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PROGRAMA DE DOCTORADO EN LENGUAS, TEXTOS Y CONTEXTOS

TESIS DOCTORAL

**Community, Secrecy and the Crypt in Anna Burns's  
Work**

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## Abstract

Anna Burns is an internationally acclaimed Northern Irish writer. Whilst her award-winning novel *Milkman* (2018) has received a great deal of scholarly attention, this PhD Thesis provides not only the first academic study of Anna Burns's oeuvre in its entirety, but also one of the first serious analyses of her novels *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007), and the first of her novella *Mostly Hero* (2019). In the introductory chapter, I begin with the (impossible) task of contextualising Burns's writing within the context of contemporary Irish fiction, during which I draw on parallels that can be found in terms of theme and style with a number of other contemporary writers and their novels. Equally, however, I attempt to determine the ways in which Burns's fiction is nonetheless distinct, especially in terms of stylistic and thematic complexity. From here, I provide both a justification for, and an introduction to, the theoretical lens from which I conduct my analyses. Chapter two consists of a detailed overview of this theoretical lens and is divided into two main parts: community and secrecy. Part one explores post-phenomenological communitarian theories as depicted by Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) and Maurice Blanchot (1988), as well as the work of Jacques Derrida on concepts such as autoimmunity (2003) and hospitality (2000). I address the apparent tensions between philosophies of ontology and ethics, ethics and community, and community and love. Part two explores the role of secrecy both in terms of the formal structure of a literary text, and within communitarian theories thus defined. In this section – in addition to Derrida – I engage with the work of such theorists as Tom McCarthy (2012), Nicholas Royle (2014), J. Hillis Miller (2002) and Clare Birchall (2011). My exploration of Royle's concept of the 'cryptaesthetic resistance' of a literary text (2014), as well as Derrida's account of the 'absolute' or 'unconditional' secret (Derrida and Ferraris 2001), leads my discussion on to an exploration of Derridean 'hauntology' (1994) and the psychoanalytic notion of the 'crypt' (1986). The rest of the chapters are dedicated to an application of this theoretical lens to a close reading of Burns's



entire oeuvre. Chapter three provides an analysis of Burns's first novel *No Bones* (2001). I suggest that the position that Burns is forwarding in this novel is that listening to and communicating with the ancestral voices of the past may allow individuals and communities alike to be able to break the self-destructive violent cycles of inherited trauma. In chapter four, I turn to her surreal second novel *Little Constructions* (2007). Here conclusions are drawn concerning Burns's subtle but significant critique of the way in which the trauma of the Troubles was initially dealt with – that is, the political response – which itself echoes critiques made throughout the novel of certain style of 'armchair therapy' – that is, the psychological response. Chapter five then looks to her most recent novel *Milkman* (2018), wherein I conclude that a reading and rereading of the text not only allows for novel literary interpretations, but equally underscores the potential role that works of fiction can play in the deconstruction of both physical and symbolic borders. In chapter six I explore the role of humour and irony in her novella *Mostly Hero* (2019) – something I claim is fundamental to Burns's writing, yet is rarely explored at any length. I conclude that whilst humour is a way of coping, it is also a way of transforming our realities. Finally, in chapter seven, conclusions are offered in reference to the (specific but not isolated) context of current Irish and Northern Irish political, institutional and social issues.

## Resumen en Español

Anna Burns es una escritora norirlandesa de prestigio internacional. Aunque *Milkman* ha suscitado gran crítica académica, esta Tesis Doctoral no sólo constituye el primer estudio en profundidad de la obra de Anna Burns en su totalidad, sino también uno de los primeros estudios serios sobre sus novelas *No Bones* (2001) y *Little Constructions* (2007), y el primero sobre su novela corta *Mostly Hero* (2019). En el capítulo introductorio, comienzo con la tarea (imposible) de contextualizar las obras de Burns en el contexto de la narrativa irlandesa contemporánea, para lo cual me fijaré en los puntos en común que pueden encontrarse, en términos de tema y estilo, con otros/as escritores/as contemporáneos y sus novelas. Sin embargo, también intento determinar de qué manera la ficción de Burns es distinta, sobre todo en términos de complejidad estilística y temática. A partir de aquí, justifico y presento la perspectiva teórica desde la que realizo mis análisis de su obra. El capítulo dos ofrece una exposición detallada de dicha perspectiva teórica y se divide en dos partes principales: la comunidad y el secreto. La primera parte explora las teorías comunitarias postfenomenológicas propuestas por Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) y Maurice Blanchot (1988), así como la obra de Jacques Derrida sobre conceptos como la autoinmunidad (2003) y la hospitalidad (2000). Abordo las aparentes tensiones entre las filosofías de la ontología y la ética, la ética y la comunidad, y la comunidad y el amor. La segunda parte explora el papel del secreto tanto en términos de la estructura formal de un texto literario, como dentro de las teorías comunitarias así definidas, y entra en conversación con el trabajo de teóricos tales como Tom McCarthy (2012), Nicholas Royle (2014), J. Hillis Miller (2002) y Clare Birchall (2011). El análisis del concepto de Royle sobre la ‘resistencia criptoestética’ de un texto literario (2014), así como el relato de Derrida sobre el secreto ‘absoluto’ o ‘incondicional’ (Derrida y Ferraris 2001), me lleva a explorar la hauntología [*hauntology*] Derrideana (1994) y su deconstrucción de la noción psicoanalítica de la ‘cripta’ (1986). Los capítulos siguientes se dedican a la aplicación de este enfoque teórico a

toda la obra de Burns. En el tercer capítulo, ofrezco una lectura detallada de la primera novela de Burns, *No Bones* (2001). Sugiero que la postura que Burns defiende en *No Bones* es la de escuchar y comunicarse con las voces ancestrales del pasado, ya que esto permite la ruptura con los ciclos violentos autodestructivos del trauma heredado. En el capítulo cuatro, me centro en el análisis de la segunda novela de Burns, *Little Constructions* (2007). Se extraen conclusiones sobre la sutil pero significativa crítica de Burns a la forma en que se abordó inicialmente el trauma del conflicto de Irlanda del Norte – es decir, la respuesta política – que a su vez se hace eco de las críticas realizadas a lo largo de la novela a cierto estilo de ‘terapia de sillón’ – es decir, la respuesta psicológica. A continuación, el capítulo cinco se centra en la novela más reciente y conocida de Burns, *Milkman* (2018). Llego a la conclusión de que una lectura y relectura del texto no sólo permite interpretaciones literarias novedosas, sino que también subraya el papel potencial que pueden desempeñar las obras de ficción en la deconstrucción de las fronteras tanto físicas como simbólicas. El sexto capítulo se centra en el estudio de la novela corta de Burns, *Mostly Hero* (2019). En este capítulo, exploro el papel del humor y la ironía tanto en la teoría como en la literatura, haciendo énfasis en la relación entre el humor y la ironía y un enfoque deconstruccionista de la literatura. La conclusión a la que llego es que, si bien el humor es una forma de hacer frente a los problemas, también es una forma de *transformar* nuestras realidades. Por último, en el capítulo siete se ofrece una serie de conclusiones interconectadas. En este último capítulo volveré brevemente al contexto (específico, pero no aislado) de las cuestiones políticas, institucionales y sociales actuales de Irlanda y de Irlanda del Norte.

## Chapter One: An Impossible Task: Anna Burns in [Con]text

### 1.1. Introduction

Born in Ardoyne in Belfast in 1962, Northern Irish novelist Anna Burns grew up during the worst years of the ethno-nationalist conflicts known as the Troubles. In an interview with *The Independent*, Burns describes how “[t]here was an awful lot of violence, shocking amount of violence, apart from the Troubles ... adults fighting in the street with each other over anything, and children fighting and dogs biting anybody. And then of course they’d be bloodstains all over the place” (Marshall 2018, n.p.). As Ardoyne is a predominantly Catholic Republican area of Belfast surrounded by Protestant Loyalist districts, her upbringing in many respects was one dictated by both physical and symbolic borders and boundary lines. The west of Ardoyne is bordered by the notorious Crumlin Road, which acts as an interface between Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods and was the scene of a number of attacks and bombings during the Troubles. Whilst such attacks certainly decreased in scale and number after the cease-fire, the conflicts between the two communities by no means came to a halt. In the years following the cease-fire, during the Orange parades to mark the twelfth of July<sup>1</sup> (of which there were many), residents of Ardoyne were often barricaded into their streets by the police and army (whilst in theory for protection, it was very much against their will). In 2001, the year that Burns published her first novel *No Bones*, the Crumlin Road was back in the news for the Holy Cross dispute which centred around the Catholic girls’ primary school that Burns herself attended. For three months, the pupils of the school, accompanied by their parents, were subject to daily abuse from Protestant Loyalist protesters on their way to school. Protesters taunted, spat, and threw stones and balloons filled with urine at the young girls and their parents (DeYoung 2023,

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst these celebrations are said to mark Prince William of Orange’s victory over King James II and VII at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, they are generally seen by Catholic communities as an expression of sectarianism and triumphalism. Union jacks don the streets, and it is not uncommon for Irish flags to be burnt.

