Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro
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Marcela Santos Brigida

"Reading-while-Walking": A Nomadology of The Troubles in Anna Burns's Fiction

Rio de Janeiro
2022

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Tese apresentada como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Doutor, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Estudos de Literatura.

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Davi Ferreira de Pinho

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DEDICATÓRIA

Tudo que eu fizer de bom será sempre dedicado à minha mãe.

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Eu não seria pesquisadora sem Davi Pinho. Pelas inúmeras trocas e conversas serei eternamente grata.

Agradeço à banca pela colaboração e pela leitura atenta e afetiva que enriquece este trabalho.

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Later on, lying in my little box room with its painted moon and stars, I think of when we were little, and how Mammy was a magical storyteller. My room is stuffy. I reach up and push open the skylight, as far as it can go, and I lean out into the night. There is no wind, and no light, tonight, and the waters of Gweebarra Bay are cold and taut as the surface of a mirror.

Lucy Caldwell

Her da'd been kind to the foxes, leaving scraps out for them. Other people weren't so keen. She remembered the week before her da'd disappeared, the week the foxes were found dead around the estate. Poisoned, her da'd said – foxes were too fly to be trapped. He'd been disturbed by the dead foxes. Had gone out to help John Murphy gather them up for skinning. He wasn't around to see the fox population recover in the years after. Her ma'd put a stop to Majella feeding the foxes the way he da'd done. And she'd banned Majella from having another cat about the place.

Michelle Gallen

RESUMO

BRIGIDA, Marcela Santos. *"Reading-while-walking":* a nomadology of the troubles in Anna Burns's fiction. 2022. 165 f. Tese (Doutorado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2022.

Os três romances publicados de Anna Burns têm a Irlanda e o Conflito da Irlanda do Norte (1968-1998) em seus centros. Esta tese argumenta que, se lida em um referencial nomadológico (BRAIDOTTI, 2011; DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987), a escrita de Burns tenta desfazer a violência sectária ao interferir direta ou indiretamente nas narrativas históricas cristalizadas do Conflito, ao se envolver com a literatura como uma linha de fuga de construções binárias estagnadas, e ao testemunhar o trauma coletivo do conflito como princípio estético e político de sua ficção, especialmente se tomarmos *Milkman* (2018) como ponto de partida para tal investigação. Neste romance, o hábito da Narradora de ler livros enquanto caminha surge como um impulso nômade que ela põe em prática não apenas pela recusa em aderir às categorias fixas disponíveis para ela em uma comunidade organizada pela diferença sectária, mas também por um processo de reescrever o espaço público e tornar-se inacessível por meio de um desaparecimento na literatura, seu "reading-while-walking". Esse hábito, que a leva a ser alienada como uma "beyond-the-pale", aparentemente faz parte de um esforço no sentido de um não-engajamento, mas inadvertidamente chama mais atenção para ela. Isso também se torna um grande ponto de controvérsia no romance, pois o corpo da Narradora, também identificada como Irmã do Meio, torna-se objeto de intenso escrutínio. Organizada em três capítulos, esta tese produz uma leitura da escrita de Burns no contexto dos estudos irlandeses contemporâneos e propõe que seus três romances podem ser lidos como uma nomadologia do Conflito da Irlanda do Norte. O capítulo 1, "Anna Burns's Troubles Fiction: The Belatedness of Trauma", argumenta que a ficção de Burns pode ser lida como uma resposta à lógica progressista do Acordo de Belfast (BFA) e sua prescrição para "seguir em frente". Este primeiro capítulo analisa *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007) e *Milkman* (2018) a fim de estabelecer uma visão geral das estratégias narrativas de Burns e de suas diferentes abordagens do trauma e do Conflito nestes romances. O capítulo 2, intitulado "Milkman as a Response to Sectarian Binaries: Anna Burns's Cast of 'Beyond-the-Pales'", propõe que os "beyond-the-pales", os párias do distrito em *Milkman*, atuam como uma máquina de guerra deleuziana (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. vii) no romance, insurgindo-se contra qualquer tipo de poder sedentário. O capítulo analisa todos os personagens colocados nesta categoria no romance, bem como as origens do termo na história irlandesa. O capítulo 3, intitulado "Middle Sister's Literary Companions", aborda o papel da Narradora como contadora de histórias e divide as referências e alusões literárias feitas em *Milkman* em três categorias: livros lidos pela Irmã do Meio que estão ligados a *reading-while-walking*, livros das suas irmãs mais novas e referências significativas feitas de forma breve. Considerando a centralidade que a literatura e o ato de ler assumem no romance, este capítulo final se debruça sobre as escolhas de Burns, argumentando que as obras e os modos de leitura da Irmã do Meio são cruciais para seu processo de tornar-se Narradora. A coda desta tese oferece um comentário final sobre os resultados obtidos no processo de pesquisa e apresenta novos rumos e ramificações que esses temas podem oferecer no futuro.

Palavras-chave: Anna Burns. Nomadologia. Conflito da Irlanda do Norte. Literatura irlandesa. Ficção contemporânea.

ABSTRACT

BRIGIDA, Marcela Santos. *"Reading-while-walking":* a nomadology of the troubles in Anna Burns's fiction. 2022. 165 f. Tese (Doutorado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2022.

Anna Burns's three published novels have Ireland and the Troubles (1968-1998) at their centres. This thesis argues that, if read in a Nomadological framework (BRAIDOTTI, 2011; DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987), Burns's writing attempts to undo sectarian violence by directly or indirectly interfering in crystallised historical narratives of the Troubles, by engaging with literature as a line of flight from stagnant binary constructions, and by bearing witness to the collective trauma of the conflict both as an aesthetic and a political principle of her fiction, especially if we take *Milkman* (2018) as a point of departure for such an investigation. In this novel, the Narrator's habit of reading books while walking about comes as a nomadic impulse that she puts to practice not only through a refusal to adhere to the fixed categories available to her in a community organised by sectarian difference, but also through a process of rewriting the public space and making herself inaccessible through a disappearance into literature, her "reading-while-walking". This habit, which has her shunned as a "beyond-the-pale," is apparently part of an effort towards non-engagement, but it inadvertently draws more attention towards herself. It also becomes a major point of contention in the novel, as the body of the narrator, also identified as Middle Sister, becomes an object of intense scrutiny. Organised into three chapters, this thesis produces a reading of Burns's writing in the context of contemporary Irish studies and offers that her three novels can be read as a Nomadology of the Troubles in themselves. Chapter 1, "Anna Burns's Troubles Fiction: The Belatedness of Trauma", argues that Burns's fiction can be read as a response to the Belfast Agreement's (BFA) progressivist logic and its prescription to "move on". This first chapter looks into *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007), and *Milkman* (2018) in order to establish an overall view of Burns's narrative strategies and of her different approaches to trauma and the Troubles in those novels. Chapter 2, titled "*Milkman* as a Response to Sectarian Binaries: Anna Burns's Cast of 'Beyond-the-Pales'" proposes that the "beyond-the-pales," the district's outcasts in *Milkman*, act as a Deleuzian war machine (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. vii) in the novel, rising against any kind of sedentary power. The chapter looks at all the characters placed into this category in the novel, as well as at the origins of the term in Irish history. Chapter 3, titled "Middle Sister's Literary Companions", looks at the Narrator's role as a storyteller and divides the literary references and allusions made in *Milkman* into three categories: books read by Middle Sister which are connected to reading-while-walking, wee sisters' storybooks, and significant references made in passing. Considering the centrality that literature and the act of reading take up in the novel, this final chapter leans over Burns's choices, arguing that the works and the modes of Middle Sister's reading are crucial to her process of becoming a Narrator. The coda of this thesis offers a final commentary on the results obtained from the research process and presents new directions and ramifications these subjects might offer in the future.

Keywords: Anna Burns. Nomadology. The Troubles. Irish Literature. Contemporary Fiction.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

While Anna Burns had been a published novelist for seventeen years upon her 2018 Booker Prize win for her third novel, *Milkman,* the impact of the announcement on the author's reach across the globe as well as on the reception of her earlier works is undeniable. Following Burns's victory, her novels *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007) were reissued by 4th Estate in the United Kingdom and Ireland, and the latter was published in the United States by Graywolf Press for the first time (2020). *Milkman* was translated to several languages, and beyond the palpable commercial effects of winning one of the literary world's most prestigious awards, this recognition of Burns's talents as a writer, which came two years after the Brexit vote, can be juxtaposed with a wider convoluted political context. In the background of *Milkman*'s publication and selection by the Booker panel, heated arguments involving the UK deal with the European Union and the stance to be adopted in relation to the Irish border were taking place and making headlines. The accusation, raised by some, that British leaders disregarded Ireland and the intricacies of the Peace Process throughout the negotiations with the EU (MCKENZIE, MORRIS, 2020; BEHR, 2020) exposes the fragility of post-Agreement Anglo-Irish relations as well as the continuity of the Troubles as a legacy into the present. This tension highlights the precarity and the fault lines of the politics of "prescribed forgetting" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 199), which has been applied as an argument for "moving on" in Northern Ireland, and the centrality of Ireland as a question for contemporary political studies.

This thesis argues that Anna Burns produces fiction that refuses the imposition to forget and to move on by mourning the Troubles in the public arena through literature as assemblage, undoing what critics have identified as the Belfast Agreement's (BFA) progressivist logic. Burns wards off the sectarian organisation of the conflict and the prescriptions of the BFA to "move on" by writing her novels in a framework of Deleuzian nomadology. In *Milkman* (2018), the novel that acts as my point of departure, the nomadic impulse of the narrator is exercised and manifested not only through her refusal to adhere to the categories available to her in a community organised by sectarian difference and logic, but also through her disappearance into literature in the public space, "reading-while-walking".

As I started this research, the fact that *Milkman*'s narrator occupied a place of otherness as a young girl in her community primarily because of her ramblings or her "reading-while-walking" made me wonder if it would be productive to read her within a

tradition of *flânerie* in English-language fiction. After all, as a *flâneuse*, she appears in the novel as a disruptive, transgressive figure, which might contribute to the thesis that Burns employs *flânerie* as a point of access to identity as becoming for a character that evades the binary categories available to her. In this sense, it is interesting to note that the *flâneur* was first described by Charles Baudelaire in 1863 as a quintessential figure of modernity. As a writer, the *flâneur* was characterised by Walter Benjamin as one who stood "on the threshold of the metropolis and of the middle class" (BENJAMIN, 2006, p. 40) and who sought refuge in the crowd. As a *flâneur*, the writer could observe the goings of the city without being observed and produce a sellable narrative.

However, the ability to mingle in the capitalist city of the nineteenth century was an exclusively male feat. Gender roles established by the rise of the bourgeoisie ensured that the crowd would offer a woman not anonymity, but notoriety, which makes the history of *flânerie* a heavily gendered one. Hence, in fiction and outside of it, the very existence of the *flâneuse* as a creative woman who seeks "refuge" in the crowd has been questioned (Cf. WOLFF; VICINUS). Still, Walter Benjamin suggests that *flânerie* constitutes not only a trait of the writer who goes to the marketplace "ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer" (BENJAMIN, 2006, p. 66), but also a form of perception, discussing different incarnations of the *flâneur*. Bearing this in mind, studies such as Deborah Epstein-Nord's *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (1995) emphasise that *flânerie* shapeshifts, accommodates other expressions and lends itself to reconfiguration. Indeed, as the *flâneur* began to appear in fiction written in English, his female counterpart, the *flâneuse*, was not simply a creative woman who strolled to observe and write, but one who, as the term streetwalker informs us, would have a disreputable social standing, taking up the form of the prostitute or the pickpocket.

Reading in the gaps of Raymond Williams, Epstein-Nord establishes that, while walking alone in the city immediately presented women as "endangered or dangerous" (EPSTEIN-NORD, 1995, p. 241), ever since the rise of the novel we can find women who penetrate the public arena through transgression and produce an urban vision of their own. From Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) to Victorian novels such as Charles Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1848) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), the disruptiveness of the woman who breaks through interdiction to stroll produces distinct traits for the literary figure identified as the *flâneuse*. Thus, if the *flâneur* and the *flâneuse* share a common principle as literary figurations that produce critiques of modernity, their critiques differ precisely because of the social constructions and demands of masculinity and femininity.

Since social customs and legislation have made the Western city available for creative women in late modernity, it is interesting that, if not specifically as a *flâneuse* but still as a woman who insists on trespassing boundaries in a demarcated city, *Milkman*'s narrator continues to raise questions of gender and to resist the fixed identities enforced by the capitalistic logic of commodification. Leaving behind the history of *flânerie*, this thesis then establishes that the kind of "reading-while-walking" practised by Burns's contemporary narrator comes rather as a trope for nomadic subjectivities. In other words, *Milkman*, as a novel that takes place in a late-twentieth-century State of Exception fractured by sectarian violence and riddled with strict gender constructs, establishes the narrator's subjectivity in a position of alterity in relation to the categories of accepted, fixed identity. This is elaborated by Burns around the character's impulse towards mobility in a community where even moving between districts could lead to reprimands. Thus, read in a Nomadological Framework, *Milkman* upholds Rosi Braidotti's idea that, since we "live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization, and nomadization", the "in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation, precisely because they are zigzagging, not linear and process oriented, not concept driven" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 217). The narrator's defining trait – her reading-while-walking – is hence considered here primarily as a figuration of nomadic subjectivity rather than within historical, theoretical, and literary discussions of *flânerie*.

As I explore in the following pages, in *Milkman* this nomadic subjectivity is framed by the narrator's efforts to bear witness to her singular traumatic experience within the collective trauma of her community. And, if "trauma involves rupture: it is 'an embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present'" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 203), any process of mourning an event as traumatic as the Irish Troubles cannot adhere to the construct of a "fresh start," one defended by the Belfast Agreement (BFA). Stephanie Lehner tells us that "the rhetoric of the peace process is notably marked by the repeated entreaty to leave what has happened behind" (LEHNER, 2014, p. 273). This goes back to the Downing Street Declaration of 1993. The document, Lehner reminds us, was issued by the British and Irish governments, and "expresses the hope that a process of reconciliation would 'remove the conflict' and 'overcome the legacy of history' (Joint Declaration on Peace: The Downing Street Declaration 15 December 1993, Paragraph 1)" (LEHNER, 2014, p. 273). This is a language that is maintained in the Belfast Agreement, which, "while acknowledging the need to deal with the 'legacy of suffering' and the importance of remembering", "is marked by the deliberate injunction to move on" (LEHNER,

2014, p. 273). This rhetoric, which seeks to define clean breaks between the past, the present, and the future, is thus aligned by critics of the language of the Agreement with capitalist interests. To Cillian McGrattan, "rather than a new ethical dispensation, Northern Irish society's reconciliation is an economic one, a reconciliation with the dynamics of a world system and the postmodern, an ideology whose only compass is the flow of capital around the globe" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 174-175).

Thus, grief and mourning for the past are expected to be enclosed and easily contained into sanctioned spheres. This policy is bound to generate silencings and erasures by repression, but it also ignores the fact that "the disruptive force of memory refuses to keep the past in the past" (LEHNER, 2014, p. 274). McGrattan further argues that the "real antagonist of memory" is "deferral, or the consigning of the past to a depoliticised realm" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 182) and that "forgetting/oblivion and remembrance/memory are two sides of the one coin" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 182-183) in a grieving process. He problematises the privatisation of the Peace Process as a depoliticisation of collective memory:

> The problem with the privatisation of the peace process, of the depoliticisation of the political, is not therefore to do simply with forgetting – although it does involve wilful forgetting and the distortion of collective memory (Judt 2005); it concerns the muting of or erstwhile removal of validity from alternative points of view to those held by cultural, political, or governing elites. However, depoliticisation and deferral, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, are ultimately fallacious projects: the 'deafening consensus' that they create in insisting on particularistic memories or narratives about the past simply 'arouses a suspicion . . . [and] awakens us where it would like to put us to sleep' (Derrida 1994:97). (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 182-183)

One could align McGrattan's criticism with Eve Patten's rejection of confessional realism as a framework to produce literature on the Troubles. In "Women and Fiction 1985-1990" (1990), the critic denounced that throughout the conflict there was "a sense of stasis in Irish women's fiction, and responsibility for it is shared by market forces *and* political ego" (PATTEN, 1990, p. 6). She added that "in Ireland, there is a vested interest in producing women's writing which is stylistically transparent, reactionary, anti-intellectual, anti-philosophical, and realist to the point at which it slips easily into journalism or polemic" (PATTEN, 1990, p. 15). She cited Frances Molloy's *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985), Deirdre Madden's *Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), and Clare Boylan's *Black Baby* (1988) as novels that evaded the "the tendentious, biographical, monotone trend" based on the "distracting 'identity' quest" she hoped the next five years would see the end of (PATTEN, 1990, p. 16). More than thirty years have elapsed since Patten published her essay and confessional realism is not a mode that is

representative of Irish women's fiction: authors like Lucy Caldwell, Anne Enright, Sally Rooney, Maggie O'Farrell, Eimear McBride and, of course, Anna Burns, are examples of that. Her argument is of interest here, for, like McGrattan, she denounced an – oftentimes organised – effort to homogenise which is precisely what Anna Burns's "jigsaw style of approach" (BURNS, 2020a) to fiction as assemblage will deactivate throughout her three novels.

An effort to "manage" traumatised communities and individuals or at least to produce a satisfactory narrative has often produced a problematic picture of victimhood. Anna Burns grew up in Ardoyne, a district of nationalist majority in North Belfast which suffered the deaths of ninety-nine residents throughout the Troubles (ARDOYNE COMMEMORATION PROJECT, 2002), and which is "surrounded on three sides by unionist/loyalist areas" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 10). In order to record their stories and honour their deceased, but also due to a perceived sense of silencing, the Ardoyne Commemoration Project (ACP) organised a book titled *Ardoyne: The Untold Truth,* recording the names and stories of the Ardoyne victims told by their friends and relatives. In their testimonies, many of them speak "of the brutality of a system that treated ordinary people with utter contempt and colluded to ensure lack of disclosure, accountability and justice" (ACP, 2002), or relate a sense of "powerlessness, marginalisation and resistance" (ACP, 2002). The editors add that "to compound personal and collective grief, sections of the media have intruded, misrepresented events and given less than equal recognition to all victims" (ACP, 2002), labelling Ardoyne a "terrorist community" (ACP, 2002). They add that previous books on The Troubles had "published details about victims, often incorrectly and without consent, causing further distress to relatives" (ACP, 2002). This sense of unequal recognition and of a hierarchisation of victims can be aligned with Judith Butler's investigation of grief in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) and its political implications and instrumentalisations via the following formulation and question:

> some lives are grievable, and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death? (BUTLER, 2004, xiv-xv)

If we are to accept the ACP's and the survivor's claims as true, it becomes clear that by labelling Ardoyne victims as terrorists, authorities are also branding their deaths as non-grievable. Although it is a different kind of "terrorist" Butler discusses in her text, as she

addresses the context of the United States and the so-called War on Terror, it seems significant that this is a cognomen that automatically banishes subjectivities from normative humanity, regardless of context.

Anna Burns's fiction produces a critique of the progressivist logic inherent to the proposal of a "fresh start" as the best way to honour the victims of the armed conflict that took place during the Troubles (1968-1998). *Milkman*, my point of departure to the thesis that Anna Burns's three novels can be read as a nomadology of the Troubles, refuses to forget and to move on without exposing its grief, thus mourning the Troubles in the public arena, undoing the rhetoric of documents like the Downing Street Declaration and the Agreement. With special interest in Burns's narrator and protagonist who evades the reality of violence by "reading-while-walking", *Milkman* appears as a gendered response to this enforced forgetfulness. If walking the city frames this young woman's trauma within the collective trauma of the Troubles, it also offers the nomadic possibility of refusing the sectarian identities available to her. On the other hand, Burns's debut novel, *No Bones* (2001), carnivalises the conventions of the realist Troubles novel, while *Little Constructions* (2007) subverts the aesthetic of another typical form adopted in Troubles fiction, the thriller.

Shane Alcobia-Murphy argues that the attempt to break away from the "legacy of the past" is problematic, as it does not address the sources of grief and antagonism that have its roots in the Troubles and that remain a question today (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 199). Further, the critic asserts that "the lack of reparation, justice, and closure for the families of the 'Disappeared' makes it difficult, if not unconscionable, to wholly embrace the progressivist rhetoric of the Good Friday Agreement or to fully sign up to a process of 'prescriptive forgetting' and 'shared amnesia'" (2016, p. 219) which some would argue necessary "for the sake of reconciliation and the continued cessation of civil conflict" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 219), a point the ACP has exemplified by exposing the effacement and silencing of victims, both those who were killed and those who survived. Alcobia-Murphy then argues that Northern Irish writers have often reacted against the prescription to promote "a willed sense of closure" by "focus[ing] on the dangers inherent in forgetting and seek[ing] to represent, embody, and bear witness to a victim's experience in their texts", a project "fraught with complications since trauma, by definition, is unknowable and unrepresentable" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 219). This thesis will show that, in her fictions, Anna Burns has done that through different strategies. By aligning Alcobia-Murphy's studies of the Irish context to Butler's political theory, Chapter 1, titled "Anna Burns's Troubles Fiction: The Belatedness of Trauma," proposes that Anna Burns's three

novels, *No Bones, Little Constructions,* and *Milkman*, reveal a wider project of fiction writing on the Troubles. I propose that Burns's project conceives literature as assemblage (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 4), ultimately functioning as an exercise against "prescriptive forgetting" (CONNERTON, 2011, p. 34-36).

In Chapter 2, titled "*Milkman* as a Response to Sectarian Binaries: Anna Burns's Cast of 'Beyond-the-Pales'", I focus on Burns's third novel, proposing that in the Narrator's habit of "reading-while-walking", one that both engages her with literature as a reader and calls attention to her current role as a storyteller, and a survivor of trauma and violence, the writer establishes a methodology to escape fixed identities in favour of nomadic subjectivities. Although *Milkman*'s narrator and protagonist is a Catholic whose brothers are "renouncers-of-the-state", that is, who are involved with a paramilitary group similar to the IRA, she repeatedly refuses to engage with the conflict in any way. Furthermore, it is because she draws away from the violent reality of a "hair-trigger society" where "violence was everybody's main gauge for judging those around them" (BURNS, 2018, p. 2) that the novel's narrator is set apart and not only noticed by Milkman – meaning the man and the structures of surveillance of the community itself –, but also turned into an object of curiosity and reproach. She reads nineteenth-century novels "because I did not like twentieth-century books because I did not like the twentieth-century" (BURNS, 2018, p. 5) while walking. This "reading-while-walking" adds another layer to Burns's critique of the Belfast Agreement. Thus, by exploring the traits that constitute the narrator's and other characters' beyond-the-paleness, Chapter 2 will probe into the space of the other in a community sectioned into two official groups – loyalists and nationalists.

It should be noted that the sectarianism that marks Middle Sister's narrative in *Milkman* remains pervasive after the Peace Process. After all, the Agreement helps establish and normalise the Two Traditions paradigm in Northern Irish society. In *Geopolitical Eclipse: Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (2005), Aaron Kelly posits the categories of Irish Nationalism and Unionism as "shared attempts to occlude the full historical and social complexity of this island, which entails a consideration of class conflicts, popular radicalisms, struggles for women's rights, the dialectics of urbanity, and so on" (KELLY, 2005, p. 548). He further argues that this paradigm, ratified by the Agreement, "frustrates the establishment of a properly constituted public space" (KELLY, 2005, p. 548) as it figures society always in relation to those sectarian categories, asserting their prevalence over those who identify with neither. The critic goes on to argue that despite "its seeming inclusivity and pluralism (embedded in the cultural notion of 'Two Traditions'), such a model actually excludes a vast

range of sociopolitical agents and concerns" (KELLY, 2005, p. 548). He cites the procedures of the devolved assembly in Northern Ireland as an example: "for any legislation to be passed a majority is required from members who must identify themselves as either Nationalist or Unionist" (KELLY, 2005, p. 548). This is something Pete Shirlow calls the "institutionalised sectarianism" of the Agreement, arguing that

> The fact that members of the Northern Ireland Assembly must designate themselves as nationalist, unionist or other and that all decisions taken must have majority support from both the nationalist and unionist blocs means that the capacity of alternative political interpretations is hindered. (SHIRLOW, 2004, p. 196)

Milkman's narrator's unwillingness to engage in or adhere to the language of sectarianism can be read as the search for an existence outside of the categories of political identity offered to Northern Irish citizens before and after the Agreement. While a violent sectarian conflict is no longer a reality for the Northern Irish, a sectarian organisation of society remains the norm. Those who do not adhere to it are identified as "other" and have few possibilities to engage in political debate.

In that framework, *Milkman'*s protagonist's initiative of narrating her story and Burns's writing itself are equally significant as political acts of "others". Burns's countering of a sectarian organisation of daily life takes its fullest expression in the narrator's "reading-while-walking". It is in this surprisingly defiant act that the character asserts a different, nomadic, subjectivity in opposition to the categories available to her. Escaping the division through "reading-while-walking", the narrator is classed as "beyond-the-pale" by her community, an expression that appears around eleven times in the novel to qualify those who "flout convention", who are "a law unto themselves" (BURNS, 2018, p. 219). "Reading-while-walking" as an exercise seems to reveal the narrator's resistance to cultural fixation, to sectarian adherence, even if being beyond the pale might at times make her more vulnerable.

Considering the centrality of the act of reading in *Milkman*'s plot, which in itself suggests that literature might be a special point of access to reframe a narrative of the Troubles, Chapter 3 is titled "Middle Sister's Literary Companions". This last chapter focuses on the novel's literary relationships, turning our attention to the books Middle Sister reads-while-walking, the ones that she mentions she has read, the works she reads with her little sisters, as well as literary references made in passing. If we take the character's habit of reading novels while rambling as *Milkman*'s main question, one that otherises her to the point of her being classed as one of the community's "beyond-the-pales", as chapter 2 explores, we

see here how this act of disruptiveness can be tensioned against not only the experience of the Troubles inside the novel and outside of it, but as Burns's interrogation of the Agreement's progressivist logic, one that is "symptomatic of the strategic containment of history" (LEHNER, 2007, p. 507). If "history is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 23), in writing *Milkman* Burns aligns herself with a counter current of artistic responses to the proposal of a "fresh start", a suggestion that the reader of this thesis will find already in its first pages.

1 ANNA BURNS'S TROUBLES FICTION: THE BELATEDNESS OF TRAUMA

In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler writes that "one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever" (BUTLER, 2004, 21). In her effort to ponder upon what makes for a grievable life in contemporary democracies, Butler emphasises the political dimension of mourning, as it "brings to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (BUTLER, 2004, p. 22). It is only by acknowledging trauma and by mourning the lives of others in the public arena that the precariousness of life itself – the fact that we are all subjected to political, environmental and epidemiological tragedies, even if precarity (much like wealth) is unequally distributed – might serve as a different form of social tie, one that favours interconnectedness and interdependence rather than separation. Though Northern Ireland comes into Butler's argument only as precedent for the extra-legal practice of indefinite detentions without trial (BUTLER, 2004, p. 71), her point that disavowed mourning brings about a dangerous form of national melancholia and paralysis is indeed relevant to Irish studies.

In "Recovery and Forgetting: Haunting Remains in Northern Irish Culture" (2016), for instance, Shane Alcobia-Murphy cites and reaffirms Graham Dawson's argument that "the attempt to overcome the 'legacy of the past' in Northern Ireland, by consigning it to oblivion, is problematic" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 199), as "it leaves intact deep sources of grief, grievance and antagonism that are rooted in the recent history of the Troubles" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 77). Alcobia-Murphy further asserts that a "determination to archive the past and foster shared amnesia is not closure for the victims, but rather the accentuation of their trauma" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 199). To develop his point, the critic analyses what he calls pieces of "cultural resistance to such politically prescribed forgetting" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 199).[1] By focusing on "the portrayal of victims, and the spectral return of those who have been 'disappeared'" (ALCOBIA-MURPHY, 2016, p. 199) as well as reaffirming the enduring presence of the Troubles and its ramifications through those works, Alcobia-Murphy engages with a line of understanding within Northern Irish Studies that problematises the language and the logic behind the greatest landmark of the settlement of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland, the Good Friday or Belfast Agreement

[1] He turns to three artworks: David Farrell's series of photographs *Innocent Landscapes* (1999-2000), Willie Doherty's video projection *Ghost Story* (2007), and Seamus Deane's novel *Reading in the Dark* (1996).

(BFA). Scholars and critics such as Aaron Kelly, Graham Dawson, and Cillian McGrattan have pointed out the absurdity of some of the Agreement's visual and verbal language, highlighting that its enforcement of the construct of a "fresh start" is damaging to those who lived through the conflict. Alcobia-Murphy therefore analyses artistic manifestations that respond to and react against the notion of a clean break between pre- and post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

Aligning Alcobia-Murphy's methodology to Butler's political theory as a point of departure, this chapter focuses on the ways through which Anna Burns's fiction appears as an exercise against prescribed forgetfulness. My analysis will reveal that, by actively engaging with the wounds of the past, such an exercise makes lost lives and lost communities grievable in Burns's fictional works. While *Milkman* (2018) constitutes the point of departure and, in many ways, stands at the core of this thesis, this chapter will also turn to Burns's other novels, *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007), as I trace the author's different approaches to the Troubles and the varied textual strategies she deploys to deal with mourning and trauma in her fictional constructions of Northern Ireland and Belfast.

1.1 **Anna Burns and The Peace Process — Resisting Institutional Amnesia, Returning to Literature**

In *Milkman*, Burns's narrative strategies, such as not naming most of the characters, the repetitive and often disjunctured language of the narrator, as well as elements and tropes of the plot, such as the protagonist's habit of "reading-while-walking", produce a form of storytelling that resists the Belfast Agreement's tenets for how Northern Irish communities should heal. Hence, Burns appears as part of a group of novelists[2] who have produced fiction interrogating the Troubles and the conflict's legacy since the Peace Process was officially sealed.

In *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969* (2003), Elmer Kennedy-Andrews observes that "since 1969 and the most recent outbreak of the Northern Irish Troubles (as the political violence has euphemistically come to be called) there has been a remarkable literary production emanating from the North about the Northern 'situation'"

[2] Alongside names like Eoin McNamee, Lucy Caldwell, Glenn Patterson, and David Park.

(2003, p. 7) and that the impact of "political violence on society, culture and the imagination" (2003, p. 7) has been such "that it would be hard to think of another regional literature with such a widely shared focus of thematic interest" (2003, p. 7). Kennedy-Andrews adds that while the Troubles appear as a hurt that have led – and keep leading – writers to "explore and to understand the specific tensions, divisions and ambiguities inherent in Northern society" (2003, p. 7), this writing is widely diverse "in standpoint and attitude" (2003, p. 7).

While realism has been a consistent feature of Troubles fiction (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2003, p. 7), some writers have avoided the realist mode, and though it is not possible "to speak of a distinctive 'school' or 'tradition' of Northern writing" (2003, p. 7), Kennedy-Andrews argues that "the most significant feature of the literature has been its resistance to, and liberation from, orthodoxy and ideology, its commitment to the 'world elsewhere' made possible by language" (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2003, p. 7). Kennedy-Andrews's study of Northern Irish fiction was published five years after the Belfast Agreement was signed and while it focuses on novels that were written and published throughout the conflict, the author points out that the Troubles remain as a question for Irish novelists. Nearly twenty years have passed since that study was published, and this remains the case, as Anna Burns's (*Milkman,* 2018), Glenn Paterson's (*Where Are We Now*?, 2020), and Michelle Gallen's (*Big Girl, Small Town,* 2020) recent publications suggest. As those novels return to the years of the conflict through their setting or through their narrator's or characters' memory, they "reflect and refract" what Stephanie Lehner has called "the unfinished business of the past" (2020, p. 140) that "haunts the Northern Irish peace process" (2020, p. 140). Graham Dawson has addressed how a strategy of "state-organised forgetting" was deployed throughout and after the peace-process in Ireland, underlining that

> the politics of reconciliation promoted by the two governments at the beginning of the peace process was designed primarily to take the IRA out of Irish politics and to stabilize the Northern Ireland State, laying the basis for a permanent political settlement in the mutual interests of capital and state security in both the Irish Republic and Britain. In furthering this, they sought initially to ground this settlement on what may be called, borrowing Heather Goodall's phrases, an 'institutional amnesia', that is, a practice of 'state-organized forgetting' concerning the causes and consequences of the conflict. If this strategy has a long history in Britain, its deployment in the Irish Republic coincides with the backlash against militant Republicanism beginning in 1972, the most violent year of the conflict, as the death toll in the North escalated. In the 1970s and 1980s, an assault on nationalist popular memory was launched in the public media, promoted by 'powerfully organized cadres within the Irish intelligentsia' and underpinned by the work of revisionist historians. (DAWSON, 2007, p. 60-61)

This politics of reconciliation was codified into a practice of prescribed forgetting that took shape in the peace negotiations and in the Agreement as a document, and as a legacy. In *Geopolitical Eclipse: Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (2005), Aaron Kelly reads this move in the context of the interests of global capitalism. Thus, "what is ostensibly a *deterritorialisation* may, to continue the Deleuzean and Guattarian terminology, ultimately be a profound *reterritorialization*" (KELLY, 2005, p. 545). Ultimately, then, the Peace Process was "not a democratising movement towards an eventual national *independence* or regionalised micropolitical enfranchisement, but rather a shift to an increased *interdependence* of economic micro-units within global capitalism and its shadowy institutions" (KELLY, 2005, p. 545-546), a point Stephanie Lehner also makes as she addresses the peace talks' urge to "re-integrate Northern Ireland into the neo-liberal global dispensation" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 137).

Cillian McGrattan further complicates the discussion. While he agrees with negative reactions to institutional arguments for "moving on" (such as the one presented in the Northern Ireland Executive 2010) (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 173), he also aims criticism at groups that focus "upon creating shared and safe spaces, and encouraging 'mutual accommodation'" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 173) whose ultimate goal is also to "move on". He argues that "a progressivist logic, which has more to do with wishful thinking than with engagement with political reality underpins both positions" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 173) and that "this progressivist vision is based on the same neo-liberal, post-modernist perspective that has been ushered-in by the peace process and the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 173). McGrattan further proposes that both initiatives oversimplify the process of dealing with traumatic experiences by searching for a sense of closure: "furthermore, it is operationalised by an unarticulated Freudian conceit – put crudely, the implicitly normative catchphrase 'it's good to talk'– that assumes that healing is linked to the closure or catharsis reached in recounting traumatic experiences" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 173-174). McGrattan ultimately concludes that "the desire to move away from what is painted essentially as a bad past towards a future utopia is profoundly anti-democratic" (MCGRATTAN, 2012, p. 177).

Having grown up during the Troubles herself, Burns spoke in an interview of the expectations some garnered that she would "move on" from writing about Ireland, a demand to "let go" not dissimilar to the one posed in the Belfast Agreement. The novelist stated, "I think: 'How do I move on?' The Troubles is such an enormous, immense occurrence in my life, and in other people's lives, that it demands to be written about. Why should I apologise

for it? It is a very rich, complex society in which to place a fiction" (ALLARDICE, 2018). In writing fiction, Burns does not have to promptly let go of the past or adhere to a political agenda that prescribes ways of dealing with trauma. She does that through narrative strategies, the multiple subjectivities of her characters and, in *Milkman*, through a return to literature itself via the concept of "reading-while-walking", one I will explore further in Chapter 2. Rosi Braidotti argues that nomadic thought rejects deference to the past's authority, proposing "the fleeting copresence of multiple time zones, in a time continuum that activates and deterritorializes stable identities" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 209). This understanding also allows us to look at the past and the traumas it produced as experiences that linger into the present. Through her fiction, Burns voices her hunger as a writer to flesh out the variety of fictional imaginings she can draw from the reality of the Troubles. However, she also sheds light over an aspect of the experience of those who lived through trauma, that is, the belatedness of a haunting event.

That the trauma left by the Troubles has a reach that overrides the interdictions imposed by the Agreement is a point often made by critics of that document[3]. Cathy Caruth argues that "the central Freudian insight into trauma" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 8) is that "the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 8-9). This is something Burns develops in *Milkman.* The narrator, while describing her horror as Milkman's harassment becomes more frequent and she is unable to simply refuse him due to the power disparity between the two, tells the reader:

> Also, why was he acting as if he knew me, as if we knew each other, when we did not know each other? Why was he presuming I didn't mind him beside me when I did mind him beside me? Why could I just not stop this running and tell this man to

[3] "The symbolic tensions of the Agreement's cover image", for instance, have been addressed by Stephanie Lehner in *The Peace Process As Arkhe-Taintment? Glenn Patterson's* That Which Was *and Eoin McNamee's* The Ultras (2007): While it pictures "a united, nuclear family watching what supposedly symbolises the new dawn that awaits Northern Irish history" (2007, p. 507), the picture actually shows "a sunset and, secondly, since Northern Ireland does not have a western coastline, that the photo was taken by a German photographer in South Africa" (2007, p. 507). She adds: "Despite the auspicious proclamation that 'This Agreement is about your future', the new dawn transmutes into a geographically superimposed sundown that is ironically devoid of the utopian co-ordinates that it announces" (2007, p. 507). Aaron Kelly also addresses this in *Geopolitical Eclipse: Culture and the Peace Process in Northern Ireland* (2005): "It is highly symptomatic of the spuriousness of postmodernism's supposed empowerments that the very image designed to entice the population of Northern Ireland into believing that the Peace Process will devolve power to them and their decision-making parades an experience which is materially impossible for them. To me, the transmutation of a new dawn into a sunset stands as a moment of what I shall term *geopolitical eclipse* that revealingly constellates the iniquitous nature of the whole process itself. The Agreement's cover image, as with the Peace Process more broadly, grants a space of desire whose fulfilments are inaccessible to the very people it seemingly lures" (KELLY, 2005, p. 546-7). Both Lehner and Kelly further criticise the Agreement as a document in their papers.

> leave me alone? Apart from ‘where did he come from?’ I didn’t have those other thoughts until later, and I don’t mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later. (BURNS, 2018, p. 10)

The impact of the traumatic event lingers, and it takes the victim many years to be able to even begin to question and elaborate on it. This is an illustration of a point argued by critics of the Agreement’s progressivist logic; that by enforcing forgetfulness, the text fails to recognise survivors as victims. The claim that those “who have died or been injured, and their families” can best be honoured “through a fresh start” (AGREEMENT, 1998) is problematic not only in the sense that remembrance is a part of the process of making sense of traumatic experiences, but also that entire communities were affected by it.

In fact, by returning to Burns’s question, “How do I move on?”, one realises that this re-enactment and reworking of the Troubles – something *Milkman*’s main character and narrator does by telling her own story in a labyrinthic fashion – is a question inherent to trauma. Cathy Caruth posits that “the attempt to understand trauma brings one repeatedly to this peculiar paradox: that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (CARUTH, 1995, p. 6-7). Furthermore, drawing on a massive event of shared traumatic experience, Caruth cites Dori Laub’s statement that “the Holocaust involved a ‘collapse of witnessing’” (CARUTH, 1995, p. 6-7), something that Walter Benjamin has famously pointed out by giving us the image of the returned soldier in “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov” (1936): “Didn’t everyone notice at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield completely mute, not richer in experiences they could share, but poorer?” (BENJAMIN, 1936, p. 59).

In that sense, *Milkman*’s plot can be read as an attempt at recollection in a moment in which a double interdiction hovers above the narrative. Firstly, there is the difficulty to bear witness to experiences that took place in a state of exception where the narrator felt completely disenfranchised. On a second level, considering she lets the reader know she is narrating events that transpired more than twenty years prior, one can infer that she is reliving those experiences under the rule of the Agreement’s instruction to start fresh and, as Burns puts it, “move on”. Thinking with Judith Butler, one could say that Burns moves backwards towards the future, for it is the traumatic experience of the Troubles that makes “grief itself into a resource for politics” (BUTLER, 2004, p. 30) – not as inaction, but rather as an exposure of everything that was made ungrievable by the Agreement. Between Butler and Burns, one finds that mourning might be a form of non-violent and yet radically

transformative political resource. In Butler's words, "it is not that mourning is the goal of politics, but that without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence" (BUTLER, 2004, xviii).

Critics have also problematised the Peace Process and the Belfast Agreement as a move to reconfigure Northern Irish society and the country's public spaces into a shape compliant to the logic (and processes of disavowal of mourning) of Western Capitalism and globalisation. Aaron Kelly denounces that while "the Peace Process supposedly offers a new, multicultural discourse of equality and reconciliation, a new language and form if you like for Northern Irish society" (KELLY, 2005, p. 547), the reality is that the document works to establish "the more novel realignment of that society with the economic and political realities of globalisation" (KELLY, 2005, p. 547). Kelly furthers his criticism by asserting that while in the surface the Agreement advocates for "new ethical dispensation" (KELLY, 2005, p. 547), the process is propelled by an economic reconciliation that leads the country to adhere to "dynamics of a world system and the postmodern, an ideology whose only compass is the flow of capital around the globe" (KELLY, 2005, p. 547).

This is a point Lehner also argues for, as she highlights that the affirmation of British-Irish relations that informs the Agreement is an equally political and economic question, "intending, at the time, to re-integrate Northern Ireland into the neo-liberal global dispensation by extending the free market principles of the British 'Third Way' westwards and the (at the time still roaring) Celtic Tiger northwards" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 137). As the critic tells us, Northern Irish poetry was quick to interrogate "the progressivist logic of this new economic corridor, which suggested redevelopment and regeneration through multinational investment as the way forward for a society deemed 'backwards'" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 137). Artistic reactions against the underlying progressivist discourses that looked to split Northern Ireland's history into old and new abound, and while *Milkman* is set in Belfast during the Troubles, it is narrated by a woman who is recollecting her experiences at least twenty years after the events of the plot. Besides bearing witness to a rearrangement of her own life after Milkman's death, she has also lived through the Peace Process. The novel can be aligned with other works of post-Agreement literature that "remain acutely aware that the 'staked' past can still sting" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 138).

Furthermore, in his discussion of the psychic legacies of the Troubles, Graham Dawson observes that those include "what Fanon described as the pathologies of violence" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 9), which manifest "in a gamut of heightened emotional states encompassing anger, loss, disorientation, hatred, mistrust, insecurity, fear and humiliation", as

well as through trauma. Dawson argues that such legacies of the Troubles "have not impacted evenly across Northern Irish society" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 9), highlighting that "nearly half of the total number of killings within Northern Ireland occurred in Belfast, and three-quarters of these were in the north and west of the city, which also suffered the highest death rates" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 10). Here, Kennedy-Andrews's reference to novels that resist political and social reality by turning to a "'world elsewhere' made possible by language" (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2003, p. 7) is of particular interest to my analysis. I would argue that Anna Burns's novels that thematise the Troubles work within that framework both by turning away from the realist mode and, at times, even refusing to name its settings, and by subverting the conventions of the thriller in *Little Constructions* and, ultimately, in the figure of the narrator and protagonist of *Milkman,* who withdrawals from her "hair-trigger society" into nineteenth-century novels even as she occupies the public space and is considered to be "beyond-the-pale" for her retreat into fiction.

