

‘I’ll Say the Bad Words I Have’: Anne Enright and Eimear McBride’s Subversive Modernisms

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There has been an increasing tendency within literary critical discourse to refer to at least two developing trends, both in the context of Ireland and internationally. The first is an upsurge in the volume of quality work being produced by young Irish writers, and the second is a resurgence of novel-writing that re-engages modernist aesthetics, which can be seen in the fiction of writers such as Will Self, Tom McCarthy and Mike McCormack. It’s worth remarking on the centrality afforded to women’s writing in the articulation of both of these developing strands, such as Sara Baume, Claire-Louise Bennett, Joanna Walsh, Eimear McBride and Anne Enright. Brian Dillon, in his review of Bennett’s *Pond* (2015) in the *London Review of Books*, sounds a dissenting note, touching on the somewhat parochial overtones of this nascent discourse:

She [Bennett] has somewhat misleadingly been set aside Eimear McBride as representative of a modernist turn among young writers in Ireland, especially women writers. Misleadingly, not because they don’t share something — a commitment to voice, a syntax that is speedy, bristling and strange at first encounter — but because they sound so different...If there is a modernism of sorts at work in current fiction in Ireland, it’s less a return in the manner called for by authors such as Tom McCarthy, and more an acknowledgement of the variety of experimental traditions on which young writers now draw (Dillon, 2016, 37–38).

Dillon’s critique of the prominence of national identifications in the defining of contemporary modernism is astute, but elides the problematic qualities of this deeply contested term. The study of modernism has undergone significant changes since the first issue of *Modernism/modernity* was published in 1994, and what is referred to as the new modernist studies began to bring an increasingly revisionist approach to the study of twentieth century literatures. Modernism is no longer deployed solely as a designator for a literary tradition formulated by a cluster of writers in continental Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather, it now encompasses

discourses as varied as the visual arts, film, fashion, architecture, scholarship and dance. The consequent reframings of nineteenth and twentieth century cultural forms, has led to a proliferation of categories within the study of modernism itself such as 'late modernism' (Bixby, 2013, 465–466), 'post-war' modernism (Whittier-Ferguson, 2014, 26) and 'cold modernism' (Burstein, 2012, 24). Space does not allow us to anatomise each of these categories individually, but overall they have served to re-radicalise contemporary notions of modernist aesthetics by de-emphasising grand narratives of breakage and insurgence which have historically reproduced the tone of modernist polemics, emphasising their distance from their literary antecedents, ostensibly in order to promote their own works (MacKay, 2007, 15). This is reflective of broader changes underway in literary criticism more generally, where structuralist and diachronic approaches have fallen out of favour due to their tendency to fix texts within totalising and teleological conceptual models (Jameson, 2002, 12–13). Dillon is correct to be sceptical of the critical usefulness of 'Irishness' in considering these writers; the term is limiting, especially when many of them cite non-Irish authors as influences (Hansson, 2011, 52; International Dublin Literary Festival, 2017; WNYC Studios and *The New Yorker*, 2011; The Biblio File, 2008). Dillon perhaps overlooks the usefulness the term modernism can now provide in accounting for sameness as well as difference, especially in moving beyond the familiar James Joyce/Samuel Beckett polarity operative in many discussions of modernism in Irish literature. In reviews of both Enright and McBride's prose, these are the two names that are invoked most frequently, to the detriment of other authors that would be just as illustrative. In this article I will contrast Enright's novel *The Gathering* (2007) and McBride's novel *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2014) in order to establish a groundwork for discussing new Irish modernism in manner that is indebted to a heterogenous notion of many modernisms over a singular modernism.