62). Meanwhile, 2013 saw a series of violent riots following a ban that prevented a contentious twelfth of July Orange parade from returning onto the Crumlin Road at night (McDonald and Quinn 2013, n.p.). Whilst there have been no serious conflicts on the road since 2016 thanks to the highly successful agreement made between the Nationalist Catholic residents and the local Orange lodges to restrict the marches from passing through Ardoyne in the evening, the stability of this peace is nonetheless precarious. As recently as 2021, petrol bombs were thrown over the wall that separates Shankill and the Falls during six nights of violence sparked by the post-Brexit Northern Ireland protocol (O’Carroll 2021, n.p.), whilst just last year (2023) several applications were made to the Parades Commission to return to march in the evening along the Crumlin Road (McParland 2023, n.p.). Moreover, despite Stormont’s 2013 pledge to remove all peace walls by 2023, the district of Ardoyne is still surrounded by barriers, with the wall that separates Shankill and the Falls standing at almost fourteen metres tall – it is more than three times the height of the Berlin Wall and has now been standing for twice as long. Taking all of this into consideration, whilst Burns insists that her novels are not autobiographical, it is somewhat unsurprising how in all of her fiction she addresses, and with an astute eye for the complexities, themes of violence, trauma, and borders.

Although Burns herself left Ardoyne for London in 1987, the destructiveness of the Troubles was neither left behind in thought nor in in terms of her physical surroundings. In an interview for the *Seamus Heaney Centre*, Burns describes the council estate where she lived in London as both violent and intimidating, wherein her and the other residents “were being left by the authorities to suffer the consequences of others’ destructive behaviour” (McWade, 2020). The physical distance did, however, provide Burns with the necessary emotional space to finally confront those otherwise unfronted memories of her childhood. In an interview for the *Belfast Telegraph*, Burns describes how in London,

I started getting my feelings. I would read about something I remembered but which hadn't engaged my feelings at the time. And then I would start to get my feelings. 15 or 20 years later I would be sitting in my room in London having a reaction emotionally to something that happened 15 or 20 years ago. That's how it started to get reconnected. I got my felt reality about that experience. (O'Doherty 2018, n.p.)

Her writing came, to a great extent, out of this deferred emotional response to the trauma she had experienced earlier in life. In the *Heaney Centre* interview, Burns describes three specific moments, that occurred within a few consecutive days that marked the start of her writing career. The first was when she bought a sketchpad in a friend's art shop, not for drawing but for writing – a moment she described as a “pivotal experience” (McWade 2020, n.p.). A few days later, another friend recommended Julia Camdon's book *The Artist's Way* (1992) and, as she explains, before she had time to open the book yet another friend invited her to a weekly night-class on “Ways into Creative Writing”. Burns describes how,

[t]hose three experiences felt to me the first strong indications as to where my focus was at that time turning. There was also a ripeness to the moment, as if the time for something else had come. After that, the writing came out of nowhere. It burst upon me and it arrived too, with no career intentions. In a rush of energy and of revelation and through a process that brought much joy and satisfaction to me, this new writing life had begun. (McWade 2020, n.p.)

From this rush of energy, three novels were born: *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007) and *Milkman* (2018), as well as one novella, *Mostly Hero* (2019). Her debut *No Bones* won her the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize in 2001, whilst for *Milkman*, she was awarded the National Books Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2018, the Orwell Prize for political writing in 2019, and the Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize and the International Dublin Literary Award in 2020. Although each of Burns's novels is

unquestionably unique, all four are incredibly complex, disturbing, moving and – importantly – funny. Her debut novel, *No Bones*, tells the brutal story of the life of Amelia Lovett from childhood to womanhood. It starts with the arrival of British troops in Belfast in 1969 when Amelia is seven and ends during the Peace Process in 1994. Surrounded by both political and domestic violence, Amelia suffers from anorexia, bulimia, heavy drinking, paranoia and psychotic episodes. Burns's incredibly surreal second novel, *Little Constructions*, is a story of violence, fear, secrets and retribution in a close-knit family of criminals known as the Does. Unlike *No Bones*, *Little Constructions* is not set in Northern Ireland, but rather in a fictional town named "Tiptoe" – known by the residents as "Tiptoe Floorboard". This being said, the criminal family bares uncanny resemblances with paramilitary groups – both the provisional Irish Republican Army (the IRA) and the Ulster Defence Association (the UDA) – and both the language and setting show telling signs of Belfast idiosyncrasies. Burns's novella *Mostly Hero*, is something of a postmodern subversion of a combination of Greek mythology and comic book heroes. It is, nonetheless, undoubtedly aimed at both the specificity of the violence of the Troubles, and more generally, tribal warfare of any kind. And finally, Burns's third and best-known novel *Milkman* tells the story of a young woman coming of age in an unnamed Northern Irish city during the seventies. However, unlike in *No Bones*, in which the violence and devastation of both the Troubles and domestic disputes is (at least at first) unrelenting, in *Milkman* very little is made explicit. Whilst *Milkman* has received a great deal of scholarly attention, not a lot has been written on any of her previous work. Accordingly, this thesis provides not only the first academic study of Anna Burns's oeuvre in its entirety, but also one of the first serious studies on *No Bones* and *Little Constructions*, and the first to be written on *Mostly Hero*.

In this introductory chapter, I shall begin with the (impossible) task of contextualising Burns's writing within the context of contemporary Irish fiction, during which I shall draw on

parallels that can be found in terms of theme and style with a number of other contemporary writers and novels. Equally, however, I shall try to determine the ways in which Burns's fiction is nonetheless distinct, especially in terms of stylistic and thematic complexity. From here, I shall provide both a justification for, and an introduction to, the theoretical lens from which I conduct my analyses, together with an explanation of my methodology. Finally, I explain the structure and layout of the thesis, together with an insight into what is to be expected in each chapter.

## 1.2. Burns in [Con]text

In *Limited Inc* Derrida explains that his most quoted statement “there is nothing outside the text” – taken as something of a slogan for deconstruction, and, in his words, “so badly understood” – means precisely that “there is nothing outside *context*” (1988; emphasis added). This assertion encapsulates both the impossibility of abstracting meaning (texts) from contexts (with emphasis on the plural here), and further, somewhat paradoxically, the impossibility of delineating or delimiting such contexts. Derrida explains how,

the text is not the book, it is not confined in a volume itself confined to the library. It does not suspend reference – to history, to the world, to reality, to being, and especially not to the other, since to say of history, of the world, of reality, that they always appear in an experience, hence in a movement of interpretation which contextualizes them according to a network of differences and hence of referral to the other, is surely to recall that alterity (difference) is irreducible. *Différance* is a reference and vice versa. (1988, 137; emphasis in the original)

Deconstruction thus understood is both “the effort to take this limitless context into account” (1988, 136) and an argument against the violence of reducing, demarcating or determining alterity and difference (1988, 137). Just as meaning can never be fixed, neither text nor context



can be defined in any permanent sense: reference is difference; presence is *différance*. Accordingly, Derrida explains that the process of deconstruction consists,

only of transference, and of a thinking through of transference, in all the senses that this word acquires in more than one language, and first of all that of the transference between languages. If I had to risk a single definition of deconstruction, one as brief, elliptical and economical as a password, I would say simply and without overstatement: *plus d'une langue* – both more than a language and no more of a language. (Derrida 1989, 14-5; emphasis in the original)

With this paradox in mind, I approach the task of contextualising Anna Burns's fiction with a certain caution. Whilst it is indeed necessary to take into account the "limitless context" of her writing, at the same time, I want to emphasise precisely how *limitless* such a context would be. I am cautious, therefore, not to reduce the significance of her work to reside within a single, enclosed or restricted framework – that is, the context of (Northern) Irish (women's) writing.

