.
5. On simultaneous narration, see Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction*, pp. 96–108, and Huber *Present-Tense Narration*, pp. 69–86.
 6. Donoghue, *Room*, p. 3.
 7. McBride, *Girl*, p. 7.
 8. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 245.
 9. Though Mann's novel conveys Aschenbach as tormented by his obsession about the much younger boy, the third-person limited narration nevertheless offers little critical distance from that obsessive desire. In *Lolita*, first-person narrator Humbert's unreliability is a question of ethics rather than competence: his self-justifications signal his place on the margins of a normative ethical frame while also proclaiming his narrative power.
 10. O'Toole, 'The Rape of the Narrator'.
 11. Huber, *Present-Tense Narration*, p. 56.
 12. Donoghue, *Room*, p. 37 and others.
 13. See James Phelan's six types of unreliability in *Living to Tell about It*, pp. 49–53.
 14. Donoghue, *Room*, p. 18. Italics in the original.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
 17. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*.
 18. Donoghue, *Room*, p. 21.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
 20. *Ibid.*, pp. 67–8, 123.
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 70–1, 102, 277, 313.
 22. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
 23. McBride, *Girl*, pp. 50–1.
 24. *Ibid.*, p. 58. This quotation – 'Done and done to. Doing. I'll do all of this' – echoes Joyce's *Ulysses*, specifically Stephen Dedalus's words in 'Scylla and Charybdis' (*Ulysses*, 9.651, 653) and, later, Leopold Bloom's thoughts in 'Sirens' (11.907–9).
 25. McBride, *Girl*, pp. 106–7.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
 29. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
 30. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
 31. *Ibid.*, pp. 151–2.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
 33. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
 34. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
 35. See Cohn, *Distinction*, pp. 37, 103–6.
 36. On 'preconsciousness', see Cahill, 'Girlhood', pp. 158–60.
 37. McBride qtd in Alice O'Keeffe, 'Interview – Eimear McBride', p. 3.
 38. See Hutton's fascinating analysis of middle sister's 'unique lexicon' ('The Moment', p. 366).
 39. See, for example, Miller, 'Coming of Age'. A notable exception is Wills, 'The Unnameable'.
 40. Burns, *Milkman*, pp. 27–9.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
 42. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
 44. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
 45. *Ibid.*, pp. 272–3, 294, 275.

46. Ibid., pp. 72–3.
 47. Ibid., p. 273, italics added.
 48. Wilde, ‘The Decay of Lying’, pp. 1–37.
 49. Reynolds, ‘Introduction’, p. 4.

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