Caroline Magennis delineates a parallel between Burns and Frances Molloy that relies on carnivalisation: "Burns's control of the narrative ensures this is a visceral, disturbing experience that verges, like Molloy's novel, on a carnivalesque disruption of the realist mode of the Troubles novel" (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 371). Thus, like Molloy before her, Burns often follows "the realist conventions of the genre but [does] so ironically" (PATTEN, 1990, p. 9). Anna Burns's novels enact repeated returns to Belfast and to the Troubles under different narrative strategies, addressing those physical and temporal spaces via increasingly vague and undescriptive names. This fictional exercise exemplifies John Brannigan's argument that "even a cursory scan of the historical settings of contemporary fiction in Northern Ireland might alert us to the significance of ruptured time, of history as interrupted by the experience of trauma" (BRANNIGAN, 2006, p. 146). Throughout the next section, I am going to argue that Burns's novels can be read as investigations on Judith Butler's question of "What makes for a grievable life?" (BUTLER, 2004, p. 20), an interrogation still alive to many residents of Ardoyne.

1.2 **A Nomadology, not a History, of the Troubles — Anna Burns's Novels**

While the setting of Anna Burns's debut novel, *No Bones* (2001) is clearly stated as Ardoyne (BURNS, 2001, p. 2), the location portrayed in *Little Constructions* is a fictional

village, named “Tiptoe Floorboard” (BURNS, 2007, p. 46). *Milkman*’s setting is not named at all. The same logic applies to naming characters in the novels: in *No Bones* the reader follows Amelia and a cast of characters which are usually named. *Little Constructions* names its characters in a labyrinthic fashion: we follow Jetty Doe and the “Doe” crime family, while in *Milkman* the protagonist does not offer the reader an identification for herself besides that of daughter or middle sister.

Burns’s use of Doe as a family name is double-edged. “John Doe” and “Jane Doe” are, of course, multiple-use names or anonymity pseudonyms which are often employed in some English-speaking countries as placeholders in legal cases or in the context of police-enforcement, either when a party’s given name is unknown or when there is a need to protect someone’s identity. According to Paul Dickson, the name John Doe “was first introduced into British law during the reign of Edward III (1327-1377) in connection with the acts of ejectment” (DICKSON, 1996, p. 132). The continuation of the entry for “John Doe” in *What's in a name?: reflections of an irrepressible name collector* (1996) is also of interest to my discussion of Anna Burns’s instrumentalisation of the name:

> In this legal debate a hypothetical John Doe claimed he had leased land to a Richard Roe who then ejected him. It was decided that if Doe could establish that he was wrongfully ejected then the title to the land was established. The names stuck and still have legal status. In American criminal law, Doe is the first unknown defendant in a proceeding and Roe the second.
> In federal courts the order of unknowns is officially John Doe, Richard Roe, John Stiles, and Richard Miles. If the defendant is a woman, she is Mary Major at the federal bench but Jane Doe in most states. In some cases the name is used to protect the name of an innocent, as in the 1980s "right to life" court battle waged to force surgery for a severely handicapped infant identified only as Baby Jane Doe. Since the original Baby Jane Doe case for a baby born in 1983, there have been a number of "Baby Doe cases."
> But the Does are also known outside of legal circles. The name shows up on specimen checks and sample airline tickets. Hospitals and psychiatric institutions use the name with a number to name patients who won't or can't give their names when admitted, and it is commonly used by morgues. As for real John and Mary Does, there are very few of them. A note in NAMES magazine in 1972 reported only six John Does in the phone books of the ten largest cities in the United States and no Mary Does. (DICKSON, 1996, p. 132)

On one level, we can read John Doe in *Little Constructions* as a signifier for concealed identity. Unlike the *Milkman* narrator who refrains from naming those she does not want to expose and leaves a conspicuous blank in the place of identification, the one in *Little Constructions* plays at the unknowability of her cast, never quite telling the reader who those people are or suggesting how using a placeholder as a family name should be understood. John Doe appears as the head of the crime family and Jane Doe as the disappeared daughter

who haunts Tiptoe Floorboard up to the point Jotty realises – with the help of the narrator – the girl was merely a personification of her own sense of grief, a placeholder name for a hypothetical character. Variations of Does abound in the novel: JanineJoshuatine, Jetty, Jotty, and so on. This is not something Burns draws from legal or procedural usages of the Doe pseudonym, however. When different placeholders are needed in those contexts, other names are employed (Richard Roe, John Stiles), with only Jane and Mary Doe as established female variations. This multiplication of Does has the double effect of both further hindering identification – Tom Spaders himself is confused with the variety of Doe women with names starting with the letter "J" – and of heightening each character's singularity. This strategy ultimately points to this family as a paradigmatic example of any group of people in a state of exception. It is not even the characters' names or the lack thereof, but the impossibility of breaking away from their Troubles-imposed identities that appears as a problem, as trauma manifests in an unending cycle. At one point, Jotty is unhappy because she realises Tom Spaders had never said her name "not even once" (BURNS, 2007, p. 55), which gives us margin to argue that maybe, if Spaders's demonstration of affection in naming her – the context of the scene renders the act of naming as one of intimacy – could break through Tiptoe Floorboard's logic, we would find a name and a mode of living for Jotty beyond "Doe". As it stands, this ambiguous naming strategy points out that there is a shared constitutive violence, loss, anger and pain for the Jane and John Does who are forever caught in the Troubles.

As Anna Burns reworks trauma and remembering through different narrative strategies, repeatedly returning to Ireland in her three novels, one could argue that her fiction exemplifies Stephanie Lehner's argument that "even as the Brexit debate significantly complicates matters, post-Agreement literature remains committed to Northern Ireland as a place of interchange that enables various crossings" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 140). Lehner argues that "rather than accepting the 'post' as a temporal marker that designates a distinct break with what came before, these texts raise awareness of what remains to be worked through and addressed" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 140). Thus, as Burns names, renames and ultimately un-names Belfast, Ardoyne, Ireland, Britain, and even her characters, she accepts the openness of the "unresolved issues, silences, and absences" that "connote a period of troubled, stalled transition, suggesting a sense of suspension that seems reflected in Northern Ireland's repeatedly suspended devolved assembly" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 140). This is both a fictional project that stands against the politics of institutional amnesia imposed by the Agreement in her weaving of narratives that recognise and exemplify the belatedness of trauma as described

by Caruth, and one that refuses conventionally allocated responses to grief, as the ones criticised by McGrattan.

Following Michael Ignatieff's assertion that in conflict zones "the past continues to torment because it is *not* past': it is not 'over', 'finished', 'completed', but permeates the social and psychic realities of everyday life in the present" (IGNATIEFF apud DAWSON, 2007, p. 10), Graham Dawson proposes that those living in regions particularly affected by the Troubles, such as North Belfast, experience a temporal frame he calls the "present past" (2007, p. 10). In the "present past", the clean break proposed by the language of the Agreement cannot be aligned with any available experience of reality. Dawson situates North Belfast in the conflict then turns to Ardoyne, the district where Anna Burns grew up:

> Consider, for example, the case of North Belfast, 'a heterogeneous mixture of small groups of streets, each with a distinct identity', that form 'a mosaic of ethnic territories', a 'highly segregated area, in which many residents live in enclaves that are almost exclusively Catholic or Protestant'. This area was 'the site of some of the most sustained and intensive sectarian killing', where 548 people lost their lives (15 per cent of all Troubles-related deaths), of whom 396 were civilians. In just one small section of that mosaic, Ardoyne, 'an overwhelmingly nationalist/republican area of around eleven thousand people, surrounded on three sides by unionist/loyalist areas', ninety-nine residents were killed. (p. 10)

In *Ardoyne: The Untold Truth* (2002), the Ardoyne Commemoration Project offers a view of the district: "for those who come from Ardoyne, and those (both nationalist and unionist) who live around it, where Ardoyne starts and ends is, generally speaking, very clearly understood. Who is and is not from Ardoyne is generally seen as a matter of common sense" (ACP, 2002). The text goes on to clarify that this sense of identification and belonging was often attached to underlying political questions, with Ardoyne's boundaries being defined "to some degree" by "the political divisions, sectarian geography and history of conflict that has shaped North Belfast" (ACP, 2002). In practical terms, "Ardoyne is an overwhelmingly nationalist/republican area of around 11,000 people, surrounded on three sides by unionist/loyalist areas", what Burns defined as a "hair-trigger society" in *Milkman*:

> At this time, in this place, when it came to the political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming, ordinary people said 'their side did it' or 'our side did it', or 'their religion did it' or 'our religion did it' or 'they did it' or 'we did it', when what was really meant was 'defenders-of-the-state did it' or 'renouncers-of-the-state did it' or 'the state did it'. Now and then we might make an effort and say 'defender' or 'renouncer', though only when attempting to enlighten outsiders, for mostly we didn't bother when it was only ourselves. 'Us' and 'them' was second nature: convenient, familiar, insider, and these words were off-the-cuff, without the strain of having to remember and grapple with massaged phrases or diplomatically correct niceties. By unspoken agreement – which outsiders couldn't

> grasp unless it should come to their own private expediencies – it was unanimously understood that when everybody here used the tribal identifiers of 'us' or 'them', of 'their religion' or 'our religion', not *all* of us and not *all* of them was, it goes without saying, to be taken as read. That summed it up. (BURNS, 2018, p. 23)

The narrator's "unspoken agreement" (BURNS, 2018, p. 23) sounds interestingly similar to the Commemoration Project's "matter of common sense" approach to belonging. While this might be effective language to explain identity in a society living under the stress of sectarianism, the fact such markers do not encompass complex subjectivities is one of the major questions of *Milkman.* While the narrator might be part of a family of "renouncers-of-the-state", live in their area and hold that exterior sense of belonging, her narrative belies the signs of nomadic thought as articulated by Rosi Braidotti: "the dynamic vision of the subject as assemblage" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 229). Within the frame of nomadic theory, both in Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and in Braidotti's rereading of their work (2011), identity works as a monolith that hinders change. Their works suggest that, when one shifts the paradigm from identity to subjectivity, one may come to understand oneself as molecular processes of identification that are never fixed or stable but in constant movement, as assemblage of ever differing parts that come momentaneously together in the process of *becoming other*. Burns's narrative strategies and themes favour this understanding of the subject as assemblage. *Milkman*'s narrator's becoming other through her difference and restlessness appear most patently, of course, in her reading-while-walking, which will be discussed in Chapter 2, in her "episodes of a kind of *jamais vu*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 42), in her "usual nineteenth-century, safe-and-sound literary thoughts" (BURNS, 2018, p. 99), outside of which she "knew how not to respond, which was to confront, to question, to push for clarification" (BURNS, 2018, p. 99). She further isolates herself in her loneliness and introspection: "rarely did I mention anything to anybody. Not mentioning was my way to keep safe" (BURNS, 2018, p. 42).

One particular episode deserves further analysis, the Narrator's singling out of men's hatred towards cats during that time: "They can never be relied upon to shore up a human ego. They go their way, do their thing, are not subservient and will never apologise" (BURNS, 2018, p. 81), which she aligns with misogyny[4]. In a powerful passage, she rescues a dead cat's head from a deserted place because she did not want to "leave it in this open awful place" (BURNS, 2018, p. 87).

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[4]"(...) boys reacting against Kate Bush for being catlike, cats for being female-like, though I didn't tell about cats being found dead and mutilated up entries to the point where there weren't many of them left in my area anymore". (BURNS, 2018, p. 12-13)
"(...) during the time cats were vermin, subversive, witchlike, the left hand, bad luck, feminine." (BURNS, 2018, p. 81)

> What if the next chapter was the same as this chapter, as had been the last chapter? What if all chapters stayed the same or even, as time went on, got worse? Again, during my thoughts, I had physically brought myself back to the cat, retracing my steps as if having no choice in the matter. *Don't be daft*, I said. *What are you going to do – stand forever and just stare at it?* I'll pick it up, I answered. I'll take it to some green. Now, this surprised me. It astonished me. Then I astonished me with hedges, bushes, the root of a tree. I could cover it, not leave it in this open awful place. *But why?* I argued. *In less than one minute you could be out of here. You could have reached the graveyard, your second landmark. Then it'll be the police barracks, then the soothing smell of cinnamon from that house with the bakery, then*— Of course! I interrupted. The usual place! (BURNS, 2018, p. 87)

As she returns for the murdered cat and inwardly debates the decision with herself, the narrator lists the "landmarks" she would walk through and ultimately decides to take it to "the usual place", which was the local graveyard. Earlier in the novel, she explains: "Next came the cemetery which everybody, including the media, the paramilitaries, the state forces – even some postcards – termed 'the usual place'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 47), affording the poor creature's remains the empathy it did not receive while alive. Her willingness to carry it there, conflicted though it may be, stands as a gesture of this woman's wilful misalignment with the basic workings of her community. Throughout her walk to the usual place, she is afraid of being seen or intercepted by Milkman, and the very fact there is a strict hierarchy even in the distribution of plots in the graveyard[5] speaks of the subversion of her decision to take this cat there. If one returns to the novel's opening sentence— "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, 2018, p. 7) —, one could even argue that it is this disruptiveness that makes her both a storyteller and a survivor while it relegates Milkman to fixed categories (paramilitary officer, assaulter) and frames him a past menace.

Further addressing identification and belonging, besides Ardoyne's geographical limits, the Commemoration Project argues "to be from Ardoyne usually means to have been born and grown up in certain streets" and that "to share a certain sense of place and belonging and to live that out in the contacts, actions and institutions that make up everyday life" (ACP, 2002). When people in Ardoyne therefore sought to remember their dead and commemorate their lives it was, in many ways, simply a reflection of this seemingly obvious take on identity and belonging.

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[5] "I hadn't known two of my brothers were renouncers, not until the funeral of one of them when the coffin got draped in that flag 'from over the border', with the cortege then making its way, not to the commoners' plot of the usual place, but to the renouncers' plot of the usual place, where three of them in uniform appeared speedily out of nowhere and fired a volley of shots over his grave." (BURNS, 2018, p. 71)

Ardoyne: The Untold Truth (2002) proposes to tell the story of ninety-nine "ordinary people, living ordinary lives, who became victims of political violence in a small close-knit, working class, nationalist community in North Belfast. The deaths occurred between 1969 and 1998 and the victims were from Ardoyne" (ACP, 2002). The book, "a community project" and one defined by the importance of writing "history from below", "has sought to give control and ownership over what is written about victims to their relatives and friends" and departs from the proposal of offering "a platform for the community to "write back" and set the record straight" (ACP, 2002). The project denounces certain journalistic discourses for hierarchising victims, which prompts a return to Butler's question of grievability in contemporary societies: "to compound personal and collective grief, sections of the media have intruded, misrepresented events and given less than equal recognition to all victims", the editors argue in the Introduction. "Over the years they have demonised and labelled Ardoyne a 'terrorist community', thus implying, in some distorted way, that the community got what it deserved" (ACP, 2002).

Considering the controversial history of the IRA's – and even Sinn Féin's – participation in the Peace Process negotiations[6], it is interesting to look at Butler's analysis of the allocation of grievability. Although her study focalises the United States, it still applies to the North if one accepts that some of the same narrative-forming elements are at stake there, namely capitalism and a progressivist logic. Butler's investigation of how "certain forms of grief become nationally recognized and amplified, whereas other losses become unthinkable and ungrievable" (BUTLER, 2004, p. xiv) originates from the same kind of erasure that

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[6] "The Joint Declaration was the outcome of three strands of diplomacy, each conducted over several years: a co-operative strategy for conflict resolution developed by the two governments on the basis of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985; understandings reached in the course of secret, mediated exchanges between the British Government's officials and the IRA; and the principles of the Hume-Adams peace strategy negotiated between the leaders of the 'constitutional' nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Republican party, Sinn Féin, which supported the IRA's armed struggle. It created the political basis for the IRA ceasefire declared on 31 August 1994 and its reciprocation by the Combined Loyalist Military Comman in October, and for the two governments' Framework Document of February 1995 setting out the conditions for inclusive, all-party, talks on the future of Northern Ireland. Talks did not begin until June 1995 and 'substantive negotiations' were further delayed, due first to British and Ulster Unionist objections to the participation of Sinn Féin while the IRA retained its weaponry, and then to the temporary resumption of the IRA's armed campaign, in response to the slow rate of political progress, from February 1996 until July 1997. When Sinn Féin eventually joined the talks in September 1997, both the Democratic Unionist Party and the United Kingdom Unionist Party withdrew in protest. What were now multi-party negotiations culminated in the Belfast 'Good Friday' Agreement of April 1998 between the two governments, the SDLP and Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party, two smaller parties linked to the main loyalist paramilitary organizations (the Progressive Unionist Party, associated with the UVF, and the Ulster Democratic Party with the UDA), together with the cross-community Alliance Party and the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition. Thus, the Agreement was supported by a significant majority right across the political spectrum in the North, including political representatives in touch with the views of both Republican and loyalist paramilitaries. In May 1998 the Agreement was endorsed by huge majorities in popular referenda held simultaneously in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic." (DAWSON, 2007, p. 22, *my emphasis*)

inspired the Ardoyne Commemoration Project. Butler's ultimate question revolves around the state's very understanding of humanity, and here it is important to repeat her guiding question: "what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?" (BUTLER, 2004, p. xiv-xv). If an unequal distribution of grievability indeed "operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human" (BUTLER, 2004, p. xiv-xv), Dehumanisation appears to be precisely what the organisers of the Commemoration Project fear and react against.

Throughout the book, victims are honoured and remembered in a non-hierarchised manner, while its preface clearly states why there is a need for such a book in the first place. It is in that sense that Butler will argue that grief "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility" (BUTLER, 2004, p. 23), highlighting precisely the unavoidable points of belonging that were identifiable by "common sense" in Ardoyne: "if my fate is not originally or finally separable from yours, then the 'we' is traversed by a relationality that we cannot easily argue against; or, rather, we can argue against it, but we would be denying something fundamental about the social conditions of our very formation" (BUTLER, 2004, p. 23). The Ardoyne Commemoration Project goes on to assert that "certain parts of Ardoyne were at one time more 'mixed'", but that "during the 1969-1971 period there was a substantial movement of people into and out of the district" (ACP, 2002). This phenomenon, which "not only ensured that the population of the area became more homogenous but that its boundaries were also increasingly clear and socially and politically significant" (2002), appears as one of the symptoms of the beginning of the Troubles.

No Bones, which opens with the sentence "The Troubles started on a Thursday" (BURNS, 2001, p. 1), has a young girl as the bearer of the announcement of the outbreak of the conflict in Derry. The same child grimly declares "there would be shootings and bombings and hand-to-hand fightings and that if they didn't find somewhere else to go, to get out of Ardoyne and away from it, there was nothing else for it but to be burned in their beds" (BURNS, 2001, p. 2-3). Burns builds a moment when, for the protagonist and her group of friends, "Ardoyne became a nationalist island in a loyalist sea, shaping a growing sense of siege and isolation" (ACP, 2002) in the same way that, according to the Ardoyne Commemoration Project, it did in real life. Dawson highlights that Ardoyne was "vulnerable throughout the Troubles to several overlapping patterns of violence" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 11), a district that "endured a permanent condition of isolation and tension, fear and loss, the

effects of which have pervaded a community grappling simultaneously with constant surveillance and harassment at the hands of the police and the British Army" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 11), besides facing the economic toll of state neglect: "the residents of Ardoyne died at the hands of all combatant parties, 'the RUC, the British army, loyalist paramilitaries, and Irish republicans'" (DAWSON, 2007, p. 10).

With that legacy of violence, trauma and grief in mind, I will argue that Anna Burns's three novels process mourning through a Deleuzian understanding of literature as an assemblage (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 4). If we accept that "writing has nothing to do with signifying," but rather with "surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 4-5), Burns's repeated, yet varied returns to the Troubles seem particularly apt. Here, perhaps, it is important to reinstate Deleuze's idea that "history is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 23). And indeed, the contestation of the writing of history even as it happens is at the fore of the debates surrounding Ireland, even when it comes to naming the North[7].

Anna Burns's complicated relationship with this type of writing appears in her assertion, in an interview, that until her thirties, she was "mainly drawn to fiction" as "non-fiction didn't much attract [her]" (BURNS, 2020a). Her explanation for that preference lies in its lack of verisimilitude: "it felt like it might not be true" (BURNS, 2020a). To Deleuze and Guattari, "what is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 23) and I would argue this is the project Anna Burns effects through her fiction on the Troubles. The strategies of her nomadology vary from novel to novel, but are described by what Burns has called her "jigsaw style of approach" (BURNS, 2020a) to writing and can ultimately be read under the light of Rosi Braidotti's Nomadic Theory, taking as point of departure her formulation that "creativity is a nomadic process in that it entails the active displacement of dominant formations of identity, memory, and identification" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 151).

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[7] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews argues that "For a start, the term 'Northern Ireland' is contestable because it carries with it some recognition of constitutionalised partition and is thus an unacceptable designation to Nationalists. Republican and Nationalists prefer the clumsy 'Six Counties'. Protestants favour 'Ulster', though the Irish province of Ulster also included Co. Donegal, Co. Monaghan and Co. Cavan. The most neutral appellation is perhaps 'The North', though, since it is a geographical rather than political signifier, it doesn't entirely satisfy Unionists. 'The North of Ireland' almost – but not quite – recognizes political realities. The situation of a people so deeply divided that they cannot agree who they are or what to call themselves clearly offers rich comic potential which writers such as Lionel Shriver, Robert MacLiam Wilson and Colin Bateman have readily exploited." (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2003, p. 11)

1.2.1 *No Bones* (2001)

> ‘Who’s worried? I’m not worried! Who said I was worried? I’m not afraid of her!’ I shrugged and turned to my Agatha Christie, which was a clever way of having a read and learning to type at the same time.
>
> *Anna Burns*

Anna Burns’s fiction lends itself to being aligned with other exponents of post-Agreement literature in the sense that its material is informed by what Stefanie Lehner has called “the unfinished business of the past” (LEHNER, 2020, p. 140). To the critic, the past which the Agreement signatories hoped would be left behind “haunts the Northern Irish Peace Process, which is reflected and refracted in post-Agreement literature” (LEHNER, 2020, p. 140). In *No Bones*, published just three years after the signing of the Agreement, Burns had already worked the haunting nature of trauma into her fiction. In one of its many scenes that play out the absurdity of domestic life during the conflict, the narrator tells us of children characters who, growing up during the Troubles, “were doomed, by a legacy, by Ireland, by England, by prehistory, by everything that had gone before them, always and forever to be one, four and six years old” (BURNS, 2001, p. 226).

Addressing *No Bones*, Caroline Magennis aligns it with Frances Molloy’s *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985) in its “carnivalesque disruption of the realist mode of the Troubles novel” (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 371). To Patten, Molloy’s novel was a welcome reaction against the realist convention, one that has also been addressed by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews in the context of its subversion of the realist mode of the prototypical Troubles novel: “the carnivalesque humour dialogises the standard sanctimonious discourse in which the sectarian conflict in the North is usually inscribed” (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2003, p. 176).

To Magennis, while “in Northern Irish women’s Troubles writing, we have many instances of women giving voice to the voiceless of the conflict” (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 372), *No Bones* is “one of the most powerfully subversive novels written about this period” (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 372). She argues that while “the presence of the Troubles is central to the narrative” (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 371), it is “contrasted with the volatility of Amelia’s family, who are depicted through the ambiguous narrative voice as depressives, sexual deviants and prone to indiscriminate violence” (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 371) and that “the language of psychology is used throughout, but does not help us make sense of the

increasingly desperate predicament in which the mentally ill find themselves in a country torn apart by violence" (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 371). While Magennis's reading of *No Bones* as a novel that "refutes attempts to make easy sense of either the Troubles or women's involvement in them as order is frustrated at every turn" (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 372) acts as a point of departure for my own analysis of the novel, I would argue that rather than contrasting the political context with the emotional unbalance and abuse that course through Amelia's family, Burns imbues the Lovetts with a wider symbolic connection to Ireland in Amelia's perception, which manifests through the violence they aim at themselves and at one another: the absent, sedated, unreactive parents; the physically abusive brother, Mick; the anorexic middle sister consumed by hunger – Amelia herself –, eager to leave Belfast, but too afraid to move; the suicidal sister, Lizzie; and the youngest sibling, Josie, who "excelled in concealing herself" (BURNS, 2001, p. 235).

As the narrator navigates through various episodes in Amelia's life from 1969 to 1994, her voice alternates from a straightforward proximity and a clearer perception of Amelia's subjectivity, especially in her earlier years, to a more disjunctured narrative voice that takes over as Amelia recoils into herself after successive traumatic events in her childhood: her brother's violent behaviour at home, which included choking her, trying to push her out of a window, as well as threatening to entrap her and leaving her without food (BURNS, 2001, p. 44-51); the occupation of her primary school by outside police forces that processed the fingerprints of all the children; and, finally, a shooting at the school yard by her friend Bronagh, who reappears in later episodes of the story.

The final two episodes are intrinsically connected in Amelia's first breakdown, marking a shift in narrative style. This is referenced by Amelia herself as the trauma of the shooting. While not immediately administrated as sectarian violence in itself, it triggers the recollection of the moment her schoolteachers disappeared and the children's fingerprints were taken by RUC officers. Addressing the shooting, Amelia observes: "everyone agreed though, that it was nothing at all to do with the Provies, the Ra, the Inla or the Troubles generally, but whatever it was, I didn't hear for, at the moment Bronagh was pulling the trigger a flash of a memory went flying through my mind" (BURNS, 2001, p. 75). This point, Magennis argues, marks a shift: "after this incident, the narrative is carefully controlled to show Amelia's breakdown with hallucinatory effect on the reader" (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 372).

Amelia returns to an event that had already been narrated in the chapter titled "In the Crossfire, 1971", set four years prior. The language used to describe it is widely different

however, underlining both the fragility of chronology and conventional history-writing, but also what Cathy Caruth has termed the temporal delay of the traumatic experience (CARUTH, 1995, p. 10). Instead of addressing trauma as "a neurotic distortion" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 10), Caruth departs from an understanding of it as not merely a "repression or defense, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of the first moment" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 10). Thus, in *No Bones* a renewed sense of fear triggers the remembrance of an earlier traumatic experience for Amelia and overwhelms her to the point of a collapsing of her narrative ability altogether.

As Magennis has observed, after the clash between 1975 and 1971, Amelia has a breakdown that seeps into the very fabric of the narrative. The unravelling of Amelia's memories go back to her discomfort in relation to her teachers' behaviours after the incident with Bronagh. On telling the reader that "she can't remember the order of things much after that day" (BURNS, 2001, p. 76) while undergoing a traumatic reexperiencing of the 1971 event, Amelia appears as a narrator facing a "collapse of witnessing" (LAUB, 1995, p. 65) produced by the lack of articulation of the traumatic experience. Caruth argues that "trauma is a repeated suffering of the event, but it is also a continual leaving of its site" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 10), and it is precisely the friction between these processes that eventually short-circuits Amelia's ability to function and even undermines the continuity of her narrative, as we shall discuss.

Throughout the novel, Amelia faces two breakdowns that impact storytelling. The first one, which I have been discussing, takes place in 1975:

> After the shooting, the teachers wouldn't stop talking. They became chatty and twittery and wouldn't settle down. Some of them even forgot their positions as teachers and acted as if they were our very best friends. 'She must have been planning to shoot all the time!' whispered Miss Tennyson, digging me hard in the ribs. Why, she had the gun planted, didn't you see it Amelia? In her basket! Why, she this! Why, she that! She can't be in the Provisionals. Isn't she too young to be in the Provisionals? Don't you have to be sixteen to be in the Provisionals?
> I couldn't stand it. It was doin' my head in.
> I had to get away. I wanted to think about that fingerprinting business and I wanted to know if there was any more of it to come. It was a very slippery memory and the least inattention and it might slide away forever. I didn't want to lose it, not for the second time. I didn't get a chance though, to think about it, for the Peelers turned up and nobody was allowed to leave. I made a note in my jotter, to remind me to remember it. Three Peelers stood at the door and all the questions began to be asked of us. And as well as the RUC, the Brits, a helicopter and an ambulance, the shooting also brought out those other, invisible, sometimes not visible people, all wanting to know what it had all been about.
> As for Grainne, she was taken away to recover from what turned out to be a minor gunshot wound. Bronagh was taken away to be charged as an underage gunman and I forgot her for quite a lot of years. In fact, I can't remember the order of things much after that day. The two things that stick out are one, it had been a sunny, no, a

> hot day, and two, on a different sunny hot day, I'd been given a chocolate for letting RUC Special Branch get my fingers dirty for their own purposes for a minute sometime in 1971. (BURNS, 2001, p. 76-77, my emphasis)

This passage, in which Amelia's sense of continuous memory is obliterated in favour of specific recollections that "stick out", evidences Burns's nomadic and rhizomatic writing: "The rhizome is an antigenealogy. It is a short-term memory, or antimemory. The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 21).[8]

While the first five chapters of the novel, which focus on Amelia's childhood and early teenage years (1969-1973), are narrated in the third person, "The Least Inattention, 1975", in which the shooting takes place, is the second of three chapters in a row narrated by Amelia in the first person (preceded by "Babies, 1974", which I discuss in the next section). Nevertheless, while Amelia remains the narrator in the chapter that follows the shooting, "Something Political, 1977" is already marked by a sharp focus on her eating disorder (BURNS, 2001, p. 79). The traumatic event that the shooting calls back to a day "at primary school when something different was going on and I didn't like it and I didn't know why" (BURNS, 2001, p. 71). After a morning spent writing poems about peace, Amelia's stern teachers suddenly disappeared and were replaced by people she could not quite then place, but was aware were members of the police and her instinct was not to trust them: "They smiled too much. They touched too much. They had stuff in one bag that they weren't showing, and chocolate and sweets in another, that they were" (BURNS, 2001, p. 39). In the chapter titled "In the Crossfire, 1971", the narrator had already described the experience as "one of those dream sequences that are rapid, different-angled, and over in no time. Did it really happen? Were the children hallucinating?" (BURNS, 2001, p. 39). The scene where Amelia's fingerprints are taken is written in verse, suggesting the fragmentation of her memory of the event even as it happens:

> The children were lined up,
> Amelia there too,
> Not one of them able to get out of it.
> When it came to her turn,
> The policewoman took hold,
> And forced Amelia's fingers into the thick of it.

[8] Deleuze and Guattari describe two methods: the arborescent and the rhizomatic. In general lines, while the arborescent metaphor describes linear processes of identity formation with a clear beginning and an end, the rhizome as a metaphor describes different access points of identity that you can inhabit at different, even simultaneous, times, without stopping at them.

> When she'd left all her marks,
> She was given a card
> And passed along to another to be dealt with.
> This one smiled a thin smile,
> Wiped Amelia's hands dry
> And patted her backside and said 'Move it'.
> (BURNS, 2001, p. 39)

As the traumatic manipulation by the adults at the school comes back to Amelia four years later, the scene is narrated in the first person: "I remembered my hand being yanked over to a nice clean surface where a female smiling monster pressed it down" (BURNS, 2001, p. 75). The imbalance between RUC officials blocking the door and the smiling women writing down their names and collecting their fingerprints, and their sense of displacement is now communicated by Amelia with an anger that denounces the absurdity of the original scene:

> They told us about this game that we were gonna play and they lined us up in a row to play it. A man stood at the door and I knew it was so nobody could leave (…) We were talked to all friendly and asked happy gurgly questions by the happy gurgly women, who took and held our fingers and wouldn't let them go. (BURNS, 2001, p. 75)

The chapter that succeeds "Something Political, 1977" follows Vincent, a character Burns originally thought would be the protagonist of *No Bones* (BURNS, 2020a). This first interlude that focuses on Amelia's friend struggling with schizophrenia both extends our view of *No Bones*' Ardoyne and signals some of our protagonist's narrative unavailability. Amelia returns in the following chapter, "Echoes, 1978", which is narrated in the first person and marks Bronagh's return to the narrative as Amelia attends a Youth Training Programme. The following chapter, however, brings yet another instance of violence that victimises Amelia, this time in the form of abuse aimed at her by her brother Mick and his wife Mena from which she is rescued by her sister Lizzie in a gory fight that ends in death. "Troubles, 1979" is one of the chapters that best exemplify Magennis's point that, in *No Bones,* "narrative risks can still be taken to great effect, even on the bleakest of subject matter" (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 372). This chapter departs from the realist mode and suggests yet again Amelia's refusal or inability to narrate (in the first person) or even to allow for narration in the third in a realist mode for the most violent and traumatic events that undercut her family and social life. Dissociation becomes a tool for her to handle trauma and in the following chapter, "Mr Hunch in the Ascendant, 1980", we go back to Vincent.

Amelia briefly assumes her role as narrator again in "No Signs of Panic, 1981", a chapter in which she announces her intention of leaving Ireland. Although it takes her some time to achieve this, the 1980s will be a decade marked by her efforts to leave and they take off in her own voice. Other encounters with violence are narrated in the third person in the chapters – and years – that follow. In "Sinners and Soul, 1982", Danny Megahey is abducted and murdered just after kissing Amelia (BURNS, 2001, p. 180-181), and in "The Present Conflict, 1983" Amelia finds herself excited with the curriculum and the expectations surrounding higher education, but is subjected to Janto Pierce's misogynistic rants while in his speeding car. "Incoming, 1986" focuses on a confrontation between Bronagh and Marsellaise, but "Battles, 1987" sees a return to Amelia's first-person narrative as she tells us of how she met Jean at an AA meeting. This is the final chapter narrated in Amelia's voice. In "War Spasms, 1988", we follow a visit from Amelia to Bronagh's home, while in "Waked, 1989" the protagonist finally buys a ticket for the late boat to Liverpool and struggles while deciding whether to go back to talk to Lizzie only to find out her sister had killed herself (BURNS, 2001, p. 236).

While the final four chapters of the novel, set from 1991 to 1994, are all narrated in the third person, it should be noted that this does not mean they develop seamlessly. In "Triggers, 1991", Amelia faces another breakdown, but this time she is publicly paralysed by fear and returned trauma in front of a supermarket in Camden Town, in London. The chapter opens with the narrator informing us that "Amelia went to Camden Town to have a breakdown" (BURNS, 2001, p. 246) and that

> she didn't know she was going to have a breakdown. She thought she was going to buy some tins of beans. Amelia hated tins of beans. They reminded her of her father. What she really wanted was a big box of Special K. a part of her said she couldn't have Special K though, because beans were on discount, at nineteen pee per tin. Special K, on the other hand, was a frilly, expensive waste at any time, so it was best not to have what she wanted and to take instead what she could never, ever, stand. 'I know you don't like them,' this deprived, depressed part of her reasoned. (BURNS, 2001, p. 246)

The passage is undercut by Amelia's dialogue with the part of herself she names "Deprived Depressed", or "DepDep", which is not exclusively confined to her inner thoughts. As the stress triggered by her conflict over the tin of bean versus the box of Special K cereal[9] comes to a head, DepDep materialises in front of her as her grasp on reality falters in a scene

[9] While the use of the cereal "Special K" here obviously enacts questions of class and hunger, it can also be read under the guise of a wider metaphorical complex concerning the character's dissociation, suggested by the slang for Ketamine.

at the supermarket where she repeatedly picks up the Special K box and puts it back, and does the same with the tins: “Deprived Depressed again got in front of her and demanded she stop being so outrageous but as this other, rebellious part of her kept resisting, this picking and putting went on five more times” (BURNS, 2001, p. 257). While Amelia’s hesitation is initially attributed to her financial vulnerability – the narrator tells us she has just cashed her giro (BURNS, 2001, p. 247), and DepDep instructs her to buy the beans because even though Amelia does not like them, “that means you’ll eat less, they’ll last longer, you won’t starve, which would be the case if you bought and ate the Special K and then had nothing left for the rest of the week” (BURNS, 2001, p. 246) – it soon becomes clear the trigger for her breakdown relates to past trauma. As Amelia repeats to herself – as per DepDep’s instruction – that “nothing’s possible” (BURNS, 2001, p. 247) to calm her own reactions against buying the beans she loathed, the careful compartmentalisation that allowed her to function within the strict realms of emotional and social deprivation begins to collapse up to the point Amelia experiences what she calls “dual realities” (BURNS, 2001, p. 251) and loses her grasp on her spatial and temporal bearings.

Amelia’s past traumas first appear in the scene as she associates the can of beans that are forced upon her with recollections of her father. Financial vulnerability seems the most obvious reason for Amelia to choose the can of beans over the box of Special K. As DepDep even reasons with her that her lack of interest in the food will make it last longer and prevent her from starving, an immediate connection with Amelia’s experience suffering from anorexia is established, with the narrator claiming, “Amelia didn’t like starving anymore for she could no longer get high on the consequences” (BURNS, 2001, p. 246). The oversimplified approach to her eating disorder, allied with the tension prompted by her relationship with food, signals yet another stressor that complicates the scene’s dynamics. Further along the chapter, however, as Amelia struggles with picking up the tins and putting them back on its shelves and is stopped by DepDep, a security guard mirrors Amelia’s imagined self’s intervention by placing himself “prominently, eye-catchingly, in front of her” (BURNS, 2001, p. 248). Amelia’s interaction with an outsider exposes yet another element to her crisis: shame. While “at first Amelia didn’t notice anyone prominent and eye-catching, so intent was she on having this fight with herself” (BURNS, 2001, p. 248), when she perceives the man’s presence she becomes “embarrassed” and hopes that “whatever else she’d been doing, she hadn’t again been talking out loud” (BURNS, 2001, p. 248). Beyond her feelings of inadequacy in relation to her immediate predicament, Amelia’s concern reveals the ramifications of her food-related stress:

> The security guard moved two steps closer and she clocked this with her left eye and was convinced it was because she had a Family Size box of Special K under her arm. She felt ashamed and guilty and was sure he was feeling angry because she was being greedy in buying Family Size all for herself. 'After all,' said Depdep, 'he can see you're giving no thought to the dead people. What about the dead people? Those killed, those murdered? What choice did they ever have?' So, to appease the guard, appease the dead, appease Deprived Depressed and all the gods who might just get jealous of her, Amelia put back the box of cereal and lifted the beans for the last time. Knowing they'd last forever, and knowing how much this would kill her, she trudged to the cashdesk with big tears in her eyes. (BURNS, 2001, p. 248)

Addressing post-traumatic stress disorder, Cathy Caruth has argued that while its precise definition is contested,

> most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (CARUTH, 1995, p. 4)

While the association between the can of beans and her father had been an indicator of the wider implications of buying that kind of food, the development of the chapter soon unveils to the reader that Amelia's misery does not relate exclusively to financial precarity, but also to self-imposed suffering: she must not only eat cheap food, but it must also be cheap food of a kind she does not like. The feelings of shame she expresses are triggered by her feeling watched – and automatically judged – by the security guard. She must, therefore, sacrifice any sort of pleasure in the name of the "dead people" who had no choice. Amelia's delayed response to the trauma of the Troubles appears in the form of her experience of "dual realities". In the section of the novel that covers the Troubles, Amelia's reaction to violence is usually to recoil into herself – be it by making herself absent in the narrative as a narrator or by disappearing from it altogether (in the chapters that focus on Vincent), be it in her introspection into Agatha Christie novels and in literally making herself as small as possible by not eating. After she leaves for London, Belfast still follows her, however.

In "Triggers, 1981", the reader sees Amelia breaking down under the weight of returned trauma as she attempts to make sense of her bearings, exemplifying Caruth's point on the belatedness of trauma. After the interaction with the guard, Amelia is terrified he will report her to the RUC (BURNS, 2001, p. 249), exposing her continuous tension towards Ireland as well as recovering an episode of childhood trauma, when she "had been given a

chocolate for letting RUC Special Branch get [her] fingers dirty for their own purposes for a minute sometime in 1971" (BURNS, 2001, p. 77).

Although Amelia pays for the beans and wishes to leave and go home, her breakdown gets worse once she goes outside the supermarket. A siren startles her, and she realises she had been talking to herself once more, as the narrator ponders that "it was frightening to Amelia when she caught herself out-louding" (BURNS, 2001, p. 249). Amelia attempts to leave again, but she argues with a passing man and gets caught up in the crowd, which increases her sense of anxiety. The narrator mentions that "the crowd had almost caught her" and that "people kept appearing and adding themselves onto it" (BURNS, 2001, p. 250). Afraid, Amelia returns to the supermarket and takes hold of the shop grille as her final stressor paralises her: "a man and a woman, speaking Belfast, walked by" (BURNS, 2001, p. 250). After the pair leave, Amelia declares she was having "dual realities," a predicament which "kept moving in and out of focus" (BURNS, 2001, p. 251) and that was not new:

> As well as being in Camden Town in London, she was also on Belfast's Crumlin Road. Dual realities weren't new, of course. She'd been having dual realities for a while already. And she'd learned that, as long as she didn't panic, ten times out of ten, Belfast always went away. So now, all she had to do was edge herself along the sides of the buildings, London buildings, not Belfast buildings, and try not to panic, to try and keep her plan in mind and head in the direction of home. Ten times out of ten also, home was always where should be and, although she knew all this in theory, still she wouldn't move from the grille. This time it was another phenomenon. Something else was starting to bother her. It turned out to be Roberta McKeown who, at that moment, was walking by. (BURNS, 2001, p. 251)

Roberta McKeown, we soon learn, was part of Amelia's hallucinations: she had "been blown up by a carbomb in 1975" (BURNS, 2001, p. 251) and Amelia had "forgotten, deliberately, to go to Roberta's funeral. After all, just how many funerals was one expected to attend?" (BURNS, 2001, p. 251). Nineteen seventy-five was also the year, of course, that Bronagh shot Grainne in the school yard, an event that left Amelia unable to "remember the order of things much after that day" (BURNS, 2001, p. 76). The correlation between the events is suggested in the novel as Amelia realises the girl she thought was Roberta was someone else, but then immediately sees Bronagh McCabe, "a woman, and a woman still living, probably happy ever after in Belfast, didn't look at her, but her old basket from her schooldays was hanging from her arm" (BURNS, 2001, p. 252). The fact Bronagh had hid her gun in said basket had prompted many comments from teachers, which made Amelia uncomfortable at the time of the 1975 shooting. As she faces her breakdown, Amelia's

Troubles stories are also unravelled, revealing not only the impact of the character's traumatic experiences, but also Anna Burns's refusal of a realist framework to structure her narrative.

Amelia is aware of her breakdown all throughout the crisis and while most people stare or merely laugh, even a sympathetic couple that approach her do nothing more than ask her if she is from an "alcoholic's shelter". The only person who assists her is the security guard, who watches her from inside the store, calls for help, and is kind to her. Amelia is particularly upset about having a breakdown in "awful Camden", but the narrator ponders that "when having a breakdown, there was nowhere so awful to have it, as the place on happened to be" (BURNS, 2001, p. 252).

Cathy Caruth explains that "the historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 8). Amelia is flooded by memories of Belfast while in Camden, but the public nature of her experience heightens its own traumatic potential. Amelia signals her feelings of dissociation: "'I might be having a breakdown,' she said, 'but I'm not sure. I'm not feeling connected. I feel as if, really, I'm standing over there'" (BURNS, 2001, p. 253). To Caruth, it is the "inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience," thus, "since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 8). Amelia is uncertain of her bearings and the lack of sympathy of the crowd that surrounds her is punctuated as a further stressor in her confusion: "Amelia realised she'd again said all of that out loud. She'd only meant to say the first part, whatever that first part had been, for already she could no longer remember. Why was her mind going funny? Why was everything becoming forgot?" (BURNS, 2001, p. 253). Caruth concluded her point explaining that "if repression, in trauma, is replaced by latency, this is significant in so far as its blankness—the space of unconsciousness— is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 8).