In so doing it may first be necessary to provide a very brief outline of the political milieu that these authors respond to, and the ways in which the Irish state has engaged, and failed to engage, with the literary avant-garde. For a variety of reasons, the Free State and the Republic have historically not been places hospitable to artistic expression or critique. Both the poet Eavan Boland and the historian Diarmaid Ferriter have written on the fraught relationship which has existed between the arts and the

state in a way which is useful in characterising the state's intolerant culture of governance, and the means through which it, with the help of the Catholic church, dismantled that which it regarded as critical of Catholic teaching (Ferriter, 2012, 542; 547). The Irish constitution granted the church a special position within the state, and under many administrations government policy was informed by encyclicals generated by the Vatican (Foster, 1985, 547). This had negative consequences for the living standards of the nation's female population, as in the failure of Noël Browne's mother and child scheme and the patchwork nature of the Irish welfare state with social payments remaining lower than their British counterparts (Foster, 1985, 572). Precedence should be attached to the material effects of these policies on Irishwomen's lives, but the effects of the Church's policing of the cultural sphere is symptomatic of this broader national culture of coercion. The attention of organisations such as the Irish Vigilance Association, the Catholic Truth Society and the censorship board, to the frustration of many authors within the literary scenes of the time, tended to fall disproportionately upon experimental works of literature. The first review of *Ulysses* (1922), being blocked by a magazine's printer in anticipation of reprisals from the Catholic Truth Society, as well as the hostile reception which met Edna O'Brien's novels attests to the persistence of a milieu hostile to formal and thematic innovation especially when coupled with criticism of the status quo. David Dickson argues that this coercive attitude, combined with a dearth of public and private funding for the arts, amounts to a sense that state policy as a whole encouraged a standardisation of expression. It should be noted that Dickson gives examples of spaces in which exceptions to these rules were possible; the Irish Film Society gave uncensored screenings, the Theatre Royal and orchestral music performances could be said to have flourished but, one should remember that one's ability to access these spaces depended upon one's social class (Dickson, 2014, 522; 507).

Enright herself has spoken of a 'resistance to the new' when she began her own career in the late eighties and early nineties. As a young Irish author at this time, selling one's writing abroad was a financial necessity, as new writers were not reviewed in the Irish establishment journals or newspapers. This resulted in the creation of an ambivalence feedback loop, wherein one would not be part of the cultural conversation in Ireland, but a concern as to how one was representing the nation abroad would

persist. For example, *The Gathering* was criticised at the time of its publication in 2007 for dealing with the matter of child sexual abuse at a time in which Ireland was economically affluent (The Seattle Public Library, 2011; The Irish Arts Centre, 2015), demonstrating that Enright's works deploy protean formal and thematic responses to a marketplace and socio-political episteme that is intolerant of experimental fiction and women's writing; an attempted formulation of an aesthetic of dissent. In *The Gathering*, the act of narrative itself is made self-conscious via its metaphorical association with bones, a motif which is initiated in the novel's opening paragraph:

I need to bear witness to an uncertain event. I feel it roaring inside me – this thing that may not have taken place. I don't even know what name to put on it. I think you might call it a crime of the flesh, but the flesh is long fallen away and I am not sure what hurt may linger in the bones (Enright, 2008, 1).

The protagonist of the novel, Veronica Hegarty, who is speaking in this section, thereafter provides the following description of a cuttlefish bone: '[it is] so pure that I have to ship it in my pocket, and I comfort my hand with the secret white arc of it' (Enright, 2008, 1, emphasis added). If we were to accept that the word 'arc' is semantically loaded, and also refers to a narrative arc, then the act of narration is construed as a private experience, one which is carried out in order to provide a kind of private consolation in the aftermath of one's experience of trauma. This can be read as a synecdoche for the novel; *The Gathering* traces Veronica's attempts to come to terms with her brother Liam's suicide, another larger attempt at the construction of a secret white arc. Veronica re-creates the events surrounding Liam's death through use of empirical, imaginative and anamnestic data. However, the novel makes clear that her account is unstable; there is no one cause, and even a multiplicity cannot satisfactorily account for Liam taking his own life. As such, narratives serve Veronica in the same way that the cuttlefish bone does, as a small and insufficient comfort, even on the individual level for which it was initially devised. Her chronicle also fails in giving rest to the uneasy spirits which populate the text such as her brother Liam, and her grandmother Ada, who make appearances during otherwise mimetic sequences in the text's action, according to the familiar schema by which what has been repressed will inevitably return.