This being said, drawing on Derrida's push for a reading that pays attention to the margins, gaps and silences out from which alterity speaks (1982, xxviii), it is worth bearing in mind how, in some respects, Northern Irish literature has recurrently faced a status, if not of marginality, then certainly of liminality. There seems to be a general uneasiness involved with categorising fiction from Northern Ireland as either British or Irish, or both – something captured in the particularly unhelpful and limiting classification of "Anglo-Irish fiction" –

which is very much connected to the complexity and nuance of the Northern Irish identity.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, I would agree with Edna Longley's observation that Northern Irish literature "overspills borders and manifests a web of affiliation that stretches beyond any heartland" (1994, 194). However, and perhaps as a result of this uneasiness, Northern Irish fiction is often considered both in isolation to other bodies of work, and frequently only in reference to the specific political and social tensions of the North.<sup>3</sup> Whilst such an approach has proved productive in terms of unravelling our understandings of the specificities of the North's turbulent past, Caroline Magennis highlights how it also inadvertently holds the potential to be both over-deterministic and reductive (2021, 4). Furthermore, Magennis warns of the dangers of reducing the significance of a piece to "an author's religion and perceived stance on the National Question", noting that very few of the writers selected for her own study "respond directly to specific historical events but rather turn towards small, intimate moments which have a more complex relationship with the political, social and economic context than this framing allows" (2021, 4). Indeed, something that is clearly visible when reading Northern Irish fiction is how both the writers' influences and the significance of their work extend far beyond the Northern Irish border (even in those novels that *do* respond directly to historical events). Derrida's

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<sup>2</sup> In Nick Bentley's monograph *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008), he discusses the connected difficulty surrounding the determination of "British", which he notes involves identifying "which writers have been or want to be labelled with a national tag that in some sense determines the way in which their work is read" (2-3). Acknowledging this difficulty, he explains that his choice of writers to include in his collection was based on his desire to provide "a representative range by choosing texts that are recognized as being part of an emerging canon of contemporary British fiction" (3). That he goes on to include a number of writers with dual heritages – such as Salman Rushdie, Courtia Newland and Monica Ali – is certainly commendable in that he gives voice to the multiplicity of identities in Britain. However, one thing I do find particularly interesting is the absence of Northern Irish writers. Bentley suggest that, with the exception of Seamus Deane and Bernard MacLaverty, "in Northern Ireland, the main literary response to the Troubles has been in drama" (7). Northern Irish novelists other than Deane and MacLaverty (whose work is not included, but whose names are mentioned in passing) are therefore present in the collection only in their absence.

<sup>3</sup> Worth mentioning here is Dermot Bolger's volume *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1993). Whilst Bolger incorporates work from a number of Northern Irish writers in his collection – including Glenn Paterson, David Park, Robert McLiam Wilson and Eoin McNamee – a number of observations he makes in his introduction are particularly telling. Not only does he complain that, whilst separate collections are accepted on Northern Irish writing, to exclude this category from a collection on Irish writing would be met with a certain hostility, but furthermore, that the lives of those in the Republic of Ireland exist as a "separate reality" from those in the North (xii). Both arguments, I believe, may resonate with the barriers faced by female writers, artists and academics. It seems that Bolger's inclusion of Northern writers is more an act to please his publishers, editors and critics than it is to demonstrate the value of reading these works in conversation with those of the Republic.

insistence on the “limitless context” – or the *dissemination* – of any given text indicates how the significance of a text necessarily reaches beyond the author’s intention (1981, 21).

Importantly, an even more noticeable reductive reading and marginalisation is apparent when considering fiction written by women. Indeed, just as Northern Irish literature, until fairly recently,<sup>4</sup> either did not feature in studies of British or Irish fiction or – as seems to be the case with Dermot Bolger’s volume (1993) – was present only to appease editors and critics, so too women’s fiction was for the most part side-lined. Whilst there has been a great deal of (highly valuable) work carried out to address this marginalisation over the last three decades, including more public platforms and publishing opportunities, the inadvertent result is that both Northern Irish literature and women’s fiction are often still either explored in separate sections within collections, or altogether separate studies.<sup>5</sup> It is especially worth mentioning here the pioneering anthology *The Female Line: Northern Irish Women Writers* edited by Hooley and published in 1985, which gave voice to a number of Northern Irish women writers by putting their work into print for the first time, as well as the subsequent publication thirty years later of *Female Lines: New Writing by Women from Northern Ireland*, edited by Anderson and Sherratt-Bado (2017).<sup>6</sup> Something these two collections achieve is the showcasing of the sheer

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<sup>4</sup> Harte and Parker’s collection *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* (2000) is groundbreaking in this respect, as it draws Irish and Northern Irish literature into conversation, recognising the ways in which literature from both sides of the divide works towards the subversion of physical and metaphorical borderlines, and arguing against the position (expressed by the likes of Bolger) that the Troubles in the North were in any way a “separate reality” from the Republic (2000, 4). The work of this collection is highly valuable both in terms of addressing this divide and in the proliferation of Northern Irish fiction, such as the novels of Glenn Paterson and Robert McLiam Wilson. Nonetheless, given that the chapters are organised by theme, it is worth noting how, even here in a collection that does so well to counter this tendency, we have a chapter titled “Reconfiguring Identities: Recent Northern Irish Fiction” (232-55).

<sup>5</sup> This is, however, something that is noticeably changing on both counts thanks to the ardent work and generous grants of European and international Irish studies associations. For example, of the nine authors, playwrights and poets invited to speak at the last four conferences organised by the Spanish Association of Irish studies, AEDEI, seven have been women, and three have been from the North. However, when it comes to plenary panels, whilst a multiplicity of themes and approaches are explored at the conferences, we still see panel sessions simply titled “Women Writers Speak Out” (Vigo 2021) or “Northern Ireland 1” and “Northern Ireland 2” (Burgos 2022).

<sup>6</sup> Other highly successful anthologies of Irish women writers (both from the Republic and from Northern Ireland) include *Wee Girls: Women Writing from an Irish Perspective* (Lizz Murphy 1996) and *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers* (Sinéad Gleeson 2015). Additionally, for an exploration of Irish women writers’ contributions to the short story genre, see Elke D’hoker’s *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* (2017).

diversity of writing by contemporary Northern Irish women in terms of style, form and perspectives, with examples taken from poetry, fiction, memoirs and reflective essays. There has also been notable progress over the course of the thirty years since the first publication in that, unlike those featured in the 1985 anthology, many of the writers chosen for the 2017 edition were already well-established writers at the time of publication (including Anne Devlin, Jan Carson, Lucy Caldwell and Colette Bryce). Nonetheless, whilst by no means discrediting the achievements of such anthologies in terms of the increased proliferation of Northern Irish women's writing, I simply express concern for potential consequences of keeping such writing separate both in terms of readership and academic recognition. It is true that writing by women is finally being read, heard and celebrated, but unfortunately, often only in reference to itself. In this sense, both these categories of writing – Northern Irish writing and writing by women – remain to some extent in the margins.

Indeed, a similar observation regarding the status of contemporary Irish women's writing is made by Anne Fogarty in her research into identity politics. According to Fogarty, "[w]here earlier histories simply ignored or discountenanced works produced by women, many current accounts of Irish culture use strategically delimited definitions of women's writing as a crucial counter" (2002, 1). Women's writing is thus either merely present in its absence, or its significance, whilst commended, is reduced to "a by-product of narrowly feminist issues" (2002, 2). Fogarty argues that, in either case, "such positioning of women's writing has the effect of reinforcing its marginality and rendering it "at worst invisible or at best quasi-visible" (2002, 2).<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, in an introduction to her analyses of three Northern Irish women

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, to return to my previous note regarding the absence of reference to Northern Irish writers in Bentley's monograph, Fogarty makes a very similar observation regarding Conor McCarthy's claim in his own collection that there does not yet exist a canon of contemporary Irish women's writing. As Fogarty puts it, his "insistence on an eerily absent or prospective canon of Irish women's writing has the double effect of both defining the contours of the male-centred view of Irish cultural modernity which he stoutly defends and of rendering invisible the female critics and artists whom he actually encompasses in his discussion" (2002, 1).

writers, Maureen Fadem is equally cautious to stress her reasons for not engaging gender as a principal concern. She explains how,

[w]riting by Irish women – not only in the North but the island as a whole – becomes ‘gendered’ immediately upon publication and, often, whatever may have been attended to or revealed about political or historical issues, whatever means by which the author ‘speaks’ the nation, gets occluded within an otherwise feminist analysis. This persists in spite of distinct, sustained political and historical reference and theme. (2015, 2)

The need for scholars to clarify that analysing literature written by women does not inherently mean their focus is on gender issues is, in itself, revealing. No such comment has ever been expected with regards to the analysis of work produced by men – and in fact, would, I imagine, be taken as somewhat absurd. This sentiment is also expressed by Irish novelist and short story writer Kathleen MacMahon when she talks of her upset at being offered a contract that described her writing not as “fiction” but as “women’s commercial fiction”. As she explains, “[t]he label ‘women’s writing’, with its implication of being of no interest to readers other than women, is an insult that has not gone away” (2020, n.p.).