At this point, the assemblage of traumatic events that overwhelmed Amelia appears to become fragmented again. In the following lines, her holding on to the grille is described as "peculiar, her arms and legs spread out very wide. She was holding onto the grille, the way men do, the way men did, over and over, being searched, by soldiers, in her childhood" (BURNS, 2001, p. 255). People start questioning her and as the bean tins fall down, children begin to laugh, her final stressor: "her brain and her nervous system, her heart, couldn't cope with children. They were the ones who became the adults and she slipped into powerless

frightened childhood every time" (BURNS, 2001, p. 256). Amelia is paralysed by fear, until she sees the guard again:

> This was what war was, she knew, this putting hands into bags. She could never get away, and that was what war was also. So how could she fall to her knees? How could she surrender? How could she trust what would happen to her when she knew what would happen to her could only be much worse? Instead, she held on, and she held on tight and she looked into the supermarket. She locked eyes with the guard. He'd been staring out all this time. (BURNS, 2001, p. 256)

Although Amelia is terribly afraid of him and concludes he must want to harm her, the guard is the only person who mobilises help. In the chapter that follows, ghosts from Belfast return to Amelia in dreams after she is taken to an institution following her breakdown, but now she has the assistance of Jewels, a sympathetic friend. She helps Amelia back to the present with the aid of Agatha Christie's fiction. Like in *Milkman*, literature is a way to bypass violence and rewrite the legacy of the Troubles:

> Amelia yawned and leaned against Jewels and said she thought she was beginning to see what they were talking about. Having those sleeps was important to start with, but perhaps they weren't the answer in the end. Jewels helped her with her juice for she still couldn't drink without jerking. Then Jewels said, 'How about a murder mystery, goddesses? Lie back and I'll read to you all.'
> So she read them an Agatha Christie, with three murders, not one murder, and Amelia found, this time, she could concentrate on what was going on. She enjoyed this fiction, they all enjoyed it, and Jewels said she very much enjoyed reading to them, and did Amelia want to have a go at reading aloud to them as well? (BURNS, 2001, p. 280-281)

1.2.2 *Little Constructions* (2007)

Stephanie Lehner has argued that the thriller "was the predominant mode for representing the Troubles" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 142), and that several literary productions she classifies as "peace process fictions" have instrumentalised elements of the form, "which has proven especially able to register the temporal and spatial crossings underpinning the Agreement, while contesting the notion that it could draw 'a line under the past'" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 142). Elmer Kennedy-Andrews has cited Gerry Smyth as identifying "three received forms of Troubles narrative":

> the Realist thriller, the 'national romance' (where the union of the lovers from opposing communities – 'love-across-the-barricades' – stands as metaphor for a larger social and political reconciliation), and 'domestic fiction' ('in which the private, feminized realm of love and desire offers an escape from the public, masculine realm of political abstraction'). (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2003, p. 8)

I would argue that, if in *No Bones* Anna Burns carnivalised realist conventions, in *Little Constructions* she parodied the Troubles thriller[10], establishing a different novelistic language to access and work through trauma and violence as major themes. To Lehner, the crime thriller "seems apt to register the traumatic excesses of the recent violent past" (LEHNER, 2020, p. 143), something Burns develops in her 2007 novel with dark, humorous undertones as she establishes the complicated dynamics of the Doe family in the fictional village of Tiptoe Floorboard.

> So what were the girls up against? Were we talking Dirty Linen in public? Were we talking Noises? Were we talking families of origin? Were we talking Mamma Doe and Papa Doe and Mamma and Papa's friends and other relatives? Were we talking Mr McCotter? Or impacts, consequences, earplugs, rolling legacies, headstaggers, four brothers in war factions, another brother not in war factions but hardly normal given his Community Centre leanings? Were we talking mental asylums, sex, no sex, or sex where you concentrate on the wallpaper? If she's saying she wants to sleep in her bedroom would that be basting aspersions on them because none of them slept in their bedrooms? If she's saying, 'There's something wrong and I'm going to the doctor', would that mean she's implying there's something wrong and that they should be going to the doctor too?
> Of course we know that Jotty, so far in therapy, hadn't been saying anything. But I think that information would have freaked the Sisters even more. (BURNS, 2007, p. 196)

While in *No Bones* Burns names the Troubles, Ardoyne, Belfast, the different sides of the conflict, as well as her characters, in *Little Constructions* she adopts a different approach, as I have discussed. Firstly, the narrative takes place in the fictional town of Tiptoe Floorboard, a place that, while narrated in a different register, is quite similar in its proneness to outbursts of violence to those observed in *No Bones*, and also – in its silences, traumatised individuals, and tangential relationship with reality through labyrinthic narratives — to *Milkman.* There is the constant threat of sexual violence aimed at the women characters of the novel, something Amelia also endures in *No Bones.* It should also be noted that one of the points *Milkman*'s narrator makes through her storytelling – that the sectarian violence of the Troubles had gendered ramifications for women, and that the power that men yielded in that society – regardless of their sides – often meant a subjugation of women, is worked through the fabric of *Little Constructions*. The novel's opening sentences, "There are no differences

[10] Discussing Eoin McNamee's exploration of thriller conventions, Matt McGuire has observed that "McNamee's work can be distinguished by virtue of its remarkable willingness to incorporate 'real people' and 'real events' within the familiar plot shapes of the thriller's generic form." (MCGUIRE, 2015, p. 63)

between men and women. No differences. Except one. Men want to know what sort of gun it is. Women just want the gun." (BURNS, 2007, p. 1), pronounced as Jetty Doe storms into Tom Spaders' shop, introduce the reader both to the world of Tiptoe Floorboard and to the ironic undertones adopted by the narrator. Of course, the fact Jetty does not care about the sort of gun becomes a talking point that returns in the novel, but more than that, it appears that this is a fundamental point of difference, especially in a society like this.

While characters in *No Bones* are easily identified – Amelia, Bronagh, Vincent, Mick –, in *Little Constructions* the identities of characters are somewhat fragmented and inaccessible even through their names. Most of them belong to the "Doe" crime family, a surname that signals the narrator's unwillingness to identify in itself. Furthermore, the Does have intentionally similar names. As Jetty storms into his shop, Tom recognises her as "one of those Doe women, the one whose name began with 'J'" (BURNS, 2007, p. 1). However, that description would also apply to other Doe women, such as Jotty, JanineJoshuatine, Janet, Julie or Jennifer, or even to Doe men, such as the head of the gang, John, his son Judas, or honorary family member Johnjoe. The narrator explains that often others "only socially connected with the Doe family" (BURNS, 2007, p. 2) also used their name as it was "shorthand – similar to the way crimes happened in war zones" (BURNS, 2007, p. 2). This is the first suggestion, of course, that both the Doe family and its crimes, and Tiptoe Floorboard, are metaphors for dynamics more complicated than the gang itself: "all crimes in such places got connected with the war, lumped together with the war, as if they were a part of it, as if they were because of it, and this happened whether they were because of it or not" (BURNS, 2007, p. 2-3). Thus, Burns's thorny naming of her characters – which even extends to Gunshop owner Tom Spaders, who has a double in Tom Cusack – is directly connected to her rhizomatic approach to the Troubles in this novel.

While my analysis of *Little Constructions* will focus on Burns's construction of trauma, it should be noted that the novel's labyrinthic language slowly unveils markers that firmly connect Tiptoe Floorboard's conflict with the Troubles. Near the conclusion of the novel, in Chapter Fourteen, members of other "factions" come to confront John Doe over the disappearance of some explosives. Here, the vernacular of the conflict is strongly marked: while John Doe is still referred to as the master of an "Empire" – his gang – the members of what the narrator calls the "Fifth Faction", which "consisted of members of the six war factions rolled into one" (BURNS, 2007, p. 262), infect the novel with the language of the conflict. Their reasoning for not interfering with John Doe up to this point was that "four brothers had been committed members of the Fifth Faction, up until the point they'd been

caught in an ambush and slain" (BURNS, 2007, p. 262). The brothers – Benedict and Samuel and Abel and Abel – are then described as "dead martyrs" and "great soldiers" (BURNS, 2007, p. 262). Doe's trespass was serious because "all of the factionists' bombing stuff, you see, had disappeared" (BURNS, 2007, p. 262).

The Troubles were, of course, marked by bombings (DAWSON, 2007, xix, p. 2, p. 12). In Anna Burns's fiction, however, the conflict as trauma is often mourned through her characters' and narrators' clash between the commonplace and the reality of war, that included explosions. The process from one state of mind to the other is captured when Amelia first hears of the conflict, in *No Bones:* "There would be shootings and bombings and hand-to-hand fightings and that if they didn't find somewhere else to go, to get out of Ardoyne and away from it, there was nothing else for it but to be burned in their beds" (BURNS, 2001, p. 2). In Amelia's breakdown in Camden Town, she sees Roberta McKeown, who "had been blown up by a carbomb in 1975" (BURNS, 2001, p. 251). When Amelia was eleven, her brother Mick stole something from her "Treasures" – a box where she kept her toys, which included bullet cases she collected – and told her mother she wished to join the Protestants' cause, claiming the object he took from her box was a "prime charger". When asked what a prime charger was, Mick replied: "It sets off bombs Ma", shocking both Mrs Lovett and Amelia, only to admit to his sister he was lying a few moments later.

In *No Bones,* Amelia also has a traumatic false encounter with a bomb in a pram in the chapter titled "Babies, 1974". Mary Dolan, a schoolfriend, had had a baby and "there'd been problems with it coming out, maybe because of all the age she was" (BURNS, 2001, p. 65), Amelia narrates. The girl is left traumatised by the event and her parents offer no help: "her da was still pretending he'd nothing to do with it and her ma was still not noticing. Nobody got in the doctor" (BURNS, 2001, p. 65). Amelia reports that Dolan "started to wheel it about it an old toy pram", walking all around Ardoyne "again and again and again" (BURNS, 2001, p. 65). People start to speculate on what, exactly, was inside the pram. One day Mary starts following Amelia on the street and the girl confronts her:

> I pushed her away. She fell against the old wall and her eyes began to water. She groped for a stone to put in her mouth. I reached over and slapped it out of her hand.
> 'Will ye stop that!'
> We stayed still for a minute in the quiet, then I said,
> 'Listen Mary – why's that bomb in your pram?'
> Mary puled at a strand of hair.
> 'Where did you get it?'
> She put the hair in her mouth. I looked at her and just wanted to shove her under a tank.

> ‘Mary! Will ye answer me? Where’s your baby?’ She looked up, surprised, then pointed to the pram.
> ‘No,’ I said. ‘That’s a bomb.’
> ‘No,’ she said. ‘A baby.’
> (BURNS, 2001, p. 69)

Amelia decides to check and realises, horrified, that inside the pram lies the corpse of Mary’s stillborn baby. She has difficulty at telling the difference between it and a bomb, however: “There was definitely strings or thin wires, you know, just under the surface. Was it a bomb? What did a bomb look like? Not like a soldier anyway. I touched it. It felt leathery and dry and a bit soft” (BURNS, 2001, p. 69). This horrifying scene is echoed in Amelia’s 1991 breakdown in Camden Town, when she panics in the moments she hears the children around her and the narrator likens the sound of children to “the sound of terrorists” (BURNS, 2001, p. 255). The pram as a container of deceitful intentions also appears in *Little Constructions*, pushed by a female police officer who was going to approach Janet Doe.

If in her debut, the pram is a container of Mary’s literal trauma and of Amelia’s projected one, in Burns’s second book, it appears as container of an outer threat enabled by sexism in Tiptoe Floorboard. The agent argues that “certain kinds of men ignore a certain kind of woman” (BURNS, 2001, p. 98) and that

> I might be right beside them, or behind them, or in front of them, say at a bus-stop, and they wouldn’t see me – no lipstick, no makeup, hair a mess, generally a bit mousy, a bit scraggly – and I’d be holding my shopping bags and rocking my pram. In one bag would be my Glock Extra Sensory 47, which as you know in its day was of the best time-saving, up-to-the-minute brighter and richer colour treble-lamp technology version, and in the other would be my old trusty standby semi-automatic affair. In the pram would be my recording equipment disguised as a big baby, just in case they got suspicious and had a look in. but no. practically they’d be shouting at each other – about the day, the time, the place and the victim for their next kill, I could have turned to them, shoved the plastic fake infant in their faces and said, “Excuse me. Would you mind repeating that? I think my special secret services law enforcement microphone disguised as this here giant baby didn’t quite pick it all up,” and you know, still they wouldn’t notice, still they’d continue detailing as before. (BURNS, 2007, p. 98-99)

She thus suggests that motherhood is among the characteristics that grant a woman invisibility in Tiptoe Floorboard, to the point men would discuss the most violent and incriminating details of their illegal activities without even noticing her presence, “as long as you don’t look like Marilyn Monroe, as long as you haven’t put on lippy, as long as you haven’t done your hair or taken yourself out of your dowdy, part-of-the-damaged, cant’-be-bothered trauma costumes, then you’ll do fine, then you’ll do more than okay” (BURNS, 2007, p. 99). Thus, prams make room for much more than just children in Anna Burns’s

fiction. The officer recognises she must adopt a different strategy around women and that with them "mostly it helps if you look slightly more on the groomed side" (BURNS, 2007, p. 99) unless "you're dealing with an exceptionally untidy highly traumatised woman" (BURNS, 2007, p. 99). The theme of traumatised women and their "trauma clothes"[11] appears repeatedly in this outsider's brief analysis of Tiptoe Floorboard's sexual dynamics. When the narrator finally introduces the Fifth Faction by the end of the novel, she explains her tardiness in typical ironic fashion, putting it down to "logistics": "I don't know how to fit them all in" (BURNS, 2007, p. 262). Finally, she addresses the reader that might insist on the Fifth Faction members being given proper space on the narrative: "'Well,' I say, 'go change your trauma clothes and leave my methods alone.'" (BURNS, 2007, p. 262). That is: as the Troubles are unequivocally unveiled after several markers as the "Interfering Outside Police Officer", the narrator states she will not write of them and establishes an association with trauma clothes, a crucial element in her plot.

Little Constructions is a novel undercut by trauma. Tom Spaders is left traumatised after being "mugged and stabbed on the way home from work by a bunch of teenagers" (BURNS, 2007, p. 3). The Doe children suffered from a condition called "Noises" that made them ultra-sensible to sounds: "at first tiny irritating sounds had started to creep in and prod at him, and again, at first without him being fully aware" (BURNS, 2007, p. 94). This was usually dealt with by "unconsciously swap[ing] their Noises for something more manageable. Violence – and by the bucketload – kept the Noises away" (BURNS, 2007, p. 94), until it no longer works for John Doe and his wife Janet starts buying him earplugs, which are kept in the "Doe Family Cupboard" which "had long been tagged and sorted. It was for earplugs. So thank goodness – no shadows or hidden trauma there" (BURNS, 2007, p. 97). While most characters are presented as traumatised – and, in some cases, as traumatising others –, I will focus on Jotty Doe, whose questions are more thoroughly developed by Burns in the novel. Jotty is a victim of abuse, has a child taken away from her, has repressed memories and establishes a direct dialogue with the narrator.

Jotty Doe's narrative is fragmented and its timeline is disrupted. The blurriness the accompanies the recovery of some of her most painful memories offers the reader a glimpse

[11] As the agent's line indicates, in the same sense that putting on "lippy" or doing one's hair was universally recognised as a performance of femininity in Tiptoe Floorboard, wearing "trauma clothes" signalled a woman was too traumatised or "damaged" (BURNS, 2007, p. 99) to engage in those sexual antics. While the garments are never fully described, the narrator and the officer both inform us that the clothes communicated one could not "be bothered" (BURNS, 2007, p. 99) to "look like Marilyn Monroe" (BURNS, 2007, p. 99) or spend too much time grooming oneself. The women who worn trauma clothes are also described as "untidy" (BURNS, 2007, p. 99).

into Burns's construction of trauma and mourning in this novel. Jotty, arguably the main female character of *Little Constructions*, suffers a breakdown that is associated by the narrator with sexual abuse. She tells the reader Jotty first experienced what she calls "going under" with Tom Spaders and that up until "until those Achilles's Heels, and until the Fathers came with the penis, she had experienced 'Going Under' brilliantly" (BURNS, 2007, p. 199). The narrator juxtaposes "Going Under", described as "slipping *into* your body, it's *giving it up* to your body, it's acknowledging that your body knows more about everything – most especially sexual – than anything your little head of super-intellectual control believes it can think up" (BURNS, 2007, p. 199), to "Going Sideways". The latter is associated to traumatic experiences and abuse, and here Burns establishes a reference to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's most celebrated short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), by refusing to address it directly. The narrator associates the Doe Sisters with "Going Sideways" and, in this instance, with an obsessive hunt for wallpapers at a supermarket as an "escape route" developed "to expert level way back in their little childhood pasts" (BURNS, 2007, p. 199). The narrator argues she does not want to "get into that Wallpaper Story" as "nowadays, you don't even have to have been sexually abused" (BURNS, 2007, p. 199) to know it. She then describes the experience that is associated with "The Yellow Wallpaper":

> Disappearing into wallpaper is 'Going Sideways'. That's cutting-out and slipping-out – I mean out of your body – until it's done and over with. Just count your numbers, recite your alphabet, examine that leaf on that tree beside that waterfall inside that wallpaper, until Daddy or Daddy Substitute falls asleep or crawls off. 'Going Under', therefore, can be very confusing, I mean for an adult who has, since childhood, always been used to 'Going Sideways'. (BURNS, 2007, p. 199)

It becomes apparent then, that Jotty was a victim of sexual abuse in her own home. The novel also brings several instances where other characters' traumas are shared or reflected in Jotty. For instance, as JanineJoshuatine gets described in Chapter One as someone "too eccentric" that people thought "should be put away – not especially for her crimes, for can't crimes always be accommodated? – but because of all the unnerving back-to-frontness she displayed" (BURNS, 2007, p. 11), the narrator tells us Jotty "worried constantly about her sister for she had witnessed more than anyone the unending torment of her sibling, for both Janine and she lived together in the same house" (BURNS, 2007, p. 11). It is also after the mugging, which leaves Tom traumatised, that he and Jotty rekindle their relationship, after a seven-year estrangement. As they start arguing, however, the issue of identity and their positions in the conflict appear. While the narrator maintains their argument is really about the

night they spent together and their poor communication skills, Jotty insists Tom stops selling arms and dealing with the Doe family, while he argues she is a Doe herself. Her response, "that's different. That's blood" (BURNS, 2007, p. 51), reaffirms the roots of Jotty's traumas as well as her social role in Tiptoe Floorboard as being linked to something beyond her control, thus being perceived by her as a source of even greater suffering. As the argument peaks, Jotty asks why Tom had never said her name, "not even once" (BURNS, 2007, p. 54). The narrator's explanation, as well as Spaders's hesitation to respond, convey something about Burns's own naming strategy for *Little Constructions:*

> And it was true. He had never said her name. indeed, he couldn't say it. Not because he'd forgotten it. Most certainly he hadn't forgotten it. It was the dread of the capitulation of it, of the handing over to her of himself in it, of what it might take from him to pay her the compliment of letting her know he really knew her name. (…) To say *her* name means you're acknowledging, means you're at the mercy – for might she not kill you, just when you've decided you're happy, you're safe, you're totally at peace with this person? That's why you won't concede. That's why you'll say a version of it. That's why you'll say a nickname instead of it. You won't ever, consciously or unconsciously, get that name right (BURNS, 2007, p. 55)

Hurt by Spaders's hesitation, Jotty changes the subject. The couple's relationship is markedly strained by her family name (or rather, what it stands for), and the violence that soils everything it touches in Tiptoe Floorboard. In one of the novel's most violent scenes, John Doe strangles Jetty Doe, his sister-in-law and mistress, after he catches her with another man. The murder should not surprise her, the narrator explains, because John had killed many men, and "and a certain contingent believe he did kill an older daughter for, let's face it, is it likely a school-age teenager would be allowed to emigrate, all of a sudden, with no money, and was now writing, as they said she was, successful cookery books on the other side of the world?" (BURNS, 2007, p. 157). That is, the killing of Jetty, an unambiguous act of femicide, reintroduces the ghost of Jane into the narrative, a process of mourning Jotty is going to pursue. Tom Spaders listens to Jetty's screams and is once more conflicted whether to engage or not with the Does as he walks the streets handling his own anxiety towards Jotty's traumatic manifestations in her fear of physical contact (BURNS, 2007, p. 159), against the backdrop of his own trauma: "here was him, struggling along, making an effort not to kill anybody, and here was them, that Doe family, not bothering their arses to struggle not to kill anybody" (BURNS, 2007, p. 159). Then there is a return to Jane in Tom's line of thinking, again linking her closely with John's murderous ways:

> The thing, though, that he couldn't let go of was a certain feeling he'd had around Doe regarding an older daughter who Jotty one day had told him had disappeared.

> At the time, he hadn't been long back in town after being out of it for ages. When she told him about the daughter, he assumed that in reality this girl must have gone off on holiday – a euphemism, of course, for being transported to the town's grim mental asylum on the hill. He assumed *that* based upon the fact that that's what periodically seemed to happen to so many of the Doe family. There had been a funeral of one of them from the asylum around the time it was said the girl had disappeared. At this funeral – of John Doe's aunt, though some rumoured it was really of his actual birth-mother – the Doe boy and girl, Judas and Julie, had stood by the graveside and cried their eyes out. (BURNS, 2007, p. 159)

The suspicion around the disappeared daughter haunts Tom, who decides to engage in a conversation with John Doe on the identity of the most recent buried woman – his aunt or granny – as candidly as possible only to be interrupted by a furious Jotty, who becomes obsessed with proving John had, in fact, buried a girl called Jane – his first daughter – instead of sending her abroad. The narrator follows Jotty's undertaking and, close to the novel's ending, even engages with her, as Doe decides to dig up the coffin. The narrator argues against it: "if she goes and digs up a coffin, I said, it would only put her down in history as the last of the Great Mad Does. By now her sisters, and indeed all her brothers and even her parents, were in jail, in graves, or in that mental asylum" (BURNS, 2007, p. 285).

Jotty's decision accumulates the manifold manifestations of trauma presented throughout the novel: Jetty's murder and Julie's attempted one, the Doe gang violence and the factions war, gendered and sexual violence, the Sisters self-sedated way to face reality and her own search for Jane. In digging up a coffin, the narrator warns her, she would be physically digging up trauma. Jane was not buried there, nor were any Doe women, but instead loads of explosives John intercepted from the Fifth Faction. At first, Jotty is relieved and believes Jane did leave the country. The narrator, however, tells her to look for the Interfering Police Officers and reminds her that Tom Spaders – who had been incarcerated for many years for killing John Doe to save Julie's life – is alive. She then proceeds to explain to us that Jane, "poor niece," who "had been raped and battered, brutally murdered, with nobody giving a damn or caring as to her whereabouts" (BURNS, 2007, p. 292), would not be located: "there was not, and never had been, any Jane Doe" (BURNS, 2007, p. 292). She clarifies that the Police Officers would help Jotty understand, "after they had instigated enquiries," that "the girl she was yearning to mourn was an ethereal construction made up of at least two people. One was herself and the other was her son" (BURNS, 2007, p. 292-293).

Cathy Caruth argues that "the ability to recover the past is thus closely and paradoxically tied up, in trauma, with the inability to have access to it," and that "this suggests that what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part,

by its lack of integration into consciousness" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 152). In that sense, it seems significant that a character that had been consistently presented as having suffered many forms of violence that produced trauma, does not undergo this overwhelming experience on the page, but that this is reported to reader as something that will take place outside of the story, not for our eyes.

This is consistent with Jotty's earlier attempts to recover memories and deal with the trauma related to her pregnancy as well as in other occasions. Earlier in the novel, Jotty's trauma is presented to the reader in snapshots that go back and forth through time. In the scene where Tom Spaders is arrested in the Doe house after killing John, Jotty is described as "having her fingers prised off Tom by the police and by the ambulance crew also", as "she was holding on because she wanted to make him alive because she thought he was dead" (BURNS, 2007, p. 261), which explains her later confusion about him. Throughout the novel, we learn they get married and that she turns his gun shop into a bra shop, happily subverting both its violent and phallic associations as she wished from the beginning.

Jotty's relationship with repressed memories can be read under Cathy Caruth' analysis of the connection between the survivor of trauma and the truth of the event, which "may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 253). Thus, "the flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 253). In Chapter 10, Jotty struggles with her attempts at reconciliation with the past and the language of recovery:

> She used to have these books, Self-Help books, Human Potential books, Recovery books, most of them borrowed. But she woke up one day and knew it was time to get rid of her own and to give the others back. They were on incest and sexuality and on recovering from child sexual abuse and on adult children of child sexual abuse and on love and lust and greed and grabbing and on giving and receiving and on trust and sharing and on co-operation not domination and on aggression during sex with or without consideration for the other person and on partners of rape victims and on 'No, get back. Stay back. Don't! Don't! I said I'm not ready yet.' Those sort of books. She decided to get rid of them because, in the years since acquiring them – and rather furtively acquiring them, if you ask me, and initially from far-flung distant Self-Help bookstores where nobody knew her, as if she were ashamed or something – Jotty hadn't gotten round to reading even one of them, even once.
> She had tried.
> 'Must read them, oh, I must read them, simply must read them. I might get cured.' So she'd pick the latest book up. But the moment of 'is-ness', of ripeness, of propitious occasion, never, ever, came upon her. An instant heaviness, a ponderous drugginess, a self-protective lassitude would come over Jotty whenever she tried to read one of them. 'If only I would read them,' she yawned, 'I might find out stuff.'
> She'd attempt. I mean she'd attempt to open one. But she'd get overwhelmed by the tyranny of having to do so and instead would set the book back down. Then she'd lie down herself and fall asleep. She'd do this on her kitchen cusions for, like most

> people in Tiptoe Floorboard, Jotty never slept in her bedroom. Forty years she reckoned the nap would be, but it would go on seventy, threatening another seventy should she, when she awoke, try to pick that book up. (BURNS, 2007, p. 178-179)

In Chapter Seven, Jotty's narrates sexual abuse by "Fathers" (BURNS, 2007, p. 195) as well as her subsequent pregnancy, described as a time in which she "started eating mounds of butter" which "she kept on eating […] until she got fat" (BURNS, 2007, p. 195), up to the point she was taken to Tiptoe Hospital to have a "menstrual period" extracted. Afterwards, while Jotty "developed a hankering for knitting" "memory blanks ensued" (BURNS, 2007, p. 195), exemplifying Caruth's description of the trauma as "a repeated suffering of the event", but also "a continual leaving of its site" (CARUTH, 1995, p. 10). This is also when she decides not to "follow her sisters down the path of grooming and of clothes-shopping" (BURNS, 2007, p. 195), wearing what the narrator terms "trauma clothes" throughout the novel.

Jotty's trauma, which follows and is pursued by her throughout the narrative, is only unveiled to herself in the form of Jane by the end of the novel, thus undoing *Little Constructions*' biggest mystery, the identity of the buried person. Ultimately, however, it was the Faction's bombs – the conflict itself – that John Doe was continually burying. By the end of the novel, the narrator declares "it was a new social order and no longer about that old aberration 'Give me all your money' – for people always think it's about money when they don't know what it's about" (BURNS, 2007, p. 295), suggesting, yet again, that the true nature of the conflict narrated throughout *Little Constructions* was more complicated than one might suppose. The sentences that follow confirm that. She informs the readers the Interfering Foreign Policeman "had done his neutralising work and, by now, had left Tiptoe Floorboard" and that "even the Fifth Faction, which had made up the six war faction as you know, had now dispersed and disbanded all their units" (BURNS, 2007, p. 295), dedicating themselves to "giving syndicated history interviews on the TV" (BURNS, 2007, p. 295), she adds in a mocking tone. Anna Burns's second novel mourns the conflict by subverting the conventions of yet another popular form of the Troubles novel, adopting a narrative strategy that, while quite different from the one employed in her debut, still establishes a solid dialogue with *No Bones* and foreshadows some of the work she mastered in *Milkman.*

1.2.3 *Milkman* (2018)

In *Milkman*, the third act of Burns's nomadology of the Troubles, the voice of the Narrator should be approached as a point of departure to analyse the author's "jigsaw approach" to both literature and to mourning the conflict. Asked about the process of establishing and writing the "language of the novel", Burns defined it as the language of the Narrator, which came to her "intact": "she obsesses and worries and circles round and takes her thoughts apart to try to understand what's happening to her" (BURNS, 2020a). While this description is closely aligned with Caruth's explanation of how survivors of trauma cope with lost – and recovered – memories, it is also informative of Burns's take on literature as assemblage. She continues: "I wrote it all down. Her digressions. Her digging herself into the sentence, covering herself in paragraphs. It is never so much about where it is leading. It's about the way it is said" (BURNS, 2020a).

If "the narrator of *Milkman* was the first character to appear," being described by Burns as "strong and clear in her thoughts" to which the author "had instant access" (BURNS, 2020a), it was the writer's own practice of reading-while-walking in Belfast during the Troubles and the curiosity it elicited in her neighbours that she identified as the first element that came to her (MORAIF, 2019). In a sense, then, reading-while-walking as a methodology for mourning the Troubles was inextricably associated with this character's voice from the outset. Burns mentioned she wished to put order to "a few hundred words of notes" to start writing a short story which she would then send to a magazine. Those notes were

> about reading-while-walking which I used to do a lot. People would say to me, including strangers in clubs and shops and bars and cafés, 'You're that girl who reads and walks!' I would continually be startled at having this pointed out, mainly because it seemed an activity not particularly worthy of note. And also, I was surprised to be noticed doing it by so many people. I wanted to try to write something around the possible reasons why this was being pointed out to me, rather than about the activity of reading while walking itself. (BURNS apud MORAIF, 2019)

In the novel, the narrator's relationship with the city is mediated by her avoidance of it. While the eighteen-year-old always prefers to walk places, she does so while immersed into nineteenth-century novels. In that sense, her relationship with public space is as peripheral as she wishes her own position in that society to be. Her behaviour, however, makes her into a target.

The eighteen-year-old's introspection raises the curiosity of the community and rumours spread about her as soon as the forty-one-year-old paramilitary leader, Milkman, takes up an interest in her. That gossip spreads so quickly and that it works as a taint to her

standing in the community but not his tells us something both about the position of women in that society and of the far-reaching effects of the version of events those in power propagated. The power and extent to which rumours produced in the interests of powerful men both affect women's standing in their community as well as gaslight traumatised individuals into doubting their own experiences. This is a constant power play throughout Burns's novels. In Amelia's childhood (*No Bones)*, her version of events is constantly overwritten by that of her abusive brother Mick, who later becomes involved with paramilitary forces. In *Little Constructions,* rumours infect and cast doubt over the identity and relationship between most of the characters to the point that murderous John Doe gets described as "Tiptoe Floorboard's Great Messiah, thus totally innocent of killing anybody – except Jetty Doe" (BURNS, 2007, p. 258) by the "Ordinary Decent Folk". Jotty is described as mad for closing the gun shop, and Tom Spaders, arrested for killing John to save Julie's life as Doe attempted to strangle his own daughter, was a rumoured "serial murderer". Those stories confuse Julie's own sense of self, to the point she has difficulty questioning them and recuperating hew own memory of events even when "hearsay" includes the information that "Julie Doe was dead" (BURNS, 2007, p. 258). The Narrator argues "that should've given the game away, for Julie knew she wasn't dead, but here we have an example of the strength of denial in the face of absolutely anything" (BURNS, 2007, p. 258).

In *Milkman*, gossip evidences the inaccessibility of any construction of a sense of truthfulness in a society that lived in fear and often communicated through rumours: "As for the rumour of me and the milkman, I dismissed it without considering it. Intense nosiness about everybody had always existed in the area. Gossip washed in, washed out, came, went, moved on to the next target" (BURNS, 2018, p. 5). While we later find out first-brother-in-law was responsible for starting the rumours, it can be just as easily inferred that Milkman himself could have initiated them to ascertain ownership over the Narrator, keeping other men away from her (further along the plot he even threatens to kill her "maybe-boyfriend") and, simultaneously, to keep control over a narrative that corners Middle Sister into accepting him, as her neighbours and family distance themselves and isolate her. In Burns's third novel, rumours take centre stage as a kind of mainstream narrative produced by the paramilitary officer that harasses the protagonist, but she, unlike Julie Doe, becomes a narrator herself and undermines both his version of history as well as her objectification through literature, the place she escapes to via reading-while-walking and where she takes ownership of events as a storyteller, as we are going to further discuss in Chapter 2.

The first meeting between the Narrator and Milkman establishes the dynamics of his pursuit of her. Milkman approaches her from his car as she walks while reading Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819). She tells the reader she often walked while reading books and that, while she saw nothing wrong in her habit, reading-while-walking soon "became something else to be added as further proof against me" (BURNS, 2018, p. 3). The passage is very informative of Milkman's approach to harassing her. He mentions he knew her father and brothers, and she states he looked "smiling and friendly by way of being obliging" (BURNS, 2018, p. 3) while offering her a lift. However, "by age eighteen, 'smiling, friendly and obliging' always had me straight on the alert" (BURNS, 2018, p. 3). There are clear sexual undertones to his offer, but also an implication that this invitation is not one she could outrightly refuse due to his naming of her male family members: "I did not want to get in the car with this man. I did not know how to say so though, as he wasn't being rude and he knew my family for he'd named the credentials, the male people of my family, and I couldn't be rude because he wasn't being rude" (BURNS, 2018, p. 3). After some hesitation, her response is to reaffirm her status as a walker, and as a reader: "So I hesitated, or froze, which was rude. 'I'm walking,' I said. 'I'm reading,' and I held up the book, as if *Ivanhoe* should explain the walking, the necessity for walking" (BURNS, 2018, p. 3) and although he insists she could read in the car, the man eventually drives away after telling her to "enjoy her book" (BURNS, 2018, p. 4).

While the narrator's reading-while-walking sets her apart in a society where she was not supposed to call attention to herself and exposes her to the scrutiny of her neighbours, it also works on at least two levels to help her deflect from engaging with the categories of identity imposed over her in that particular version of her country. A friend who was a "renouncer of the state" – a paramilitary nationalist – decries reading-while-walking as something that calls attention to Middle Sister and declares it both "disturbing" and "not self-preservation" (BURNS, 2018, p. 200). However, while "not self-preservation", reading-while-walking is what permits the young woman to refuse Milkman's lift in that first attempt. The Narrator's immersion into her exercise of reading-while-walking, which allows her to experience her city in a manner that is inaccessible to any of her neighbours, is an exercise of creativity in itself. If, as we have seen, imagination is indeed a nomadic process, we can say Burns finds an ideal tool to build a character and a plot that evade both the categories the Troubles would force upon young women, but also recognising the far-reaching effects of having to evade them for so long. Middle Sister becomes the narrator of her own story more than two decades later by leaving the position of the reader immersed into a nineteenth-

century novel to occupy that of a storyteller that turns to the century she loathed to question, to elaborate and to share her own traumatic experiences, which are different but intertwined with the traumatic experience of her community.

Burns's strategy of adhering to an aesthetic of namelessness in *Milkman* adds to the character's and the story's elusiveness. If we read the novel as a woman in charge of telling her own story, her choices of naming and non-naming can also be interpreted as a gendered response to the violent silencing mechanisms of pre- and post-Agreement Northern Ireland. While *Milkman*'s narrator does not name herself, the place where she lives, other characters or even her country, the name of the man who stalks her and who personifies the violence, the misogyny and the powerlessness she felt is the only one she shares. She does so before the story even begins, as the book is titled after her abuser. However, even this sort of public-shaming is ambiguous as it is only at the end of the novel that it is revealed to the reader that "the milkman" was not a codename or a nickname, but rather the paramilitary officer's surname, Milkman.

> After they shot him, and the six unfortunates who'd got in the way of him, it was revealed, along with his age, abode, 'husband to' and 'father of', that Milkman's name really was Milkman. This was shocking. 'Can't be right,' cried people. 'Farfetched. Weird. Silly even, to have the name Milkman.'(…)
> Alarmists, meanwhile, continued to debate over the provenance of the Milkman name. Was it one of ours? One of theirs? Was it from over the road? Over the water? Over the border? Should it be allowed? Banned? Binned? Laughed at? Discounted? What was the consensus? *'An unusual name,'* everyone, with nervous caution, after great deliberation, said. (…)
> [T]he news of this Milkman name unsettled people; it cheated them, frightened them and there seemed no way round a feeling of embarrassment either. When considered a pseudonym, some codename, 'the milkman' had possessed mystique, intrigue, theatrical possibility. Once out of symbolism, however, once into the everyday, the banal, into any old Tom, Dick and Harryness, any respect it had garnered as the cognomen of a high-cadre paramilitary activist was undercut immediately and, just as immediately, fell away. People consulted phonebooks, encyclopaedias, reference books of names to see if anyone, anywhere in the world had been called Milkman. Many were left stranded, uncomprehending, with nothing for it but to grow speculation, both in the media and in the districts, over just who exactly this Milkman person was. (BURNS, 2018, p. 304-305)

On an external level, the passage above reveals how Burns defies an element of the Peace Process critics have identified as "archive fever", as Lehner explains: "[Colin] Graham notes that part of the Peace Process 'has been to filter out that which does not fit into or attend on the present moment . . . Thus the difficult and the embarrassingly recent past, or the non-conforming present, is archived'" (LEHNER, 2007, p. 507). Is it possible that, by naming her abuser — even if only after his death and after remembering the feeling that, finally, her "body was proclaiming, *'Halleluiah! He's dead. Thank fuck halleluiah!'"* (BURNS, 2007, p.

302)—, *Milkman*'s mature narrator decides to bear witness to the "difficult and embarrassing recent past, or the non-conforming present"? "[M]aybe I'll calm down now, maybe I'll get better now, maybe this'll be the end of all that *'don't let it be Milkman, oh please don't let it be Milkman*'" (BURNS, 2007, p. 302), the woman in charge of telling her own story remembers longing for the chance to heal as a girl. Telling the story, then, bears witness to the traumatic experiences of her youth at the same time that it allows her to mourn and honour her many losses.

This complex structure of remembering and enunciating one's grief is symptomatic of the sense that the experience of the Troubles remains a part of Northern Irish emotional reality, in spite of the problematic project of enforcing a break between Troubles-Era and Post-Agreement Northern Ireland. While Anna Burns's voice is her own, she takes part in a tradition of Northern Irish writers who "have used their fiction to comment on the changing nature of their society" (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 365). Such novels "powerfully explore the legacy of violence and complicate simple narratives of sectarian conflict with a focus on gender, class and embodiment" (MAGENNIS, 2015, p. 365). In *Milkman*, the novelist offers her reader several points of access to a fictional account of life during the Troubles for a young woman, communicating not only the toll the experiences took on her as they happened, but the way they are part of her present and future.

The act of storytelling reaffirms the longevity and the impact of traumatic experiences, exercising through language the ineffectuality of the Belfast Agreement's prescription for a "fresh start". Burns's novel also interrogates the simplification of complex Northern Irish identities to a nationalist/unionist binary. This is achieved through the construction of a character who responds to the harshness and the scrutiny of her community by turning to "reading-while-walking". This *flânerie*, which can be read as a political act of resistance, allows her to occupy an in-between place of alterity as a nomad, one who only belongs because she too has her precariousness exposed. As long as she walks-while-reading, she is not entirely there. As long as she looks at her city as peripheral to the pages of her long, nineteenth-century novels, the reality of bombings and armed violence cannot entirely encompass her.

As many writers have done before her, Anna Burns turns to fiction to try to make sense of Northern Ireland, but her strategy is particularly clever in the sense that literature figures as a way out in the novel itself. Burns firmly sets her main character beyond the reach of the past that haunts her as she looks back at it as its narrator. If in the past, and in much of our present reality, the official version is that of those who are in power, in Burns's fiction the

category of the other owns the narrative. After all, only by operating this radical movement of walking as and towards the other we can “critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain human lives are more grievable than others” (BUTLER, 2004, p. 30), a point that will be the focus of our next chapter.

2 *MILKMAN* AS A RESPONSE TO SECTARIAN BINARIES: ANNA BURNS'S CAST OF "BEYOND-THE-PALES"

> *It is incumbent upon us to list you your fears lest you forget them: that of being needy; of being clingy; of being odd; of being invisible; of being visible; of being shamed; of being shunned; of being deceived; of being bullied, of being abandoned; of being hit; of being talked about; of being pitied; of being mocked; of being thought both 'child' and at the same time 'old woman'; of anger; of others; of making mistakes; of knowing instinctively; of sadness; of loneliness; of failure; of loss; of love; of death. If not death, then of living – of the body, its needs, its bits, its daring bits, its unwanted bits. Then the shudders, the ripples, our legs turning to pulp because of those shudders and ripples. On a scale of one to ten, nine and nine-tenths of us believe in the loss of our power and in succumbing to weakness, also in the slyness of others. In instability too, we believe. Nine and nine-tenths of us think we are spied upon, that we replay old trauma, that we are tight and unhappy and numb in our facial expression. These are our fears, Dear Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie. Note them please. Remember these points please. Susannah, oh our Susannah. We are afraid.*[12]
>
> *Anna Burns*

Throughout Chapter 1, I argued that Anna Burns has written a three-act nomadology of the Troubles through her novels. I turned to Deleuze and Guattari in order to establish that nomadology opposes history in the sense that it does not produce a static and representational narrative that merely accumulates facts or significant events in a teleological timeline. In this chapter, however, I would like to further address the political aspect of a nomadology and its impact both on Anna Burns's narrative strategy and on the subjectivities of her characters in *Milkman.* Deleuze and Guattari's "Treatise on Nomadology" (1987, vii) proposes a re-evaluation of the relationship between the state and the war machine departing from the

[12] Burns uses italics in this passage in *Milkman.*

axiom that "the war machine is exterior to the State apparatus" (1987, p. 351). This apparatus, which has "political sovereignty, or domination" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 351) as its main constituting element, is established upon a binary logic that the war machine evades. It "seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 152). The extrinsic power of the war machine is not to be confused, thus, with the intrinsic one waged by the two poles of the State apparatus, its magic violence and its military institution. Deleuze and Guattari argue that "the concern of the State is to conserve" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 357). They turn to Clastres to present war, in its primitive historical genesis, as a "social state that wards off and prevents the State" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 357) or, in other words, as a nomadic counterpoint to sedentary perpetuations of power. Ultimately, they argue the war machine is realized "more completely" in the "barbaric" assemblages of nomadic warriors.

Since the war machine, as a concept, stems from Deleuze and Guattari's model of "becoming and heterogeneity, as opposed to the stable, the eternal, the identical, the constant" (1987, p. 361), I would argue that such a concept offers an appropriate framework to access some of *Milkman*'s main questions pertaining to the construction of subjectivities in becoming as well as to the ampler thread Burns weaves between her characters' disruptiveness and the precarious relationship of the Narrator with what she calls the "political problems" that undercut the lives of every person in her "statelet", including her own. Here, then, I would like to propose a reading of *Milkman* that considers its lines of flight under the light of the novel's unstable power politics as well as its complicated relationship with the languages of war. While the predations endured by the Narrator are heavily defined by her position as a woman, the narrative complicates any attempt at a binary reading of gender politics to show how the dynamics at work in the Narrator's 1970s Northern Irish city – clearly Belfast, but unwaveringly unnamed – are complicated by the logic of sectarianism as well as that of British occupation. She is not predated upon by Milkman alone, but also by the community[13]. The men in the novel are widely ineffectual and inaccessible, but women characters are often equally damning in the scarce occasions the Narrator seeks their help.