The novel also displays a broader understanding of the historical position of women in Irish society, reflecting on how Veronica's mother and grandmother processed their negative emotions, or more accurately, did not, when Veronica was young: 'I don't know what they called these episodes. Single women had 'breakdowns', but in those days married women just had more babies, or no more babies' (Enright, 2008, 46). The political critique contained within *The Gathering* lies in references such as these to the results of the Irish state's repressive and coercive social policies, but also in its rejection of the possibility of accounting for the extent of the tragedy, as in the following passage in which Veronica describes a mass grave at the former mental institution in Portrane:

Just one cross – quite new – at the end of a little central path. A double row of saplings promise rowan trees to come. There are no markers, no separate graves. I wonder how many people were slung into the dirt of this field and realise, too late, that the place is boiling with corpses, the ground is knit out of their tangled bones (Enright, 2008, 46).

The tangled knit of human remains stands in contrast to the discrete cuttlefish bone of the novel's opening and does not present an auspicious starting point for the realisation of a root cause. This failure of narrative to explain away the mass institutionalisation carried out within Irish state has a continuity within Enright's oeuvre in its disavowal of textual authority: 'however culturally historically I'm placed I don't claim an authority in the text...[being] from a class of people who isn't particularly empowered about writing books...Irish women, this gives me a way of doing it, by writing through other voices' (Boston College, 2007). Enright therefore writes from a self-conscious position of enforced liminality but in such a way that reverses its terms. By writing relative to a historical record that is pockmarked with silences, both enforced and otherwise, narratives can only fail us. *The Gathering*, via its stylistic and formal architecture, demonstrates this failure within the context of late twentieth century Ireland, and the beginning of a process which subverts or interrogates the enforced silences of the earlier years of the free state.

The notion of Enright's modernism as a kind of resistance should be kept in mind when discussing *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*. McBride's modernist praxis is in some ways coterminous with the modernist aesthetics as resistance that Enright's fiction exemplifies, but it is also worthy of consideration on its own terms, for the reason that McBride is the novelist of the current generation who is suffering most egregiously under the comparisons to either Beckett or Joyce, which are present, in every review of her novels (Wood, 2014; Brantley, 2016; Mars-Jones, 2013). This leads to a kind of interpretative distortion whereby McBride's works are not the object of study so much as an ongoing level of attention to a reified canon of male modernist writers, a tendency which McBride has noted and critiqued (London School of Economics, 2017). It is on the basis of these comparisons that Claire Lowdon has charged McBride's prose with redundancy and artificiality, arguing that because Joyce is among McBride's most forthright influence, which is debatable, her writing must be judged by the benchmark established by Joyce's writings (Lowdon, 2016). From an attention to the way in which *A Girl* uses language, it is clear that *A Girl* is more formally aligned with *Finnegans Wake* than with *Ulysses* albeit with a far less overt attention to the materiality, or referential capacity of language.

There are less puns, and obviously less written in another language, as well as less dependence upon leitmotifs in the conveying of narrative information. But it would be a mistake to regard this as McBride's failure to live up to her twentieth century modernist forebears, considering this is a role that has been largely imposed upon her by critics rather than one her or her writing has claimed. The example from the opening paragraph that Lowdon cites reads as follows:

For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day (McBride, 2014, 3).

'Wait and hour and day' carries with it a vague association with the phrase 'a year and a day' but it doesn't strictly make sense in that context and there is no clearly defined reason for the semantic distortion. But just as there is no requirement that McBride's novels compose a mythic framework in the same way that the *Wake* does, there is no reason that these words necessarily have a grand or multi-faceted significance. If we

approach these examples from the perspective of McBride's own concerns, we will be capable of arriving at a more sophisticated understanding of her work, one which doesn't amount to downgrading it because of its perceived inadequacy in relation to Joyce. McBride has spoken of her interest in nineteenth century novels, texts which are less discernibly self-consciousness about language and its processes of meaning-making. McBride has cited the work of nineteenth-century Russian naturalistic author Fyodor Dostoevsky as a significant influence, particularly as an example of proto-modernism; modernism in a nascent stage of its development wherein human intersubjectivity was beginning to make itself known within the novel while the tenets of naturalistic fiction were still trying to accommodate it. McBride's point is one which is very much of a part with the current discourse within new modernist studies, which avoids entering the accounts of traditionally canonical modernist authors and attempts to emphasise instead the influence of genres such as realism, naturalism and popular literature in modernism's development, rather than relegating these genres and naturalism to a Victorian pre-history due to their pessimism, environmental determinism and perceived stylistic inadequacy, in comparison to the stylistic transcendence certain aspect of the modernist movement has trafficked in historically (Budd, 1995, 42, 43; Joyce, 2014, 1, 5). Critics such as Emer Nolan and Joe Cleary have emphasised the importance of naturalism to comprehending the development of Irish modernism in particular, and how the legacy of the Irish literary revival has tended to elide the influence of naturalism on authors such as Joyce and George Moore (Joyce, 2014, 84–85). While remaining aware of the fact that *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016) is not the novel under discussion, it's important to note the ways in which it stages this interplay between the formal traits of modernism and naturalism. Within the context of what the author calls *The Lesser Bohemians*' 'modernist monologue' there is a very melodramatic narrative in which Stephen, the novel's love interest, outlines his life story to Eily, the novel's protagonist, doing so in a directly rendered monologue. McBride has said that this is a very deliberate formal mechanic which is pertinent to the text's thematic concerns, as it is a novel about relating to another person in spite of one's traumatic past (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 2017).