Taking all of the above into consideration, we may conclude that Northern Irish fiction written by women is doubly marginalised in this respect. This being said, both Fogarty’s excellent comparative study of the work of Paula Meehan, Deirdre Madden, Mary Morrissy and Marina Carr, and Fadem’s critical analyses of the drama, poetry and fiction of Anne Devlin, Medbh McGuckian and Anna Burns, reveal the inaccuracy and limiting nature of such an approach to women’s writing, as well as how these particular writers contribute to current political and public debate at large. Indeed, Fogarty draws attention to how “one might find a way of conceptualising the work of particular women writers which shows that it is a central part of and not merely an addendum to, or a missing link in, contemporary Irish literary history” (2002, 2). I strongly believe a similar case can be made not only for Anna Burns, but for all the

contemporary women writers I go on to reference in this introductory chapter. Similarly, writers from the North contribute not only to conversations on Northern Irish current affairs, but also those had on a global scale. Equally relevant in this respect, therefore, is the work of contemporary Irish studies scholars who bring the writing of such authors into the critical domain. I would certainly agree with Caroline Magennis's observation that "[i]n recent years, academic scholarship which revisits the past and considers the future in innovative, challenging ways is reshaping the critical landscape" (2021, 5). Of particular note in this respect are Fiona McCann's *A Poetics of Dissensus: Confronting Violence in Contemporary Prose Writing from the North of Ireland* (2014), Maureen Fadem's aforementioned *The Literature of Northern Ireland: Spectral Borderlines* (2015) and Caroline Magennis's own monograph *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles: Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures* (2021).

There is, I believe, something to be said for the power of writing from a position of marginality or liminality; in line with Derrida (1982, xxviii), I am of the opinion that it is those things in the margins that hold the potential to both disrupt our sense of certainty, and in turn transform our understandings and lived experiences. This is achieved largely through questioning and trespassing boundary lines. Indeed, as Stefanie Lehner points out, "the critical category of Northern Irish literature itself – depending on where it is taught or sold – straddles and thereby *questions* the categories of English, Irish, and British literature" (2020, 1; emphasis added). This observation is particularly relevant for my current purposes, for in the chapters to come, I explore how Burns's fiction interacts with notions of borders, inheritance and alterity. As Rosemary Jenkinson rightly observes in her (somewhat controversial) piece regarding writers' communities in the North, "[b]elonging is the key to any community, but shared values are where the problems begin", and further that "[t]he drawback with communities is that they expect conformity. Group politics are so unforgiving of those who stray" (2022, 24-5). I would suggest that this is precisely the message we receive from reading Burns.

On a side note, however, it is worth considering the fact that, having won numerous literary awards for her fiction, including, as previously mentioned, the Man Booker prize in 2018 (making her the first Northern Irish writer to win the award), Burns has now been, to a great extent, firmly positioned *within* the canon of contemporary fiction; something further evidenced by the abundant studies conducted on *Milkman* (2018) both within and beyond the field of Irish studies. However, it is equally important to recall the divided response to her Man Booker win. For the criticisms made against Burns would not, I suspect, have been made against a male writer. It was described on the one hand as “inaccessible”, “impenetrable”, “brain kneading”, “relentlessly internalised” and “baffling” (cited in Stefanou 2019), whilst on the other as only a *moderate* challenge for those who read the *Journal of Philosophy* (cited in Flood and Armistead 2018). This latter comment was made by one of the Man Booker judges themselves, and ironically in an attempt to defend the novel against such criticisms. In contrast, Paul Beatty, for example, on winning the prize in 2016 for his exceptional novel *The Sellout*, was rightly praised for his “daring and abrasive” writing (Colter Walls 2015, n.p.). Indeed, similar praise was given for 2017 winner George Saunders whose novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* was described as “a performance of great formal daring ... it stands head and shoulders above most contemporary fiction” (Kunzru 2017, n.p.). As I elaborate in clearer terms in chapter five, I am of the opinion that the very features of *Milkman* that received the most critique are the very same features that owe to her success: as was said of *The Sellout*, Burns’s *Milkman* is (and to its merit) stylistically *and* formally daring *and* abrasive. In its exploration of the topics of marginality, Burns’s fiction certainly has disruptive potential.

To return, then, to the (impossible) task at hand – that is, contextualising Burns’s fiction – I shall begin by providing a brief (and by no means comprehensive) overview of a some of the most remarkable contemporary Irish and Northern Irish fiction (with the exception of the inclusion of one Scottish writer) that can be said to address similar themes to that of Burns.

The writers whose work I shall briefly discuss are (and in this order): Lucy Caldwell, Paul McVeigh, Louise Kennedy, Jan Carson, Francesca McDonnell, Elaine Canning, David Keenan, Anne Enright, Glenn Patterson and Mary O'Donnell. The themes that connect their novels include, but are not limited to, the inheritance of trauma; the haunting presence of the past; memory; secrecy; mourning; individual and communal identity; and borders, barriers and binaries. The observations and connections regarding the novels that I discuss are based on my own analyses of the vast array of contemporary literature that I have read thus far. That the majority of these writers are both women and from Belfast is, on the one hand, simply a credit to their work, and on the other, evidence to support my claim as to the power of writing from a position of liminality. Importantly, by establishing these connections, echoes, or traces between the novels in question, I am by no means suggesting that the writers belong a community or movement of writers, determined by heritage, gender, or generation – I simply wish to identify the ways in which it may be interesting to draw these texts into conversation (no matter that they are undoubtedly singular and interesting in their own right). Indeed, I would largely agree with Claire Kilroy when, in an interview with Lozano García, she says of contemporary Irish writing, “I cannot say that there is a movement. There is just collegiality, but we are all doing our own thing and I find my generation’s work interesting. I find the older crowd’s work interesting. I do find Irish writing interesting, but it is hard to pinpoint a shared imaginative train within it” (Lozano García 2018, 159). However, whilst perhaps not as clear as the tracks of an “imaginative train”, there are, I would suggest, certain traces and threads to be followed (at least amongst the selected writers I have chosen to include). Nonetheless, and with this in mind, I shall also identify the ways in which Burns’s work to some extent stands against the grain – that is, the ways in which her writing is innovative both in its thematic but also *stylistic* embrace of singularity, alterity and difference (or the ways in which she does not *belong* in any essentialist way to the writing of “her generation”).



Perhaps the most formidable thematic trace that can be found amongst contemporary Irish writing is the confrontation with the past. According to Andrzej Gabiński, this has been a common approach for quite some time: “The best Irish writing over the last 200 years” – he suggests – “concerns itself with trying to make connections between the past and the present in order that a more fruitful future can be imagined. And indeed, the same – I would argue – is true of the best Irish fiction in the present moment” (2007, 45). Often, this involves going back to the past in order to reassess and reimagine the present. Neal Alexander’s depiction of post-Agreement novels as “retrospective” comes to mind in this respect, wherein he describes Irish fiction written after the Good Friday agreement as having a “tendency towards recreating a particular moment in the past in an effort to illuminate the North’s contemporary predicament” (2009, 274). In Lucy Caldwell’s *Where They Were Missed* (2006)<sup>8</sup> and Paul McVeigh’s *The Good Son* (2015), for example, we witness the life of a young child growing up in Belfast during the Troubles – one in Ardoyne, the other in Protestant East Belfast, but both equally dictated by tribal warfare and paranoia. Both the geographical and historical setting of the novels, as well as Caldwell and McVeigh’s embrace of the child narrator, hold certain similarities with the first few chapters of Burns’s *No Bones* in which we see seven-year-old Amelia Lovett navigating life in war-torn Ardoyne. Further similarities may be found between Burns and McVeigh’s embrace of both irony and local idiosyncrasies: as Patricia Craig writes of *The Good Son*, it “embodies Belfast wryness and resourcefulness – and its local idiom is spot-on” (2018, 193). Equally, in all three novels we witness the external conflict spill over into domestic and personal turmoil. Also set in Troubles-era Belfast is Louise Kennedy’s *Trespasses* (2022), which tells the somewhat clichéd (though beautifully told) story of a young primary school teacher in a Catholic district who falls in love with an older married man,

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<sup>8</sup> For an insightful exploration of the theme of loss in Caldwell’s novel, see Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado (2018).

himself a Protestant barrister. As is also the case in Caldwell and McVeigh's novels, here too we witness the struggles of determining individual identity from amidst a heavily divided community dictated by social norms, together with the emotional strain of committing to one's ethical outlook. Kennedy's astute realism, not dissimilar to that of Caldwell's, is as captivating as it is moving, and she successfully addresses issues of love and loss with emotional nuance.