Reading-while-walking, the element that first came to Anna Burns when she decided to write the novel and one that appears as one of its main questions, is a marker of the Narrator's difference and a habit that both shuns and sheds a light over her. Soon, we learn that "beyond-the-pale" is a marker of eccentricity, but also one reserved for those who are

[13] "According to his rulebook – mine too, at least before the predations upon me by the community and by Milkman – the physical-contact aspect could be the only aspect." (BURNS, 2018, p. 179)

somehow politically dangerous, and also a statement of power from the margins. As the character referred to as longest friend tells the Narrator off for calling attention to herself by reading-while-walking – thus becoming a beyond-the-pale – and for refusing to engage with the community, or even to answer their questions, Middle-Sister relents and states she will no longer read books while walking the streets, but that is the only point in which she will give in to them. She must remain silent and give nothing away as this was her only source of power in an altogether disempowering world (BURNS, 2018, p. 108). This comes from, of course, a young woman who at age eighteen has already been vilified by her community as the mistress of the forty-one-year-old paramilitary man who was harassing her.

Judith Butler states that "the refusal to narrate remains a relation to narrative and to the scene of address" (BUTLER, 2005, p. 12), and that "as a narrative withheld, it either refuses the relation that the inquirer presupposes or changes that relation so that the one queried refuses the one who queries" (BUTLER, 2005, p. 12). This is very much in line with the Narrator's refusal at this point. She had already tried telling her mother the truth behind the rumours, but had been called a liar (BURNS, 2018, p. 33). Her mother also calls her "some sort of mob-woman" (BURNS, 2018, p. 33) and declares her "out of the pale", someone who "lost your intrinsic rights and wrongs" (BURNS, 2018, p. 33). Finally, the older woman declares: "you make it hard, wee girl, to love you" (BURNS, 2018, p. 33), and states her father would not be pleased if he was still alive. This triggers a remembrance of the Narrator's father, not as a reflection of the prevailing construct of masculinity of the community, but as someone who suffered from his own traumas. The Narrator remembers that her father was, himself, someone outside the pale, who could not perform his gender role as expected. This, in turn, frustrated her mother. She remembers an occasion when he was at the hospital with her and her younger sisters and he told them about being sexually abused as a child. In that sense, her mother's chastisement always relies on gender binaries that do not play out in the world as she observes it. In one instance, she is upset because her sixteen-year-old daughter is not yet married, and wonders why she will not accept the advances of her stalker, Somebody McSomebody.

It is precisely those binaries – male and female, Catholic and Protestant, Renouncer of the State or Defender of the State – the Narrator evades by being beyond the pale. The first person to place her there through language is her mother, and she does that as a response to their inability to communicate. This argument comes early in the novel, and it is the source of the Narrator's retreat into herself, into literature, simultaneously into the past – the time of the books she reads – and into the future – the time of the book she narrates:

> In response, and I suppose proving her right, I closed up again, took my teenage satisfaction in renouncing the attempt to seek out any leverage point that might have existed between us. Instead I thought, this is my life and I love you, or maybe I don't love you, but this is who I am, what I stand for and these are the lines, mother. I didn't speak this, because I couldn't have done so without getting into a fight and always we were in fights, always making attack on each other. Instead I closed up, thinking, *gee-whizz, gee-whizz, geewhizz, gee-whizz*, and I stopped caring too, from that moment, as to whether or not she blamed me. From now on she'd get nothing from me. But was that how it was to be always? Me, according to her, sharp of heart? And her, according to me, ending in nothing but arrowpoints herself? (BURNS, 2018, p. 34-35)

In a sense, then, *Milkman* is as much about the life of this character as she undergoes her community's predations as it is about her relationship with her mother. There are, of course, two milkmen in the novel. The paramilitary, whose name is Milkman, and "real milkman," who was a milkman by trade, and who occupies a large portion of the latter section of the narrative as a love interest for the Narrator's mother. He is also a beyond-the-pale. There is a large section in the narrative that is centred on the way the Narrator's relationship with her mother changes after real milkman is mistakenly shot by state forces in an attack that had paramilitary Milkman as its actual target. The mother's own personality becomes "adolescent". In a sense, they exchange roles, but the Narrator offers her mother the acceptance and understanding she herself did not receive:

> I attempted to reassure ma, because I'd noticed, even if she hadn't, that a side-benefit to real milkman getting shot but crucially not dying, was that ma was dropping years off her, though in correlation to this, it seemed she was losing a lot of confidence, becoming adolescent, giving off the belief she didn't stand a chance against those ex-pious women who also seemed to be dropping years off them but who again, and in correlation, also were developing self-esteem issues of their own. (BURNS, 2018, p. 170)

The lengths the Narrator goes through to make sure her mother has a chance at being happy with real milkman reveals a bond between the two women that is more profound than the one the reader is initially led to believe, especially considering the mother's dismissal of her daughter's words and her remarks on the Narrator being "hard to love". The narrative is rife with harsh statements and scepticism from the mother, even when the girl is poisoned. This willingness to rewrite herself into the narrative and even outside of it (as someone who aids her mother but is not an active actor in that particular plot), I would argue, is a trait that pertains to the Narrator's beyond-the-paleness. This is a trait that allows her not to rationalise her life and choices into static binaries, but that exemplifies becoming woman/animal/world in the minoritarian mode (BRAIDOTTI, 2008, p. 43), a possibility to look at being at the

margin not as a limitation, but as a source of power. This is something the Narrator realises when she holds on to her silence – the source of her otherness – even as she lets go of her reading-while-walking. Rosi Braidotti argues that "nomadic becomings are rather the process of affirmation of the unalterably positive structure of difference, unhinged from the binary system that traditionally opposed it to Sameness" (BRAIDOTTI, 2008, p. 46). In *Milkman,* to be beyond-the-pale is to be marginalised by the community, and to threaten the poorly established power structure of paramilitaries and state forces. Nevertheless, in a community ruled by a sectarian logic, even outsiders cannot be truly *outside,* so they are closely watched.

Deleuze and Guattari assert that "collective bodies always have fringes or minorities that reconstitute equivalents of the war machine—in sometimes quite unforeseen forms—in specific assemblages such as building bridges or cathedrals or rendering judgments or making music or instituting a science, a technology" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 366). Tablets girl's – the district's poisoner – letter features as an epigraph to this chapter. A notorious beyond-the-pale who gets murdered after poisoning both the Narrator and a man she mistook for Hitler, tablets girl's anxieties are ultimately aligned with many manifested throughout the novel by the Narrator herself. Considering Middle Sister's unreliability in recounting and remembering events, and even in placing herself in that society – in excusing herself from the conflict, she forgets her closest friend was a paramilitary officer, as well as two of her brothers –, any analysis of *Milkman* as the cynosure of a nomadology of the Troubles must address the beyond-the-pales as nomads. Rosi Braidotti defines nomadic becomings as "a collective assemblage, a relay-point for a web of complex relations that displace the centrality of ego-indexed notions of identity" (BRAIDOTTI, 2008, p. 46). The powers that shun, that threaten to, and that even kill them, accept the beyond-the-pales as threats to established, albeit precariously, powers. This is somewhat analogous to Virginia Woolf's late 1930s political commentary on patriarchy and militarism. In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf's "Outsider's Society" is constituted not as a brick-and-mortar institution with regular meetings, but as part of a project for a third way beyond the same binaries nomadic identities evade. In Woolf's essay, the Outsiders are women in the middle of a war established by different facets of patriarchy. In Burns's novel, men and women are tormented by gender constructs upheld by the community but, once again, intensified by war.[14] The conflict haunts them in different ways, as I shall discuss in the next section. To look at the Narrator, however, we must access

[14] This is something Virginia Woolf would also recognise in the early 1940s, though in a radically different context. See "Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid" (1940).

the other Outsiders, and understand their function in this novel. Deleuze and Guattari argue that, ultimately, war is not the object of the war machine, and that

> If war necessarily results, it is because the war machine collides with States and cities, as forces (of striation) opposing its positive object: from then on, the war machine has as its enemy the State, the city, the state and urban phenomenon, and adopts as its objective their annihilation. It is at this point that the war machine becomes war: annihilate the forces of the State, destroy the State-form. (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 416-417)

While there is a war taking place, and a state of exception in which local paramilitaries depend heavily on the support of the community, as the Narrator herself observes, those are the ramifications of ampler socio-political import. In *Milkman,* those placed beyond-the-pale articulate a nomadic war machine.

2.1 **"'I don't know' was my three-syllable defence in response to the questions": Evading Binaries in *Milkman***

Middle-Sister's narration of *Milkman* is also one that tells the reader of her refusal to give an account of herself to her community. This extends, but is not limited to, the supposed affair with the paramilitary man who stalks her and other related rumours. While Walter Benjamin proposes that "experience that is passed from one mouth to the next is the source from which all storytellers have drawn" (BENJAMIN, 1936, p. 60), I would argue Middle-Sister is only made a storyteller through the process of isolation Benjamin has posited as the demise of storytelling – the rise of novel –, a point I will unpack and further discuss in Chapter 3. The reason I return to Benjamin at this point is that Middle-Sister's silence and inscrutability, her effective refusal to narrate within the novel's narrative, is one of three elements that compose a triad that defines her as a liability to the political power of the "renouncers-of-the-state". This results in her sentencing as a beyond-the-pale. The other elements are reading-while-walking, and the incident with the cat's head, which I introduced in Chapter 1.

All elements are connected, of course, and are aligned with the recurrence of the number three throughout the novel. This is a consistent pattern[15] that can be read under the framework of Christian symbolism, in a nod to the Holy Trinity in a novel whose political language is equally dense and sparse. While the words "Catholic" and "Protestant" are markedly absent from the text, questions such as "Is he the right religion?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 29) haunt the Narrator, as well as the fact that her first sister never recovered from the grief of losing the love of her life, a man whose death Milkman uses as a decoy to covertly threaten to kill the Narrator's maybe-boyfriend: "He'd been killed in a carbomb at work because he'd been the wrong religion in the wrong place and that was another thing that happened" (BURNS, 2018, p. 30). Davi Pinho's analysis of the centrality of the number three in the structure of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) departs from the passage "But...those three dots mark a precipice" (WOOLF, 1938, p. 90), and establishes a compelling argument for Woolf's instrumentalisation of the number three as a mark of her refusal of binary oppositions, as well as a signifier of her earlier turn towards androgyny as a way to evade a binary division between the male and the female sentences in *A Room of One's Own* (1928):

> It is at this point that she introduces a "But" followed by an ellipsis: three dots that symbolise the precipice between supposedly similar interlocutors. From this break, Woolf interpolates the solicitor's missive with a letter from the honorary treasurer of a women's college and another one from the treasurer of a society that promotes professions for women, the latter two asking not only for a guinea for their causes but for whatever clothes and food she could spare. Three letters compose her mosaic of difference, and the three guineas from the title are materialised in three significant points: three currencies, three values, which will be analysed throughout three chapters. Three, the prime number, indivisible if not by itself, is the significant form that allows for the collage of the three letters by Woolf's "Cubist" writer. And it is the number three that anticipates her praise of multiplicity, her demand for the end of binary oppositions. (PINHO, 2019, p. 4)[16]

This nod to a third way, then, is aligned with the writer's project "to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity" (WOOLF, 1938, p. 215). While Burns approaches both war and gender in a different way in her novel, the fact she populates her narrative with the number three can be read as a nod to her character's uneasiness towards the binary categories offered to her and the inescapability of them. Of course, the Narrator was a Catholic, the sister of renouncers living in a renouncer district, and while she tried to remain aloof to the present, she declares it was not possible not having a view on the political problems, and that she "could see the necessity for them, for the renouncers, for how it was

[15] Check Attachment A
[16] My translation.

they came about, how it seemed they had to come about, given all the legalised and defended imbalances" (BURNS, 2018, p. 63). Middle Sister, therefore, belongs to a nationalist community. Nevertheless, her anxiety towards labels appears even in her most affective, emotional relationship, or rather, what she calls her maybe-relationship. While the Narrator claims that while she "would have liked to have been a proper pairing and to have been officially dating and said so at one point to maybe-boyfriend" (BURNS, 2018, p. 10), he reminded her of a failed attempt she forgot about in one of her episodes of *jamais vu*. Maybe-boyfriend tells her that when they attempted being each other's "steady boy" and "steady girl", she "went peculiar", and that while it was true that the same could be said of him, "never had he seen [her] with so much fear in [her] before" (BURNS, 2018, p. 10). She remains uneasy towards the veracity of what maybe-boyfriend says, remembering "something of what he was recounting" (BURNS, 2018, p. 10), but doubting some of its passages, such as when maybe-boyfriend claims he suggested they "split up as steady girl and steady boy which, in his opinion, had just been [her] anyway attempting that 'talking about feelings" (BURNS, 2018, p. 10). This is a memory that remains inaccessible as the Narrator does not offer any contextual commentary – looking back as she does – to it.

Ultimately, it is the fact that the couple would rather "go back to the maybe territory of not knowing whether or not [they] were dating", the insertion of a doubt of their coupledom in itself, that allows for them to be together. Forgetting, and episodes of *jamais vu*, are, of course, some of the ways the Narrator becomes other. The novel is structured according to the logic of the Narrator's reasoning, not always adhering to a chronological timeline. After Milkman is killed, we go back to the time Middle Sister spent recuperating in her home to follow her mother's crisis and relationship with real milkman. There is a return to the main timeline to see the demise of Somebody McSomebody and first brother-in-law. The only logic, however, is the one of recollection. As Rosi Braidotti puts it when regarding molar memory

> Coherence is a matter for a posteriori, external, relational and momentary synchronizations. One's ability to remember it and reconstruct it as a unified block is the necessary, albeit delusional, expression of a yearning for a unity, a self-presence, which is not within the reach of the humans of today – if ever it was" (BRAIDOTTI, 2008, p. 53).

The Narrator simultaneously holds and hides her difference at plain sight. It is only in relation to others – and through language – that she can truly be recognised for what she is: a beyond-the-pale, or a nomad.

2.2 **The District's Beyond-the-Pales: "This was not schizophrenia. This was living otherwise"**

> The beyonds had funny wee ways which the district had conceded were just that bit too funny. They no longer passed muster, were no longer conformable in the mystery of the human mind as fully to be accommodable and this too, was before the days of consciousness-raising groups, of personal-improvement workshops, of motivational programming, basically before these modern times when you can stand up and receive a round of applause for admitting there might be something wrong with your head. Instead it was best then, in those days, to keep the lowest of low profiles rather than admit your personal distinguishing habits had fallen below the benchmark for social regularity. If you didn't, you'd find yourself branded a psychological misfit and slotted out there with those other misfits on the rim. At that time there weren't many on the rim in our district. There was the man who didn't love anybody. There were the women with the issues. There was nuclear boy and tablets girl and tablets girl's sister. Then there was myself, and yes, took me a while to realise I too, was on that list. Brother-in-law wasn't on the list but that didn't mean he ought not to have been.
>
> *Anna Burns*

If we are to look at *Milkman* as both the centre and a point of departure from which one can analyse Anna Burns's nomadology of the Troubles, the best way to access it is through its margins. Reading-while-walking is, of course, the image for the Narrator's difference, a metareference to literature itself. However, it is also the physical or material act that situates her in a transit that dislocates her from the boundaries of accepted behaviour within the logic of established standards of sociability. Reading-while-walking is both conspicuous and alienating, it tells those the Narrator should be afraid of that they do not matter as much as *Ivanhoe,* so in the logic of the war waged by state forces and paramilitary men, both political and sexual, as it is undeniable Milkman mobilises IRA structures to harass the Narrator, it does get to a point when it is more outrageous to read *Jane Eyre* while walking then to walk around carrying Semtex, as she observes. There is a framework she refuses to recognise and *jamais vu* is the Narrator's default there, as she, strategically or not, either fails to make connections between events and implications, or entirely forgets about them. This is not merely trauma, I would argue, but rather a self-fashioning that results from nomadic

becoming as a process of affirmation of a structure of difference, as proposed by Braidotti (2008, p. 46).

It is telling that the Narrator does not merely refuse to engage with the nineteen-seventies, or with the Troubles; she declares she does not like the twentieth century, and only reads books that were published before it (BURNS, 2018, p. 9). She occupies and moves through the public space while excusing herself from it. This is a gesture that, in its symbolic turning away from the "hair-trigger nature" of the Troubles, unhinges her from the binary system upon which it stands. One might even speculate that this very gesture is one of the reasons Milkman decides to objectify, harass, and subjugate her, not only to reaffirm oppressive (and binary) gender dynamics, but to recodify her into the community. The attraction might just be the power play. It is telling that in their first meeting, she is reading *Ivanhoe* while walking, and he offers her a ride referring to the men in her family, some of which were paramilitaries, to justify their alleged acquaintance and his right to approach her. There is a label, then, that he attaches to her: a paramilitary's sister. Soon, first-brother-in-law spreads rumours about the Narrator and Milkman and another label is attached to her: a paramilitary's mistress.

Being outside the pale is to threaten the delicate balance of the community. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us that the term "pale", originating from the Latin word *palus*, "stake", is "a district separated from the surrounding country by defined boundaries or distinguished by a different administrative and legal system" (THE EDITORS OF ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA, 1998). Historically, there have been two English pales: one in France and the other in Ireland. It is from this definition that the popular expression "beyond the pale", instrumentalised by Burns throughout *Milkman*, derives. In *Irish Pedigrees: Or, The Origin and Stem of the Irish Nation* (1892), John O' Hart explains that

> The term Pale, signifying a fence or enclosure, was applied to those English settlements in Ireland, within which their laws and authority prevailed; and the designation "Pale" appears to have been first applied to the English territory about the beginning of the fourteenth century. […] The extent of the Pale varied much at different periods, and Spencer says again of Bruce's forces—"they marched forth into the English Pale, which then was chiefly in the north, from the point of Dunluce (in the county Antrim), and beyond into Dublin, having in the midst Knockfergus (now 'Carrickfergus'), Belfast, Armagh, and Carlingford, which are now the most out-bounds and abandoned places in the English Pale, and indeed not counted of the English Pale at all, for it stretched now no further than Dundalk towards the north." According as the English power extended, so did the Pale, and it was considered to comprise at some periods the counties of Antrim, Down, part of Armagh, Louth, Meath, Westmeath, Dublin, Kildare, King's and Queen's Counties, Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary, Waterford, Wexford, and part of Wicklow; but in general the

> name “Pale” was confined to the counties of Dublin, Louth, Meath, and Kildare. (O’HART, 1892)

Those outside the original Pale were the people who lived beyond the bounds of English rule. O’Hart explains that the Irish who lived “within the people” acknowledging English authority were in turn “considered as subjects,” and “had to a certain extent the protection of English laws” (O’HART, 1892). The Irish outside the Pale, however, “were styled *Irish enemies*, not being recognised as subjects; while the Anglo-Irish, or Irish of English descent, who resisted the Government, were termed *English Rebels*, being accounted as subjects” (O’HART, 1892).

The laws of the Pale sought to suppress and erase Irishness and even classed the killing of the Irish people as a felony. The Statute of Kilkenny (1367), O’Hart tells us, forbid intermarriages between families of English descent and the native Irish as well as the appointment of the latter to any ecclesiastical roles. Further, “any person of the English race speaking the Irish language, or adopting Irish names, dress, customs, or manners, should forfeit all their goods, lands, and tenements” (O’HART, 1892). Later penal laws were passed to compel the native Irish “to change their names and take English sirnames; to give up the use of the Irish language, and speak only English; to adopt the English dress, manners, and customs” (O’HART, 1892). Today, “beyond the pale” is a popular expression widely used to refer to a person who has acted “outside the limits of acceptable behaviour or judgment” (JENNINGS, 2016). It is true that the colloquialism has been detached from its original context. Nevertheless, the political significance of the Pale in Irish history, as the attempt by English invaders to suppress the Irish, cannot be ignored in a novel as politically charged as *Milkman.* While the community are extremely defensive around what the Narrator calls “quintessential ‘over the water’ language” (BURNS, 2018, p. 17), they still form a pale of their own and ostracise those who do not adhere to the rules, reproducing, in a sense, the historical violence of the coloniser, but now against those who are perceived to wander in a metaphorical lawless land beyond-the-pale.

The Narrator recognises that “given the time and place, I might have been scary, walking around, terrorising the neighbourhood with ‘How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich’, but it wasn’t just me. In their own idiosyncratic ways, an awful lot of other people were pretty scary here as well” (BURNS, 2018, p. 159-160). However, while the minoritarian mode puts those beyond-the-pale in an adversarial position to the *status quo* – precarious as the order established by the paramilitaries may be, we can look at it as part of the State or City structure the nomadic war machine threatens –, those who hold on to

ascribed gender or social roles and look at their own identities as fixed suffer the crumbling of their own selves. Examples abound in the novel, be it in the characters who refrain from relationships with those they love to favour more conscientious ones, be it in the specific construction of the Narrator's mother, who fully embodies her role as an Ardoyne ma, and later laments the lack of identification with her own body. While tortured, unhappy, and some even mentally ill, those beyond the pale still articulate difference as positivity, which in Rosi Braidotti's words "entails a multiple process of transformation, a play of complexity that expresses the principle of not-One" (BRAIDOTTI, 2008, p. 46). Throughout the following sections, I will argue, aligned with Braidotti, that in *Milkman* Anna Burns builds and affirms difference in the thinking-subject not through "the expression of in-depth interiority," nor through "the enactment of transcendental models of reflexive consciousness" (BRAIDOTTI, 2008, p. 46), but rather in the construction of a nomadological narrative that assembles a collective cast of difference. To look at how Burns evades the representational mode, we must, of course, begin our analysis with the first element of the beyond-the-pales: "the women with the issues," or rather, the district's feminists.

2.2.1 The Women with the Issues: "Depravity, decadence, demoralisation, dissemination of pessimism, outrages to propriety"

The district's feminists are introduced into the narrative by the man who didn't love anybody, real milkman. It is a pattern throughout the novel that beyond-the-pale characters are usually called upon by fellow outsiders, which prompts an interlude from the current scene in which the Narrator returns to past events to contextualise the role said characters perform in their community. While the "women with the issues" are listed among the beyond beyond-the-pales by the Narrator at the beginning of the novel, she only unpacks their impact on the district after real milkman suggests it would be a good idea for her to talk to them. Unaware of her own status as a beyond-the-pale at this point, the Narrator is horrified by the idea, wondering if real milkman was "crazy as well as blind and deaf and dumb to what was said about those women in this area" (BURNS, 2018, p. 82). She concludes it would be akin to "committing social suicide" (BURNS, 2018, p. 82) to be seen with one of them. She goes on to explain that the women with the issues constituted "the nascent feminist group," which placed them "in the category of those way, way beyond-the-pale" (BURNS, 2018, p. 82).

While she explains the rejection of those women and what they stood for in terms of language, stating that the word “feminist” was considered to be beyond-the-pale and that even the word “woman” “barely escaped beyond-the-pale”, the very fact the political stand of that group is directly addressed and named in a novel remarkable in its evasion of identifications (we never hear of the IRA, or even of nationalists, but rather of “renouncers-of-the-state”, for instance) suggests the narrator’s analysis of this group, while often sceptical, is set to a subversive mode. That is, the word “feminist” being undesirable as well as, I am going to argue, a threat to the stability of local paramilitary power, the Narrator makes a point of naming it, even if to state it as unwelcome. She concluded that the two words – feminist and woman – put together or replaced by “a general word”, a euphemism in an attempt “to soften things” such as her community did by addressing the group as “the women with the issues” achieved basically the same effect, that is, communicating an uncomfortable otherness.

Real milkman suggests the Narrator should talk to the women with the issues as he finds her distressed after her meeting with Milkman at the ten-minute area. Aware of the fact she is being harassed by the paramilitary, real milkman is the first person who addresses the Narrator as a victim of psychological and intended physical abuse, not a perpetrator of a social trespass. That awareness, a critical eye to the misgivings of powerful elements of the paramilitary group, is a distinctive feature of real milkman’s otherness – his beyond-the-pale quality, which I will address more thoroughly in the next section. While real milkman declares he does not understand the district’s feminists, it is precisely their knowledge in a field he finds himself lacking that leads him to state they could address and provide the Narrator with the help he realises she needs. He underlines, however, that the women in question seem “to know an awful lot about gender history and sexual politics” (BURNS, 2018, p. 82), so he directs the Narrator to them without necessarily aligning himself with them. If we look at those beyond-the-pale as potential articulators of a war machine external to the State apparatus, which in the context of the novel, is very much focused on the violent power structures of the community and of the local paramilitaries, this exchange suggests the alignment of real milkman and the issue women as a barbaric assemblage (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 359) of nomadic warriors. That is, when real milkman proposes that this young woman who is isolated as a beyond-the-pale due to her reading-while-walking could find allies in the issue women, commending their knowledge, but refraining from it, we glimpse a Deleuzian framework of nomadic assemblages as war: “far from deriving from exchange, even as a sanction for its failure, war is what limits exchanges, maintains them in

the framework of ‘alliances’; it is what prevents them from becoming a State factor, from fusing groups” (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 357-358).

It is precisely in his recognition of Middle Sister’s oppression and the suggestion that others might help that real milkman destabilises the predominant narrative – the Narrator as a paramilitary groupie/mistress – and sets up a reaction on her part. When he proposes it would be a good idea for the Narrator to look for them, real milkman underlines both the women’s expertise on the matter and the fact the Narrator did not feel safe talking about it in the area (BURNS, 2018, p. 82). In this, he both denies and embraces the group’s strangeness by recognising their knowledge as valid, disarticulating the narrative against the Narrator in his suggestion that the problem lies in the community, not with her. It is also relevant that in a scenario where an abuse of political power translates into gendered violence, real milkman directs a vulnerable woman to other women who are likely to listen to her. I would argue, however, more than signalling his lack of knowledge about “up-and-coming women’s topics” (BURNS, 2018, p. 82), real milkman’s act of directing the Narrator towards women who might listen suggests he is more aware of such topics, as well as of “gender history and sexual politics” than he admits.

Milkman is set in the nineteen-seventies, a time marked not only by some of the most violent events of the Troubles, but also by the disappointment that followed the brutal repression of the Civil Rights Marches. The description of the arrival of the feminist movement in the district suggests a self-organised group that, in its evasion of the binary logic of sectarianism, presents itself as a threat even before it displaces women from their strategic roles at home and within the movement. While “a sister branch” of an international women’s movement is said to have “spr[ung] up in our very downtown” (BURNS, 2018, p. 82) in a remarkably impersonal description, it is through a housewife – “who seemed traditional and normal” and had “a husband and children” (BURNS, 2018, p. 82) – that organised feminism enters the district. The Narrator tells us that the woman hung a notice that said: “ATTENTION ALL WOMEN OF THE DISTRICT: GREAT GOOD NEWS!!!” (BURNS, 2018, p. 82). This woman’s bringing of “good news” – a subversion of the Gospels – signals how easily assumed roles are abandoned and replaced by women in the district. Further along the plot, several of the “pious women of the area” – women described as intermediaries between the “holy women”, the nuns, and the renouncers-of-the-state – also let go of their identities when they realise real milkman is emotionally and sexually available. On their turn, the traditional women appear as foils to the issue women, clashing with them on some occasions and coming to their rescue on others. At this point, however, feminism sounds

simultaneously like a cult, and a threat to a political state based on the upholding of the logic of sectarianism:

> It [the international women's group] was seeking to set up sister branches in all the world's countries, with no place – no city, no town, no village, no hamlet, no district, no hovel, no isolated residence – to be excluded from the remit, with no woman – again, any colour, any creed, any sexual preference, any disability, mental illness or even general dislikeability, indeed, of any type of diversity – to be excluded from the venture […]. (BURNS, 2018, p. 82)

The Narrator describes negative reactions from the media akin to the ones the red-light street had received. While at face-value such criticism focuses on issues of propriety (BURNS, 2018, p. 83), it seems significant that the red-light street also appears as a non-binary space. Maybe-boyfriend invites the Narrator to share a home there with him as those who live in the red-light street are either reluctant to "settle down" (BURNS, 2018, p. 27), or do not abide to expected patterns of behaviour. Besides those who lived there unmarried, there was a rumoured gay couple. The narrator observes that "there weren't any women living together, though one woman was famously said to live in number twenty-three with two men" (BURNS, 2018, p. 27), a description that foreshadows her own triangle with maybe-boyfriend and Chef. Likewise, the feminist open call brings not only people "from the two warring religions", but others from "the lesser known, lesser attended to, indeed completely ignored, other religions" (BURNS, 2018, p. 83). This is a movement, then, that being based on inclusion, creates a hub of interaction where women could potentially become aware of their oppression under the logic of their own local communities. The sense that even attending the event was a subversive act is conveyed by the description of how the woman who would later announce "the good news" never sought "permission" to go there. She "didn't seek approval, didn't ask anyone's opinion or request they go with her for moral support and protection" (BURNS, 2018, p. 83). Whatever this woman hears at the meeting is impressive enough for her to put the notice as soon as she returns and seek to "set up a sub-sorority branch in our district, just as some other women from other districts were now attempting in theirs" (BURNS, 2018, p. 83). Through this woman's notice the group is first established, and it grows until it reaches significant seven local members.

In "Women on the Market" (1977), an essay contemporary to the discussions of the women with the issues, Luce Irigaray departs from the notion that "the society we know, our own culture, is based upon the exchange of women" (IRIGARAY, 1977, p. 170). In *Milkman*, the reader witnesses what appears as an upholding of that pattern, as during his first

encroachment of the Narrator, the paramilitary justifies his approach by identifying her father and brothers (BURNS, 2018, p. 8). She explains to the reader that while she did want to get into his car, she had no pretext under which to react as he not only had not been "rude", but he also had "named the credentials," (BURNS, 2018, p. 8) that is the male members of [her] family. Irigaray further argues that "the passage into the social order, into the symbolic order, into order as such, is assured by the fact that men, or groups of men, circulate women among themselves, according to a rule known as the incest taboo" (IRIGARAY, 1977, p. 170). In the context of the novel, the assumption of women's bodies as inherently pertaining to men also produces tension when different predations intersect. As the narrative progresses, we learn that the Narrator had been enduring the harassment of Somebody McSomebody since she was seventeen years old, a stalking her mother took for fondness and led her to wish her daughter would date or even marry him (BURNS, 2018, p. 159). After Middle Sister rejects him, McSomebody starts threatening her:

> 'We will follow you,' he said and continued to say as soon as it dawned on him that he was being rebuffed by me and not accepted by me as he had presumed to be accepted. And although I'd tried to be respectful in my rebuffing it didn't work because, 'We will be next you, always next you. You started this. You made us look at you. You made us think … You suggested … You don't know what we're capable of and when you least expect it, when you think we're not there, when you think we've gone, you'll pay back for, oh, you'll pay back for … You'll …You'll …' (BURNS, 2018, p. 64-65)

The Narrator highlights the oddity of his behaviour (referring to himself in the first-person plural), as well as his habit of telling "untruths", such as pretending he was one of the renouncers. I would offer that Somebody McSomebody's reasoning reflects precisely the system of male sociability that Irigaray exposed in the 1970s. As Milkman claims the Narrator, McSomebody not only stops making threats, but denies his own interest in her, apologising for his behaviour and reaffirming his identity as a member of the renouncers, which includes, in this instance, abdicating from sexual desire. He is, of course, what the Narrator calls an "armchair supporter" (BURNS, 2018, p. 64), but his resentment towards women – directed at a specific one in this case – appears to run through a logic of homosociality that is mediated by his obsession with the local paramilitaries. As he learns of Milkman's interest, he recoils and attempts to rewrite past actions:

> Up until this point, Somebody McSomebody had been known about the area as a fervent supporter of the renouncers and certainly he came from an entrenched renouncer family. After being the rabid type for a while, however, he fell into that other category, the one of thinking himself a renouncer which meant, he implied when he made this second move on me, that I'd made a mistake in rejecting him

> first time. He said that although he'd come out with a lot of stalk-talk on that occasion in response to my rejection of him, he hadn't meant all that 'just you wait, filthy cat, you're going to die'. He said he hoped I hadn't taken it in the wrong vein but instead had known really, had accepted his words really, as expressive of his natural desire for my company. (BURNS, 2018, p. 71)

Following Milkman's death, McSomebody is quick to resume his own predations. He follows the Narrator to a nightclub, but this time he comes armed with a gun. The Narrator looks back at his intended violence as the result of a resentment generated by her lack of interest in him and furthered by Milkman's thwarting of his own plans. It is relevant that while the Narrator's lack of interest in him only intensifies his pursuit of her, Milkman's desires take precedence over everyone else's. In a configuration where the Narrator is desired by both Somebody and Milkman, her own desire is of no consequence, being addressed by Milkman only in relation to her practical, affective and sexual relationships in the real world as he covertly blackmails her into breaking up with maybe-boyfriend. In Somebody McSomebody's eyes, however, a young male who fetishizes the – heavily patriarchal – paramilitary structure itself, the Narrator's desires are not considered as a halt to his pursuit of her, but Milkman's – a senior figure in that organisation – own interest in her is enough for him to not only retreat, but to try to make amends.

As soon as Milkman ceases from being an impediment, however, Somebody McSomebody unleashes his misogynistic anger upon the Narrator: "He'd made his decision because I was supposed to have been a nice girl and further, his nice girl, but some mistake had occurred which confused him and insulted him but because of Milkman setting his sights, he'd been forced to retreat and keep resentment in check" (BURNS, 2018, p. 160). Here, as in the scene where Milkman first approaches the Narrator, we witness in Somebody McSomebody a symbolic exchange between men. The logic of that exchange is so pervasive that it withstands even while some of those men are absent (the Narrator's brothers), unwilling (Milkman never interacts with Somebody McSomebody in any way), or outsiders to the workings of that society (the Narrator's father, who is easily aligned with his paramilitary sons by Milkman). Irigaray states that "the circulation of women among men is what establishes the operations (…) of patriarchal society" (IRIGARAY, 1977, p. 184). In *Milkman,* it is often the reactions of women – organised or spontaneous – that disarticulate patriarchal forms of violence. Therefore, while the Narrator refuses real milkman's suggestion to go talk to the district's feminists about the paramilitary's predations, "So no thanks. Not keen to have a word, not now, not ever." (BURNS, 2018, p. 82), their placement at the margin

carries deeper metaphorical import, suggesting the fact that even the word "woman" was considered borderline beyond-the-pale has an impact on how the novel's conflicts unwind.

When Somebody McSomebody attacks the narrator at the nightclub, he confirms her suspicions "that the death of Milkman wouldn't mean, for me, the end of Milkman" (BURNS, 2018, p. 159) due to the double nature of the predations, inflicted upon her not only by the paramilitary but also by the community through their gossip and rumours. The attack by Somebody McSomebody materialises not only his own anger at being thwarted and rejected, but also a second wave of structural violence inflicted upon the Narrator by the community, who ensures the continuation of her victimisation "because they thought Milkman had gained ownership; because of my haughtiness; because my protection was now dead; because it was now being put about I'd tried to evade retribution for cheating on him with a car mechanic" (BURNS, 2018, p. 159) and Milkman's death appears as a communal, not an individual event, which always allowed for a bit of "anarchy". Within the confines of this in-between place and time, Somebody McSomebody invades a female restroom armed with a gun to shoot the Narrator. His attempt to subdue her fails, however. Faced with the prospect of death she remembers the words of her father: "*a recklessness, an abandonment, a rejection of me by me*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 160-161). Recollecting the fact that she could die "any day" frees her of the "place of terror that he thought, with his gun, he had just put me in" (BURNS, 2018, p. 161). Emboldened by that stance, the Narrator takes hold of Somebody McSomebody's gun and hits him in the face with it. While he quickly recovers possession of the gun, the Narrator's reaction in this scene is significant both in the fact that the remembrance of her father's words incites her into action and in the fact that her first reaction is not to try to shoot Somebody McSomebody. The former is relevant in the sense that her father is among those men in the novel – along with maybe-boyfriend, chef, and real milkman – that fail or refuse to perform masculinity as prescribed by the community. The latter reaffirms an earlier assertion of the Narrator in which she stated "three times in my life I've wanted to slap faces and once in my life I've wanted to hit someone in the face with a gun. I did do the gun but I have never slapped anybody" (BURNS, 2018, p. 157).

Throughout the novel, armed violence is generally linked to men, a pattern upheld here. While throughout the Troubles women remained active members both in *Cumann na mBan* and in the IRA from 1970 (REINISCH, 2016, p. 151), paramilitary women are remarkably scarce in *Milkman*. Longest friend is the only character we meet, albeit briefly, and she is conspicuously secretive about her activities. Other female renouncers are only mentioned in passing (BURNS, 2018, p. 67). Thus, in the moment in which the Narrator

decides to fight back, she reaches for the gun as a blunt-force instrument. This does not mean she – or other women in the novel – is constructed as a pacifist. As the weapon hits its target, she is surprised at her own disappointment at the effect it produces: "It wasn't though, a satisfying crunch of metal on bone, of someone having their head broke open which until that moment I wouldn't have thought I'd be so bloodthirsty for" (BURNS, 2018, p. 161).

A few moments later, the reader witnesses yet another manifestation of women's power to inflict violence. Somebody McSomebody takes back the firearm, but as he attempts to regain control, he learns that the dislocation of power, at least in that setting, is irrevocable. As he points the gun at the Narrator's breast, he is surprised by the power of women as a collective. She states he was interrupted as "something else he hadn't reckoned on, hadn't overhauled his blueprint on, was women, particularly women in toilets, these women, in these toilets" (BURNS, 2018, p. 161). This scene's significance allows us to draw two parallels, which I would like to discuss before unpacking its dynamics. The first one converses with the role women often played out in paramilitary organisations during the Troubles, one that often explored Irish and British gender constructs and assumptions as a vulnerability. The second reflects back to the fear the word "feminism" inspired in this community, to the point even the word "woman" was beyond-the-pale-adjacent. If we look at guns as a staple of male violence within the novel's imagery, this scene should be considered within a wider metaphorical complex as a group of women take down a man who, filled with delusions of paramilitary grandeur, had invaded their space to threaten the life of one of their own.

Aiming to "introduce *Cumann na mBan* into the historiography" (REINISCH, 2016, p. 149) of the Troubles, Dieter Reinisch conducted oral history interviews with former members of the paramilitary organisation. According to those interviews, fields of activities in *Cumann na mBan* (the Irishwomen's Council) could be divided into three main categories. Category A includes "women who focused on political and legal work" (REINISCH, 2016, p. 158), Category B "is formed by women who did the same activities outlined in Category A plus additional clandestine work such as transportation of arms, ammunition, explosives, and bombs hidden or produced in the Republic, and later couriered to the North" (REINISCH, 2016, p. 158). Finally, Category C "includes women who were actively involved in open warfare in the North" (REINISCH, 2016, p. 159). One of the women interviewed by Reinisch, Una, told him of an occasion when she transported arms and bombs to Belfast in the early 1970s. She was stopped by a British officer and told him she was carrying her laundry.

> I was coming by bus from Dublin. It was raining in Belfast and I had a big bag with me I could hardly carry, it was too heavy for me. When I walked up Grosvenor Road, coming from City Centre I was stopped by a young British soldier. I thought: 'Oh my God, that's it.' I told him I had my laundry with me and that I was on my way home. He took the bag off me and said he would help me to carry it home. We walked there, talking about the weather and stopped at Springfield Road and I took a taxi. (…) He didn't know what he was doing. This British soldier carried the bomb the whole way from City Centre up to Springfield Road. (REINISCH, 2016, p. 159)

Reinisch underlines how this situation illustrates a subversion of ascribed gender roles. The fact a man would hardly be offered the same treatment as Una did exemplifies how the sexist values that ruled a patriarchal society were manipulated by the IRA throughout the Troubles. Before the Narrator took his gun, Somebody McSomebody had made a point of telling her nobody would come to her rescue. His sentence – "Do you think anybody here gives a fuck if we teach you a—" (BURNS, 2018, p. 160) – however, is never concluded. First, the Narrator defends herself, and then a group of women attack him. While she makes a point of stating "it was for his behaviour that they beat him up, not for the irritation of guns, for wearing a balaclava when everybody knew who he was anyway; not for threatening me either, a woman, one of their soul sisters" (BURNS, 2018, p. 161), suggesting the reaction would have been the same if he had been there at any other time, as they stand in the plot, those elements are not quite separable. It is also significant that as the women physically attack him, they actually inflict upon him as a group the violence she had wanted to, but had failed to produce individually before. Therefore, as she declares Somebody McSomebody's two guns were left abandoned by the group of women on the bathroom floor as "cumbersome and irrelevant, or maybe just irrelevant" (BURNS, 2018, p. 161), she agrees that "this called for bare hands, stilettos, booted feet, flesh-on-flesh, bone-on-bone, hearing the cracks, causing the cracks, venting all that pent-up anger" (BURNS, 2018, p. 161). Just as a British soldier could not identify a woman as an IRA soldier, Somebody McSomebody did not calculate the impact of the symbolic violation of entering an all-female space to point a gun to a woman and the possible consequences such an act could garner for him. The clubgoers who beat him are a demonstration of the power of women as a collective within the novel, pointing to the reasons why their organisation beyond the logic of the ongoing conflict might be seen as dangerous, beyond-the-pale.

Accordingly, the renouncers take up measures to contain and attend to any complaints from women within the district, even claiming to be much more progressive than their occupiers, the British: "'Streaks ahead therefore we are,' they maintained, and they meant in terms of modernity, of conflict resolution and of gender progressiveness. 'Look at us,' they

said. ‘We take things seriously’” (BURNS, 2018, p. 162). After the incident in the bathroom, Somebody McSomebody is taken to a kangaroo court, charged with “one-quarter rape” for “peeking about in women’s toilets, even though none of the women from the toilets had mentioned rape or demanded to have it admitted that that was what it was” (BURNS, 2018, p. 162). This is part of a system the renouncers developed in which sex crimes were classified into subsections ranging from full rape, three-quarter rape, half rape, and one-quarter rape.

> Women’s issues were baffling, demanding, awful bloody annoying, not least because anybody with an ounce of clergy could see that women who had issues – as evidenced by our sample grouping who still met weekly in that backyard shed – were completely off their heads. In those days, however, with times a-changing, with the approach of the Eighties, it was getting that women had to be cajoled, had to be kept in with. What with female-orientation and female-amalgamation and women-this and women-that, also with talk of the sexes now being equal – seemed you could easily spark an international incident if you didn’t walk out your door and at least make polite gesture to some of their hairbrained, demented ideas. That was why our renouncers tormented themselves and bent over backwards, trying their damnedest to please and to include into the discourse our beyond-the-pale women. (BURNS, 2018, p. 162)

This tension between women’s issues in the community and “the women with the issues,” the feminist group as an organised movement within the district, persists throughout the novel, appearing in a myriad of ways. The clashes between the district’s “traditional women” and the “issue women” works to further highlight the fact that organised into a movement or not, women’s power to subvert a patriarchal structure is repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the novel. The Narrator states she never hears of Somebody McSomebody after his kangaroo court, where the quarter-rape charges were dropped as the women in the bathroom seemed unbothered by the follow-up. Remarkably, the charge turns the focus from invading a female space back to the conflict and to symbolic male violence: “instead they charged him with taking guns unauthorised from dumps to use for getting dates with girls purposes, which was not, they admonished, what guns were supposed to be used for” (BURNS, 2018, p. 162). Nevertheless, Somebody McSomebody disappears from the narrative after this, effectively rendered irrelevant.