What makes McBride's particular modernism distinct then, is the importance it attaches to the conveying of narrative information to the reader in directly sensuous

terms (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 2017). McBride has also expressed frustration at the disproportionate level of attention her idiosyncratic use of language receives in reviews at the expense of her content, expressing ambivalence with regard to the merely formally adventurous wing of the modernist movement exemplified by an author such as Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (1925) due to its formalist solipsism, arguing that *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* emulates the physical experience of attending theatre; regarding this aspect of the text is more significant than its use of language (London School of Economics, 2017; Shakespeare and Company, 2017). The importance McBride attaches to the book's content, at the expense of the difficulty of its form, is fundamental to what we might call McBride's reader-centric literary ethic, and represents at least a partial reversal of one's expectations regarding her relationship to modernism, in that it is conceptualised, not as an estrangement from reality as such, but an simulated attempt to move the work closer to 'the reality' of phenomenological experience in a primordial state, before the stage at which feelings or sense-impressions take conceptual shape. One example of this formal mechanic in action can be seen in phrases such as: 'My thud cheeks up' or 'This are boring' (McBride, 2014, 35), which lead the reader to decode the text at only a partial remove from a reality that it otherwise quite discernible.

This is done in such a way that provides the artifice of an intimacy, or a proximity to wavelengths of nascent thought, in a state of abstraction, before having been actualised into words or strictly defined concepts. In a way that further demonstrates the significance of the plot, and how determined the novel's style is by its *syuzhet*. The following paragraph which represents a conversation between girl, and her brother, referred to as 'you', about the way he experiences the world may prove illuminating in locating the impetus behind the way in which *A Girl* is written:

Don't you knock your brother's head. You stumble. Not that bad. And walking into doors...is blind eye at side like in eyelid? No. Like water? No. Like glass? You said it is like nothing at all. It must be something. What? And words, trace stammers. Trace stammer of (McBride 10).

In case this paragraph requires parsing, it represents a conversation between the two characters in which girl is attempting to understand how her brother's brain injury, due to a tumour having been removed when he was an infant, effects his ability to perceive the world. Any insight we as readers get into his perception of reality is defined negatively, girl offers the comparisons of water or glass, and he rejects both of them, offering instead that it is 'like nothing at all'. One should note the significance of the first two suggestions, which are distinct in that both are transparent and are traditionally posited as analogies for how realistic or mimetic literary art functions. According to the terms of these analogies, we have our attention drawn not to the work itself necessarily, but to what it opens out onto. In actuality these two mediums do refract the light that passes through them, these mediums do effect what we see, albeit in subtle ways. So it isn't realism that is being dispensed with, but referentiality. It is an attempt to generate a language that points to nullity and surfeit.

To conclude, what I have said about Enright and McBride as authors is the product of close readings of their works set next to remarks they have made about them in interviews and at public events. Therefore, I find it unlikely that they will articulate their novels in such a way that will make them easy to encompass as part of a notion of contemporary modernism that is either neat or consistent. What this might point to is the inadequacy of the notion of modernism that is most frequently deployed, one which MacKay refers to as institutionalised, or establishment modernism which confine us to hopelessly overdetermined generic or temporal limitations (MacKay, 2007, 15). Modernism should instead be considered relative to its unique significance for individual authors.

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