Another novel that directly confronts the themes of inheritance and legacy is Jan Carson's *The Fire Starters* (2019). Set in a fictitious Belfast sixteen years after the signing of the peace treaty, the story is comprised of the parallel accounts of two fathers whose concern for the traumas that might be passed down to their offspring leads them to feel a sense of shame and responsibility for the cycle of reemergent violence. As the character Sammy puts it, "violence is a passed-down thing, like heart disease or cancer" (Carson 2019, 47). What allows Carson's novel to stand out from the rest, however, is her embrace of magic-realism (we are told how Jonathan's new-born daughter was born to a siren, and the narrative is regularly interrupted by stories of the so-called 'unfortunate children' of Belfast – a girl with wings, a boy with wheels for feet, another who sees the future in every liquid surface). As well as the concern for inheritance, Carson's novel – like those of Burns – also explores the ways in which an openness to alterity could interrupt the cyclical return of violence, together with the potential dangers such an openness may bring. As Magennis writes in her analysis of the novel, what Carson presents to the reader is "both the stark reality that what we love could destroy us and also the enriching powers of intimate life" (2021, 41).

In a similar way, Irish American writer Francesca McDonnell Capossela's *Trouble the Living* (2023) draws the past into a direct confrontation with the present. The novel tells the inter-connected stories of Brid and her sister Ina coming of age in Belfast during the final years of the Troubles, and Brid's daughter, Bernie, growing up in Southern California in 2016. Whilst the stories are intimately tied, they are geographically and temporally separated. The fragility

of the relationship between mother and daughter is shaken given the revelation of the mother's secret – one that pertains to both legacy and inheritance. In an incredibly honest and intimate prose – similar in many respects to Kennedy's realism – Capossela confronts the haunting presence of transgenerational secrets, mourning and trauma with an attuned sensitivity. This takes us on to a second prominent theme – that of the haunting presence of silences and secrets.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Maureen Fadem comments, “[f]iction from the North ... bears the signature of scrimmed spectrality” (2015, 10).<sup>10</sup> Lucy Caldwell's *These Days* (2022) is especially relevant in this respect. Whilst set in Belfast, the backdrop to the story is not the Troubles but the Blitz. Interestingly, unlike in Capossela's *Trouble the Living* where the present is experienced as haunted by the secrets and trauma of the past, what haunts the text in *These Days* are the spectres of the future. As Joseph O'Connor writes in his review for *The Guardian*, “[h]aunting such passages are the images of subsequent violence in the same city, ghosts from Belfast's future. Caldwell does not point to them explicitly, but they hover in this impressive novel's margins” (2022, n.p.). Finally, another novel that both directly addresses themes of mourning and hauntings that trespass generational, geographical and historical borders is Elaine

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<sup>9</sup> For an especially enlightening collection of essays that confront silences in contemporary Irish fiction from a number of distinct perspectives, see *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak* (Caneda-Cabrera and Carregal-Romero, 2023)

<sup>10</sup> Two other novels also come to mind when considering both hauntings and secrets: Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996) and Deirdre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* (1996). Although there is a significant separation of years (and therefore context) between the publishing of these novels and the contemporary fiction that I am currently discussing – indeed, these are the only two novels I mention that were written prior to the signing of the Belfast agreement – both novels have clear correlations with Burns's fiction. Additionally, the temporal gap is significantly reduced when considering Burns's first novel, which was published in 2001. Deane's *Reading in the Dark* deals with the haunting presence of transgenerational secrets. His protagonist is a young boy who seeks to piece together the mystery of his missing uncle – a mystery, as we saw in *Trouble the Living*, that centres around an unspoken/unspeakable family secret. Interestingly, in a similar manner to Burns's protagonist in *Milkman*, the boy goes unnamed. Whilst the setting is not Belfast but Derry, and prior to the outbreak of the Troubles, the ghosts that haunt are nonetheless undoubtedly connected. Madden's *One by One in the Darkness*, on the other hand, details the story of a family trying to comprehend the circumstances of their father's murder. Set in Belfast during the Troubles, Madden's domestic focus blurs the boundaries between public and private, and political and personal destruction – equally recurrent themes throughout Burns's oeuvre. As is also the case in Burns's fiction (and especially in *No Bones and Little Constructions*) the central traumatic event of the novel – in this case, the father's murder – is largely repressed and untold, and so the reader is left to piece together the events from a series of gaps and absences. Moreover, the complex postmodern style of Madden's novel bears more similarities with Burns's own writing style than most of the other works of contemporary fiction I have discussed thus far.

Canning's incredibly original debut *The Sandstone City* (2022). What makes this particular novel stand out is how, unlike in the previously discussed works, past spectres are not confronted as a kind of haunting presence, but rather as ghosts in the quite literal sense. A deceased grandfather is granted a forty-day grace period to help decipher and heal his granddaughter's traumas and confront the ghosts of his own past. As the novel moves between Salamanca during the Spanish Civil war, and modern-day Belfast, the result is an unsettling disruption of time and place. Interestingly, Canning cites both Caldwell and Carson as influences (Arts Council of Northern Ireland 2022, n.p.).

Where all six authors significantly differ from Burns, however, is in terms of stylistic and formal conventions. I suggest that where Caldwell, McVeigh, Kennedy and Capossela algin is in their brilliantly convincing and astute telling of the lived experiences of trauma – something that evokes a strong empathetic and emotional response from the reader. Although Carson's novel certainly stands out in terms of style and form, magic realism is still, to some extent, a form of realism. Despite the crossing over of mythology and magic into her fictitious Belfast, once immersed in Carson's world, the story feels both believable *and* real. Likewise, whilst Canning's unconventional ghost story is both bold and innovative, her prose is clear and easy to follow, and the novel ends with a strong sense of reconciliation and resolve. In contrast, across Burns's entire oeuvre, although she deals with similar themes of trauma, loss, secrecy and inheritance, her writing is incredibly disorientated, cryptic, and unconventional, with the gaps, silences and absences in her storylines never being fully resolved even at the novels' conclusions. This is especially the case with *Little Constructions* wherein the reader is left with very little to hold on to, and with no clear footing as to where their sympathies should lie.

With this in mind, Scottish writer David Keenan's unconventional *For the Good Times* (2019) holds a closer resemblance to Burns's work in terms of form and style. *For The Good Times* is narrated by a Belfast republican foot soldier, Sammy, from within the confines

of a prison cell, who recounts the violent work he did for the IRA and a kidnapping gone wrong. Whilst Keenan's use of dream sequences particularly resonates with that of Burns in *No Bones*, the segments in which he replays the events as a superhero adventure story also brings the novel closely in line with Burns's *Mostly Hero*. Additionally, the perspective gained from Sammy's trip to Glasgow in *For the Good Times* bares a certain likeness to *No Bones*'s concluding chapter in which we see Amelia and her friends take a day trip to Rathlin Island. Equally of note therefore is how Keenan's novel revolves around the central theme of the dominance *and* deconstruction of borders – a theme that can be found at the heart of all of Burns's work. As Leszek Drong notes in his comparative study of *Milkman* and *For the Good Times*, "Burns's and Keenan's writings have proved to be particularly useful in challenging assumptions about the fixity of borders, boundaries and barriers both between and within communities" (2020, 178).

Moreover still, just as Sammy's superhero power is that of forgetting, Burns's entire oeuvre interacts with the recurrent theme of short-term memory loss, *jamais vu* and communal amnesia – a theme that, I suggest, acts both as an allegorical warning of the dangers of political amnesia, and a means of casting doubt on the assumed objectivity of official memory. As Gerry Smyth comments in relation to trends in contemporary Irish culture, "the category of memory – official, secret, repressed – has come under intense scrutiny" (2001, 134). Similarly, Constanza del Río identifies "contradictory pulls in the contemporary Irish novel towards veiling and unveiling the memory of the past" (2010, 11). Also of note therefore is Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) which, written in a testimonial mode, engages with this exact tension felt between the fallibility of individual and collective memory and the desire to uncover ignored, hidden and repressed traumas of abuse. As Carol Dell'Amico writes in her analysis of the novel, "Enright's characters enact a pattern of the nation as whole: a revulsion concerning the revelations of abuse that is ultimately passive and inadequate, characterized as