First brother-in-law, the first man to sexually harass the Narrator (BURNS, 2018, p. 7), also meets his comeuppance after a trespass against women. It is through longest friend – the only female renouncer we ever meet in the novel – that the Narrator learns both that he was the person who started the rumours about her and Milkman and that his “reality check, unsurprisingly, was to stem from his latest sexual obsession” (BURNS, 2018, p. 110), which “had him visiting nuns – the community’s full-on holy women – with masturbating questions

disguised as harmless cultural queries about art" (BURNS, 2018, p. 110). Having asked said questions regarding Teresa of Avila's statue, he was thrown out by Sister Mary Pious "after the rest of the nuns had had a slap at him first" (BURNS, 2018, p. 111). They denounce him to the pious women who, in turn, alert the local paramilitaries. First brother-in-law's fall elicits one of the ways women were connected in the community and the way the paramilitaries worked along with them. The Narrator's reaction to this story is highly significant. She remembers being surprised at seeing a picture of the statue while reading a book about Teresa of Avila at school at age twelve. That was the same age first-brother-in-law began harassing her.

As they discuss first-brother-in-law's future, the Narrator is upset when longest friend states he would probably only receive a warning as it was his first offence, since he had harassed her when she was a teenager. Interestingly, the district's feminists appear in her argument as longest friend suggests he might get a harsher punishment due to the fact he harassed the holy women. The Narrator interrogates this hierarchisation of women also through a reference to the district's feminists:

> 'The women with the issues,' I said, 'won't like that.' At this longest friend frowned and I thought at first it was because of this take on female hierarchy, that women all for God and having visions in billowing clothes should take precedence over other women, for who then came next – wives? mothers? virgins? The frown though, turned out not to be over the issue women's insistence on everything being fair which meant not patriarchal, but over my making reference to her business when we had that unspoken agreement that never was I to do that. She though, had been the one to start in on her business. (BURNS, 2018, p. 111-112)

Through this exchange, the social role of the women with the issues as beyond-the-pales becomes quite clear. Instead of claiming this hierarchisation of victims as unfair, Middle Sister outsources her outrage to fellow outcasts. The role of the women with the issues is to represent a theoretical claim to equality that, due to their placement beyond-the-pale will not be actualised, but rather diluted in particular claims by women perceived as more sensible. Interestingly, however, the only paramilitary woman we ever meet takes no issue with this reference to the feminists. This could be read as a nod to the complicated relationship the Republican Movement itself had with organised feminism throughout the Troubles. According to Tara Keenan-Thomson (2010),

> Earlier events of 1968/9 had helped lay the groundwork for a change in the structure of the gender regime by allowing women the space to enter into political discourse. Women such as Bernadette Devlin, Edwina Stewart and Ann Hope had quickly risen to become political figures and role models for this new type of expression, but a

> feminist consciousness did not surface during this period due to a variety of factors, including the intensity of unfolding sectarian warfare and an ensuing sense of tribalism (KEENAN-THOMSON, 2010, p. 214).

In the novel, claims pushed forward by the district's "traditional women" were often more likely to be heard than those presented by women seen as radicals. While clashing with the British, for instance, they often explored the image of domesticity paramilitary women weaponised for the republican movement's own ends. For instance, while protesting curfews imposed by the occupying forces, women were careful to protect themselves:

> With them would be their children, their screaming babies, their housepets of assorted dogs, rabbits, hamsters and turtles. Also they'd be wheeling their prams and carrying their pennants, their banners, their placards and shouting, 'CURFEW'S OVER! EVERYBODY IS TO COME OUT! CURFEW'S OVER!', thereby inviting all in the area who weren't already out, to come out, so that everybody could enter into state defiance and every time so far when the traditional women had done this, when they'd reclaimed sanity, the police and the military would find the latest curfew, right before their eyes, had stopped. To shoot up a district of women, children, prams and goldfish otherwise, to run them through with swords much as one might like to, would not look good, would look grave, sexist, unbalanced, not only in the glare of the critical side of the home media, but also in the eyes of the international media. (BURNS, 2018, p. 86)

It is in the context of such protests that the question raised by the district's traditional women clash with those of the women with the issues. It should be noted that when the local paramilitaries rise against the local feminists, the traditional women are the ones who defend them, unprompted. While the all-inclusive nature of the movement as well as the bad reputation it received from the press would be enough for the woman who started the local group to be taken away by renouncers "as the latest person acting suspiciously in our area" (BURNS, 2018, p. 83), a group of seven local women gets established. The paramilitaries take issue, however, with a coordinator from the downtown group who joined them "fortnightly" to "give pep talks, speak of expansion, introduce historical and contemporary comment on women's issues, all to help bring, she said, women from everywhere out of the dark and into the fold" (BURNS, 2018, p. 83). The fact the women also visited the downtown branch to meet with women from other groups – and, of course, religions – raised suspicions and made the renouncers uneasy. Even more compelling, perhaps, is the Narrator's specific and detailed knowledge of the activities developed by the coordinator in the fortnightly meetings which, by all accounts, considering her refusal to even talk to the feminists about her troubles with Milkman, she never joined. In *Milkman*, the instabilities of memory renders the Narrator somewhat unreliable. Together with the fact her story is always shadowed by the

alternative version of rumours and hearsay, the narrative allows for some speculation, such as in the moments when, even rejecting or recoiling from the women with the issues in her descriptions of them and in her interactions with others, the Narrator expresses an alignment with their claims (i.e. her conversation with longest friend about the hierarchisation of women), or when she reveals specific knowledge of their routine (i.e. the description of the activities with the downtown coordinator).

As the renouncers decide to take action against the eighth woman, the outsider from downtown, they do so because of an inability to accept the possibility of a political discourse that is not produced through, or at least undercut by, the binaries that rule their community: "after all, warned the grapevine, might she not be an issue woman really, a women's libber really, but instead some slippery agent provocateur for the state?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 84). Here, then, feminism is read as a subterfuge employed by a state spy to "to entrap into informership our seven naïve and dotty women" (BURNS, 2018, p. 84). The renouncers' reaction is simultaneously the opposite and a furthering of that of the British soldier who underestimated Una and carried her bomb for her. It departs from a categorisation of women. Those foreign to the district are read as cunning and dangerous, while the local women are gullible and naïve. Thus, while the feminist movement described by Burns proposes a unification of women of "any colour, any creed, any sexual preference, any disability, mental illness or even general dislikeability, indeed, of any type of diversity" (BURNS, 2018, p. 82), the patriarchal logic of the renouncers further divide them into set categories. If the British soldier was deceived by an all-encompassing construct of domesticity surrounding women, the paranoia of the renouncers in the novel makes them look at women in terms of sectarianism. Another consequence of this is that feminism is read as a movement organised at the service of men. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), Hélène Cixous argues that it is by writing that women can subvert the ingrained logic that subordinates and marginalises their experiences to patriarchal power:

> It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem. (CIXOUS, 1976, p. 881)

I would argue that this is precisely the movement Middle Sister, our Narrator, establishes. Rejecting an outright alignment with the district's feminists as ineffectual, she reinscribes her own experiences within that community into language through storytelling.

The narrative she produces is one that takes great care to explore the nuance of the relationships between women, social and structural, as well as personal. On the evening the paramilitaries decide to attack the eighth woman, the other feminists warn her not to come and protect her from them. When the renouncers warn them she is not to come back, "on pain of her being killed as a spy-agent with they, themselves, severely punished for aiding and abetting the state" (BURNS, 2018, p. 85), the women refuse to submit to their authority, even though the eighth woman was unlikely to return. Once the argument between renouncers and feminists reaches a critical point, however, with the women stating the men would only get their way "over their dead bodies" and the paramilitaries more than happy to oblige, given that their social capital did not "constitute the same robust critical mass" (BURNS, 2018, p. 85) as that of the traditional women, it is precisely this group that intervenes in favour of the feminists. Considering their pivotal role in this standstill, and the fact that they "would instinctively unite and rise up to put an end to some gone-mad political or district problem" (BURNS, 2018, p. 85), it seems significant that the traditional women are able to exercise a feminism of their own. Without the fanfare and the political jargon, they access power through the existing structure without necessarily overthrowing it. As the traditional women explore their own roles at the margin of a patriarchal structure to get their way, the Narrator ultimately aligns herself with their style of feminism, stating the issue women "were challenging the status quo while I was trying to go under the radar of the status quo" (BURNS, 2018, p. 88).

Through their mediation of the conflict between renouncers and issue women, the traditional women represent yet another instance where, by adding a third party into a dispute, *Milkman* evades binaries. While the renouncers produce an ultimatum and the issue women respond with a hard refusal to abide to it, the traditional women defeat both parties' supposedly unrelenting stances through rhetoric. When addressing the renouncers, they make sure to affirm the issue women as "intellectual simpletons" only fit for "academe" (BURNS, 2018, p. 82). The suggestion the renouncers could not kill the women because it would be "tantamount to unjust, inconsiderate and merciless behaviour towards the more fragile of our district" (BURNS, 2018, p. 82) preys on the paramilitary's vanity, departing, as it does, from the premise that the men are their intellectual superiors. This is very much aligned with Mary Carmichael's conclusion in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928) that "women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (WOOLF, 1928, p. 28). If, as in the Rebecca West novel Carmichael quotes from ("The arrant feminist! She says that men are

snobs!") the persecution of the district's feminists in *Milkman* is clouded not just by rumours of espionage, but by the fear of having their political power undermined by female intruders, the intention of killing the women who made a fool out of the local boys and refused to obey their orders are entwined with a "cry of wounded vanity; it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself" (WOOLF, 1928, p. 28). By restoring their authority through language, however, stating their intellectual superiority, the traditional women get much closer than the official feminist branch would ever get to subverting, or at least unbalancing the power structure. By offering themselves (while praising the renouncers), and the issue women (while criticising them), as their much-needed reflections, the traditional women proceed to subtly command the men to do their bidding, proposing that they would go downtown themselves to talk to the eighth woman: "this was said as diplomatically as possible, as if presenting to the renouncers not a directive but a favour or, even better, an urgent request for assistance" (BURNS, 2018, p. 88).

On their turn, the renouncers are willing to engage in this exchange with the traditional women, aware as they were of "the difference between a directive and a request for assistance" (BURNS, 2018, p. 88) due to their own unsteady hold on power. The Narrator states that "the fact that their survival as an armed guerrilla outfit in a tightly knit, anti-state environment depended upon local support in that environment, meant that they were quite willing to engage in polite brinkmanship too" (BURNS, 2018, p. 88). In the peculiar configurations of power within the context of the novel lies the explanation for "woman" to appear as a word that barely escapes the classification of beyond-the-pale. When united as a group, women become powerful, and even the ones the district calls "traditional" bear enough strength to threaten sedentary power. This becomes clear not only through the anti-curfew demonstrations they organise, but also in the sense they are willing to play into the logic of patriarchal power politics to exercise their will. It is through a negotiation with the renouncers that they infiltrate the apparatus. Through this compromise, "women" as a general category escapes the outright classification of "beyond-the-pale". Thus, only those who refuse to submit in any way to the rulings of the renouncers, and are confrontational in their manifestations, the "women with the issues", are ostracised. Like the Narrator suggests here, the group's survival in the conflict relied on the support of people like the traditional women, people who in real life were carrying bombs in laundry baskets and who, in the context of the novel, allowed the renouncers to bury guns in their backyards.

Calling attention to oneself is a major staple of beyond-the-pale behaviour, one that all those thus addressed in the novel share. The traditional women are not called that way for any

of their manifestations or intrusions, be it when they intercede in favour of real milkman, be it when they come in the feminists' defence, be it their televised protests. This is because they stand in a liminal space, not active participants but constant liabilities – should they withdraw their support – to that particular power structure. Finally, then, they approach the eighth woman and order her to keep out: "We don't care what happens to you. What we don't want is for us normal women always having to drop our common tasks and daily rounds to prevent our daft women from being taken away by our paramilitaries. So we mean it. Stay out of our area" (BURNS, 2018, p. 88). Significantly, they speak with the authority not of the paramilitary organisation, but one that is entirely their own. They claim kinship with the issue women following an incident where they dreaded any association with them. The issue women had joined one of the traditional women's demonstrations against curfews holding their own placards about issues that were not related to the demonstration at all. As the protest was being televised, the Narrator explains that "what mostly got to the traditional women, however, was that anybody in the world watching would think that they, the sensible traditional women, were also these issue women" (BURNS, 2018, p. 87).

Ultimately then, as they handle the impasse between renouncers and feminists, the traditional women overcome their reservations and not only assert their power but claim women's issues as a matter of their own. Since they do that by working within the established power structure, the traditional women establish through their wits something akin to the Outsiders Society Virginia Woolf's letter writer describes in *Three Guineas.* It is a group they "join outside your society but in cooperation with its ends" (WOOLF, 1938, p. 183). It is powerful due to the fact that *your* refers both to the renouncers and to the feminists.

2.2.2 Real Milkman: "The Man Who Didn't Love Anybody"

Real milkman is first introduced by the Narrator, as she enlists those "on the rim" of the district, as "the man who didn't love anybody", an agnomen she only explains further along the plot. Presented to the reader as just "another beyond-the-pale", the character initially stands at the narrative's periphery. He attains relevance, however, at one of the novel's central events, when the Narrator rescues a cat's head at the ten-minute area and is subsequently accosted by Milkman. Following their exchange she meets – and is rescued by – "the man who didn't love anybody" and it is at this pivotal point that she both clarifies why he was

called that way and begins referring to him as "real milkman", explaining that unlike the renouncer, this was a man who "did take milk orders, who did have a proper milk lorry and who really did deliver the district's milk" (BURNS, 2018, p. 76). That is a tipping point in the narrative, where this beyond-the-pale character is firmly established as a foil and a double to the paramilitary. In this, he performs his role as a beyond-the-pale in the realm of the uncanny to further disrupt any possibility of a reading of *Milkman* as a sedentary narrative, destabilising the reader's certainties about the very materiality of the antagonist. Real milkman's role in the beyond-the-pales war machine, then, lies in the very uncanniness of him as a shadow that confounds both narrator and reader as to not only who really is present, but to what feelings should be elicited by the novel's title: fear and a sense of danger, or familiarity and stability.

As real milkman enters the narrative and suggests the Narrator should seek help from the district's feminists to evade the predations of the much-older paramilitary, the stalker gains a haunting feature that renders him somewhat allegorical as the identities of the two men get confused, up to the point real milkman is shot by state forces who aimed at killing the renouncer, as I mentioned earlier. The passage in which the Narrator unpacks Milkman's death highlights, on one level, the fact that to state police forces all bodies on the district are killable – exposing a Necropolitical logic[17] – and that civilians targeted are mere casualties of an effort to control "terrorists", and, on another, furthers the confusion between Milkman and real milkman:

> As for his death, they had ambushed him late morning as he pulled up in that white van outside the parks & reservoirs, which meant that after six false starts, they had got their man at last. Before Milkman, they had shot a binman, two busdrivers, a road sweeper, a real milkman who was our milkman, then another person who didn't have any blue-collar or service-industry connections – all in mistake for Milkman. Then they shot Milkman. Then they played down the mistaken shootings while playing up the intended shooting, as if it had been Milkman and only Milkman they had shot all along. (BURNS, 2018, p. 158)

The response to this erasure appears in the media that is "critical of the state" through headlines such as "MILKMAN SHOT IN MISTAKE FOR MILKMAN" (BURNS, 2018, p. 158). After the renouncer is killed and "Milkman" is revealed to be his last name, a shroud of

[17] Achille Mbembe has defined Necropolitics as a logic in which a State's sovereignty is expressed primarily not only through the right to kill, but also to define which lives are disposable according to political convenience: "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die. Hence, to kill or to allow to live constitute the limits of sovereignty, its fundamental attributes. To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power" (MBEMBE, 2003, p. 11-12).

uncanniness blurs the narrator's and the community's sense of his actual social role, diminishing his power as an individual threat and further reaffirming the predations on the Narrator as collective and structural in the rumours circulating in the community as well as in Somebody McSomebody's unhinged attempt to kill her. As Milkman's power grows thinner and his personhood eventually vanishes into the movement and the community, that of his beyond-the-pale foil comes into focus, with the aftermath of his shooting producing a romance subplot involving the Narrator's mother and the district's pious women that has Middle Sister revaluating her relationship with her "ma", as well as the older woman's own outlook on the community and herself.

The shooting also has a direct impact on one of the district's interdictions that placed political matters over life itself. While earlier in the novel characters such as shiny girl and the Narrator face impending death due to said interdiction — that is, they are denied access to hospital treatment as people who sought out medical assistance were either co-opted by state forces to act as informers or thought to have done so by the district —, having been mistakenly shot, real milkman is immediately transported to a hospital by state forces themselves before anyone can intervene. Further, "fears of informership" are overwritten by several of the district's women during the time real milkman is hospitalised as they go visit him. In between the lines of this act of defiance appears the instability those beyond the pale represent to the precarious order imposed by the state forces on the one hand and negotiated by the renouncers on the other. This suggests the outliers are isolated because their joining together threatens the reactionary logic of binary division under which the district and, in a wider sense, the "statelet" works.

Although real milkman has an enduring presence throughout the novel, we only ever see him interacting with anyone at the scene he rescues the Narrator from the ten-minute area following her meeting with Milkman. The passage also explains his agnomen, "the man who didn't love anybody", by including a flashback of him clashing with the renouncers. After that, however, we only hear *of* him. The scene in question is pivotal to the development of a web of connections between those that lie beyond-the-pale. It reassures the Narrator at a moment Milkman was working to undermine her sense of self through threats and gaslighting: "again, this was suggestion, with his continuing in that friendly, obliging vein, the one of doing me favours, of helping me out by taking my walking away, taking my running away, taking away maybe-boyfriend" (BURNS, 2018, p. 74). Real milkman is described as "solemn, austere", but as a lifeline when she felt hopeless: "here he was, giving me his time, bringing me hope, listening to me, taking me seriously" (BURNS, 2018, p. 78).

The first person to listen to and believe her, real milkman suggests an alternative reading for what it means to be beyond-the-pale that the Narrator does not openly address. He is connected to all those placed in this category as someone who has helped them or their families, becoming, himself, a link between them:

> He'd helped Somebody McSomebody's ma, who was also poor dead *nuclear boy*'s ma, after her husband's death, then after her daughter's death, then again after each of her four sons' deaths. Then he'd helped ma when da died, then when second brother died, also when second sister got into trouble with the renouncers over her rebellious choice of a spouse. He'd helped *me* too, after that meeting I'd had in the ten-minute area with Milkman. So he'd gone to the aid of others, many others, *tablets girl* too, who'd rebuffed him, though surprisingly she hadn't poisoned him. The *women with the issues* also he'd helped when communal attitude towards them was one of mockery and chastisement for storms in teacups when eight hundred years of the political problems were still to be sorted. So he did all this helping, and he did it too, from some wider perspective, some higher state of consciousness. All the same, it counted for nothing as far as his name in our community went. (BURNS, 2018, p. 133)[18]

In "The Uncanny" (1919), Sigmund Freud cites Ernst Jentsch's study on the *Unheimlich*, stating that the psychiatrist "ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always be that in which one does not know where one is, as it were" (FREUD, 1919, p. 2), and that, therefore, "the better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it" (FREUD, 1919, p. 2). While Freud does not fully align with that view, that take is an apt point of departure for us to look at the way real milkman is introduced into the novel and how its very uncanniness contributes to undermine Milkman's power as an antagonist in the long run.

Both meetings between the Narrator and Milkman/real milkman take place in the ten-minute area, a place described by her as having a reputation "for dark arts, for witchcraft stories, sorcery stories, bogeymen rumours, human-sacrifice rumours, scary tales about upside-down crucifixes" (BURNS, 2018, p. 74), a "ghostly place that simply you had to get through" (BURNS, 2018, p. 47). The ten-minute area is repeatedly affirmed as a frightening, unstable place. However, the uncanny is not merely what is fearful or unknown in a frightening way, but rather what confounds the boundaries between that which is familiar and that which is not. That is, the uncanny is "that class of the terrifying which leads back to

[18] My emphasis.

something long known to us, once very familiar"[19] (FREUD, 1919, p. 1-2). It is in that sense that I argue that the two consecutive meetings could only happen in the ten-minute area, a beyond-the-pale place "on the outskirts of downtown" (BURNS, 2018, p. 47) that resists the geography of sectarism. If "the political problems (…) seemed in comparison with this area to be naïve, clumsy, hardly of consequence" (BURNS, 2018, p. 47), the ten-minute area still retained reminders of violence in the form of buried bombs from World War II, further disrupting the logic of the two factions paradigm by invoking not a language of peace and neutrality, but that of older, external violence. It is also a victim of this foreign violence that makes the Narrator stop there. While it was a place "no one in their right mind would think of dawdling" (BURNS, 2018, p. 47), she is disrupted in her crossing when she finds a cat's head she concludes was "killed by the Luftwaffe" (BURNS, 2018, p. 56) after a World War II bomb detonated at the ten-minute area, also causing the collapse of one of the three derelict churches there.

After the Narrator is accosted by Milkman and his fellow renouncers, she reflects that all the mysteries associated with the ten-minute area were thought "at least during these present troubles" to be caused by the "state security forces with their black ops and their dupery of a general public" (BURNS, 2018, p. 74), pondering, however that "the fact I myself was in it, talking to a sinister man while holding the head of a cat that had been bombed to death by Nazis was proof, if anything, that the ten-minute area was not for normal things" (BURNS, 2018, p. 74). The interaction, marked by the paramilitary man's veiled threats invades her sense of self, disturbed as it already was, by her distancing from the downtown, where she took classes with a teacher who encouraged the class to think outside the standard binaries, and approximating her own district, where she felt disenfranchised and alone while enduring harassment. It is in this sense that Jentsch's proposal of an intellectual uncertainty – especially regarding one's own location – is relevant to this thesis. It is precisely when she is lost in thought, referring to herself as a "mad girl" and having the question "there's no point, what's the use, what's the point?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 76) encircle her thoughts that the

[19] As Freud notes in "The Uncanny", while one might instinctively suppose the word *unheimlich* to be the opposite of *Heimlich*, the latter meaning "familiar," "native," or "belonging to the home", and thus conclude that the uncanny is merely that which is unfamiliar, the intricate relationship between the German words also explains why that is an inadequate definition for the concept discussed here. Freud wards off an equation between the *unheimlich* and the unfamiliar based on a dictionary entry investigation of the meanings of the word *Heimlich.* The search unveils it as not only ambiguous, but also shows that it shares common ground with its supposed opposite, the *unheimlich*: "what *is heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich.* (Cf. the quotation from Gutzkow: 'We call it *unheimlich;* you call it *heimlich').* In general we are reminded that the word *heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight" (FREUD, 1919, p. 4).

Narrator is startled by the realisation that Milkman is back, only to realise it is not really him, but the man who didn't love anybody, finally unveiled to the reader as "real milkman".

As we follow the Narrator's descriptions of the man's ties to the community, it soon becomes clear that the agnomen "the man who didn't love anybody" should not be taken at face value. While the name is only fully explained much later in the novel, after real milkman gets shot by state security forces, as being related to his romantic relationships, if anything, real milkman is more caring than most. He defies political interdictions to visit his ill brother in England and refuses to comply with the renouncers' practice of burying guns in civilians backyards, digging up armaments buried in his own property and shouting abuse about the paramilitaries to anyone who would hear him. As his lorry approaches her, however, the Narrator is certain Milkman has returned: "So I was at the ancient, rusted cemetery gates, and this was when I heard a car behind me. Instantly I had another attack of shudders. *Oh no. Him! Walk on. Keep walking. Don't look round or engage*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 76). The Narrator first experienced the shudders she refers to in this passage a few hours before as she looked out the window during her French class and saw a white van she believed belonged to Milkman. This intricate physical reaction is described by her as an "anti-orgasm":

> At the same time I dismissed a strange bodily sensation that had run the lower back half of my body, during which the base of my spine had seemed to move. It *had* moved. Not a normal moving as in forward bends, backward bends, sideways and twistings. This had been a movement unnatural, an omen of warning, originating in the coccyx, with its vibration then setting off ripples – ugly, rapid, threatening ripples – travelling into my buttocks, gathering speed into my hamstrings from where, inside a moment, they sped to the dark recesses behind my knees and disappeared. This took one second, just one second, and my first thought – unbidden, unchecked – was that this was the underside of an orgasm, how one might imagine some creepy, back-of-body, partially convulsive shadow of an orgasm – *an anti-orgasm*. (BURNS, 2018, p. 45-46)

Once Milkman approaches her in the ten-minute area she feels it again, stating that in that moment her body shut down: "instinctively everything in me then stopped. Just stopped. All my mechanism" (BURNS, 2018, p. 57). By the third time the Narrator relates feeling the "shudders", therefore, the reader already expects a new apparition of the renouncer, especially considering up to this point she had not described the vehicle that approached her.

Earlier, as Milkman threatened maybe-boyfriend and offered her lifts in his cars, the Narrator's mind wandered back to the cat's head, which is an image for gendered violence that pervades the novel such as in the graphic scene of the maggots she described moving through "those clumps about the nose, the ear, the eye" (BURNS, 2018, p. 76), or in the fact local men hated, mutilated and killed cats for "for being female-like" (BURNS, 2018, p. 10),

or still in the fact that the narrator herself is called a "cat" by Somebody McSomebody, another of Milkman's shadows in the novel, as he threatens her life. This figurative penetration of the cat's head by the maggots mirrors that of the Narrator's own mind by Milkman's menacing words, filling her with a sense of helplessness as she cannot simply walk away from him. The anti-orgasm that announces Milkman's *doppelganger,*[20] however, reveals itself as a red herring. It is not a harbinger of danger, but perhaps an indicator the character about to be introduced, Milkman's double, will turn *Milkman* into a different novel. The physical introduction of this character into the narrative takes place in the realm of the *Unheimlich* in the sense that in the ten-minute area those two men, one Milkman who "wasn't our milkman", who "didn't take milk orders", who "didn't ever deliver milk", and who "didn't drive a milk lorry" (BURNS, 2018, p. 7), and another who "who did take milk orders, who did have a proper milk lorry and who really did deliver the district's milk" (BURNS, 2018, p. 76), fulfil the specific function of aligning the familiar with beyond-the-paleness.

Up to this point, the Narrator has been preyed upon by a man of high standing in her community and found no solace or understanding from anyone. She has been constantly chastised and blamed for it. Those who do not adhere to the logic of the community, one heavily influenced by a network of rumours and gossip, and to whom the Narrator somewhat identifies with – maybe-boyfriend, French teacher – live outside her district, but she never trusts them enough to tell them what is happening to her. Real milkman, however, already knows, and promptly takes her side. Following the logic that "everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light" (FREUD, 1919, p. 4), *Milkman* needs a beyond-the-pale double for its paramilitary antagonist to expose the complicity of the conforming community in situations of violence, be it Middle Sister's harassment, be it tablets girl's murder. In the same sense that "*Heimlich* is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory are yet very different: on the one hand, it means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight" (FREUD, 1919, p. 4), Burns introduces this one male character into the novel who is not inherently misguided, misogynistic, paralysed by trauma,

[20] In *The Double*, Otto Rank explains that doubling oneself has to do with the narcissistic protection of one's *self* in regards to one's own deviant desires and moral transgressions. Projecting one's socially immoral other onto a separate entity would allow for the schizophrenic coexistence of one's socially accepted and socially outcast selves. In Rank's psychoanalytical work, then, the double is an uncanny psychotic manifestation of that which should have remained repressed. As a literary motif, the double usually stands for this projected other. In the world of *Milkman*, however, these uncanny others do not always take the form of an immoral, murderous or lustful nonconformist within strict societal norms, though they still bear the mark of a life that could not fit into the specific social codes of a given society.

or a sexual predator. Nevertheless, after this powerful scene where he both affirms her version of the narrative as true, produces a place of kinship by offering to bury the cat's head in his own backyard – the same place he denied the renouncers – and reveals his proximity with her family by revealing his concern about her little sisters and mother (unlike Milkman, who merely mentioned male members of her family), real milkman all but disappears from the novel, effectively becoming the paramilitary's shadow up to the point he gets shot in the renouncer's place.

When real milkman offers her a lift, the Narrator trusts him enough to accept it. Unlike her mother, who given the truth had called her a liar, real milkman states "he was aware there might be an encroachment upon me by some person of paramilitary intent, also one of might and influence in the area" (BURNS, 2018, p. 81-82) and asks, "if that were so, would I feel strong enough to be able to stand up and speak out?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 82). Upon noticing her discomfort, real milkman apologises and suggests she should talk to the women with the issues. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that his premise, from the start, is not to question if Middle Sister is having an affair with Milkman, as per the rumours. He frames the situation as an "encroachment" and does not name Milkman at all. Further, all his suggestions invite her to speak up, to defend herself by telling her own story – rewriting the rumours as she does by narrating the novel.

While she refuses to speak to the district's feminists at that point, after real milkman offers to bury the cat's head for her, two things change for the Narrator. On one level, his attitude – dissonant in itself – makes her feel hopeful and produces a sense of identification up to then only available in people outside the district:

> It seemed, and again I liked this, that this exchange was taking place in that 'How can we get this done?' manner, that same manner of maybe-boyfriend, also of teacher, not the prevalent 'What's the point, nothing is of use, it's not gonna make any difference is it?' and this surprised me" (BURNS, 2018, p. 78).

On another, as they are photographed by state forces when leaving the ten-minute area, real milkman acknowledges what happened, something that also uplifts the Narrator by identification. Earlier in the novel she had been photographed in the parks & reservoirs with third brother-in-law who did not react to this and, when questioned, highlighted the inadequacy of the Narrator's own response. When real milkman curses at the camera click and states "well, they can make of this what they will" (BURNS, 2018, p. 78), a standard "beyond-the-pale" reaction, the Narrator feels appeased by the implications of his stance: if someone else "could acknowledge one of the unmentionables, also acknowledge he was

unable to do anything to alter this unmentionable" (BURNS, 2018, p. 78), this put her in a different position as well, one in which her circumstances were not necessarily movable, but one in which her attitude and reactions were: "that meant it might be possible for anybody – for me – even in powerlessness, to adopt such an attitude of acknowledgement, of acceptance and detachment too" (BURNS, 2018, p. 78). After the conversation with real milkman the Narrator becomes much more aware of her little sisters and their particular academic interests – elements he points out to her – and later in the novel her bond with them and her mother becomes a central element in the narrative. As he drops her at her house, the Narrator states she "got out my key and slipped it – for the first time in what felt like ages – easily, without a shake, into the lock" (BURNS, 2018, p. 88), feeling safe, albeit temporarily.

2.2.3 Nuclear Boy: "It is because of Russia and because of America that I am doing this"

Real milkman's open, spontaneous reaction to the fact state security forces were taking pictures of them is specifically significant to the Narrator due to an earlier occurrence in the novel in which, hoping to evade Milkman, Middle Sister had taken up running with third brother-in-law in the parks & reservoirs. This decision is motivated by the young man's popularity in the district, as she reasons that Milkman would not go so far as to threaten a person so well-liked by both men and women: "as a renouncer heavily reliant upon the local community, my guess was he wouldn't alienate himself for me" (BURNS, 2018, p. 13). Throughout the scene, the Narrator muses on the fact that while her brother-in-law is considered an odd person due to an excessive admiration of women, he is not included in the "beyond-the-pales" list. In a community where she jokes that the word "woman" itself was almost beyond-the-pale, the Narrator argues that a man known for his "avowals of devotion towards women, his mission of idolatry, his supreme glorification, and deification and view that on earth in women was the life of things, the breadth of things, the cyclicality, essential nature, higher aspect, the best, most archetypal and utmost mystery of everything" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36) should be an outsider, too, especially considering "this was the Nineteen-Seventies". While at this point she concludes the reason he was not placed at the margin was "his popularity" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36), I would argue that both the conversation that triggers these considerations, and the exchange that follows them, suggest otherwise.

The Narrator is startled by the fact third brother-in-law asks to have a conversation with her, since they usually ran in silence. Fearing the topic would be Milkman, she is still rattled by the fact he wished to discuss – and criticise – her reading-while-walking habits as "unsafe" as they lead her to "cut off consciousness", "not pay attention", and "ignore her surroundings" (BURNS, 2018, p. 35), echoing the community's – as well as anticipating the longer conversation on that same issue she would have with longest friend – assessment and warning her of her behaviour and status. The conversation with third brother-in-law frames the longest section of the novel dedicated to nuclear boy, an introduction triggered by the former's assertion that he was nothing like the latter, that is: detached from reality, beyond-the-pale. The Narrator presents a reading of third brother-in-law that is her own: she believes he should be regarded as a beyond-the-pale – while at this point in the narrative she does not know she, herself, is already seen this way, could this also come from a desire of identification? – and that the only reason he is not branded as such is his popularity. However, her assessment of him is revealed to be eschewed by her episodes of *jamais vu* as she had also claimed he knew nothing about the "political problems": "brother-in-law, however, paid no attention either to osmosis, to the very noticeable social and political upheaval of the time and the place he was living in. Instead he went about blinkered, unaware, which was weird, very weird" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36). Angered by his criticism of her reading-while-walking, the Narrator decides to interrogate him on his own unawareness. The dialogue that follows frames the *de facto* introduction of nuclear boy. I would argue that the terms in which his name is invoked by third brother-in-law are all the indicators we need to ascertain the latter is not a beyond-the-pale at all.

As the Narrator asks her brother-in-law if he is aware of the "political problems", he replies first by naming the Troubles (also including the variants "sorrows", and "sadnesses"), the only character to do so outrightly throughout the novel. She remarks upon the fact that not only was he aware of the conflict, but also "the community, maybe both communities, maybe even the land 'over the water' and the land 'over the border', had moved things on to the tune of the political problems here being referred to now as the sorrows, the losses and those other things he had just said they were" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36). While she markedly avoids repeating the term "troubles" throughout the narrative, Middle Sister not only repeats the word during this scene, but echoes it twice in her Narrator voice further along the novel.[21] At

[21] The word "troubles" appears four times throughout the novel. The first two are in this scene, with third-brother-in-law uttering it for the first time: "'What political problems?' he said. 'Are you referring to the sorrows, the losses, the troubles, the sadnesses?'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36), and the Narrator repeating it: "'What

the scene, however, third brother-in-law concludes that the fact he knows more about the political situation than her is not surprising considering her wilful alienation:

> 'Not surprising either,' he went on, 'for as I've been saying, sister, you're not vigilant as evidenced in particular by this reading-while-walking. I saw you with my own eyes last Wednesday night-time committing social insanity by entering the area completely and dangerously blind to the lower forces and influences – your head down, the tiniest of reading-torches shining on your pages. Nobody does that. That's tantamount to—' *'You know about the political problems?'* I asked. (BURNS, 2018, p. 36)

Third brother-in-law's main line of criticism of reading-while-walking lies, therefore, on his friend's lack of attention to her own surroundings while living in a dangerous place. Her reiterated question ignites a rant that uses nuclear boy as yet another example of how not to live. While I am not suggesting the Narrator and nuclear boy are necessarily similar, they are aligned by third brother-in-law's criticism of alienating oneself from reality, be it through a mental and physical immersion into literature and periodical episodes of forgetting, be it through an obsession with the war that lies beyond. "Is it that you think I'm nuclear boy, so far gone in my Americo-Russo atomic bomb displacement condition that I can't tell my own brother's lying dead with no head beside me?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36), he asks her. Nevertheless, she had just admitted to the reader all she knew about the political problems she learned through "osmosis", being willingly unaware of much, and forgetting some.

Nuclear boy never interacts with the Narrator. More of a haunting than a developed character, he appears in the text in two short, meaningful passages. In the first, he is invoked as everything third brother-in-law claims he is not. In the second, during real milkman's introduction, the Narrator states that when nuclear boy died by suicide the "man who didn't love anybody" helped the boy's mother, as he had already done when she lost her older son. The Narrator herself does not perceive any similarity between nuclear boy's behaviour and

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sorrows and sadnesses?' I said. 'What troubles? What losses? I'm sorry but this is unintelligent.'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36).

She then goes on to repeat it on two different occasions:

"I knew even as a child – maybe because I was a child – that this wasn't really physical; knew the impression of a pall, of some distorted quality to the light had to do with the political problems, with the hurts that had come, the troubles that had built, with the loss of hope and absence of trust and with a mental incapacitation over which nobody seemed willing or able to prevail." (BURNS, 2018, p. 51)

This surprised me because the reputation of this place – for dark arts, for witchcraft stories, sorcery stories, bogeymen rumours, human-sacrifice rumours, scary tales about upside-down crucifixes; regardless too, of whether or not the state security forces with their black ops and their dupery of a general public were thought, least in these present troubles, to be at the bottom of it – meant most people might hurry through the ten-minute area because they had to get from A to B but other than that, would tend to stay away. (BURNS, 2018, p. 74)

her own. She concludes her brief introduction of his obsession with the Cold War by aligning herself with the community's gaze. Firstly, this person "was one of those outcasts, a beyond-the-pale, having put himself there with his strange Cold War obsession" (BURNS, 2018, p. 67). Needless to say, her own reading-while-walking behaviour rings just as odd to her onlookers, even the ones she saw as friends. Secondly, her logical conclusion is that such oddness should be recoiled from: "this meant that if you saw him coming, quick as a flash, you ducked the other way" (BURNS, 2018, p. 67). It is precisely in the sense that the Narrator cannot yet access a language of difference – let alone embrace her own – that the encounter with real milkman bears crucial charge in her development as a storyteller.

After introducing nuclear boy to the reader, the Narrator returns to her conversation with third brother-in-law, who reiterates his criticism of her reading-while-walking, something she terms an "intrusion" (BURNS, 2018, p. 38). This reiteration comes as a warning that if she was not "careful I'd be banished to the furthest reaches of darkness, ostracised and shown no mercy as a district beyond-the-pale. Already he warned that I was being talked about as the 'reading-while-walking' person" (BURNS, 2018, p. 38). This caution, which comes right after third brother-in-law's complaint that middle sister had been listening to what was said about him "on the grapevine", still echoes the district's gossip. Contrary to Middle Sister's fears, Milkman was not the topic of the conversation. While he was not, and while third brother-in-law's quirks might place him in the first of two categories of the district's "mental aberrations", "the slight, communally accepted ones and the not-so-slight, beyond-the-pale ones" (BURNS, 2018, p. 36), his choice of subject are even more significant here as we assess where this man is placed within that community. It is not merely that he is knowledgeable of the "political problems," but that brother-in-law is an active enforcer of the kind of normativity that leads the Narrator to recoil into herself in the first place. As he affirms she is inching close to becoming a beyond-the-pale, she asks:

> 'Okay,' I said. 'So if I were to stop walking-while-reading, and hands in pockets, and little night torches, and instead looked right and left and right again for dangerous, unscrupulous forces, does that mean I'll end up happy?' 'It's not about being happy,' he said, which was, and still is, the saddest remark I've ever heard. (BURNS, 2018, p. 38)

This numb acceptance of things-as-are is further reaffirmed by third brother-in-law as they resume their running and are photographed by a hidden camera set up by state security forces. The Narrator becomes distressed by the thought that he might have become a target, catalogued as a Milkman associate because of her, who had been more aware of the cameras

since the older man's predations began. The first time she had noticed she had had her photograph taken was during her first meeting with Milkman in the Parks & Reservoirs, and "within a week of that first click, I'd been clicked again four times" (BURNS, 2018, p. 41). Middle Sister is upset by the fact that – like Milkman – third brother-in-law had ignored the "click" and confronts him about it. Again, he reiterates to her there is nothing to be done:

> 'I always ignore clicks,' he said. 'What do you expect me to do? Get outraged? Write letters? Keep a diary? Put in a complaint? Get one of my personal secretaries to contact the United Nations Amnesty International Ombudsman Human Rights peaceful demonstration people? Tell me, sister, who do I contact and what do I say, and while we're about it, what are you going to do about the click yourself?' Well, I was going to have amnesia of course. In fact, here I was, already having it. 'I don't know what you mean,' I said. 'I've forgotten,' his forthrightness having sent me immediately into *jamais vu.* (BURNS, 2018, p. 40)

While the passage further reaffirms Middle Sister's position as an unreliable narrator – one whose sentence is always undercut by *jamais vu* episodes –, it also has the effect of aligning third brother-in-law with a sense of discouragement that stretches along many in her community. She identifies that with a "constriction", an "insidious" outlook she defines as a reiteration of the sentences *"*There's no point, what's the use, what's the point?*"*. These appear as she dreads approaching the district after watching the sky's many colours downtown during her French class as well as when she fears meeting Milkman (BURNS, 2018, p. 76). While she feels reassured by third brother-in-law's explanation that state security forces always took photographs of everyone "for the record" (BURNS, 2018, p. 39), which meant this was not her fault, the muted acceptance lingers until the scene where real milkman appears. Besides offering to bury the cat's head for her, he is angered by the sound of a click, and expresses it by stating "they" could make of "it" what they wished (BURNS, 2018, p. 78). While real milkman, like third brother-in-law, recognises nothing can be done to change this, his attitude "uplifts" the Narrator (BURNS, 2018, p. 78). Where third brother-in-law's sarcastic reply makes Middle Sister feel better only because it also incidentally informs her that she has not made him any more of a target than he already was, real milkman's earnest reaction reassures her because in mirroring and giving voice to her own frustration where she felt it might be unwarranted, he provides her with an alternative language to process her discontentment, a beyond-the-pale one.

While third brother-in-law casts himself as nuclear boy's "antithesis" on the grounds of being "politically and socially aware" with "his own routine of scrutinising and reconnoitring the environment" (BURNS, 2018, p. 37), I would argue that the boy's

American-Russian obsession is rather a reverberation, not a denial, of a deep-set concern with the local conflict. While scholars disagree on the relevance that should be awarded to the international dimension when analysing the dynamics of the Peace Process, for instance (COX, 1998a; DIXON, 2002), the fact that the perception of Britain's political and economic interests in Ireland shifted enough after the end of the Cold War to precipitate the abandonment of armed struggle as a strategy by the IRA seems to be less open for dispute. It is in the sense that the Cold War was often read by nationalists as an element that explained not only England's economic interests in Ireland, but also a political one, that is, it not only made sure the North was a part of NATO, but also prevented the creation of a neutral and united Ireland outside of it.

Although Paul Dixon concedes that the end of the Cold War "did appear to have some impact on the willingness of the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, to make overtures to the Republican movement" (DIXON, 2002, p. 113), he is adamant that the event did not directly "pressurise" the British government nor ended its strategic interests in Northern Ireland, as, in his view, the British had long "been without any overriding interest in the island of Ireland beyond stability and have actively pursued the peace process" (DIXON, 2002, p. 119). Michael Cox argues that the speech presented by the British secretary of state for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke, in 5 November 1990, in which he declared that Britain had "no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland" (BROOKE, 1990 apud COX 1998a) was a "significant intervention" (COX, 1998a, p. 334) that led some of Sinn Féin's leaders to discuss in private the "possibility that Britain's declared neutrality 'might be real and that the IRA might, therefore, be open to persuasion on the merits of armed struggle" (COX, 1998a, p. 334). Ultimately, Cox highlights that the Downing Street Declaration (1993) reiterated that post-Cold War commitment: "On this basis, he [the British Prime Minister] reiterates, on behalf of the British Government, that they have no selfish strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland" (DOWNING STREET DECLARATION, 1993). Cox argues then that while it "would be plainly absurd to suggest that the inclusion of this phrase led directly to the first IRA cease-fire" (COX, 1998a, p. 335), "without it, a cessation of violence would have been unthinkable" (COX, 1998a, p. 335).