‘a century of looking the other way’” (2010, 73). Regarding the role of memory, Glenn Patterson’s *That Which Was* (2004) may also be relevant here. Although his style of prose stands at odds with that of Burns – as Neal Alexander comments, “Patterson writes in unshowy, naturalistic and deceptively simple prose” (2009, 276-7) – the central themes of the novel could not be more pertinent. *That Which Was* centres around the confused confessions made to a Priest of murder and political concealment, and faces head-on how repressed memories, in the character Larry’s words, “come back to haunt you, even when someone has tried to erase them” (Patterson 2004, 49). This particular quote equally brings to mind Mary O’Donnell’s *Where They Lie* (2014). O’Donnell’s writing style and narrative structure is also more similar to that of Burns as she employs tropes of fragmentation, repetition, anachronistic time and dream sequences to explore the formal structure of the secret, and does so through the lens of traumatic loss. Furthermore, O’Donnell’s protagonists’ obsession with recovering the remains of the dead is arguably the central thread in Burns’s *Little Constructions*, which in turn ties both novels with the work of Derrida on mourning. As Derrida writes, “[n]othing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where” (1994, 9; emphasis in the original). Indeed, as José Manuel Estévez-Saá explains in his critical analysis of *Where They Lie*, “[n]either the Peace Process nor the Belfast Agreement in Northern Ireland has been able to successfully exorcise all the haunted and haunting voices from the times of the Troubles” (2016, 21). This sentiment is supported by Colin Graham who rightly warns of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland, that “constructing a political process which forgets rather than remembers, which detaches itself for survival, which regards identity, in its widest sense, as a danger rather than as the very substance of the matter” will inevitably mean that the country remains stuck in “patterns of repression and recurrence” (2007, 180). Similarly, Fiona McCann, in reference to flag protests and the marching season, warns of “the dangers of airbrushing out of history the underlying reasons of the conflict and refusing to address

contentious issues such as housing and education as they relate to the ethno-religious segregation which is so deeply anchored in the very geography of the North” (2014a, 2-3). Richard Kirkland, for his part, applies Gramsci’s notion of the interregnum to the situation in North, depicting a nation trapped in a period of stagnant or stalled transition (1996, 9). Nonetheless, I believe that what all of these novelists demonstrate are the ways in which a more open, disrupted, or alternative narrative (and narration) allows not only for the possibility of *re-constructing* our perspectives on identity and community, but also for a representation of Belfast as a turf that is fertile for both reimagining *and* change.

Notwithstanding the apparent correlations and similarities that can be found between Burns’s fiction and that of her contemporaries, I maintain that what makes Burns’s writing especially powerful, provocative and *philosophically* transformative are the ways in which she stands apart. Whilst Claire Kilroy rightly acknowledges how “Irish literary fiction is always chaotic and personal” (Lozano García 2018, 159), and although there is certainly a Joycean undertone to her writing, Burns has an especially unique voice: she subverts expectations, disrupts narrative flow and allows connections to arise when least expected. As Daragh Downes writes in his review of *Milkman*, Burns “throws stylistic and narrative conventions to the winds” (2021, 231). In turn, the complex, subversive and cryptic style of her writing resists unitary interpretations, with the secrets at the centre of many of her narratives threads never being revealed nor resolved. Moreover, on reading and re-reading her texts, we begin to see how hidden in the numerous literary crypts are not only the spectres of the living dead, but alterity itself. Whilst the majority of the writers I have mentioned thus far engage with the process of writing trauma into fiction – indeed, part of what makes their narratives so moving and powerful is the extent to which they resonate with the lived experience of trauma – I suggest that Burns pushes the trauma narrative to such an extreme that we begin to see the cracks in its hold.

Additionally, the complexity of her writing means that Burns's novels do not easily fit into categories of genre. This is a feature well demonstrated by the sheer range of categorisations of *Milkman* – including dystopian (Callan 2023; Sweeney 2018), hysterical realism (White 2021), picaresque (Malone 2019) and postcolonial gothic (McMann 2023), to name but a few – together with the variety of different critical approaches to the novel, from feminist literary studies to those of international relations. Just as we see in Burns's characters, the novels themselves trespass boundary lines. Indeed, I would agree with Fiona McCann's analysis when, in reference to *Little Constructions*, she describes how Burns's fiction, by means of engaging with innovative modes of representation, participates “in the opening up of new perspectives through which the past, but also the future, can be questioned, (re)shaped and (re)written” (2016, 34). Similarly, I wish to explore how this is particularly the case when considering the re-imagining of different forms of communities. Finally, despite their disorientated modes and dark subject matters, Burns's novels are also incredibly humorous, but not in the light-hearted sense of McVeigh's high-spirited boy narrator. Her humour is, for the most part, dark and sinister. Although a similar cynical sense of wit can, to some extent, be identified in a few of the characters in both O'Donnell's *Where They Lie* and Keenan's *For the Good Times*, something we see more so in Burns's writing is how she develops her use of humour in such a way that it may be said to embody the very form of the philosophical position that runs throughout her texts – indeed, this is something I explore at length in chapter six. The singularity of Burns's writing echoes both the singularity of the event in fiction, and the singularity of the Other in communitarian theory. Keeping this in mind, I shall move on to a description and justification of my theoretical approach.

### **1.3. Theoretical Framework: Justification, Methodology and Objectives**

In line with Derek Attridge's depiction of “hospitable reading”, I maintain that the singular response to the singularity of literature allows the alterity of a text to hold communal and ethical



significance (Attridge 2017, 280-305). Such a response involves paying close attention to what may be looming in the margins of a text and listening to the unspoken, unspeakable and undecidable. Indeed, as Ian Hickey concludes with Derrida, “the present is made up of spectral, absent presences of the past that are visible only in the traces and markings that they leave in texts and within us” (2022, 16). This conviction, together with a combination of Burns’s engagement with deeply philosophical themes and the subversive style of her writing, has informed my choice of theories from which I conduct my analyses. Interestingly, there are also clear parallels to be found between Burns’s own account of her writing, and Attridge’s depiction of the kind of ergodic texts that demand a hospitable response. In the aforementioned interview for the *Seamus Heaney Centre*, Burns describes how,

the jigsaw style of approach became the name of the game with most of my writing. Unlike an actual jigsaw in a box, however – picture displayed on the lid so at least you have a fair idea of what it is you’re supposed to be aiming for – my writing for those books didn’t come with any plan. What would come, leisurely and invisibly, was a massive process of underpinning. I could feel it happening, and I loved it happening, but I couldn’t gain access to it, nor did it seem I was meant to gain access. Least not consciously. Each book was forming itself more and more under the surface, with less writing as evidence, as it were – and sometimes for ages – on top. A huge part of what becomes the writing time of a book for me is all about that underpinning. You can’t share underpinning. It’s impossible to catch hold of. But it contains all the business and it comes to me with waiting. (McWade 2020, n.p.)<sup>11</sup>

Whilst Attridge, for his part, describes how,

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, in *Little Constructions*, the narrator describes the piecing together of repressed memories also in reference to a jigsaw. We are told how, in Jotty’s therapy session, “all her broken reality [was] returning in jigsaw pieces to resemble itself painfully inside her” (Burns 2007, 190).

part of the secret, a secret on the surface, not one that can be uncovered ... is an essential and obvious aspect of a work's singularity; it plays an important part in the reader's experience; and yet it remains irreducible to meaning. ... It takes place every time the work is read as a non-meaningful event – or, to be more precise, as an event whose meanings remain undecidable and inexhaustible. (2021, 30)

The correlation is to be found between Burns's depiction of an invisible and undecipherable underpinning of her writing and Attridge's account of the inexhaustibility of meaning. From here, we may conclude that, to adopt the words of Derrida, "the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret" (1992, 152). Thus, the appropriateness of a deconstructive approach to Burns's work, with a focus on singularities, spectres and secrecy, could not more evident.

The theoretical basis of my research draws first on post-phenomenological communitarian theory as encouraged by such thinkers as Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, but with a particular interest in the way in which these theories interact with and respond to Heideggerian ontology and Levinasian ethics of alterity. The noticeable correlation between the unavowable of "communities of secrecy" (López 2021, 10) and Derrida's equation of the denial of the right to secrecy and the totalitarian state (Derrida and Ferraris 2001), is in part what connects this first aspect of my framework to the second, which explores the role of secrecy both in communities and in texts. Nancy and Blanchot's concern with singularities rather than individuals (Nancy 1991; Blanchot 1988), the relevance of the concepts of hospitality and hospitable reading (Attridge 2017) and autoimmunity (Derrida in Borradori 2003), and Derrida's account of the 'absolute' secret (Derrida and Ferraris 2001) also invite the incorporation of Derridean hauntology into this framework, as well as the psychoanalytic notion of the 'crypt' (Derrida 1994; 1986) – both of which I discuss at length in chapter two.

This theoretical framework is greatly indebted to two groundbreaking collections of essays – *Community in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Rodríguez Salas, Martín Salván and Jiménez Heffernan 2013) and most profoundly, *Secrecy and Community in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Fiction* (López and Villar-Argáiz 2021) – as well as collaboration carried out with the Spanish Ministry-funded research project *Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Literature in English*. What I believe the work in these collections and of the group demonstrates is the ways in which literature – as a space that allows for secrecy and equally resembles the formal structure of the secret as such – provides a productive liminal space wherein the very concepts of community, secrecy and the crypt may be re-imagined. I suggest that disrupting and re-writing – or deconstructing – our core understandings through which we engage with the world and others can in turn transform our lived experiences.