On his turn, Paul Dixon plays down the significance of Brooke's speech as something that "merely reiterated in a stark way what had been stated before" (DIXON, 2002, p. 110), that is, "that there was no purely military solution to the conflict and that Britain had no selfish, strategic or economic interest in Northern Ireland" (DIXON, 2002, p. 110). Dixon recognises that the international dimension has played a significant role in Northern Irish

politics throughout the Troubles and the Peace Process, but argues it has been overemphasised by critics like Cox, Frank Wright, and Adrian Guelke. Besides focusing on a shift on the perception of British interests in Ireland after the Cold War, Cox highlights that it is not reasonable to analyse the conflict and the road to peace negotiations without looking at a wider, international political context to which not just Ireland, but also the Republican movement were connected: "it was inevitable that, as the tide of global radicalism began to retreat after 1989, this would feed into republican thinking" (COX, 1998a, p. 330), leading them to consider abandoning the armed struggle. Cox also highlights the role the logic of capitalism and globalisation of the 1990s played, an element that I have discussed in Chapter 1:

> As one of their member pointed out, though republicanism had traditionally been a movement of economic resistance, by the mid-1990s, its attitude towards the market and private enterprise had undergone a good deal of change. As he put it rather pithily (at a time when Adams himself was trying to convince American multinationals to invest in Catholic West Belfast), republicans no longer had a serious 'problem with capitalism' Before the ideological earthquake of 1989 such thoughts would have been considered pure heresy in an organisation devoted to liberating the 'men of no property'. With the passing of the old Europe and the collapse of planning across the continent, this was no longer the case. Neither Ireland it seemed, nor those who had fought to unite it for over 25 years by violent means, could escape the irresistible logic of globalisation. (COX, 1998a, p. 340)

While I do not intend to produce an in-depth discussion of the role of the international dimension in the Troubles, Dixon's and Cox's arguments are relevant to me here as they allow us to access nuclear boy's question as one not necessarily borne out of alienation, but of a distinct engagement with his own reality. In a novel that refuses to name the Troubles if not in a list of synonyms for "problems", but whose specificity nobody aware of the geographies of the conflict would be able to evade, this character's Cold War obsession produces a haunting of precisely this international dimension, however relevant one endeavours to consider it.

Nuclear boy is described as a fifteen-year-old beyond-the-pale who "happened to be Somebody McSomebody's younger brother" (BURNS, 2018, p. 37). Therefore, this is a boy that comes "from an entrenched renouncer family" (BURNS, 2018, p. 71). According to the Narrator, while Somebody McSomebody's boasts of being a paramilitary himself were all false, "his father and his eldest sister and his eldest brother – until their deaths – all had been renouncers" (BURNS, 2018, p. 72). Nuclear boy's categorisation as beyond-the-pale is, of course, the one, alongside tablets girl's, that puts the community's reading of otherness closer to a straight-forward alignment with mental illness. The premise here is that the boy obsesses

with a foreign conflict to evade the realities of the one taking place on his doorstep. This plays out in a traumatic scene that has his brother – neither McSomebody, nor the paramilitary, but the one who was closest to him – randomly killed by a bomb while crossing the street to talk to him. Nuclear boy quickly resumes his ruminations: "Nobody could afford to ignore the risk that mad Russia and mad America were posing, with the rest of us thinking we could afford to ignore the risk" (BURNS, 2018, p. 37).

> Never worried, he didn't, when his favourite brother's head got blown off in the middle of the week, in the middle of the afternoon, in the middle of the street, right there in front of him. One moment this favourite sibling, the second eldest boy, the sixteen-year-old and the most calm and beloved of that family, was making his way over the street towards his nervous, panicked brother, to discourse with him, once again to try to soothe him in his wild nuclear distraction. Next, this teenager was on the ground with his head completely gone. Not ever, not even after the commotion died down, did anybody find it. And people looked for it. The man who didn't love anybody – another beyond-the-pale – and some other men, many men, even my da, had looked well into days and nights for it. Just after the explosion though, nuclear boy had paused long enough to pick himself up from where the blast had thrown him, then to get his bearings, then to remember where he'd been in his words about America and Russia, then to carry on from where he'd left off. Amidst the screams he went back to worrying, straight back to worrying. (BURNS, 2018, p. 37)

The Narrator does not consider, however, that in the same sense that the only way she was able to cope was through episodes of *jamais vu*, nuclear boy's reaction to his brother violent death seems to be left unprocessed as he turns back to an anxiety which, as we have seen, is not as disconnected from the Troubles as the community might have suggested. It is not the fixation upon the stockpiling of weapons that otherises him, however, but the fact that his obsession lies upon the nuclear race between Russia and America. It "would have made some sense if he'd been fretting and distraught over stockpiling of weapons owing to the political problems in his own country" (BURNS, 2018, p. 37). The beyond-the-pale issue is that he focuses elsewhere and is vocal about it: "He was referring to nuclear weapons being stockpiled in as far away as somewhere else. […] Nobody could afford to ignore the risk that mad Russia and mad America were posing, with the rest of us thinking we could afford to ignore the risk" (BURNS, 2018, p. 37). In that sense, his strangeness lies not in his ruminating thoughts nor in his obsession, but in the foreign nature of it. This aligns nuclear boy with the women with the issues, who bring the questions of international feminism into the district: those resonate with some local women even as the renouncers attempt to suppress them out of fears of the new feminist branch opening a space for "informership".

Nuclear boy's fears regarding the nuclear arms race, obsessive and inflected by trauma as they may be, are neither unreflective of the anxieties of many who lived through the Cold

War period nor disconnected to the Irish context. The Republic, of course, maintained its politics of neutrality, having refused the invitation from the United States government to sign the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 on the grounds that

> any military alliance with, or commitment involving military action jointly with, the state that is responsible for the unnatural division of Ireland, which occupies a portion of our country with its armed forces, and which supports undemocratic institutions in the north-eastern corner of Ireland, would be entirely repugnant and unacceptable to the Irish people. (IRELAND DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, 1950)

As a part of United Kingdom, however, the North automatically integrated NATO. Considering the strategic interest Ireland represented to Britain at the very least from a Republican perspective, one that justified the continuance of the Troubles as an armed struggle, nuclear boy's obsession with that foreign binary does not ring so far from home. Michael Cox explains the Republican outlook:

> According to Republicans, Britain remained in Northern Ireland because this provided them with a vital (albeit costly) platform from which to exercise economic control over Ireland as a whole. As a Sinn Féin document of 1988 argued, although the annual British subvention to the North was high, it would be quite 'wrong to conclude that this level of spending negates any British economic interest in Ireland'. But economics was only one part of a complex set of ties linking the two countries. Of even greater importance was an abiding British fear of what might happen if Ireland were ever to be united. For, locked as it was into what seemed like a permanent Cold War conflict with Russia, Britain - according to Republicans - stayed on in the North to secure one part of Ireland for NATO and to prevent the creation of a united and neutral Ireland outside of the NATO alliance. (COX, 1998b, p. 77)

Nuclear boy appears very briefly in *Milkman:* the next time we hear of him is when the Narrator is considering how the deaths in Somebody McSomebody's family must have "unhinged him" (BURNS, 2018, p. 73). She then describes nuclear boy's death by suicide, which took place two months after his favourite brother's death. The note he left, which stated: "It is because of Russia and because of America that I am doing this" (BURNS, 2018, p. 73), suggests yet again more nuance to his Cold War obsession than the Narrator affords it. Coming as it did, merely two months after witnessing the explosion that killed his dear brother, nuclear boy's death entangles the local and the international in the same sense his obsession did. Later in the novel, the Narrator's mother tells her the ex-pious women have suggested she should give up her interest in real milkman and "leave him" to nuclear boy's mother, as she had endured more losses related to the political problems than she had. While the Narrator realises the women's reasoning in this grief Olympics was not at all disinterested,

it is still remarkable that the boy's death was read as politically charged. The Narrator concedes to the reader this remains a place of contention, but not to her mother, whom she cheers on by listing her own politically related losses, while also reasoning that nuclear boy's mother, suffering from so much recent grief, was hardly "on the look-out for any sexual romantic interest" (BURNS, 2018, p. 171):

> Firstly, I said, poor nuclear boy's mother had lost only two of her sons through the political problems, not three sons, only two, even if others in the area were saying that nuclear boy should perhaps – regardless of America and Russia – be counted in there also. I couldn't afford to count him in as ma by now was heading into critical self-sabotage stage. So I said about the one son, the favourite, the one who'd died politically while crossing the road owing to that bomb in the street going off. And I said about the eldest renouncer son and one renouncer daughter and of course, the husband also dying politically. (BURNS, 2018, p. 171)

While Somebody McSomebody is described by the Narrator as "unhinged," and exhibits a series of antisocial and odd behaviours, such as obsessing with the paramilitaries and implying he was one of them to the point of being chastised by the group, referring to himself in the third person, and harassing people, he is never considered to be beyond-the-pale. While his brother is never violent or actively dangerous to the renouncers or the community in any way, nuclear boy appears on the list. Is it that his obsession produces an uncomfortable haunting to the way people went about their business? Like reading-while-walking, to those on the outside the activity might ring odd, but what makes it enough to "ostracise" (BURNS, 2018, p. 38) a person? Reading-while-walking is repeatedly criticised as an activity that leads the Narrator to become aloof to her surroundings at a time when she should be hypervigilant. Interpreted as it was, obsessing with a foreign war also meant nuclear boy did not worry about the important things in the eyes of his community: according to the Narrator he "never worried" (BURNS, 2018, p. 37) when his brother died, although he died himself just two months later.

Nuclear boy is only connected to other beyond-the-pales through real milkman, who according to the Narrator helped both him and tablets girl (BURNS, 2018, p. 37), characters otherwise unsociable. Nuclear boy's Cold War obsession is beyond-the-pale, I believe, in the sense that it rearticulates the questions of identity that produce friction in the local context under the logic of the international dimension of the conflict. This articulation, however, still falls into a non-evadable binary, which he mentally replays in a vicious cycle as the outside world continually enacts the violence from which he recoils. It is in this sense that nuclear boy's and the Narrator's modes of processing reality differ. While her reading-while-walking unhinges binaries through creativity via aesthetic experience, something she also experiences

in her French class – nuclear boy's coping mechanism wears itself off in its self-referentiality to "Sameness" (BRAIDOTTI, 2008, p. 46). The Narrator might be weary of what Braidotti terms an "emptying out of the self" that allows for encounters with the "outside": she is initially reactive against maybe-boyfriend's wishes to watch the sunset and her teacher's incentives for the class to look for different colours in the sky. Nevertheless, when she finds that real milkman has the same "*How can we get this done?'* manner" (BURNS, 2018, p. 78) that teacher and maybe-boyfriend had, she feels reassured. It is this process that allows for becoming. Nuclear boy's obsession is war, and yet he is perhaps the most non-violent character in the novel. His grief and fear ultimately paralyse him. Nevertheless, his strangeness adheres to the beyond-the-pale figurative war machine in the sense that it defies homogeneity (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 361). Up to the very end, even Middle Sister struggles to know and narrate him, entangled as he was in the ambiguity of his Cold War obsession and the Troubles-related deaths in his family.

2.2.4 Tablets Girl and Shiny Girl: "Susannah, oh our Susannah. We are afraid."

The Narrator introduces tablets girl as the district's "most notorious beyond-the-pale" (BURNS, 2018, p. 113). While often referred to as a girl, the Narrator tells us she "was this girl who was really a woman, a small, slight, wiry girl, nearing thirty who put poison in people's drinks" (BURNS, 2018, p. 113). This is the distinct feature that earns tablets girl her position among the district's beyond-the-pales. Nevertheless, the community was intriguingly accommodating of her poisoning sprees due to their regularity: always on Fridays, always on the district's most popular nightclub: "menace that she was, in that different time, during that different consciousness, and with all that other approach to life and to death and to custom, she was tolerated" (BURNS, 2018, p. 115). While her methods were well-known and poisonings had become commonplace for those unable to ward her off quickly enough, she was accepted as part of the community, if only as a beyond-the-pale. People would organise to be vigilant when she arrived at the district's most popular night-club instead of banning her from attending, having her hospitalised or arrested, something the Narrator herself admits was odd. Still, "she got herself thoroughly disliked, but contrarily, for all this disliking, tablets girl was pretty much taken in the district's stride" (BURNS, 2018, p. 114). This politics of tolerance shifts, however, when tablets girl changes her "trajectory", "poisoning people on

other days besides Friday, also becoming verbose as to why" (BURNS, 2018, p. 115). This transgression leads the renouncers to revaluate her status. Having become too unstable and nearly killing her latest victim, the renouncers let tablets girl's family know the poisonings had to stop. She would be given one last chance.

Tablets girl is not the only beyond-the-pale threatened with death by the district's paramilitaries – the women with the issues and real milkman are menaced as well but are saved by the district's traditional women's appeals. She is, however, the only one effectively killed by one. Still, I would argue what makes her death significant in the plot is the way in which her character seems very much invested in destabilising Milkman by poisoning the Narrator. Her act of violence does depart, of course, from schizophrenia. However, placed in a wider metaphorical complex where the character is read as a "cunning wee innate, fierce feminist-tract person" (BURNS, 2018, p. 123), who is denied a place in the movement precisely because of her mental health,[22] it is significant that her murder by Milkman can be read as the first act that destabilises his position of authority and leads to his own death.

Tablets girl's transgression is to repeatedly poison her own sister. Believing shiny girl to be her uncanny double, tablets girl sets out to destroy her younger sibling as an undesirable aspect of herself. In this, she enacts a rejection that originally led the community to brand her sister as a beyond-the-pale. The Narrator first introduces "shiny people" by explaining how they unnerved the community. The first reference to "shiny people", does not act to define them as a group or as individuals, but rather to explain the effect they had in an unwelcoming community. In fact, the situation she describes involves a dog, not a person. The Narrator alludes to a scene in the film *Rear Window* (1954) in which said dog is killed and its owner accuses her neighbours of slaughtering the animal "because he liked them". The Narrator explains she was first unsettled by this claim (later disproved in the film) because "absolutely it made sense to me, in the world I was in, that it had happened that way" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51)[23]. Shiny girl was the Narrator's age and the only person in her neighbourhood "who was unanimously agreed upon to be one of the rare shining" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51). Not disliked, but unsettling in her attitude, walking around "translucent, untouched by our darkness, walking in her light in our darkness" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51), shiny girl was beloved, but not understood. To the Narrator, it would "absolutely make sense" that the dog could have been

[22] "except still she wasn't a feminist according to the real feminists because the women with the issues here said she was mentally ill". (BURNS, 2018, p. 123)

[23] One could argue the scene was also poignant to the Narrator at age 12 since just a few years before British soldiers had killed nearly all her district's dogs by slashing their throats. Later in the novel, tablet's girl is also killed by having her throat cut.

killed merely because he liked the people in the building because she understood not being able to cope "with innocence, frankness, openness, with a defencelessness and an affection and purity so pure, so affectionate" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51) and that they probably saw it as self-defence. She addresses this inability to cope in terms of a "mental incapacitation" that comes with "some distorted quality to the light [that] had to do with the political problems, with the hurts that had come, the troubles that had built, with the loss of hope and absence of trust" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51). This is one of the few times she uses the word "troubles" to refer to the conflict, and the suggestion here is that the history and the present of the North had become so oppressive that even happiness had been pushed beyond the pale. Shiny girl was widely liked, but people were afraid of opening to the possibility of being like her[24] and that light "going off" or being "snatched away" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51):

> And that was the trouble with the shiny people. Take a whole group of individuals who weren't shiny, maybe a whole community, a whole nation, or maybe just a statelet immersed long-term on the physical and energetic planes in the dark mental energies; conditioned too, through years of personal and communal suffering, personal and communal history, to be overladen with heaviness and grief and fear and anger – well, these people could not, not at the drop of a hat, be open to any bright shining button of a person stepping into their environment and shining upon them just like that. (BURNS, 2018, p. 51)

Shiny girl was then designated as "similar to her sister", an "ostracised" (BURNS, 2018, p. 52) beyond-the-pale. Her inclusion, which takes place exclusively on the grounds of unsettling the community with her "shininess", ultimately exposes the fact that beyond-the-pales were not branded as outcasts because they were mentally ill or actively troublesome, but rather because their difference challenged the community's ways enough to defy understanding and produce otherness where a strict binary had already been operating.

Deleuze and Guattari personify the war machine in Indra, the warrior god. Rather than representing the branch of the state apparatus that instrumentalises war, he "brings *a furor* to bear against sovereignty, a celerity against gravity, secrecy against the public, a power *(puissance)* against sovereignty, a machine against the apparatus" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 352). If one accepts the setting of Burns's novel as Belfast in the 1970s, it remains a fact that what we call the state apparatus that the beyond-the-pales destabilise already

[24] "What if we accept these points of light, their translucence, their brightness; what if we let ourselves enjoy this, stop fearing it, get used to it; what if we come to believe in it, to expect it, to be impressed upon by it; what if we take hope and forgo our ancient heritage and instead, and infused, begin to entrain with it, with ourselves then to radiate it; what if we do that, get educated up to that, and then, just like that, the light goes off or is snatched away?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51)

encompasses conflict and contested authority. It is against that particularly oppressive way of living, in which even watching the wrong TV programme could be interpreted as signalling political allegiance, a world split into binaries, that the community "quarantines" those who come too close of disarticulating identity as not just a binary, but as a fixed element. In her exchange with real milkman, the Narrator is glad to think she could join in his more proactive attitude. Discussing shiny people, she also includes "French teacher from downtown" as an example, and states "then perhaps there might have been, were it not for the state of his hoarding, maybe-boyfriend" (BURNS, 2018, p. 51). There is an intersection, then, between the "How can we get this done?" manner (BURNS, 2018, p. 78) and the shiny people, and the Narrator is, while perplexed by it, undeniably attracted to both of those minoritarian ways.

Once the renouncers give her family an ultimatum, tablets girl's relatives decide to look for her poisons around the house to throw them out. Inside the "the once beloved family ragdoll" (BURNS, 2018, p. 137), shiny girl finds the letter that opens this chapter, in which tablets girl had listed all her fears, most of which came in pairs of opposites: she feared being "thought both 'child' and at the same time 'old woman'"; if not death, then living, being invisible, but also being visible. At the end of the letter, however, she lists her "biggest worry," one that, according to her, "if only we didn't have it, even if we should retain all our other fears, still would we be indescribably happy, that which has condemned us profoundly, changed us negatively, stopped us surmounting trifles such as the fears already listed" (BURNS, 2018, p. 138). The biggest worry, she goes on to explain, is "that weird something of the psyche" that "possesses" her. Something of "Lightness and Niceness that had got inside us" (BURNS, 2018, p. 138). This, shiny girl explains, is a reference to herself.

Following a conversation with her sister in which she tried to talk about the reason behind the poisonings, tablets girl not only poisoned her for the first time, but she also started to believe her sister was a part of herself that needed to be destroyed. It should be noted that shiny girl was not the first beyond-the-pale who tried to help tablets girl: the women with the issues had tried to help by talking to her and by trying to convince the renouncers this was not a matter they should get involved in. Real milkman had also tried to help. While some of the feminists ended up getting poisoned amid their efforts (BURNS, 2018, p. 123), the Narrator underlined tablets girl had rejected his help, but not poisoned real milkman (BURNS, 2018, p. 133). None of those characters produce a sense of the *Unheimlich* for tablets girl, however, and it appears that it is out of a combination of the general feeling the community aimed at shiny girl and a deep identification that originates in their sisterhood that their identities get confused enough for tablets girl to feel violated. This triggers a reaction: tablets girl

repeatedly poisons her sister in what amounts to five attempts to kill her. When the Narrator meets the girl on the street after being poisoned, she attests that "as for her shininess, I now had my own confirmation that it was damaged, patchy, hardly to be discernible. Apart from a few dithering blinks and the odd, sullen twinkle, she could have been any one of us with our heavy, slumbering loads" (BURNS, 2018, p. 136), so even though tablets girl ends up dead because of her excesses, she also succeeds in extinguishing "Lightness and Niceness".

In their defence of tablets girl's life, the women with the issues reiterate the argument they had used to claim she was not a feminist herself, that is, that she was mentally ill, and therefore her actions should be judged accordingly. Once the renouncers produce an ultimatum, the women argue "it was now obvious she was periodically using, not just legitimate issues of gender injustice, but also other legitimate issues of any kind of injustice as a front to cover up her madness" (BURNS, 2018, p. 123). Therefore, it "was pointless to keep warning tablets girl to stop doing what she was doing because she couldn't stop what she was doing and that she needed intervention – just not [the renouncer's] type of intervention" (BURNS, 2018, p. 123). While their intervention is very similar to the one administered by the traditional women in their rescue of the issue women themselves, in their suggestion the renouncers should occupy themselves with more pressing affairs and leave the feminists and the eighth woman to them, the issue women not only did not hold the same gravitas the traditional women did, but they had also failed in their attempts to contain tablets girl before, as the renouncers point out.

There is an interesting crossing point, however, between Milkman's harassment of the Narrator and the renouncers warning of tablets girl at this point. The issue women suggest that instead of pursuing the district's poisoner, the paramilitaries could do something "about that middle-aged letch in their movement who went around preying upon and grooming young women" (BURNS, 2018, p. 123). Earlier in the novel, real milkman had suggested the Narrator could talk to the issue women about Milkman's encroachments, which she refused. Nevertheless, the district's feminists are not only aware of that fact, but they also suggest the paramilitaries should take action. While they would probably be aware of the rumours circulating about Milkman and Middle Sister, and could also had been informed by real milkman himself, it is possible to conjecture that Middle Sister did go to the feminists and eliminated this episode from her narrative through *jamais vu*. However it happened, the renouncers refusal of "being dictated to" do and of being "drawn into equivocation" (BURNS, 2018, p. 123) underlines both the feminists' unwillingness to play the same rhetorical games the traditional women did when negotiating with the paramilitaries, which invariably flattered

the men's egos, and also puts Milkman's indiscretions towards young women at the centre of the conversation.

Earlier in the novel, the Narrator had addressed the community's ambivalence towards a new generation of renouncers: "there was a loop of regard, at least for the old-school renouncers, those with the principled reasons for resistance and for fighting before most ended up dead or interned, bringing in a preponderance, as ma put it, 'of the hoodlum, the worldling, the careerist and the personal agenda'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 63-64). By suggesting they investigate Milkman without actually naming him the district's feminists are implying not only that the forty-one-year-old who tries to entice young women into entering his "flashy cars" is among the latter types of renouncers, but that by refusing to investigate and thus being complicit, the other renouncers fall into such category as well. That all of those concerns are raised and articulated by women (the district's feminists and the Narrator's mother) and that the forms of violence – dispensed and threatened – are aimed at women as well (the Narrator and tablets girl) is relevant, especially since later in the novel Middle Sister describes the renouncers as baffled as to how to address "women's issues", coming up with a system that produced charges of rape with subsections. While the renouncers claimed the system was much better than that of the "burlesque courts of occupiers," the application of the charges were not seen to be put to practice. Further, with claims of "gender progressiveness," the system was deemed more than enough to address any claims by women: "that'll do for them, meaning women, meaning justice for the women with the issues as well as for women without issues because not all women had issues" (BURNS, 2018, p. 162). With this odd, ineffectual gesture, any debate regarding the abuses of a figurehead like Milkman, for instance, gets muffled. It is in that sense that I would argue that while the claim the women with the issues make about tablets girl might be correct, she is mentally ill, it does not correctly express the character's role as a beyond-the-pale in the novel, especially regarding the events of Chapter Five. The official discourse makes a joke of women's issues and however warped tablets girl's logic may seem, her role as the district's poisoner triggers a chain of events that ultimately help to demoralise Milkman in the community. While she is not directly responsible for his death, his unlawful killing of her prefigures his own erasure from the district and from the narrative as a figure of authority.

In "Plato's Pharmacy" (1972), Jacques Derrida turns to Plato's *Phaedrus* (c. 370 BC) to analyse and discuss the concept of *pharmakon* as presented by Socrates in the dialogue. In it, the philosopher produces an analogy between the written text and the medicine which "acts as both remedy and poison, already [introducing] itself into the body of the discourse with all

its ambivalence" (DERRIDA, 1972, p. 429). Tablets girl's poisons are simultaneously affirmed as such and never provided with a specific name or kind, or even a precedence. That this woman whose sole occupation is ever described as "poisoner"[25] is able to procure, on her own, such an expressive stash is as significant as the fact that her family is never able to locate her poisoning instruments on the day of her murder. The materiality of tablets girl's poisons is exclusively textual, and it is in that sense that I would argue that from Chapter 5 onwards, when her poisonings break pattern, having been triggered by her uncanny identification with her younger sister, these events take up the role of Derrida's *pharmakon* in *Milkman*'s text. Having poisoned her sister five times, the last of which nearly resulted in shiny girl's death and left her eyesight severely impaired, tablet's girl receives a final warning by the renouncers. Still, she goes to the district's nightclub, where the Narrator had met with longest friend, and accuses Middle Sister of colluding with Milkman to kill her and twenty-three other women in a different life. Tablets girl highlights that some of the women killed "were definitely doing herbs, […] just their innocent white medicine" (BURNS, 2018, p. 113). In this seventeenth century scenario, Milkman himself had been a doctor, "but one of those quack doctors" (BURNS, 2018, p. 113):

> Here she looked revolted that I would align myself with, would become the cat-familiar of, such a counterfeit man. She said there was no point in my denying I'd known of his impostorship. I had abetted him, done black magic for him, cut up dead animals for him, been a female accessory to his murders of those twenty-three women, plus her, in our picturesque village. 'We all died, sister,' she said, 'because of you.' Because of this, she said I deserved exactly what was coming to me. (BURNS, 2018, p. 113)

In this accusation, which the Narrator quickly considers attuned with tablets girl overall disturbed behaviour, lies the female tradition she sees herself as belonging to, one that is silenced and vilified for practising alternative medicine – presumably the women in question were condemned as witches – and it is through *pharmaka* that she intends to wage her revenge against the patriarchal order. Still, some of the details in her accusation suggest that tablets girl's fixation on the Narrator and on Milkman as a pair is not random and not merely born of her schizophrenia. The claim that Middle Sister had "cut up dead animals for him" (BURNS, 2018, p. 113) could easily be a distortion of the incident with the cat's head in

[25] When Longest Friend tells the Narrator she had been branded a beyond-the-pale, her first instinct is to express her shock at being in the same class as tablets girl: "*Me! In the same boat as our poisoner, tablets girl!*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 106). Still, her description as "our poisoner" here echoes the Narrator reiterated usage of "our milkman" (BURNS, 2018, p. 7; p. 158) to highlight the inappropriateness of the renouncer taking up that name when that was not his occupation and when there was, in fact, a milkman who took the district's milk orders.

the ten-minute area[26]. Throughout their entire conversation, the Narrator held the cat's head in her hand. That was something longest friend was aware of, and which had come up in their conversation on that same day. The number of women who were supposedly killed by Milkman in collusion with the Narrator is one that is reiterated thrice in the novel: it is both the age-difference between the two of them [forty-one and eighteen], and the number of a house in the red-light street where a woman lived with two men, an image that could both stand for the dangerous dynamic involving the Narrator's relationship with maybe-boyfriend and Milkman's constant threats, as well as maybe-boyfriend's cheating of the Narrator with his roommate, Chef. Finally, tablets girl does not include her own death among those twenty-three women, so in a sense this accusation prefigures her own violent killing by Milkman, which happens not as the execution the renouncers had warned would take place if she did not stop the poisonings, but as a mysterious event, an "ordinary killing" they begin to investigate. Absurdly as it may be structured, tablets girl accusation could be read as the same one the Middle Sister had been enduring throughout the novel: the district's poisoner is dismayed because she believes the Narrator – whom she addresses as a sister – has associated herself with a man such as Milkman. For that reason, she argues, the Narrator deserved to be poisoned. Tablets girl's last poisoning provides an even stronger argument to this reading by reiterating her connection with the ten-minute area and the cat, which "had been bombed to death by Nazis" (BURNS, 2018, p. 74). The last person tablets girl poisoned was a man she thought was "Hitler maybe" (BURNS, 2018, p. 124), and it was this man's wife who told the renouncers she had disobeyed their order.

Earlier in the novel, a random detonation in the ten-minute area had led to many accusations between the two sides of the conflict until it was discovered "it had been an old bomb, a history bomb, an antiquity Greek and Roman bomb, a big, giant Nazi bomb" (BURNS, 2018, p. 48), which put a stop to recriminations. While it was claimed nobody got killed, one day, after most of the rubble had been cleared, the Narrator realises there was a cat there, "the head of a cat, one that had been alive up until that explosion. Something had died then, I realised, in that bomb from long ago after all" (BURNS, 2018, p. 53). The passage in which she decides to rescue the cat's head (which I discuss further in the next section) is of particular interest here because it plays into an ampler metaphorical complex in which cats, frequent victims of violence in her district, were also often conflated with women, as briefly noted before. The murdered cat could not even escape the carnage of fascists, their

[26] Another accusation is that she had become his "cat-familiar".

instruments of violence dormant, but still present in the unruly ten-minute area. The Second World War had already appeared in the form of the Narrator's father's trauma and depression, elements that bar his ability to perform masculinity in the way he was expected to, and which lead to his wife's frustration:

> 'Your da,' she said. 'Your da. Do you know that even his sister said he'd lie abed during the sirens with places around him on fire and not go to the shelters with the other people? Only young too – sixteen, maybe seventeen – with me twelve years old at the time and having more sense than he had. Crazy. Wanting those bombs to fall on him. Crazy,' which at first time of hearing – for this was not first time – also before my own depressions started – I used to think was crazy too. And now she was talking of the big war, that world one, the second one, the one – ask any teenager – with nothing to do with up-to-date humanity and modern-society living; the one no one my age could attend to which wasn't surprising, given most of us could hardly attend to the current, more local one, we were in. (BURNS, 2019, p. 49)

In Middle Sister's father, who tells her of the sexual abuse he suffered as a child when he is in the hospital, a character who is constantly and repeatedly criticised and misunderstood for not fitting into the expected standards of masculinity, Burns reaffirms the gendered languages of war in the novel. With this haunting of the Second World War in the ten-minute area, tablets girl final act is to poison Hitler, a dictator who died by suicide in 1945, likely by ingesting cyanide and shooting himself (CHARLIER; WEIL; RAINSARD; POUPON; BRISARD, 2018, p. 2).

Derrida defines the *pharmakon* as a "substance – with all that word can connote in terms of matter with occult virtues, cryptic depths refusing to submit their ambivalence to analysis, already paving the way for alchemy – if we didn't have eventually to come to recognize it as antisubstance itself" (DERRIDA, 1972, p. 429). This duality is inherent to an understanding of the *pharmakon* as both remedy and poison, but its status as antisubstance, "that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance; granting philosophy by that very fact the inexhaustible adversity [literally, 'othersidedness'] of what constitutes it and the infinite absence of what dissolves it" (DERRIDA, 1972, p. 429) is key to my argument that Burns's construction of the poisoning subplot works both to establish tablets girl as a nomadic warrior as defined by Deleuze and Guattari in her anxiety towards set boundaries for identity and in her symbolic attack on perceived patriarchal authority.

The Narrator describes tablets girl's as "very deft, very furtive, very making herself invisible, blending into everything, dissolving away to nothing" in her strategy to poison someone's drink as she "talked incessantly her hypnotic, inventive stories at you" (BURNS,

2018, p. 123). The first element of the poisoning, then, involves storytelling: "that way she got you, her next victim, hooked and involved. Disquieted yet fixated, you focused on her words, meaning – and despite knowledge of her *modus operandi* and of all of her poisoning history – you didn't take in what her hands were up to. That was what she wanted" (BURNS, 2018, p. 123). Throughout the novel, we are only privy to the story tablets girl shares with the Narrator, and it is disturbing enough – implicating her and Milkman as accomplices, instead of either reiterating the community's rumours or taking her side and recognising her as a victim – to make her let her guard down.

Tablets girl's actions are always veiled by her language and by her perceived madness, but her poisonings are both immaterial and evidenced exclusively by the bodies of her victims. All people know about her is that she "put poison in people's drinks," "with most deciding she was doing what she was doing because of some feminist complaint" (BURNS, 2018, p. 113), something the local feminist group disputed. After a conversation with longest friend, in which the Narrator is frustrated when the other woman does not take her side regarding her reading-while-walking and her new beyond-the-pale status, tablets girl takes advantage of a moment she is left alone at the table and it is an ambiguous accusation, "You should be ashamed" (BURNS, 2018, p. 113), that makes the Narrator hesitate long enough for tablets girl to begin her poisoning. While in practical terms this is described as tampering with people's drinks, metaphorically it is by shaming Middle Sister and then accusing her of colluding with Milkman to harm other women that she begins the poisoning process. Considering people at the district could not go to the hospital without facing the risk of being approached by state security forces to act as informants or at least being thought to have been so, the victims of tablets girl undergo "purgings" at home, usually performed by women. It is at the scene where the Narrator's mother gathers with her neighbours to save her daughter that the word "herbs," invoked by tablets girl, appears for the second and final time in the novel, aligning the alternative medicine of the murdered of her imagined past life with the one practiced by the traditional women of the present.

> Ma returned with an awful-smelling, dreadful-looking, monstrous pint-size concoction. So also appeared neighbours, bearing demijohns, bell-jars, green, brown and yellow warning jars, balsams, philtres, phials, herbs, powders, weighing scales, pestle and mortars, huge pharmacopoeias, plus other 'keep it in the family' distillations of their own. They had materialised out of nowhere which was usual with neighbours on occasions of 'not going to hospital'. Like ma, they were prepared, with nightdress sleeves rolled up. First there was a conference held in the bathroom with the women standing over me, speaking to and fro across me. I heard most everything with wee sisters filling in blanks later on. They were debating the course of action, with the purists among them saying it was not good policy to

> induce vomiting if it hadn't been ascertained what it was they were dealing with. Others said to take a look, that it was clear this was no time to be precise and godlike, that a makeshift, slapdash approach would be entirely in order here. 'Speaking of entirely,' said one of the neighbours, 'this is entirely similar to that poor girl who had been poisoned by her sister.' 'What poor girl?' said ma, and tones of voice, according to wee sisters, dropped low at this point. (BURNS, 2018, p. 119)

The first suggestion the Narrator's poisoning had been inflicted by tablets girl appears precisely at that scene, but it quickly dissipates, and not even Middle Sister establishes the connection between being approached by tablets girl and her condition. When the Narrator wakes up in the middle of the night startled that someone might have come in, and feeling painful cramps, a "burning sensation in [her] innards," and "a pungency in [her] mouth" (BURNS, 2018, p. 116), her initial instinct is to believe this was her body's response to the psychological stress of Milkman's predations: "this is more of Milkman and of how his coveting is affecting me now" (BURNS, 2018, p. 116). Her mother expresses her concerns in a straight-forward manner, still blaming the girl for the supposed-affair with Milkman and asking, among other questions, "With what had I been poisoned" (BURNS, 2018, p. 117). She quickly jumps to the conclusion it would had been one of the "wives" and states "Well, what do you expect, wee girl,' she said, 'if you go round stealing other people's husbands? Of course those women are going to try to kill you. For all your so-called knowledge of the world, how come you don't know that?'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 117). After the Narrator denies all accounts: "No wives, ma. No husbands. No affair with Milkman. No poison." (BURNS, 2018, p. 117), her mother considers the possibility there had been no poisoning, but the Milkman rumours still hold up in her alternative reading of events, asking if the Narrator had been pregnant and sought out one of the "drab aunts" in the area.

> Once again, she was showing no faith, didn't believe I could be true, that I was true, that I might have enough wit of my own not to take up with such a man as Milkman, all of which didn't inspire me to inspire her with confidence in me, for why should I? Last time I tried she called me a liar, demanding – even though I had been doing it – that I give her the truth. She didn't want the truth. All she wanted was confirmation of the rumour. What was the use therefore, in trying to settle the attribution, to get her to see that these spasms, this stiffness, this unable to straighten, unable to stand, weren't down to poison or to any of her imaginings but instead were an intensified version of the usual? I was being sick because of Milkman stalking me, Milkman tracking me, Milkman knowing everything about me, biding his time, closing in on me, and because of the perniciousness of the secrecy, gawking and gossip that existed in this place. So ma and I were at cross purposes, as always we were at cross purposes, but then I did attempt because in that moment, which was a lonely moment, more than ever I longed for her belief in me, for her properly to perceive me. 'No wives, ma,' I said. 'No husbands, no foetus, no drab aunts, no poison, no suicide' – adding on that last to save her the trouble of adding it on herself. (BURNS, 2018, p. 118)

The neighbours and her mother proceed to perform a purging, with the women dividing into a group that administered the purging substances and another who prayed throughout the night. The purging process leaves the Narrator longing for her own death, and while before they began her mother had to be talked out of taking her to the hospital by the neighbours, the Narrator was resolute there had been no need for one at all: "all the same, I myself didn't want an ambulance, didn't want the hospital. Nor did I need them because – *how long must I say?* – this wasn't a poisoning" (BURNS, 2018, p. 120). In one night, then, the Narrator has *pharmaka* forcibly or unwillingly administered to her in two different occasions. Besides making Middle Sister physically ill, the poisoning by tablets girl infects her with her dubious storytelling and turns her into a stranger to her own psyche. The *pharmakon,* Derrida argues, "makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual, paths and laws" (DERRIDA, 1972, p. 429). Middle Sister wakes up startled, crying "*It got in! It made its way in! They got in while I was sleeping!*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 116), "but before I came awake properly and could work out what I was talking about, a burning sensation in my innards took hold" (BURNS, 2018, p. 116). "It" works as a reference to the poison, but the erotic subtext of violation cannot be ignored, especially considering her following reaction is to attribute her condition to a breakdown caused by Milkman's predations. Throughout this, tablets girl "makes herself invisible" as described by the Narrator, and it is only when she learns the woman had been killed and the renouncers had been to her house while investigating the murder that Middle Sister realises what truly happened.

While recuperating from both poisoning and purging, she wakes up several times. The first time she stays in bed, "mentally conjugating the French verb, *être*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 121), which reaffirms her connection with French teacher from Downtown, one Milkman will be eager to shut down, but ultimately fail. The second time, still denying she had been poisoned, she worries about the effect of the renouncer's harassment and wonders how to evade him: "well, if that's the latest effect he's had on me with his sexual prowling, I don't know how I'm going to escape from him now" (BURNS, 2018, p. 121). Finally, she awakens "from a dream of Proust, or rather, a nightmare of Proust, in which he turned out to be some reprehensible contemporary Nineteen-Seventies writer passing himself off as a turn-of-the-century writer, which apparently was why he was being sued in court in the dream by, I think, me" (BURNS, 2018, p. 121). Finally, she knows she has "turned a corner and [is] now on the mend" because she "was doing an elaborate Fray Bentos Steak and Kidney Pie fantasy in [her] head" (BURNS, 2018, p. 121), feeling hungry again.

The Narrator's poisoning marks a shift in the narrative. While the suspicion that Milkman had murdered tablets girl to avenge Middle Sister's poisoning likens him to a common killer and "ordinary murders were eerie, unfathomable, the exact murders that didn't happen here" (BURNS, 2018, p. 124), this belief produces the effect of making the community fear the Narrator. After the poisoning, she constantly feels hungry and when trying to buy chips one day she fears Milkman had just entered the same shop due to reactions from other clients, only to realise they were reacting to her: "It was at my back, the silence, making shivers at my back, and I couldn't turn, though my mind began racing. *Don't let it be Milkman. Oh please, don't let it be Milkman.* Then I did turn and it wasn't Milkman. It was everybody else. Every single person was staring at me in the shop" (BURNS, 2018, p. 125). This breeds anger, but the Narrator is not thoroughly isolated because her relationships at home have changed.

While she is recuperating, her landline receives three calls: one from third brother-in-law, one from maybe-boyfriend, and another one informing them that real milkman had been shot, having been mistaken for Milkman. This triggers an unexpected response from the Narrator's mother who, besides immediately rushing to help her friend, effectively changes her outlook on herself by resuming her romantic interest on real milkman. This leads to a closer relationship between mother and daughter, as mentioned before, but also between the Narrator and her younger sisters, whom she takes care of more frequently. On its turn, the phone call from maybe-boyfriend precipitates the end of their maybe-relationship. After they argue on the phone, the Narrator decides to go to his house, only to conclude he had been in love with Chef all along and their maybe-relationship was merely a way to deflect from his real feelings, in the same way many people in her district did. The Narrator appears to be frustrated not only because of the emotional toll of the indirect rejection, but due to the fact she had misread her maybe-relationship. She was a "wrong person" and he had "settled" for her in the same sense her third brother had settled for a spouse he never loved instead of marrying shiny girl. That she could not evade this "settling" deception even by staying in the "maybe" category unsettles the Narrator: "So much for thinking maybe-boyfriend unstudied, uncomplicated, free from deception, the man who eschewed protections for his heart when here he was, confirming to chef, and to myself, that he too, had been a 'settler', had chosen some safety-net wrong person instead of the right person" (BURNS, 2018, p. 153). The Narrator believes it was due to her lack of awareness, the reiterated accusation aimed at her reading-while-walking, that she never noticed what supposedly had been in front of her all along: "The truth was dawning on me of how terrifying it was not to be numb, but to be

aware, to have facts, retain facts, be present, be adult" (BURNS, 2018, p. 153). There is, of course, ample space for interrogating if the Narrator's conclusions could be considered accurate in this moment of extreme distress where, having decided to talk openly to maybe-boyfriend after their argument, she not only heard him refer to her as "yon renouncer's love interest," but that he did so "unkindly" and "derisively" (BURNS, 2018, p. 151). The scene at maybe-boyfriend's home overwrites, then, not only the conversation the pair had shared on the phone, when he asked her to tell him what had been happening to her and explain the rumours regarding Milkman, but also their entire relationship.

The poisoning of the Narrator triggers a process of becoming for Middle Sister as she gives up *jamais vu* as a coping strategy. The night in which she is poisoned is also the one the promises longest friend to abandon her reading-while-walking, which she parlays for her inscrutability by the community. Nevertheless, after the night in question the Narrator's isolation is punctured as well as her numbness. Derrida argues that

> the *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself *at once* be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing. (DERRIDA, 1972, p. 440)

After the poisoning, the Narrator breaks away from her maybe-relationship, but also accepts "that for me this was to be one long getting-over of ex-maybe-boyfriend" (BURNS, 2018, p. 164). She becomes closer with her sisters and with her mother, and even accepts to read some twentieth-century books to the little girls (BURNS, 2018, p. 144).

Nevertheless, if we understand tablets girl's *pharmakon* metaphorically as writing, especially considering that a letter was found where her poison tablets were expected to be, as well as that her technique involved storytelling, it seems crucial to point out that while she saw Milkman as her ultimate foe, the only way she could possibly do away with him was through text. In that sense, as Derrida affirms in reference to Plato, she "maintains *both* the exteriority of writing *and* its power of maleficent penetration, its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside" (DERRIDA, 1972, p. 440).

2.3 **The Narrator's Nomadic Becoming: "It was a vigilance not to be vigilant"**

> Ex-maybe-boyfriend himself had said, ‘Don’t know, maybe-girl, but… look at your face and it’s as if your sense organs are disappearing or as if they’ve already disappeared.’ Some things stick. That stuck. I wished he had not commented on the dispossession of my face.
>
> *Anna Burns*

The *pharmakon,* in its ambiguous non-identity, is the ideal instrument for a notorious beyond-the-pale to destabilise patriarchal authority. As she walks home from maybe-boyfriend’s house, Milkman approaches the Narrator once again with his car and offers her a lift, which she dejectedly accepts. He plans to pick her up the following day, addressing her as “princess”, defining what kind of clothes she must wear, and making it clear she must stop attending her classes downtown. Just as the Narrator had surrendered to the idea the man could not be escaped, however, Milkman gets killed by state security forces. Derrida writes that “the *pharmakon* is the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the difference of difference” (DERRIDA, 1972, p. 443). In its ambiguity, the *pharmakon* both produces the conditions that allow for the Narrator to finally accept a lift from Milkman – making her feel more isolated by the community as they believe the paramilitary committed an ordinary murder for her, in her constant hunger, as well as in her break-up with maybe-boyfriend – and the ones that help her develop stronger ties with her family, as well as to become more self-aware. Ultimately, while it was reported Milkman had been killed by state security forces, some more extreme rumours still suggested Middle Sister had orchestrated his death. The fact remains, however, that he was not well-remembered and did not become a martyr in the eyes of his community, remaining an elusive and somewhat tainted figure. In the following sections, then, we turn to the most prominent beyond-the-pale voice Anna Burns offers us, the Narrator/Middle Sister, in order to argue that there is a methodology for proliferating difference in *Milkman*, especially if we consider “reading-while-walking” within a nomadic framework for becoming-minoritarian.

It is fitting to start at this point in Burns’s narrative, that is, when the Narrator enters Milkman’s car. When she accedes to this most dreadfully anticipated event, she simultaneously remembers her own earlier resistance to “step[ping] over that threshold” and is surprised by her lack of emotion when the thing she fretted over for so long finally happens. Maybe-boyfriend’s words come back to her then, and while she reads his observation as a remark on the “dispossession” of her face, I would argue it allows for a wider understanding

of the Narrator as a body without organs as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. If we take maybe-boyfriend's comment on the Narrator's inscrutability as a point of access to her beyond-the-paleness, the metaphorical alignment between the disappearance of her "sense organs" and her alternative take on both herself and the community seem poignant. Deleuze and Guattari define the body without organs not as one that has been "stripped of organs", but as a body "upon which that which serves as organs […] is distributed according to crowd phenomena, in Brownian motion, in the form of molecular multiplicities" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 30). Its distinctive feature, then, is to oppose "the organization of the organs insofar as it composes an organism" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 30), in the same sense that the war machine attacks the sedentary state. The body without organs blows apart the organism and organisation: it is a beyond-the-pale body that favours difference: "the full body without organs is a body populated by multiplicities" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 30).

Middle Sister stands at a unique position in this study of the beyond-the-pale community considering she does not submit to the same rules as not only the protagonist of the novel, but also its narrator. While *Milkman* narrates the predations imposed by that renouncer and the community, as well as Somebody McSomebody's obsessive stalking of Middle Sister, that conflict, while unpacked throughout the plot, is subsumed by the novel's already cited first sentence: "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" (BURNS, 2018, p. 7). While at this point the reader cannot know that Milkman will never get to physically touch the Narrator, the fact she owns this narrative and places him as a casualty and herself as a survivor from the start already opens room for other questions beyond the harassment imposed on her by Milkman and Somebody McSomebody. This is later reinforced by the fact that while news of the renouncer's murder reaches her at the beginning of Chapter Seven, his death is in no way part of her denouement. The narrative follows for nearly another eighteen thousand words, focusing on the Narrator's relationship with her mother and sisters, as well as on her recovery post-poisoning, as discussed above. Even the moment when the Narrator receives the news of Milkman's death is subordinated to the framework of Middle Sister's fractured relationship with her first sister, who "looked gleeful, excited, that this man she thought was my lover, this man she thought had mattered to me, was dead" (BURNS, 2018, p. 157). It is only after she discusses the implications and repercussions of the altercation that ensues with her sister that she celebrates the renouncer's death, her reaction to

the news being the very opposite of what her sister had anticipated. She states that what was "at the forefront" of her mind was

> no more having to watch my back, expecting to turn a corner to have him fall into step with me, no more being followed, being spied upon, photographed, misperceived, encircled, anticipated. No more being commanded. No more capitulation such as the night before when I got beat down enough, had become indifferent to my fate enough as to have stepped inside his van. Most of all there would be no more worry about ex-maybe-boyfriend being killed by a carbomb. So it was, while standing in our kitchen digesting this bit of consequence, that 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. (BURNS, 2018, p. 157-158)

This is the process we follow throughout Chapter Seven, with the Narrator repositioning herself in her world, from the realisation that Milkman's death did not equal the end of Milkman for her due to the fact that the predations were amplified by the community's participation via rumours, but also in Somebody McSomebody's stalking, until the point she feels free to start running again with third brother-in-law. Throughout all this, her reading-while-walking, source of both refuge and ostracisation, a signifier of her difference, is abandoned after the night of her poisoning by tablets girl, although her reading and literary references remain a constant feature in the novel. Reading-while-walking is criticised by three of the narrator's closest friends – third brother-in-law, longest friend, and maybe-boyfriend – as a strategy to alienate herself that simultaneously makes her be perceived as dangerous due to her inscrutability and puts her in danger as people felt they could not read her.

The Narrator's disappearance into literature in the public space appears as both a coping strategy to avoid facing the realities of her community during what she terms the political problems – "hence, the dichotomy, the cauterising, the *jamais vu*, the blanking-out, the reading-while-walking" (BURNS, 2018, p. 63) – and a creative exercise that allowed her to conceive of her selfhood outside the bounds of the sets of binaries that organised her community. While some beyond-the-pales are perceived as dangerous due to being mentally unstable (nuclear boy, tablets girl), or politically defiant (the women with the issues, real milkman), the Narrator is a liability because she makes herself unknowable, her reading-while-walking defying both the expectation one should always stay alert to their surroundings ("Not self-preservation") and the expected courtesy of taking part on the district's communal life ("Not public-spirited").

The Narrator agrees to stop reading-while-walking, but not to open herself to the community's prying, and I would argue that when she resumes her walking, but not her

reading-while-walking, she does so because unlike the time when she was being preyed upon not only by the community, Middle Sister becomes a narrator through her experience, and while before her poisoning she frequently experiences *jamais vu* to cope, this too ceases to appear in the latter part of the narrative. Thus, it is by becoming ill and surviving, by getting angry at the community for ostracising her even further after tablets girl's death, by breaking up with maybe-boyfriend and even by finally facing Milkman, that Middle Sister abandons her earlier claim that without her strategies for self-alienation she would not be able to cope: "if unmediated forces and feelings burst to my consciousness, I wouldn't know what to do" (BURNS, 2018, p. 63). Instead of physically reading-while-walking in the narrative, she produces a beyond-the-pale narrative. In this retrospective gesture, I do not mean to say she presents outcasts as a unit or a cohesive group. As I have argued before, real milkman is the only link between all of them. Nevertheless, while naming her offender only, *Milkman* is a narrative that remains heterogeneous largely through what Deleuze and Guattari have called "a veritable becoming-animal of the warrior, a becoming-woman, which lies outside dualities of terms as well as correspondences between relations" (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 1987, p. 352). At the centre of those becomings, stands the Narrator's reading-while-walking.

When reading-while-walking appears for the final time, having been abandoned after her conversation with longest friend, it is through a variation. The Narrator mentions she had been "walking and reading" her way into town when she noticed a different kind of subversion, this time a collective, maybe even more disruptive one, inspired by the "international couple", ex-maybe-boyfriend's parents and enacted by children. Little girls from both sides – renouncers and defenders – "dressed-up, paired off, dotted about, waltzing, getting in everybody's way, getting on everybody's nerves, falling over, getting up, dusting off and waltzing off again" (BURNS, 2018, p. 163).

2.3.1 "Not Self-Preservation": Three Warnings Against Reading-While-Walking

We learn of the Narrator's reading-while-walking at the scene where Milkman first approaches her. She argues that she saw nothing wrong with her habit, but that it was regarded as "further proof" against her. Accordingly, reading-while-walking gets scrutinised and criticised by three people that are dear to the Narrator in the novel as something that marks her as different and exposes her to danger. Those characters, while close to the

Narrator, are not outcasts themselves: not one beyond-the-pale ever remarks on the matter of her reading-while-walking. Milkman produces an interdiction not merely on her habit, but on walking altogether, but this is not articulated through discourse. After he approaches her on the street, "for the first time ever I did not do my reading-while-walking. I did not do my walking" (BURNS, 2018, p. 12). Other characters mention it incidentally. The Narrator states that when she was surprised upon learning that her second and fourth brothers had been renouncers, none of her family members "showed sympathy or patience at my being left out of this knowledge; not surprising, they said, owing to my deliberate obfuscation of reading while walking about" (BURNS, 2018, p. 71). The Narrator's reading-while-walking is interpreted as an inherent oddness that testifies against an understanding of the near-inscrutability of her demeanour as pretension:

> At first they said they weren't sure if I was displaying an unamiable Marie Antoinetteness by being stuck-up, by thinking I was above them. Then they decided that no, probably this was some eccentricity in keeping with my character, most likely stemming from all that reading of ancient books I did while walking about. (BURNS, 2018, p. 95)

In the first two conversations about reading-while-walking, the Narrator defends her habit as something ordinary that is only rendered odd by the community's incessant scrutiny, a constant attempt to invade her perception of herself. While third brother-in-law focuses on the risks reading-while-walking's aloofness represents to the individual, longest friend's emphasis is on reading-while-walking as antisocial behaviour and its effects on the community. To the Narrator, her resulting ostracisation as a beyond-the-pale is absurd, as she highlights that their community has normalised the fact men like Milkman will carry explosives on the street but will find so many faults in a person who merely refuses to engage.

While talking to third brother-in-law, the Narrator believed him to approach his exercise obsession in the same vein that she did her reading but her misperception of him reveals the fact that it is not merely reading-while-walking that produces an escape, but the alignment of chosen literary worlds with her *jamais vu* episodes. It is by forgetting and rewriting that she becomes someone unreachable by her community's obsession with the urgency of the present. Even so, she will recognise that when it came to the "political problems" there was no way to remain neutral: "I myself spent most of my time with my back turned in the nineteenth century, even the eighteenth century, sometimes the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries, yet even then, I couldn't stop having a view" (BURNS, 2018, p. 62). Third brother-in-law's argument against reading-while-walking focuses on the Narrator as an

individual. To "switch herself off" is to "abandon herself": "it's not safe, not natural, not dutiful to self" (BURNS, 2018, p. 35). Longest friend, described by the Narrator as "the one person I could speak with, the one person I could listen to" (BURNS, 2018, p. 103), is also a voice of authority as a prominent renouncer. Although her political activities represent a taboo subject between the two women, she is free to enquire on the matter of Milkman's predations and to ultimately conclude the Narrator brought her sentencing as a beyond-the-pale "on herself", evaluating that being sexually harassed by Milkman was not a hassle, but rather a wakeup call that would force the Narrator to abandon her antics and to face reality.

Longest friend's tone is authoritative as she criticises reading-while-walking as "not public-spirit" (BURNS, 2018, p. 106), turning the focus to the community. While third brother-in-law had warned her of the physical and practical dangers of her habit, longest friend tosses aside the Narrator's suggestion that her earlier criticism of reading-while-walking had been due to similar concerns. Her focus is the collective. After asking about the Narrator's relationship with Milkman and receiving a full, "unchronological" account, longest friend stays quiet and ponders. Her demeanour reminds the narrator of Milkman: "for the first time it struck me that this staring into the middle distance, which often she'd do when we'd meet, was identical to that of Milkman […]. Was this some 'profile display stance' then, that they all learn at their paramilitary finishing schools?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 105). When she finally speaks, longest friend states she understands that the Narrator did not want to talk: "that makes sense, and how could it not, now that you're considered a community beyond-the-pale" (BURNS, 2018, p. 105). This assertion shifts the conversation away from Milkman and his predations, pointing towards reading-while-walking. Besides "not public spirited", longest friend brands reading-while-walking as "disturbing," "deviant," "optical illusional," and "Not self-preservation" (BURNS, 2018, p. 106). It "calls attention to itself and why – with enemies at the door, with the community under siege, with us all having to pull together – would anyone want to call attention to themselves here?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 106). The focus, then, she suggests, should always lie on the community and on the collective effort. Since she does not consider the Narrator mentally ill like some of the other beyond-the-pales, the question presents itself: why would she willingly set herself apart instead of "pulling together" with the others?

At this conjuncture individuality itself becomes an issue open for interrogation. While longest friend argues she had been warning the Narrator against reading-while-walking since primary school, the fact this piece of criticism comes from one of the district's renouncers, the first person to refer to Milkman by name in the novel, introduces this as a formal, if kind,

warning. Longest friend instructs her: “Just don’t do it while you’re walking about. They don’t like it” (BURNS, 2018, p. 106), and while the Narrator interprets *they* as the community, this obviously implies she is upsetting the renouncers, especially considering she has acquired some notoriety not only as the girl who reads while she walks, but as Milkman’s supposed mistress. Like she does in her conversation with third brother-in-law, the Narrator insists on the defence of her own logic. While longest friend suggests that it was, in fact, alright for Milkman to carry Semtex and not for her to read *Jane Eyre* while she walked and that what the Narrator lacked was awareness of their context, Middle Sister reaffirms her own reading of their reality:

> ‘Just because I’m outnumbered in my reading-while-walking,’ I said, ‘doesn’t mean I’m wrong. What if one person happened to be sane, longest friend, against a whole background, a race mind, that wasn’t sane, that person would probably be viewed by the mass consciousness as mad – *but would that person be mad?*’ (BURNS, 2018, p. 106)

Longest friend insists on the need for reassessment then by referring to the incident with the cat’s head: “‘So you think,’ she said, ‘walking about while reading with your desk lamp on during riots and gunplay with one dead animal in your pocket instead of countless animals isn’t going to tip the balance? Question is, friend, *why are you carrying a cat’s head about?*” (BURNS, 2018, p. 106).

Longest friend argues that by making herself inaccessible, the Narrator has fallen into “the difficult zone,” with the renouncers, one usually reserved for informers, due to the fact she will never answer the community’s questions. While they supposed she had a relationship with Milkman, and that could offer her some protection, she would still be his mistress, not his wife. Finally, she pleads that the Narrator will give some of herself away, so that they will let go and “move on to the next person” (BURNS, 2018, p. 108). This leads Middle Sister to agree to stop reading-while-walking, but to reaffirm her silence and her impenetrability, her “one bit of power in this disempowering world” (BURNS, 2018, p. 108). After their agreement, longest friend still warns the Narrator to be “careful” (BURNS, 2018, p. 108).

After enduring the criticism of both third brother-in-law and longest friend, the Narrator reflects on her own conspicuousness: “these past months, ever since the beginning of Milkman, I was getting an education on just how much I was impacting people without any awareness I’d been visible to people” (BURNS, 2018, p. 106). This highlights longest friend’s point that by trying to make herself invisible, or unavailable, she had inadvertently made herself into a target by singling herself out, perhaps even to Milkman’s eyes as the girl who

nonchalantly read and walked amid “riots and gunplay”. When assessing the scrutiny she had been receiving, the Narrator concludes that “everybody, bar maybe-boyfriend and – though I hated to admit it – Milkman, was homing in on my harmless reading-while-walking” (BURNS, 2018, p. 106). Nevertheless, while Milkman does not criticise it, he inhibits reading-while-walking through his predations, which make the Narrator avoid her abandonment to literature and force herself to stay alert, and by constantly offering her lifts in his cars.

Maybe-boyfriend will also have something to say about it during their conversation on the phone. Bothered by the fact he had called her at home although she had never given him her landline number, she asks where he had gotten it, to which maybe-boyfriend replies he had looked for her last name in the phonebook. His behaviour had startled her as “not himself,” and “instead more and more Milkman” (BURNS, 2018, p. 147). His first “slur on [her] reading tastes” comes as a question: “are twentieth-century phonebooks off-limits also?” (BURNS, 2018, p. 148). This makes the Narrator feel more isolated in her oddness, and soon they begin fighting about the things that made each of them stand out: he cooks, enjoys looking at sunsets, talks about Lithuanian films, and “replaces people with cars” (BURNS, 2018, p. 149). When they discuss her reading-while-walking, he reaffirms that he likes it as “the sort of quiet, out-of-sync thing you would do, thinking too, that nothing was odd or that anybody was noticing” (BURNS, 2018, p. 149). Nevertheless, he still criticises it as “odd,” “not normal,” and “not self-preservation” (BURNS, 2018, p. 149).

The fact maybe-boyfriend repeats longest friend’s words signals to the reader that while he was all the confusing things that had inspired the Narrator to align him with real milkman and French teacher from downtown, he could never be a beyond-the-pale, even if he had been a resident of her district. Ultimately, his language comes precisely in the same normative tone of her renouncer friend as he declares her behaviour unsuitable to their “environment”. The charge is thus repeated, this time by someone who would fully not adhere to this code himself: the problem with the Narrator’s subjectivity is that it lacks awareness, and it takes up too much space in not allowing people to pin her down into a category: “it’s unyielding and confounding and in our type of environment it presents you as a stubborn, perverse character” (BURNS, 2018, p. 149). There is a break of trust inherent in the way he presents her reading-while-walking back to her that marks the end of their partnership. While she still tries to make amends by going to his home, maybe-boyfriend is made unreachable both by the words she hears him speak about her, echoing the community’s rumours about her and Milkman, and by the fact she now sees herself as the “wrong person” in their relationship.

Maybe-boyfriend's judgment on reading-while-walking effectively ends their relationship, and they never speak again.

After those three conversations, the Narrator remains true to her word and stops reading-while-walking, even after Milkman dies. It only appears in the novel one more time, by its end. In the obsession over the international couple displayed by little girls on both sides of the sectarian divide the Narrator glimpses – while reading and walking – an alternative, creative image for a future that does not replicate the basis of the division upon which the violence in which her community lived was founded. While little boys refuse to take part in their play, as "they wanted to continue throwing miniature anti-personnel devices at the foreign soldiers from the country 'over the water' any time a formation of them appeared on our streets" (BURNS, 2018, p. 163), little girls, including the Narrator's ingenious wee sisters, are obsessed with the idea of emulating "ex-maybe-boyfriend's glamorous, super-beautiful mother". Since there were no boys, and nobody wanted to play his "boringly dressed famous father", "they dispensed with the father, either pairing off themselves as two supremely costumed waltzing women, or else just pretending to have a male prop dancing partner, 'for that way,' explained wee sisters, 'you get to dress up and be *her* every time'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 163). The Narrator explains she had noticed, as she was "walking and reading" her way into town: "all the little girls had taken to dressing up and dancing about, not just in our street but in every street of the area – even across the interface road in defender areas" (BURNS, 2018, p. 163). While boys are still caught up in the Troubles, little girls "'our side', 'their side' – were dressed in long clothes and high heels and were falling over as they played the international couple" (BURNS, 2018, p. 163). The Narrator suggests this meant ex-maybe-boyfriend's parents "had achieved that outstanding status of straddling the sectarian divide, a feat probably meaning nothing outside the sectarian areas in question, but which inside equated with the most rare and hopeful occurrence in the world" (BURNS, 2018, p. 163). This hope, of course, is manifested through the bodies of young girls who, like the Narrator in her reading-while-walking, are completely immersed in a creative – if emulative – activity of their own, bearing no relation with the contingencies of the present. Maybe-boyfriend's parents abandoned their children and their home to become ballroom dancers and are therefore known as the "international couple": their art moves young girls to occupy the public space not with war, but with a joy that does not contribute anything to the logic of the binary divide, but that overwrites it, even if symbolically. In a novel where the main character's body is so heavily policed – in her reading-while-walking as well as in the fact she was "ungenerous in [her] facial expression" (BURNS, 2018, p. 95), one could argue those

little girls will be able to build their own queerness collectively. If, as longest friend and maybe-boyfriend suggest, the problem in her reading-while-walking lies in her position as a minority – what would happen if we read those dancing girls as an image for a beyond-the-pale future?

2.3.2 The Cat and the Ten-Minute-Area

While attempting to assess the Narrator, the community is frustrated at the fact she remains "near-expressionless" and, therefore, near-inaccessible. They proceed to compare her to the ten-minute area in her "not being one thing or the other": "a bit eerie, a bit creepy, they decided, adding that they hadn't noticed before but it was that I resembled in my open-but-closed perspective the ten-minute area" (BURNS, 2018, p. 95). As I have discussed, the ten-minute area is established in the novel as a place with a law of its own, a location that, while invaded by the violence of wars past and present, scares precisely due to its indefinability. As noted before, while going back to her district after a class with French teacher downtown, the Narrator rescues a cat's head from the debris caused by the explosion of a Nazi bomb. From the beginning of the novel, there is a suggested interchangeability between misogyny and animal abuse directed at cats. Somebody McSomebody repeatedly calls the Narrator a cat while stalking and harassing her. In the same way Middle Sister refrains from telling maybe-boyfriend about Milkman's predations out of fear for his life, she does not tell him about "cats being found dead and mutilated up entries to the point where there weren't many of them left in my area anymore" (BURNS, 2018, p. 10).

The episode in which the Narrator rescues the cat's head is central to the narrative. It takes place after the class in which French teacher had insisted the students described which colours they could see in the sky besides blue until the Narrator, in an epiphany, realises "it was now a mix of pink and lemon with a glow of mauve behind it" (BURNS, 2018, p. 44). When she realises there was a cat's head among the debris, the Narrator describes "the days of her childhood" when "cats were vermin, subversive, witch-like, the left hand, bad luck, feminine" (BURNS, 2018, p. 53) and she, herself, would avoid them. Nevertheless, these beyond-the-pale creatures are repeatedly described in terms similar to the ones employed to define middle sister in her refusal to be accessible throughout the novel. Cats "are not adoring like dogs," "don't care," and "can never be relied upon to shore up a human ego" (BURNS,

2018, p. 53). They "go their way, do their thing, are not subservient and will never apologise" (BURNS, 2018, p. 53). Likewise, even as she gives up her freedom to walk and read, the narrator does not give any of herself away. Like the Manx Cat from *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that mirrors the disquietude of Virginia Woolf's narrator "as if it too questioned the universe" (WOOLF, 1929, p. 9), and leads her to interrogate the differences in the guests' behaviour before and after the war, the cat victimised by the Luftwaffe sets Middle Sister in motion, both in action and in thought. She feels "jolted" when looking at "the little head lying in the detritus" (BURNS, 2018, p. 56). She decides to rescue it, inspired by the words of French teacher who proposed they should "change one thing, class, just one thing, and I assure you, everything else will change also" (BURNS, 2018, p. 56). While it was the violence of men that killed cats – literally and figuratively – it would be through the words, choices and kind gestures of women that they could be saved. While the community misunderstood this act of kindness and further otherised the Narrator, she still found a friend in real milkman, who helped her bury the cat properly as she wished, as I described earlier.

Later in the novel, it is also through the actions of women that a cat – this time a figurative one – is saved. Following the paramilitary's death, Somebody McSomebody corners the Narrator in a female bathroom with a gun, which makes her dread the possibility that there would be no end to Milkman for her due to the fact that his predations were not his alone but produced by the community. It is this logic, which makes men believe they take precedence over women's bodies, that makes an individual such as Somebody McSomebody able to stalk the Narrator for years. Nevertheless, as discussed, his harassment, which included him calling Middle Sister a cat multiple times as well as a physical fight, is interrupted as a group of women enter the room and attack him for invading their space. Among the many rumours that circulated after Milkman's death, the Narrator mentions that some of the most extreme ones even attributed his death to her (BURNS, 2018, p. 159). While this does not reflect the truth, the fact that Milkman dies leaving an ambiguous legacy, and that she becomes a storyteller that narrates the Troubles from her own beyond-the-pale point of view remains. Figuratively, then, one could argue Middle Sister ultimately kills Milkman.

2.3.3 "It fits in – more than your dangerous reading-while-walking fits in": Reading-While-Walking as a Methodology for Becoming-Minoritarian

As longest friend explains to the Narrator why "reading-while-walking" was more disturbing than bombs given their context, Middle Sister reasons that she "could sense her words, in one of those medieval, philosophical, 'relative versus absolute' dimensions, did have some ring of truth about them" (BURNS, 2018, p. 106). It is precisely against that philosophical method she rises against. This is one of the few times in the narrative in which the past is invoked by her not as a nostalgic literary escape route, but as an oppressive tradition. While she can see the reason behind that logic, it is not one she will adhere to: Middle Sister might abandon reading-while-walking as a practice, but she will not abdicate from it as a thinking methodology. As Judith Butler has argued, while universality is not violent by definition, "there are conditions under which it can exercise violence" (BUTLER, 2005, p. 7). In longest friend's ultimatum, universality appears as a pull towards stationary values that are impervious to contestation: while the Narrator has already been ostracised and, further, has agreed to cease from reading-while-walking, her refusal to assimilate by performing "normality" leads longest friend to deliver yet another warning.

Throughout the novel, reading-while-walking appears as a signifier of Middle Sister's process of becoming-minoritarian. The fact that her community itself frequently imposes patterns of oppression due to it being marginalised itself by a communal oppressor – amid the efforts to "pull together" with "enemies at the door" – does not remove the configuration of a centre and a margin from it – as we see with the ostracisation of the "beyond-the-pales" – or remove the need for it to be "set in motion toward a becoming-minoritarian that requires qualitative changes in the very structures of its subjectivity" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 20). Braidotti's argument is that "there is no uncontaminated location free of power" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 20). It is Milkman's social standing in the community that renders Middle Sister's word worthless regarding the rumours spread by first brother-in-law. Nevertheless, by realising it is futile to clash with the expectations of the majority, she embraces her position as "the pale, adamantine, unyielding girl who walks around with the entrenched, boxed-in thinking" (BURNS, 2018, p. 107) and reaffirms her own stance in terms of sanity, by interrogating longest friend if it is merely convention and the majority who can establish the philosophical standards by which one is measured. Once again, she produces what Braidotti has called a "a critique of representational regimes that focus especially on the dominant image of thought as the expression of a white, masculine, adult, heterosexual, urban-dwelling, property-owning subject" (BRAIDOTTI, 2018, p. 6), leaning towards a rhizomatic formation. For its very disruption and the reaffirmation of it, in the production of a subjectivity who overwrites realism through *jamais vu*, the Narrator engages in nomadic

thought in her rejection of sameness. The latter mode appears in the novel as the questions *what's the point? What's the use?,* which are counteracted by the influence of beyond-the-pales like French teacher from downtown and real milkman, who produce "creative efforts aimed at activating the positivity of differences as affirmative praxis" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 7) and effectively influence the Narrator's choices and actions: it is because of teacher's words that she chooses to rescue the cat's head in the ten-minute area and it is with the help of real milkman that she is able to bury it.

Braidotti argues that nomadic theory "foregrounds the force of affirmation as the empowering mode for both critical theory and political praxis" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 3), distancing itself from melancholia, and borrowing from Spinoza "a positive notion of desire as an ontological force of becoming" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 2). I would argue that Middle Sister undoes the static approaches to identity that marginalise her not only by remaining stubbornly on the margin and giving nothing to those who demand it, but by becoming the one who narrates. The story she has to tell is "unchronological" as the one she told longest friend, filled with the blanks of *jamais vu.* Further, while she occupies the public space with her reading, and even walks through "riots and gun play," this is a novel in which her aesthetic experiences take precedence. While *Milkman* has been described as a Troubles novel, and indeed, it is impossible to evade or to have a view the "political problems" in a world in which they are pervasive, this is a narrative that *inhabits* without *adhering* through the movements of those multiple others as told by one of them. If "thinking is about tracing lines of flight and zigzagging patterns that undo dominant representations" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 2), Middle Sister tells a story that is articulated through nomadic thought in the sense that the "authority of the past" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 2), an element akin to the philosophical logic of longest friend, is undone. Middle Sister achieves this precisely by presenting it as static and anachronistic, while she keeps moving, "unfolding in perpetual motion" (BRAIDOTTI, 2011, p. 2) as she runs with third brother-in-law in the novel's final scene and nearly laughs with delight at the evening light.

3 **MIDDLE SISTER'S LITERARY COMPANIONS**

> For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.
>
> *Virginia Woolf*

In "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Work of Nikolai Leskov" (1936), Walter Benjamin establishes a hard distinction between the storyteller and the narrator. While the former is connected to the oral tradition, the latter is historically attached to the rise of the novel. The shift, he argues, extends further than the presupposition that stories conveyed in writing and apprehended through reading produce a solitary aesthetic experience whereas the oral tradition focused on a communal one. Rather, the novel narrates individual instead of collective feats, reflecting a bourgeois sense of isolation produced by individualism. While Benjamin refers to *Don Quijote* (1605) to situate his argument, the association between the rise of the novel and that of the middle classes, as presented by Ian Watt (1957), would arguably align well with the context of production of most of the books that Middle Sister, *Milkman*'s narrator, reads throughout Anna Burns's novel. Thus, if it has been my argument that it is precisely her retreat into literature through reading-while-walking that enables Middle Sister to become a storyteller, both in the sense that her relationship with the Troubles is mediated by her retreating from it and in her ostracisation by the community as a beyond-the-pale, one could argue that, in Benjaminian terms, Middle Sister is not a storyteller at all. Nevertheless, I would like to turn to "The Storyteller" to further complicate our understanding of the term while proposing that the narrative Middle Sister produces does not enforce an individualistic logic that relies on an I/other binary.

Benjamin's argument that "the art of storytelling is dying out" (BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 59) relies on the premise that "encounters with people who know how to tell a story properly are becoming ever rarer" due to a loss of the ability "to share experiences" (BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 59), which he in turn aligns with the collective trauma of the First World War. The impossibility to share such stories, he argues, has produced an inevitable effect: "experience's stock has fallen in value" (BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 59). Middle Sister's narration, however, is what results from overcoming the silences produced by both traumatic experiences and by

disenfranchisement. If in *No Bones* (2001) Amelia's hold on the narrative is fickle, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, wavering as her mental health falters, in *Little Constructions* (2007) a third-person narrator is employed to not only convey the story, but also to meddle with it and, at one of its highest points, directly address Jotty Doe to point out that the character's grasp on events has been thwarted by trauma. In *Milkman,* however, Middle Sister has the benefit of retrospect. She clearly differentiates between her two selves, one still immersed in (if somewhat defiant of) the rules of her community, the other openly questioning them:

> Also, why was he acting as if he knew me, as if we knew each other, when we did not know each other? Why was he presuming I didn't mind him beside me when I did mind him beside me? Why could I just not stop this running and tell this man to leave me alone? Apart from 'where did he come from?' I didn't have those other thoughts until later, and I don't mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later. (BURNS, 2018, p. 9)

After she is poisoned by tablets girl, Middle Sister wakes up three times, the last of which she tells us of a dream of Proust "or rather, a nightmare of Proust", in which the author "turned out to be some reprehensible contemporary Nineteen-Seventies writer passing himself off as a turn-of-the-century writer, which apparently was why he was being sued in court in the dream by, I think, me" (BURNS, 2018, p. 121). As I have proposed earlier in this thesis, I believe we can read Middle Sister's poisoning as a shift in the narrative where she accepts that she will no longer physically read-while-walking to become a storyteller. While still immersed in a world of art and literature, she becomes more attuned to her surroundings, which will ultimately allow her to realise that the influence of the international couple has "straddled" the sectarian divide. This nightmare of Proust, then, can be tied to her process of becoming a storyteller-narrator. While all the writers Middle Sister had cited up to this point published their works in the nineteenth century or earlier, when she refers to Proust, whose masterpiece was published from 1913, his name appears as a "turn-of-the-century" modernist signature. Significantly, she differentiates between "the hideous century" and "the acceptable century" (BURNS, 2018, p. 144) of Thomas Hardy when complaining of her younger sisters' love of the author's poetry, which had her reading it for them. Since no turn-of-the-century ambiguity is afforded to Hardy, who died merely six years after Proust, why does Middle Sister employ this euphemism at this point? Significantly, her concern is that Proust's identity is confused with that of a "reprehensible contemporary Nineteen-Seventies writer", this being the second of only two times where she situates her narrative in time.

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, reading-while-walking appears in *Milkman* as not only Middle Sister's literal disruptive habit of reading books while walking about, but also as

a method for hierarchising experiences. The Troubles, or as she calls them, "the political problems", are experienced through an alienation made possible both by literature and by *jamais vu* episodes. Further, even as she gives up reading and walking, Middle Sister refuses to open herself to the community's interrogations, which she deems an invasion of her selfhood. In that sense, her later narration of the story, contained as it is in a novel, would appear to steer away from storytelling territory: she refuses to engage in the community's rumours and, literally, to tell them stories about herself or others. Still, to Benjamin the great storyteller is not merely the one who passes down experience "from one mouth to the next," but also the one who is successful in emulating the speech of "the many anonymous storytellers" (BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 60) in their writing. While Benjamin establishes specific groups (the sedentary farmer, the merchant seaman) that fill those categories, I would argue that Burns refashions storytelling for the purposes of her novel and that Middle Sister's narrative appropriates and instrumentalises both anonymity and the oral register in ways that expand Benjamin's proposal of the storyteller as "a man of good counsel for his audience" (BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 61). Instead, she brings to the forefront a voice of difference that amplifies the inadequacy not of storytelling, but of the hero- or male-poet-based epic model whose demise Benjamin laments. In this, she must simultaneously apprehend and subvert the framework of the nineteenth-century novel she inhabited.

In her process of becoming-minoritarian and also of becoming a narrator-storyteller, Middle Sister carnivalises the realist novel through a take on tradition that aligns her with early twentieth-century modernists. The dream image of Proust as another who may also be herself can be aligned with creative practices of artists and writers of the Bloomsbury Group, especially with Virginia Woolf's early feminist interventions in the modernist debate. After all, Woolf concludes *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with an image for the androgynous creative mind that would arguably deactivate the "tradition that objectifies others to become a subject" (PINHO, 2015, p. 30). This is, of course, a literary tradition investigated by Woolf that has been shaped by what she calls the male sentence. The rise of the novel, besides accompanying the rise of the bourgeoisie, also marks the ascension of the woman writer. Middle Sister's storytelling-from-the-margin effects a process Davi Pinho has described while discussing Woolf's project:

> Writing is, therefore, a place in which the naming subject breaks down to reflect all the worlds of those who read. In other words, the subject's world is permeated by other subjects, and what remains in art is an image of the multitudes that constitute an individual. A world of Others, not One. (PINHO, 2015, p. 30-31)

Benjamin's definition of the storyteller is considerably gender inflected. Not only is the storyteller "the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself" (BENJAMIN, 1936b, p. 81), but he also cites only men. His text is dedicated to discussing Nikolai Leskov, but he also cites Wilhelm Hauff, Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert Louis Stevenson. While the criticism is clearly directed at the novel as a harbinger of capitalism, it seems poignant that more than a few of his varying definitions for the storyteller rely on a male community (Cf. BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 81). This is of interest to me considering that much of the encroachment Middle Sister experiences comes from her community's treatment of women, the word itself barely escaped being considered beyond-the-pale, after all.

Finally, Benjamin asserts that while "someone listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller" and that "even someone reading it shares in that companionship" (BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 73), "someone reading a novel […] is solitary, more so than any other reader" (BENJAMIN, 2019, p. 73). This is an argument that relies on the premise that "even someone reading a poem is ready to give voice to the words for a listener" (BENJAMIN, 1936b, p. 73), while novels would only be read in solitude. While this disregards even the shared nature of reading produced by some nineteenth-century publishing formats, it should be noted that the contemporary popularisation of audiobooks has highlighted an aural experience for many works of prose. *Milkman,* for instance, has been narrated on Audible by Northern Irish actor Bríd Brennan. Through Brennan's interpretation, one is able to not just read Belfast's vernacular, but to also hear it. The actor's embodiment of "speaking Belfast" (BURNS, 2001, p. 250) adds another layer to the reader's – or the listener's – experience with the novel.

Ultimately, as Middle Sister becomes somewhat confused with a "reprehensible contemporary Nineteen-Seventies writer," she veers away from *jamais vu*, a strategy for mentally rewriting her present and evading trauma, becoming more watchful. The kind of observation she develops, however, is not the paranoid, vigilant stance some hoped she would adopt, but rather a more artistically inclined eye that was influenced by people like real milkman and, especially, French teacher from downtown. It is precisely because she comes from a place of dissonance that she produces a method for storytelling developed as *Milkman*. The difference here, as longest friend highlights, is not her reading, but rather the way it invades the public space, creating an ambiguous relationship between Middle Sister and those around her who, while isolated from the narrative, still figure somehow in her reading process. As she becomes a storyteller, however, the roles are reassembled. Everyone is a character in the narrative and plays a role in the story being told. As she repositions herself

from “the girl who reads” (BURNS, 2018, p. 107) to the woman who tells not only her own story, but one that also belongs to that community, Middle Sister testifies to the possibility of becoming a narrator in the margin, beyond the pale. If before she had “pulled down shutters against the topic” (BURNS, 2018, p. 63) of the renouncers, Middle Sister refashions herself as a storyteller of the Troubles through her narrative.

Middle Sister’s relationship with literature plays a crucial role in her process of becoming-other, as I have discussed. Throughout the novel, she refers to a series of works she is currently reading, has read or is about to begin. Throughout this chapter, I will discuss three categories of literary references in *Milkman.* The first one includes works and authors that are referred to by the Narrator in passing, but do not appear as books connected to reading-while-walking. The second category includes her wee sister’s “storybooks” which are as varied as unexpected. The final category includes the books Middle Sister reads or mentions she has read throughout the novel, most of them connected to reading-while-walking. By mapping out these references I intend to produce a brief analysis of Middle Sister as a reader, while also contrasting her choices with the more contemporary ones of her younger sisters.

3.1 **Significant References in Passing**

In the evening when Middle Sister and her fellow classmates finally manage to see other colours in the sky as the sun sets, they do so while looking through the windows of the room where English Literature classes were held. The reason the “weirdos down the hall” (BURNS, 2018, p. 41) were absent and French teacher was able to move her own class and make use of their better view of the sky was that “they had gone to the theatre with pens, flashlights and little notebooks to watch and critique *Playboy of the Western World*” (BURNS, 2018, p. 43). While John Millington Synge is not cited by name, his 1907 play is one of the few works featured in *Milkman* that were not only written by an Irish author, but also published and produced in the twentieth century. Middle Sister does not take part in the experience undertaken by the English Literature group and joins her classmates in ridiculing their behaviour by referring to them as the “littérateurs”, “weirdos”, and asserting that the teacher’s proposed exercise – to describe the colours in the sky – was pointless as they, who were there exclusively to learn French, were unlike the group in the literature class:

> This is "learning a foreign language" class, not a class on burdening us with taking things apart which are in the same language to find out if they're a poem or something. If we wanted figures of speech and rhetorical flourishes, with one thing representing another thing when the represented thing could easily have been itself in the first place, then we'd have gone to English Literature with those weirdos down the hall.' 'Yeah!' cried us and also we cried, 'A spade's a spade!', also the popular *'Le ciel est bleu!'* and *'What's the point? There's no point!'* continued to come out of us. Everyone was nodding and slapping desks and murmuring and acclaiming. (BURNS, 2018, p. 41)

Their argument, which is initially based on straight-forwardness and realism ("A spade's a spade!"), reiterates their resistance towards seeing different colours in the sky as well as the logic that language-learning was their only goal ("*Le ciel est bleu!*"). By the end, however, they reiterate a mode of thinking that often exhausts Middle Sister throughout her novel, and it is precisely their "What's the point? There's no point!" that leads French teacher to insist that they should make an effort to look for more colours in the sunset, and to assess their resistance as a sign of deprivation:

> 'My poor deprived class!' cried teacher and again she was bluffing, pretending sorrow about our lack of colour, our hampered horizons, our mental landscapes, when it was obvious she was a person too defined within herself to be long perturbed by anything at all. (BURNS, 2018, p. 42)

What unsettles Middle Sister, more than French teacher's insistence, is the fact that she is at ease with herself while openly behaving in a "beyond-the-pale" manner. She might not have lived in the same district as the Narrator (and therefore not known what, precisely, a beyond-the-pale was), but still, she was happy to be "a law unto herself" (BURNS, 2018, p. 115). The questions that spring to Middle Sister's mind, which have her interrogating French teacher's cultivation of an "anti-culture" (BURNS, 2018, p. 115) have a lasting effect upon her, as does teacher's following action: "but she was laughing again" (BURNS, 2018, p. 115), when pointing out to the class that there was no blue in the sky. As I have discussed, French teacher will be a key reference to Middle Sister as she begins considering what it means to be outside the pale.

The process of deconstruction that takes place in the class is not easy for the students, and it is triggered by two literary events. The trigger for the teacher to take the class to look at the sky was a book she was reading (which the Narrator does not identify). From it, a controversy arises: "the sky in this passage she was reading from wasn't blue" (BURNS, 2018, p. 41). They can only see the sky clearly when they leave their own classroom and go to the one usually occupied by English Literature students, who were absent to see a play by a twentieth-century Irish playwright, whom Middle Sister would usually avoid.

Set in a public house in County Mayo, *The Playboy of the Western World,* a comedy in three acts, was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1907. It follows Christy Mahon, who has fled his farm after having supposedly killed his father. In the preface, Synge referred to the contributions of the "fancies" of the "Irish peasantry" to the language of his play:

> In writing *The Playboy of the Western World*, as in my other plays, I have used one or two words only that I have not heard among the country people of Ireland, or spoken in my own nursery before I could read the newspapers. A certain number of the phrases I employ I have heard also from herds and fishermen along the coast from Kerry to Mayo, or from beggar-women and ballad-singers nearer Dublin; and I am glad to acknowledge how much I owe to the folk imagination of these fine people. (SYNGE, 1907)

Discussing the Irish context, Synge highlighted what he called the "springtime of local life," which should be regarded as a particularly rich writing material: "In Ireland, for a few years more, we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent, and tender" (SYNGE, 1907). Nevertheless, while the playwright was very keen to express the multiplicities of Irishness in his theatre and to find an adequate theatrical language for the Ireland of his time, when *The Playboy of the Western World* premiered at the Abbey Theatre, there was a riot. Declan Kiberd situates the context of this reaction:

> Ireland in 1907 saw itself as ready for self-rule and it expected its artists to promote the image of a steady, sober, self-reliant people. Instead, with *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge gave them a play in which a village loon splits his father's head open with a spade, runs away, tells people he "killed his da" and is promptly installed as a hero by excitable women and drunken men. Worse still, this drama was staged not in some backstreet art-house, but at the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre, one of whose mission statements was to show that Ireland was not the home of buffoonery but of an ancient idealism. (KIBERD, 2011)

Kiberd also explains that tensions extended to the way some nationalists resented "the implication behind the Abbey project that there could ever be an Irish national literature in English, the language of the coloniser" (KIBERD, 2011), while Synge defended it was possible to Irishify English for his own means. Therefore, his characters disrupt "standard" English not only through local expressions, but also by thinking sentences through and arranging phrases according to an Irish logic.