Additionally, whilst contemporary approaches to the novel tend to place an emphasis on cultural, political and historical contexts (especially in the context of Irish studies, where critical theory is, for the most part, neglected), I propose that Burns’s complex and cryptic writing style welcomes an abstracted reading, wherein context and borders become blurred rather defined, and from which we are opened up to a multiplicity of potential interpretations. As Derrida writes, “no border is guaranteed, inside or out” (1979, 78). In turn, such an approach equally allows for more broader reaching conclusions – ones that trespass the very borders with which they engage. Moreover, as post-phenomenological communitarian theories explore the tensions felt between singularities and their communities, the conclusions reached from such a study may provide new insights into issues that, given current social and political tensions (both in Northern Ireland and across the globe), could not be more relevant.

The innovativeness of my research lies principally in the fact that this is one of the first communitarian approaches to Irish literature, the first (to my knowledge) of its kind to literature from the North, and the first to a reading of the work of Anna Burns. Previous studies on the

relationship between the individual and the community within the field of Irish studies, whilst highly insightful, have for the most part remained subtly faithful to the modernist idea of the isolated individual, whereby community is understood in terms of commonality and belonging. For instance, although Brian Cliff's research into community in Irish literature carefully reveals the ways in which a focus on nationhood dictates normative identities whilst excluding certain others, his analysis nonetheless relies on the notion that community is "a manifestation of the desire to belong" (2006, 114). Cliff does well to illustrate how, in his words, "contemporary Irish literature's maps of alternative communities expand the field's critical vocabulary and address increasingly difficult questions about the nature of community, belonging and being together" (2006, 125). What he seeks, however, are traces of other types of belonging: those that are often marginalised or quashed by the rhetoric of nationhood. Whilst this concern for the marginalised is closely connected to the communitarian discourse, something I wish to underscore in my present study is the ways in which communitarian theories embrace communities of *non*-belonging: or communities of those who "have nothing in common" (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 58).

The potential productivity of a communitarian approach to Irish literature has been well demonstrated by a number of studies conducted by Pilar Villar-Argáiz. In her critical analyses of a selection of Irish novels, short stories and poetry by James Joyce (2013a; 2015), Edna O'Brien (2013b) and Eavan Boland (2020), Villar-Argáiz demonstrates how such an approach both works towards the deconstruction of dominant forms of belonging, as well as the reimagining of the very notion of community itself in more open terms. In reference to Joyce's short story "The Dead" ([1914] 2004), for instance, she argues that "Joyce shows that the construction of any form of communal identity can only be achieved at the expense of some form of otherness which is excluded and defined negatively in relation with that imaginary sense of communal self" (2013a, 63). Importantly, however, something that Villar-Argáiz drills home is

how such an approach to literary analysis does not simply involve identifying the authors' critiques of organic communities, but equally reveals how examples of inoperative or unworked communities – those based not on belonging but on exposure and alterity – can be identified within the studied works. In her chapter on O'Brien's short fiction, for example, Villar-Argáiz explains how O'Brien visualises alternative communities not only thematically, but equally symbolically and formally (2013b, 192).

With regards to secrecy, although a number of studies have been conducted on secrecy in Burns's fiction,<sup>12</sup> something I hope to bring to debate is one of the first approaches to the role of secrecy in her work from the perspective of Derridean hauntology. Whilst this is by no means a common approach to the analysis of Irish literature, the results of three previous studies add weight to its effectiveness in reaching new conclusions. Eugene O'Brien's 2009 collection of essays *'Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse': Negotiating Texts and Contexts in Contemporary Irish Studies* presents one of the first deconstructive approaches to Irish studies from the perspective of hauntology. Taking on the work of the so-called literary canon of Irish studies – Yeats, Joyce, Heaney and Ó'Faoláin – alongside the television programme *Father Ted* and a number of Guinness advertisements, O'Brien's analyses are particularly powerful in their revelation of how, read through the lens of critical theory, these canonical voices and cultural phenomena are open to "the other of language" (2009, 8). Interestingly, in his introduction to this collection, O'Brien goes so far as to trace the influence of French literary and critical theory on Irish culture, suggesting that whilst it came later than in continental Europe – that is, whilst it was differed – it has, nonetheless, worked towards what he describes as "a new openness":

an openness where the old centres have not been demolished, merely decentred, deconstructed in the sense that they are no longer beyond the power of critique. The

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<sup>12</sup> On secrecy in *No Bones* see McGuinness (2010) and Fadem (2015). On secrecy in *Milkman*, see Piątek (2020), Morales-Ladrón (2023) and Malone (2021).

legacy of literary and critical theory is that of the question: the question that asks the unaskable, that suggests the unsuggestable. (2009, 28)

O'Brien refers here not only to the state, but to the church, and to the partitioned community. Also of particular note is Matthew Schultz's groundbreaking monograph *Haunted Historiographies: The Rhetoric of Ideology in Postcolonial Irish Fiction* (2014), which provides an excellent example of how hauntology is especially relevant for the study of contemporary Irish and Northern Irish literature. Whilst beginning with Joyce and ending with Beckett, in the chapters in between Schultz explores the spectres of famine and revolution in eight contemporary Irish novels. In contrast to John Brewer's position forwarded in his sociological approach to the Peace Process that in Northern Ireland the past exists as a form of "eternal present" (2010, 145), something that Schultz underscores in his analyses is how "haunting is imagined as a productive vehicle for moving the nation out of the past rather than for keeping it there" (2014, 14). In his chapter on Burns's *No Bones* (one of just four previous studies conducted on the novel), Schultz explores the ways in which Burns's critique of gothic inheritance acts as a means of confronting the reemergence of transgenerational violence (2014, 134), which is something I shall return to in my own analysis of the novel in chapter three. In *Haunted Heany: Spectres and the Poetry* (2022), Ian Hickey, for his part, applies the lens of hauntology to an analysis of the ghosts and spectres that haunt Seamus Heaney's poetry – from his first to his last collection. As his analyses engage with ghosts from Norse mythology to British colonialism, we are met with the recurrent theme that there is always a multiplicity of spectres haunting a given text; a recognition that in turn disrupts our very sense of time and place.

Building, then, on the work of Villar-Argáiz in terms of communitarian approaches to Irish fiction, the studies carried out in López and Villar-Argáiz's 2021 collection into "communities of secrecy" (López 2021, 10), and Schultz and Hickey's applications of

hauntology to Northern Irish fiction and poetry, this thesis will, I hope, demonstrate how these three approaches interact with and supplement one another as tools for literary analysis. This takes me on to the final aspect of my theoretical approach – the psychoanalytic notion of the crypt. Whilst Hickey recognises the significance of the crypt for Derridean hauntology, especially with respects to themes of repression and repetition (2022, 21-3), I aim to go a step further in identifying and deconstructing possible literary constructions of crypts within the texts themselves. In this, I take inspiration from Pascual Garrido's study of Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2021) and Rodríguez-Salas's analysis of Ihimaera's *The Uncle Story* (2021). Importantly, the conclusions reached from such an analysis hold significance not only in terms of understanding the role of spectres in the process of mourning as one might expect, but equally with regards to our understandings of the concepts of hospitality, alterity, democracy and community.

The general objectives of the research are to investigate the ways in which literature may help to reveal and unravel the tensions between philosophies of authenticity and those of ethics and community. Very much connected to these tensions, I also investigate the role of secrecy within such theories. With this in mind, I shall explore how engaging with communitarian theories might work towards a revision of our understanding of the tensions between secret keeping and secret sharing, secrecy and visibility, and secrecy and transparency – a revision that, in turn, invites a reading from the perspective of hauntology. Finally, I wish to investigate the productive potential that such theories hold when applied to an analysis of literature. My specific aims, moreover, are first and foremost to explore the insights that can be gained from a communitarian approach to Anna Burns's fiction, with a focus on the role of secrecy both in terms of form and content, as well as literary applications of the crypt. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how the subversive power of her writing works towards the deconstruction of the interconnected symbolic borders that have come to dominate our

narratives: those between the individual and the community; ‘us’ and ‘them’; presence and absence; public and private; transparency and secrecy; and the past, present and future. Whilst I argue that the conclusions made as a result of such a study reach far beyond the land and sea borders of Northern Ireland, I also wish to investigate the ways they speak more specifically to both the Irish and Northern Irish narrative and the trauma narrative. Indeed, as Constanza del Río explains through her use of a literary analogy, Irish history is either “an experimental open-ended text that continuously demands re-interpretation, since there would always lurk the threat of meaninglessness” or a Gothic text, for “a history of dispossession, violence, conflict, fragmentation and alienation is a Gothic history” (2010, 5). Finally, I aim to investigate the place of humour and irony within this theoretical framework and explore the ways in which the contingency and undecidability of humour may allow for an ethical discourse to emerge from within the margins of Burns’s oeuvre.