Vigilance over her literature is something that only appears for Middle Sister later in the novel, and through the interference of the police. While everything was inspected and scrutinised in her community in a test of allegiance, the only time a book by an English author is taken from her, this is done by state forces. There was a list of banned names for male

babies “for the reason they were too much of the country ‘over the water’” (BURNS, 2018, p. 18). Maybe-boyfriend gets into trouble after winning a Bentley supercharger in a raffle even though it does not have “the bit with the flag on” (BURNS, 2018, p. 19) as the car is associated with England. Nobody should watch James Bond films: “it was another quintessential, nation-defining, ‘over the water’ patriotism” (BURNS, 2018, p. 65). Further:

> 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. How you pronounced your ‘haitch’ or ‘aitch’. Where you went to work. And of course there were bus-stops. 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. There was a person’s appearance also, because it was believed you could tell ‘their sort from over the road’ from ‘your sort this side of the road’ by the very physical form of a person. (BURNS, 2018, p. 19)

Nevertheless, of the thirteen works Middle Sister reads throughout *Milkman*, four are by English authors. During her poisoning ordeal, the Narrator briefly mentions Enid Blyton when discussing the news regarding shiny girl: “With this news of her poisoning, and regardless of the excitement at being allowed up in the night to attend the adult equivalent of an Enid Blyton midnight-feast adventure” (BURNS, 2018, p. 119). Two references to Shakespeare also appear in the novel. Middle Sister states her wee sisters read “too many Shakespeares” and she also warns them to stay away from first brother-in-law even “if he should appear suddenly and try to expound on the thesis of Francis Bacon really being William Shakespeare” (BURNS, 2018, p. 111), suggesting not only she was also a reader of his works, but that this was a subject she had in common with the girls. Other authors include Geoffrey Chaucer, and Victorian novelists Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray. While Middle Sister’s reading-while-walking is unnerving and undeniably conspicuous, the contents of what she reads never seem to bother those who criticise the practice in itself. In fact, she is the one who volunteers the titles and names of the authors she reads most of the times, but no reprimand is produced.

Kiberd reports that the tensions regarding Synge’s play also had a sectarian element: “Catholics took particular offence at the way in which a writer of Protestant Ascendancy background causes the Playboy, Christy Mahon, to utter such imprecations as: ‘With the help of God, I killed him surely, and may the holy immaculate mother intercede for his soul’” (KIBERD, 2011). The play the English literature students from the school Downton go see in order to leave room for Middle Sister to see “a mix of pink and lemon with a glow of mauve” (BURNS, 2018, p. 43) in the sky has, according to Kiberd, a “riotous history”. It seems

poignant that Burns chose to cite it – albeit briefly – at this point in the narrative, just one scene before Middle Sister's encounters with Milkman and real milkman in the ten-minute area.

Among the works Middle Sister alludes to but does not appear reading or directly mentions she has read throughout the novel is *Dracula* (1897), yet another work written in English by an Irish writer. Published ten years before *The Playboy of the Western World*'s premiere, however, the work still lies in Middle Sister's preferred century. The allusion to the work appears after her meeting with Milkman in ten-minute area when, although he and the three other men are already gone, after he "delivered unto [her] his latest commands and wishes" (BURNS, 2018, p. 75), Middle Sister still feared he could appear yet again "from behind some Tombstone of Dracula to carry on the next part of his plan" (BURNS, 2018, p. 75). As I have discussed in Chapter 2, Milkman does not appear again at this time, but she remains haunted by this possibility up to the point real milkman arrives in his lorry. While postcolonial criticism of *Dracula* has produced compelling readings of the novel as a recodifying of the Irish Question (KEOGH, 2014), in this passage Count Dracula appears to be invoked as a codename that highlights both the age gap between Milkman and the Narrator, and the sexual threat that he represents to Middle Sister[27]. Ultimately, however, it appears significant that of all literature's monsters Middle Sister chose one penned by an Irish writer – and a nineteenth-century one – to represent this eminent Nationalist.

3.2 **Wee Sisters' "Storybooks"**

Besides the aforementioned "too many Shakepeares" remark, wee sisters' reading appears in the novel as quite varied, extending from other Early Modern classics to turn-of-the-century poetry, and contemporary thrillers. Their library bears a specific mark that carries out the function of standing as foil to their older sister's avoidance of the twentieth century in her reading. Not only many of the references that come from wee sisters are contemporary,

[27] Her mother also invokes the image of the vampire while warning her against the relationship: "There was ma too, continuing her barrage of how I wouldn't get married, of how I was bringing shame by entering paramilitary groupiedom, of how I was bringing down on myself dark and unruly forces, bad-exampling wee sisters, bringing in God too, as in light and dark and the satanic and the infernal. 'It's like being hypnotised,' she said, 'or how you might imagine those people who are got by vampires in those horror films feel. They don't see the horror, daughter. Only the people outside see the horror. Instead they are in thrall, entranced, seeing only attraction.'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 97-98)

but they also frequently employ the Narrator as a reader in the latter portion of the novel. Therefore, as she reads to them before bed, Middle Sister must remove herself from the mode of reading-as-isolation that reading-while-walking had allowed her to access a logic of reading as a shared experience within a familial setting. This, of course, takes place after her poisoning by tablets girl.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, reading-while-walking was the first element that came to Anna Burns when she started to write *Milkman*. She was inspired by her own experience doing that when she was a young woman living in Belfast, when that habit attracted just as much attention as it does in the novel. Further, in the same way Middle Sister's reading habits are not shareable with her community, and not even with her family, Burns has described her family as "bookish", but one that was considerably private in their reading:

> Burns grew up as one of seven siblings in a working-class, Catholic family. As was common among large families living in tiny homes known as "kitchen houses", she explains, she lived with her unmarried aunt over the road. "I had the rowdiness of home and then I could withdraw to my aunt's quiet house. I liked that mix," she says. They were a bookish family, but "it was very private. You wouldn't say: 'What's that you're reading?'; that would be a terrible insult." There was a high currency on library cards, which were always being taken so someone could borrow extra books. (ALLARDICE, 2018)[28]

In the novel, however, we hear that wee sisters had taken William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971) from "ma's stack of books by her bedside" (BURNS, 2018, p. 122). Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragicall History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1592) had been "taken from I didn't know where" (BURNS, 2018, p. 122). By taking care of the girls in their mother's absence and by constantly reading their books (borrowed, "taken," or their own) to them, Middle Sister suffers a pull towards the communal after her poisoning.

The younger girls' twentieth century reading also unsettles Middle Sister and, in her new role as their storyteller, she cannot stay out of her own century. The children would be "lulled to sleep by Rice Krispies, Tayto Crisps, Paris Buns, bread-in-the-pan, halibut orange tablets with extra sugar on everything" and "*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* which was their choice of matter, not my choice of matter" (BURNS, 2018, p. 131). Nevertheless, while Edward Albee's 1962 play, which appealed to the girls for its "fairytale title, which simply they wanted to hear over and over again" (BURNS, 2018, p. 131) disturbs Middle Sister, this

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[28] Upon winning in 2020 the International Dublin Literary Award for *Milkman*, a prize that receives nominations from public libraries around the world, Burns revisited the "high currency" of library cards, now including her friends and neighbours: "to go from being a wee girl haggling over library cards with my siblings, my friends, neighbours, my parents and my aunt, to be standing here today receiving this award is phenomenal for me, and I thank you all again for this great honour" (BURNS apud MCCLEMENTS, 2020).

is merely the first in a series of literary "phases" the girls will go through in the following weeks. Their Kafka, Conrad and, finally, twentieth-century Thomas Hardy phases become a part of Middle Sister's routine as much as her own reading of eighteenth-century works books by Montesquieu, her favoured author during this section of the novel:[29]

> So I'd read to them even though it was the hideous century of Hardy and not the acceptable century of Hardy, but I'd do it then, to round off the evening, I'd get into my own bed and start in on my eighteenth-century *Some Considerations on the Causes of Roman Greatness and Decadence* which, published in 1734, was pretty much, I reckoned, how all books should be. (BURNS, 2018, p. 144)

This closer relationship with wee sisters, then, which had been suggested by real milkman earlier in the novel, produces a new form of socialisation that does not alter Middle Sister's tastes, but still pushes her to rethink her avoidance of twentieth-century literature. The approximation with the girls is particularly significant considering that during this time Middle Sister had stopped physically reading-while-walking, and it is only by looking at them playing and dancing like the international couple that she will read and walk once again, seeing in their freedom an image that might evade sectarian divisions.

Besides the temporal contrast that is established with the Narrator, *Milkman*'s references to wee sisters' books are built upon the absurdity of such young children – they are seven, eight, and nine – reading such complex books. No book encapsulates this more thoroughly than the fictional "children's adaptation of the adult *Call Yourself a Democracy!*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 122), which, ironically, is the only book directly quoted in *Milkman.* The criticism suggested by the title is reiterated in the quote, which does not name Northern Ireland, but refers to the same "statelet" the Narrator mentions throughout the novel, presenting a criticism of its lack of due process:

> 'Which statelet up until five years ago could search homes without a warrant, could arrest without a warrant, could imprison without a charge, could imprison without a trial, could punish by flogging, could deny all prison visits, could prohibit inquests into deaths in prison after arresting without a warrant and imprisoning without a charge and imprisoning without a trial?' Weird wee sisters, I thought. (BURNS, 2018, p. 122)

This fabricated quote calls back to an earlier passage in the novel where Middle Sister recalls an occasion when she and her older sisters "came in the door and found wee sisters reading the papers from 'over there'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 80). Interrogated by their older sisters (even

[29] Besides *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline* (1734), she also cites *Persian Letters* (1721).

having such papers in their possession could present their family as informants), the little ones merely dismiss them: "'Hush, older sisters,' they said. 'We're busy. We're trying to understand their viewpoint'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 80-81). This incident, which qualifies wee sisters as thinkers, also highlights them as readers who are particularly qualified to embody an argument against sedentary binaries, as they play down pre-determined alliances to engage in their own investigations, as potentially dangerous and subversive as they may be. In this context, real milkman's concerns, expressed to Middle Sister on the evening he gives her a ride after meeting her at the ten-minute area, are particularly apt. He fears the girls' mother "might not understand" or "notice their uniqueness, what might be called their genius" (BURNS, 2018, p. 79) and wonders why "their teachers aren't picking up on it" (BURNS, 2018, p. 79). Nevertheless, he suggests, to Middle Sister's unease, that the "guidance" the girls might need is one that she can give them, placing her in a position not dissimilar to the one he sees in them in terms of creative and intellectual potential, and implying their "weirdness", as described by the Narrator, could just in time turn into a beyond-the-paleness of their own.

3.3 **The Narrator's Books**

Throughout *Milkman*, thirteen works are referenced by Middle Sister as ones she is currently reading or has previously read. Those are usually associated with her habit of reading-while-walking, though not all of them are tied to specific scenes, such as *Ivanhoe*, which is the first literary reference in the novel and also the book Middle Sister is reading when Milkman first offers her a lift. Of the thirteen works that Middle Sister mentions throughout the narrative, nine were published in the nineteenth century, confirming the claim about her predilection for that century even in relation to other times that preceded her own (BURNS, 2019, p. 62). Among other titles that are referenced in *Milkman*, there are only three eighteenth century works, and one originally published in the fifteenth century. Middle Sister mentions four English writers, two Russian, two French, one Scottish, and Maria Edgeworth, a challenge in herself as an English-born author that emigrated to Ireland early and made her name writing about that country and its people.

The reference to Edgeworth appears in a pivotal moment in the narrative, right after Middle Sister leaves the French class where teacher had pointed out the different colours in

the sky. The Narrator declares she "didn't once consider taking *Castle Rackrent* out to read" as she was "too buzzy to read, thinking of teacher, of her manner of saying there were sunsets every day" (BURNS, 2018, p. 46). Before leaving, she tells us she "said goodbye on the college steps to Siobhan, Willard, Russell, Nigel, Jason, Patrick, Kiera, Rupert of Earl and the rest" (BURNS, 2018, p. 46). While Middle Sister had already mentioned that the fact the classes took place downtown meant that the group had people from both sides of the sectarian divide, some of the names listed here echo the list of banned names in her district because they were "too much of the country 'over the water'". Those are Willard, Nigel, Jason, and Earl of Rupert, which appears here as "Rupert of Earl". The listing of names suggests both another reason why Milkman would later try to keep her away from these classes and highlights the "anti-culture" in which teacher is engaging by inviting the class to

> let go the old, open ourselves to symbolism, to the most unexpected of interpretations, that we must too, uncover what we've kept hidden, what we think we might have lost. 'Implement a choice, dear class,' she said. 'Come out from those places. You never know,' she concluded, 'the moment of the fulcrum, the pivot, the turnaround, the instant when the meaning of it all will appear'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 46).

That Middle Sister begins considering her words at this point in the narrative both highlights her own complicated relationship with fixed identities and foregrounds the shift in her reading-while-walking.

In the introduction to *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (2013), Susan Friedman and Rita Felski write that "intertextuality, with its insistence on the relational and interdependent nature of meaning, underscores comparison as an inevitable, rather than optional, form of thought" (FRIEDMAN; FELSKI, 2013, p. 2). In *Milkman*, Middle Sister's reading habits frequently produce comparisons, although those are not always established between the novel itself and the work that is referenced. Rather, the source of tension is usually placed on Middle Sister's reading and the subject matter may bear more or less weigh depending on the circumstances as well as on the recipient of the comparison. For instance, Middle Sister does not take time to discuss *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), *Tristram Shandy* (1759), *Vanity Fair* (1848), and *Madame Bovary* (1856) as she quickly enlists these novels in Chapter 1. The point she makes by citing them is precisely to point to a gap in her communication with maybe-boyfriend after he becomes excited about the Bentley supercharger:

> He'd talk on, giving technical exposition to the last hyphen and punctuation mark which was more than needful, indeed helpful, but I understood he had to make use of me because he was excited by the car and I was the only one in the room. Of course he wouldn't intend me to remember, just as I wouldn't intend him to remember *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Vanity Fair* or *Madame Bovary* just because once, in a state of high excitement, I told him of them. Even though ours was a maybe-relationship, not a proper committed, going-somewhere relationship, each was allowed in heightened moments to give full coverage, with the other making an effort to take in at least a part. (BURNS, 2018, p. 15)

Because maybe-boyfriend would know no more than the titles of those very different novels the Narrator loved, she refrains from doing any more than listing them. None of those titles are mentioned again, so their purpose is clear: in the same way the mechanical terms are translated into the page as "technical exposition to the last hyphen and punctuation," she expects that all that remains to maybe-boyfriend of her reading of Dostoevsky, Sterne, Thackeray, and Flaubert are the titles of the novels. This fraught communication, we learn, is part of the dynamics of their maybe-relationship, which is only interrupted when maybe-boyfriend harshly questions Middle Sister's reading habits after her poisoning. We soon learn that throughout this scene, the Narrator was holding an actual book with her, a publication of Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" (1842), which maybe-boyfriend sets on a table after interrupting their conversation about the Bentley and kissing her. The couple is disrupted, however, by the arrival of maybe-boyfriend's neighbours. Their enthusiasm and conversation about the Blower Bentley lead the Narrator back to the book: "as this talk continued with no hint of stopping, I looked at the clock and thought, where's my Gogol?" (BURNS, 2018, p. 18). The technical terms employed by the men alienate her, and she decides to leave. Again, the book is emphasised: "I couldn't take the overload and had to get myself and 'The Overcoat' out of the room" (BURNS, 2018, p. 18).

If maybe-boyfriend's and the Narrator's intellectual interests produce a gap that reiterates the relationship as a "maybe", their bodies appear to briefly abridge those limitations before they are pulled back into their differences by the others. Maybe-boyfriend ambiguously declares: "'Forget the seats,' he murmured. 'Seats important but not most important. This is what's important.' I was unclear if still he was on 'car' or had moved his attention now to me" (BURNS, 2018, p. 16). While the Narrator states she suspected he was still referring to the car, this appears to be yet another sign of their verbal miscommunication, considering his following move is to kiss her, and to remove the book from her hand. To be together, then, both must symbolically remove themselves from language. Significantly, the Narrator will not be able to leave at the point she decides to due to the interruption of a neighbour who accuses maybe-boyfriend of having "the bit with the flag on" (BURNS, 2018,

p. 17), a charge that will haunt both him and Middle Sister throughout the novel. He will get involved in numerous fights because of it, as people suspect him to be an informer, whereas Milkman instrumentalises this controversy as leverage to blackmail the Narrator into having an affair with him as well as ending the maybe-relationship. While maybe-boyfriend's obsession develops into this politically – and sexually – charged intrigue, the Narrator is first predated upon when reading-while-walking. It is this fragile communication between the maybe-couple that stops her from telling maybe-boyfriend that the reason she draws away from him is not the rumours about him nor disinterest, but rather a deep-set concern that Milkman might assassinate him.

Furthermore, later in the novel Middle Sister finds out she has been placed into the "difficult zone", something akin to the classification used for informers, due to the fact she refuses to give anything of herself away to the community. While maybe-boyfriend is often mentioned by the Narrator as someone akin to French teacher from downtown, that is, an inspiring person that contradicts the "What's the point" mode of most people in her community[30], she ultimately concludes she was his "wrong person" upon watching him with Chef. While in her relationship with wee sisters literature will bring about a sense of togetherness for the Narrator, and even further her process of resignifying reading-while-walking, literature comes as an image for the miscommunication and unfulfillment that seep into her maybe-relationship as Milkman – metaphorised here as the anxieties about the supercharger – infects their already fragile dynamics.

As I have already discussed in Chapter 2, the irony of the fact that Milkman is one of only two people (the other being maybe-boyfriend) who do not directly criticise reading-while-walking is not lost on the Narrator. Still, I would argue that "directly" should remain as a keyword as we analyse Middle Sister's relationship with the renouncer through the books that she is reading – or stops reading – in scenes where he appears, as well as the literary references she attaches to him, as the aforementioned *Dracula*. Milkman might not voice a criticism of her reading-while-walking, but he effectively bars it from taking place as Middle Sister begins avoiding walking alone to evade his harassment. On the other hand, while his knowledge of her family, routine, and habits frightens the Narrator, Milkman gets one thing wrong about her: he is unaware that she takes French classes downtown. Instead, he believes

[30] There is even a parallel in the way French teacher encourages the class to look for the colours in the sky as evening falls and the day maybe-boyfriend takes the Narrator to watch the sunset. Both unsettle her, but also change her perspective in a way that is referenced under a positive light later in the novel, even though she criticises maybe-boyfriend during their fight over the phone.

she is taking "Greek and Roman" classes. While the thought that her stalker did not know everything about her puts her somewhat at ease at first, Middle Sister is even more unsettled after giving it more thought: she had considered enrolling for the Greek and Roman but had refrained from doing so because the classes took place on Tuesdays, when she spent the night with maybe-boyfriend. Since she had opted for French only because it took place on Wednesdays, Middle Sister concludes "he'd read my mind regarding the Greek and Roman class" (BURNS, 2018, p. 89). This sense of Milkman as an influence that invades her mind without permission explodes in the narrative after her poisoning, when she is certain that the physical effects of the poison are consequences of the exhaustion his stalking has caused on her mind. It is precisely on this exhaustion that Milkman will later predate. If before he would merely offer her lifts and not say anything about her reading-while-walking, on the day she finally surrenders and enters his car he already attempts to impose the first interdiction, along with his instructions:

> Then came his last words. He said that I was beautiful, did I know I was beautiful, that I must believe I was beautiful. He said he'd made arrangements, that we'd go somewhere nice, do something nice, that he'd take me to a surprise nice place for our first date. He said I'd have to miss my Greek and Roman but that he was sure I wouldn't mind missing my Greek and Roman. Besides, he said, did I really need all that Greek and Roman? Something for us to decide, he said, later on. He said then that for as long as I remained living in the family home, he'd call up to my door but wait outside and that I was to go to him. He said then he'd call at seven the following night in one of his cars. 'Not this,' he added, dismissing the van, mentioning instead one of those alpha-numericals. For my part – here he meant what I could do for him, how I could make him happy – I could come out the door on time and not keep him waiting. Also I could wear something lovely, he said. 'Not trousers. Something lovely. Some feminine, womanly, elegant, nice dress.' (BURNS, 2018, p. 156)

As soon as he believes he has claimed Middle Sister as his own, then, Milkman not only instructs her on what to wear, but also implies what kinds of behaviours he will later coerce her to abandon, such as taking her night classes downtown. Just as entering his car was not precisely a choice of her own, but the outcome of a long process of grooming and harassment, it is implied that there is no room for her in the "us" he proposes will decide if she needed "all that Greek and Roman". Those interactions, as well as the threats he aimed at maybe-boyfriend, show that Milkman's language is slant. Therefore, unlike any other member of the community who might have commented on or criticised the fact Middle Sister was reading Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) the first time he approached her, and even used it to avoid entering his car, he merely tells her to "Enjoy your book there," (BURNS, 2018, p. 8), laughing it off. To Milkman, this comes with her antics and will be part of the chase. To the

Narrator, however, the relationship between her enjoyment as a reader and the encroachments of the much-older man is a much more complicated one.

In longest friend's eyes, this violence comes under a positive light: it will force Middle Sister to reassess her relationship with the community, and inevitably become more aware. To the Narrator, however, it is in hyperawareness that the problem lies. If the logic of the conflict turns Semtex into an element more attuned to their "context" than her books, her juxtaposition of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the plastic bomb[31] produces a criticism on the excessive scrutiny placed on her own mobility by the community while men like Milkman were free to do as they wished – even instrumentalising their influence to harass young women, as the district's feminists point out – precisely because they existed in a seemingly permanent state of exception. If Middle Sister's refusal amuses Milkman, it is only because he is certain of the outcome of the predations which, as we have seen, were not only his, but also produced and expanded by the community. If they can also understand his carrying of bombs as part of a campaign of resistance, but not her reading of books while walking about as a resistance of her own, a gendered organisation of the public space can be delineated here, and it goes beyond longest friend's discussion of the Narrator's focus on the individual versus the collective efforts of the community to pull together.

Jane Eyre opens with the sentence "there was no possibility of taking a walk that day" (BRONTË, 2016, p. 8). In her narrative voice, Jane relates that while earlier that day she had been "wandering" with the Reeds, the evening had brought heavy clouds and "penetrating" rain. According to Jane, however, it is just as well: she does not enjoy those long walks, especially in the winter. Nevertheless, the exchange that follows, in which Mrs Reed delivers the first of the many puzzling criticisms of Jane's behaviour which supposedly justifies her imposed isolation from the rest of the family, might suggest to the reader that the walks are

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[31] On 28 April 2017, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee concluded an enquiry on Libyan support for the Irish Provisional Army. It stated that: "from the early 1970s through to the 1990s the Gaddafi regime provided material support for the Provisional IRA in the form of many tonnes of arms and ammunition, millions of dollars in finances, military training, and explosives. In particular, through a series of shipments, which took place in the mid-1980s, the regime supplied somewhere between 2.75 and 10 tonnes of Semtex—a highly powerful, malleable and virtually undetectable plastic explosive."
The report also concluded that "the supply of Semtex greatly enhanced, with deadly effects, the Provisional IRA's bombing campaign from the late 1980s. On 8 November 1987, a bomb using Semtex killed 11 people during a Remembrance Sunday ceremony in Enniskillen. On 10 April 1992, a 45kg bomb using Semtex detonated outside the Baltic Exchange in the City of London, killing three people and injuring more than 90 others. On 20 March 1993, a bomb containing Semtex was detonated in Warrington, resulting in the death of two children, Tim Parry and Johnathan Ball. On 9 February 1996, the Provisional IRA broke its ceasefire when it detonated a bomb in the Docklands area of London, killing two people and injuring around 100. These are just a few examples of the destruction wrought through the support provided to the Provisional IRA by the Gaddafi regime" (PARLIAMENT, 2017).

unpleasant because Jane is treated poorly. Resting from any kind of walk and away from company, Jane retreats physically into the window-seat of the breakfast room, careful to pull the red curtains to hide herself from view, and mentally into Bewick's *A History of British Birds* (1816). Sitting by the window, isolated from the Reeds, Jane Eyre is enchanted by the book, as well as by its illustrations. In solitude, she also takes her time to gaze at the dreary weather outside with an outlook of her own. Jane Eyre by the window is an image that will be recurrent throughout the novel as the character comes of age in Lowood, and begins to hope for wider horizons, and later as a governess in Thornfield Hall, as she still feels restless about the limitations imposed even on women like her, who seemingly occupy their place on the public world by earning their own upkeep. Back in Gateshead Hall, however, Jane's reading is disturbed by the young male tyrant of the house, John Reed. This interference on her happiness was already feared and expected, however: "with Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption and that came too soon. The breakfast-room door opened" (BRONTË, 2016, p. 11). The violence that follows includes the physical and psychological blows John Reed delivers, but the scene is also emblematic in the sense that the boy not only places an interdiction on Jane's reading that is based on his obsession with having control over her body and mind, but also that the argument presented by him is established upon a tyrannical notion of the book as property, which he goes on to instrumentalise by turning it into an object fit for his own use, that is, a deliverer of violence. Thus, he orders Jane to remain still, away from any objects that could get damaged or broken and proceeds to toss the book at her. By claiming the books as his own, Reed does not mean to participate in an aristocratic tradition of generational curating of family libraries, but rather to claim any and everything as exclusively his. The consequence of John Reed's wickedness in this scene is well-known. Jane defends herself and her excess of "passion" results in her exile in the red room.

This early episode and its outcome are key to Jane Eyre's tale of development. Learning to control her "passion" becomes a major point in her *Bildung* as she endures many other deprivations not only during her remaining time with the Reeds, but especially throughout her years in Lowood. Much later, after Rochester's true marital status is revealed, it is through an exercise in self-control that Jane produces a dialogue with herself to decide what she would do: "Leave Thornfield at once" (BRONTË, 2016, p. 266) is the answer. "Let me be torn away, then" she pleads: "Let another help me!" (BRONTË, 2016, p. 266), but her own resolve remains: "No; you shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the

victim, and you the priest to transfix it" (BRONTË, 2016, p. 266). Edward is surprised to see she has not wept: "You are passionate: I expected a scene of some kind" (BRONTE, 1847, p. 267). Jane Eyre has mastered her own temper, however. The process of estranging herself from Thornfield Hall involves an abrupt and immediate abandonment that has Jane leaving with just enough money to get her far enough not to be found. Friendless and penniless, she walks – and wanders – and is even taken for a vagrant by Hannah when she first asks for help at the Rivers household. This radical process of dispossession in the name of her sense of self that has Jane at the brink of death presents her at the polar opposite of the male figures that have predated or violated her up to this point. "*I* care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself," (BRONTË, 2016, p. 284) she tells Rochester when he suggests nobody will care or be hurt if she accepts his offer to live with him.

At this point, Jane Eyre is the antithesis of materialistic, profligate John Reed who terrorised her childhood, turning books into instruments of violence, and claiming the family library as property only to lose most of his inheritance as soon as he came of age. She is also an opposite to Mr Brocklehurst, the hypocritical Christian who believed the girls at Lowood should have the "worldly sentiment of pride" forcibly "mortified"[32] (BRONTË, 2016, p. 33) while his own family lived in luxury. Finally, her earnestness also appears as the opposite to her beloved Edward, who lied to her and attempted to drag her into a sensational bigamous plot, remaining adamant that she should stay with him even after the truth was exposed. Ultimately, Rochester had been committed to an arranged marriage with Bertha Mason due to financial reasons. Jane's wandering leads her to unexpected friends, but the melancholic freedom of her detachment rekindles her curiosity in books, now with a directed focus on language learning. Jane is considerably content in her dispossession; the news of her inheritance introduces both a new standing of her sociability with her friends – now cousins – and the social mobility that being a poor woman denied her earlier in the novel, both symbolically and literally. As a rare nineteenth-century English heiress with no male relatives to rule over her, Jane is finally free to make choices.

[32] Mr Brocklehurst's obsession with "mortifying" the "lusts of the flesh" in the young girl's later comes back to haunt him as the epidemic that ravages Lowood exposes the myriad of absurdities that took place at the school: "The unhealthy nature of the site; the quantity and quality of the children's food; the brackish, fetid water used in its preparation; the pupils' wretched clothing and accommodations—all these things were discovered, and the discovery produced a result *mortifying* to Mr. Brocklehurst, but beneficial to the institution" (BRONTË, 2016, p. 77. My emphasis).

Considering the stress that is placed upon Jane Eyre's mobility, then, I would argue that Middle Sister's comparison of the different reactions to her reading Charlotte Brontë's novel while walking with Milkman's paramilitary activities leads the way for another level of comparison, one between her own walking and Jane Eyre's as well as between the limitations imposed on the bodies of women in the public space. Susan Friedman and Rita Felski point out that "the political stakes of relational thinking call for more extensive consideration" (FRIEDMAN; FELSKI, 2013, p. 2) as comparisons must consider cultural and contextual particularities. And yet, they assert that "comparison is central to the analysis of world systems, transcontinental connections, and interculturalism, not only in the current phase of globalization but throughout human history" (FRIEDMAN, FELSKI, 2013, p. 2). Thus, aligning the two radically different contexts of *Jane Eyre* and *Milkman* reveals how the female body has been placed under heavy surveillance in different moments of modernity as a project, as Jane's reading as well as her walking repeatedly reiterate her difference both in Charlotte Brontë's and in Anna Burns's novels, even when Middle Sister supposedly escapes from reality. Investing in this comparison might ultimately reinforce Middle Sister's decision to adopt a different strategy in her reading-while-walking, from the literal towards the metaphorical. *Jane Eyre* begins with a book being taken away from Jane. A book being taken away from her by state forces is one of the stressors that lead Middle Sister to accept she will stop reading-while-walking, declaring she has lost her pleasure in it:

> That experience of relaxing into it, of walking out the door and slipping the book out of the pocket, of sinking into the paragraph coming up after the recently left-off paragraph, had changed since the stalking, also since the rumouring, since even the state forces had got suspicious and were stopping me to take *Martin Chuzzlewit* for state-security purposes out of my hands. Then there was being watched as I was reading, being reported upon about my reading, being photographed by at least one person with or without the reading. How could a reader's concentration upon and enjoyment of a novel be sustained in the face of all that? (BURNS, 2018, p. 108)

Thus, recognising herself in the becoming-minoritarian mode, Middle Sister will, like Jane Eyre, become a narrator and tell a story.

Middle Sister returns to Gogol when assessing the way others probably saw her beyond-the-paleness. She declares that she might have been "scary" in her "terrorising" of the community with "How Ivan Ivanovich Quarrelled with Ivan Nikiforovich" (1835). The author had also played a key role at the scene where she discusses her problematic rapport with maybe-boyfriend, presenting literature as a world of her own others in her immediate vicinity could not access, as well as the book as an object that allowed her to keep them at a distance.

Middle Sister's conversation with longest friend at the nightclub touches upon a central point of contention for the Narrator. She believes her ostracisation by the community and their predations are one and the same thing. That is, she has become isolated because people believe she is having an affair with Milkman. Longest friend, however, will tell her that ostracisation is a ramification of her inaccessibility, not of the rumours involving Milkman, who appears as a peripheral question in a more complex whole. If anything, his interest lightens any pushback from the community against her. The fact Middle Sister refuses to engage in performative sociability, however, does not mean she does not feel the impact of her isolation or that she is in any way misanthropic. She suffers the toll of the predations by Milkman in a myriad of ways, one of which in through an impact at "relations at work," which she laments "were not as they were" (BURNS, 2018, p. 98). Her performance at her job had been impacted by insomnia and low-quality sleep: she would "jump awake," afraid Milkman or the community had somehow entered the house in the middle of the night, and proceed to look for them. Her complicated mediation of literature and social relationships also takes up the form of anxious dreams: "jumping awake also, because of nightmares that I'd turned into the sickly, misanthropic Reeve from the 'General Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales*" (BURNS, 2018, p. 98).

In the same way Middle Sister will have a "nightmare of Proust" (BURNS, 2018, p. 121) in the night after her purging, at this earlier point in the narrative her dream projects a fear of becoming akin to Chaucer's "sclendre colerik man" (CHAUCER, 2018, p. 16), a man who caused other serfs to be "adrad of hym as of the deeth" (CHAUCER, 2018, p. 17). The Proust nightmare, which elaborates on confused identities, might be interpreted, as I have suggested, as an uneasiness towards Middle Sister's own position as not necessarily a "reprehensible contemporary Nineteen-Seventies writer" (BURNS, 2018, p. 121), but as a writer in the making, a storyteller whose gaze is turning towards the communal as well as to the literary after her poisoning. As I have shown throughout this chapter, her reading is also pushed into the twentieth century after the poisoning by her interactions with wee sisters. In its turn, what the earlier dream exposes is that the isolation from others was never what Middle Sister sought in literature. Seeing her own self confused with the Reeve is codified by her under a negative light in terms of misanthropy. This, which comes in a context of a growing estrangement from those around her due to the predations by Milkman and the community is, after all, a nightmare. The Narrator wishes for connectedness, although not the performed one longest friend seeks to impose. Middle Sister repeatedly tries to tell her mother the truth about Milkman's harassment throughout the narrative, and the fact that so much

room is awarded to the intricacies of the relationship between the two women (a focus that is expanded in chapter Seven, after Milkman's death), suggests the novel is as much about a search for an affective language that can traverse trauma and violence to enable connectedness, in a sense that was not available to her late father, as it is about her own experiences in a state of exception.

Milkman produces a rhizomatic articulation of belonging, departing as it does from Middle Sister's reading-while-walking as a point of access to narrate a myriad of others through the category of beyond-the-pale. In the same way a narrative that focuses on those nomadic multiplicities remains in conflict with any attempt to consolidate sedentary power, the literary references that permeate the novel play out specific roles. Their successful alignment with the present through comparison is double-edged, however. If not to longest friend, Middle Sister will succeed at least rhetorically to prove her point by aligning Semtex and *Jane Eyre*, Milkman's mobility and her own. The comparison inevitably suggests that while the works she read might offer a vast cultural repertoire, if she read them "because she did not like the twentieth century" (BURNS, 2018, p. 9), they are not as effective an evasion as she might have believed. As characters' and writers' identities collapse into her own, wee sisters' twentieth century reading list also merges with her own eighteenth-century one. Literary conversations are soon revealed to be socially aware, such as the Narrator's warning regarding first brother-in-law's advances. Rebuked for making herself unavailable through her reading practices in the public space, Middle Sister refashions her behaviour to expand her reading from the books to the community itself. It is precisely through a furthering of reading-while-walking that will include ampler observation that Middle Sister will become the contemporary storyteller her community lacked, if only years later.

CODA

> Libraries have always been important to me. I have prominent memories of my childhood Saturdays, when I would go to the library with my aunt and we'd make good on our tickets. And oftentimes not just our own, or even our own. There seemed to be a black market in library tickets when I was growing up. No one seemed to have their own yet managed to go into the building with about three to five cards and come out with about nine to fifteen books, so I thank too, the lovely Oldpark Library in North Belfast and the Central Library in Downtown Belfast. Not just for playing a huge role in my reading life, but for letting everybody away with being a different person from whom their library cards their week were saying they were.
>
> *Anna Burns*

The first time I read a book by Anna Burns was in June 2018. *Milkman* had just been published, and besides the usual emails by Foyles, Waterstones, and Faber, the "book with the pink sky," as some Instagram book bloggers referred to it, seemed to be everywhere. It is, of course, a fantastic cover. There is no milkman, real or otherwise, to be seen. Instead, the reader is met with the sky Middle Sister and her classmates strive to see under their teacher's goading: one in which there is no blue whatsoever, but a myriad of shades of mauve, purple, and orange. Afar, a dark silhouette walks alone. Like most of the people who read Burns for the first time in 2018, before and after her Booker win in October, I had no idea what to expect. I was aware of the fact the book dealt with the Troubles in some capacity but was completely unprepared for Burns's narrative style. I could not put the book down and thought about it many times until I read it again. That was my first year as an MA student researching a topic that I was passionate about, the relationship between Emily Dickinson's poetry and music. While I still had a long road of dissertation-writing ahead of me, I remained quite interested in Burns and began reading more of her work.

In May 2019, I flew to England in what would become my last pre-COVID holiday. In my long journey home, among the sitcoms and blockbusters, I was glad to find that the latest Booker winner was also available as an in-flight entertainment option. Therefore, I spent most of the eleven-hour flight listening to Bríd Brennan's narration of *Milkman*, which I was also

bringing home in a newly released paperback (signed!) edition. By then, it was a proper time to not only finish my dissertation, but also to think of what I would like to research during my PhD. My advisor, Professor Davi Pinho, remarked that since I was so interested in Anna Burns, maybe it would be a good idea for me to consider the possibility of turning that curiosity into an investigation.

By the time my PhD effectively started, COVID-19 was already a worldwide reality. Our semester began on 9 March 2020. WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic on 11 March. These have been, of course, unfathomable times, but working on my thesis and reading and re-reading Anna Burns has helped me to cope with the madness and the sadness of our strange reality. During the research process, this thesis was altered and revised in many ways with the support of my brilliant advisor of many years, Prof. Davi Pinho. The insights and questions posed by Prof. John Brannigan in my qualification exam were also instrumental both in helping me fix problems and in opening new possibilities. Prof. Adriana Jordão's attentive reading has also helped improve my work in many ways. Any faults or mistakes are my own. I believe any analysis or study of Irish questions produced by a non-Irish person should express an awareness of the limitation of its outlook, which I hope to have achieved here, especially in Chapter 1. That is, while I align myself with the Irish scholars that I have quoted, as a Brazilian researcher I do not believe it is my place to establish an independent argument on Irish affairs outside of the realm of the literary works I have proposed to study in this thesis.

There were some topics that I initially hoped to cover in this research, but which felt out of place throughout the process of writing the thesis. I hope to develop those in a later study. The main point of interest is the relationship between Anna Burns and other contemporary Irish writers, such as Lucy Caldwell, Eoin McNamee (she has cited both before as novelists she admires), and Michelle Gallen (who has cited *Milkman* in her debut novel, *Big Girl, Small Town*). This has been a complicated yet rewarding research process that I am happy and proud to see through. Writing and thinking through Burns's words have taught me much about her literary worlds and those are places I would very much like to revisit. If anything, I believe this thesis sheds light over the very namelessness that Burns's novel explores. While it may seem that sectarian differences are localised issues, they are connected to and communicate broader questions, touching upon themes such as the fault lines of democracy, the workings of states of exception, and the process of becoming-minoritarian in a contemporary context.

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ATTACHMENT A

The following index lists all the occurrences of the number three in Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018).

1. The Narrator states "I don't know" was her "three-syllable defence in response to the questions" (BURNS, 2018, p. 93).
2. The Narrator has three significant meetings with *Milkman*, after which he "infiltrates her psyche" (BURNS, 2018, p. 89).
3. The Narrator is the middle-sister: she has three older sister, three younger sisters.
4. The Narrator has three brothers. She states she has four, but one of them was her second brother's best friend, and not her parent's son (BURNS, 2018, p. 143). Another way to look at it is to include this brother and state she has three living brothers, as second-brother died before the events of the novel.
5. The Narrator's reading-while-walking is criticised by three of her loved ones: third brother-in-law, maybe-boyfriend, and longest friend.
6. The number three also appears in patterns in the Narrator's sentences. As she recounts the early harassment suffered by her and her sisters at the hands of the man who became first-brother-in-law, she states: "Six years on, as he tried to work his way through me and my remaining elder sisters, with *the three of us – directly, indirectly, politely, fuck off-ly* – rejecting him, the milkman, also uninvited but much more frightening, much more dangerous, stepped from out of nowhere onto the scene" (BURNS, 2018, p. 7, my emphasis).
7. Maybe-boyfriend has three brothers (BURNS, 2018, p. 25).
8. The Narrator has three objections to living with maybe-boyfriend (BURNS, 2018, p. 25).
9. Three of maybe-boyfriend's friends remain at his house after the fight over the supercharger. Another trio is formed by maybe-boyfriend himself, Chef, and the Narrator (the latter three are also involved in a romantic triangle, though the Narrator does not know about that at this point) (BURNS, 2018, p. 23).
10. When the Narrator and her classmates have an epiphanic moment and realise there are more colours in the sky at their teacher's goading, she observes that "even then, even though there were more colours than the acceptable three in the sky – blue (the day

sky), black (the night sky) and white (clouds) – that evening still I kept my mouth shut" (BURNS, 2018, p. 41-42).

11. The teacher tells the class to describe "three sunsets – 'in French if you like'" (BURNS, 2018, p. 46).
12. There used to be three derelict churches in the ten-minute area. Due to an explosion caused by a World War II bomb, one of said churches collapses. (BURNS, 2018, p. 47).
13. After being approached by Milkman in the ten-minute area and cornered into talking about maybe-boyfriend, the Narrator finds herself defending him, and even contradicting herself to do so. Analysing her reaction, she states that "here three things were new" (BURNS, 2018, p. 59).
14. Three men appear on the Narrator's third meeting with Milkman, in the ten-minute area. (BURNS, 2018, p. 75).
15. During the Narrator's second-brother's funeral, three "renouncers" fire a volley of shots over his grave (BURNS, 2018, p. 71).
16. Somebody McSomebody's and nuclear boy's youngest brother was a three-year-old. (BURNS, 2018, p. 79)
17. While boasting of being a paramilitary man, McSomebody states that "the average renouncer" often feels he is living his last hours and that "there are three options". He ends up listing five options, but the Narrator does not correct him so that he will not feel encouraged by her. (BURNS, 2018, p. 71-72)
18. Three women are present at the inaugural Wednesday Women's Issues Meeting (BURNS, 2018, p. 83).
19. There are three stories that make the Narrator stay away from the issue women. (BURNS, 2018, p. 88)
20. Three traditional women go to the downtown branch of the feminist movement to talk to the eighth woman. (BURNS, 2018, p. 88)
21. The Narrator has three further encounters with Longest Friend after the poisoning. (BURNS, 2018, p. 112)
22. Three months after the funeral of Longest Friend's husband, Longest Friend herself dies.
23. The usual place has three alternative names: "the no-town cemetery", 'the no-time cemetery", and "the busy cemetery" (BURNS, 2018, p. 112).

24. The Narrator remembers the first three times she awakens after the purging of the poison. (BURNS, 2018, p. 121)
25. Shiny Girl lives three streets away from the Narrator. (BURNS, 2018, p. 137)
26. Tablets girl poisoned her sister five times, but she states the first three times she "thought were just periods" (BURNS, 2018, p. 138).
27. After hearing of the murder of tablets girl, but before the encounter in the chip shop, the Narrator is in bed rest when three phone calls come through. (BURNS, 2018, p. 128)
28. Fourth brother has accidentally killed "three ordinary people". (BURNS, 2018, p. 143)
29. Before Milkman's threats, the Narrator used to stay at Maybe-boyfriend's house three-nights-a-week. (BURNS, 2018, p. 150)
30. After they have an argument over the phone, the Narrator decides she must talk to Maybe-boyfriend in person. She believes it is best to take the bus, however, and enlists three reasons not to walk there. (BURNS, 2018, p. 150)
31. The Narrator states there were "Three times in my life I've wanted to slap faces and once in my life I've wanted to hit someone in the face with a gun. I did do the gun but I have never slapped anybody" (BURNS, 2018, p. 157)
32. The Narrator's First Sister had "three youngling twin sons and one daughter" (BURNS, 2018, p. 176)
33. The Narrator's Third Brother is her twin brother. (BURNS, 2018, p. 141)
34. Third brother-in-law is the closest thing to a kindred spirit the Narrator finds in her community.