In terms of methodology, I embrace what may be considered a deconstructive approach to literary criticism: as opposed to delineating concepts and seeking meaning, clarity or truth in a text, I explore the ways in which Burns’s fiction works to reveal the *untruth* of the fixity of meanings and, in contrast, allows for a multiplicity of interpretations. I shall begin with an in-depth reading and critical analysis of the philosophical and theoretical texts and debates that contribute to, or engage with, phenomenological and post-phenomenological theories of community and secrecy. In particular, I seek to unravel the ways in which these theories communicate with each other, as well as establish connections between certain thinkers and concepts that are not normally considered alongside one another. I will then explore how these philosophical theories interact with certain movements in current literary criticism, with a focus on their potential literary applications. From the result of this critical research, I shall construct a theoretical framework. I then turn to my close reading and literary analyses of Burns’s oeuvre. During this process, I engage with previous studies conducted on her fiction in order to identify



both the ways in which these studies may contribute to my current research, and the gaps in terms of critical approaches to the novels that my research seeks to fill. In this respect, I shall also consider interviews conducted with the author, and literary reviews where appropriate. Finally, I apply the theoretical framework to my own close reading and deconstruction of Burns's oeuvre, paying close attention to what is left unsaid, and that which speaks from the margins.

#### **1.4. Structure**

In terms of structure, whilst chapter two is dedicated to my theoretical framework, each of the subsequent chapters address, in turn, Burns's three novels and one novella. Whilst the novels are dealt with in order of publication, I leave her novella (originally self-published prior to the publication of her most recent novel) until last. The reason for doing so is that I shift my focus here from community and secrecy to the role of humour, which, I believe, is something that links all of her otherwise heterogeneous works together. The final chapter is then dedicated to my conclusions.

As previously indicated, chapter two provides a detailed overview of the theoretical lens and is divided into two main parts: community and secrecy. Part one of this chapter explores post-phenomenological communitarian theories as depicted by Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) and Maurice Blanchot (1988), as well as the work of Jacques Derrida on concepts such as autoimmunity (Borradori, 2003) and hospitality (2000). It begins with a brief overview of Heidegger's account of sociality and authenticity ([1953] 2010) to which these theories provide a critique and a response, before moving through the apparent tensions between philosophies of ontology and ethics, ethics and community, and community and love. The second part of this chapter explores the role of secrecy both in terms of the formal structure of a literary text, and within communitarian theories thus defined, and enters into conversation with the work of such theorists as Tom McCarthy (2012), Nicholas Royle (2014), J. Hillis Miller (2002) and

Clare Birchall (2011). My exploration of Royle's concept of the 'cryptaesthetic resistance' of a literary text (2014), as well as Derrida's account of the 'absolute' or 'unconditional' secret (Derrida and Ferraris 2001), leads my discussion on to an exploration of Derridean hauntology (1994) and his deconstruction of the psychoanalytic notion of the 'crypt' (1986).

In chapter three, I apply the theoretical lens to a close reading of Burns's first novel, *No Bones* (2001). Whilst the accuracy of Burns's depiction of the trauma and violence that the community in Ardoyne experienced during the Troubles is unquestionable, I claim that part of the success of the novel lies in the way Burns's prose regularly forces the reader to question the reliability of each one of the perspectives they are presented with. I suggest that the reader is frequently misdirected and mislead, whilst faced with constant reminders of the fallibility of both individual and collective memory. In this chapter, parallels are made with the very real case of Ann Lovett, and conclusions are reached regarding the displacement of trauma, individual and collective memory, transgenerational hauntings and the blurring of borders. I suggest that the position that Burns is forwarding in *No Bones* is that listening to and communicating with the ancestral voices of the past may allow individuals and communities alike to be able to break the self-destructive violent cycles of inherited trauma.

In chapter four, I turn to Burns's second novel, *Little Constructions* (2007). This chapter addresses the topic of secrecy in the novel, first briefly in reference to the communitarian depiction of the operative community, with a particular focus on the role of names and rumours, and later through the lens of Derridean hauntology. I discuss applications of the concept of autoimmunity, the so-called 'visor effect' of the spectre, and literary constructions of the crypt. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how Burns's *Little Constructions* reveals that the construction and fragmentation of secrets in the realm of the political is reflected in the realm of the psychological. Conclusions are drawn regarding Burns's subtle but significant critique of the way in which the trauma of the Troubles was initially dealt with – that is, the political

response – which itself echoes critiques made throughout the novel of certain style of ‘armchair therapy’ – that is, the psychological response.

Chapter five then looks to Burns’s most recent and best-known novel *Milkman* (2018). The oppressiveness, patriarchy, and constant fear portrayed in the community is discussed as a clear example of an operative community. Nonetheless, I propose that, despite the apparent inescapability of the hegemonic community, examples of inoperative communities can be found – not as fixed, projected or transcendental relations but rather as transient occurrences, founded upon a confrontation with death, trauma, exposure, heterogeneity and vulnerability. From here, I turn to a discussion of the role of secrecy both in terms of plot and style. Finally, an application of the notion of the crypt to two objects, connected with two encounters, highlights the unconditional or absolute secrets of the text – those that remain unsolved. I conclude that a reading and rereading of the text not only allows for novel literary interpretations, but equally underscores the potential role that works of fiction can play in the deconstruction of both physical and symbolic borders.

Chapter six then turns to a study of Burns’s novella *Mostly Hero* (2019). In this chapter, I explore the role of humour and irony both in theory and in literature, with an emphasis on the relationship between humour and irony and a deconstructive approach to literature. As Fiona McCann acknowledges, “[t]he comic strain is ... what differentiates [Burns’s] novels from other trauma narratives and there is no doubt that they make for highly uncomfortable reading for this reason” (2014a, 20). With this in mind, emphasis is then placed on the role that humour may play first in disrupting the dominant (and therefore *comfortable*) rhetoric, and thence in opening up a space for non-homogenising communities to be brought into being. This chapter engages with a number of well-known approaches to humour and irony, but with a particular focus on Freud ([1927] 1990), Derrida (1988), Bakhtin (1984) and Rorty (1989). I conclude that whilst humour is a way of coping, it is also a way of transforming our realities.

Finally, in chapter seven, a number of interconnected conclusions are offered. Importantly, this chapter is not merely a summary of the observations obtained as a result of each of my literary analyses, but further allows for broader conclusions to be made regarding Burns's entire oeuvre. In this chapter, I look at the ways in which such conclusions may provide insights into the (specific but not isolated) context of current Irish and Northern Irish political, institutional and social issues. In so doing, I return to certain concepts introduced in the introduction, including identity, autoimmunity and hospitality in order to explore how Burns's fiction allows for a creative reimaging of our understanding of community. I also return to the notions of memory, and secrecy in order to address Burns's critique of surface level solutions, and the presentation of the idea that conversing with spectres does not simply take us back to the past, but rather provides a productive way out of. Finally, I suggest that what ties all of her work together is the role of humour and irony – something I claim allows her novels to break the hold of the trauma narrative.

## **Chapter Two: Ontology, Ethics, Community, Secrecy and Hauntology: An Overview of the Theoretical Lens**

### **2.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I provide an extensive overview of the theoretical lens from which I conduct my literary analyses. The chapter is divided into two main parts: community and secrecy. Part one begins with a brief account of Heidegger's depiction of sociality and authenticity ([1953] 2010), before tracing the tensions between philosophies of ontology and ethics, ethics and community, and community and love. In this section I engage primarily with the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1989), Jean-Luc Nancy (1991), Maurice Blanchot (1988) and Jacques Derrida (2003), although at times I also make connections with the thoughts of Giorgio Agamben (2003) and Luce Irigaray (2001). As I move between the different theories, I explore the following concepts: immanence and exposure, immunity and autoimmunity, domestic and unconditional hospitality, alterity and fusion, transcendence and finitude, and communion and communication. Equally, emphasis is placed on a correlation that may be found between the unavowable of Nancy's inoperative community and Blanchot's community of lovers, and Derrida's equation of the denial of the right to secrecy with the totalitarian state (Derrida and Ferraris 2001). This observation takes me onto the second part of this chapter, which investigates the role of secrecy both in terms of the formal structure of a literary text, and within communitarian theories thus defined. In this section – in addition to Derrida – I engage with the work of such theorists as Tom McCarthy (2012), Nicholas Royle (2014), J. Hillis Miller (2002) and Clare Birchall (2011). Addressing Royle's concept of the 'cryptaesthetic resistance' of a literary text (2014), as well as Derrida's account of the 'absolute' or 'unconditional' secret (those that can never be resolved) (Derrida and Ferraris 2001), leads my discussion onto an exploration of Derridean 'hauntology' (1994) and his deconstruction of the psychoanalytic notion of the 'crypt' (1986a). I suggest that both the spectrality effect of hauntology and the

structural indeterminacy of the crypt are in part what link theories of community with those of secrecy. Further connections are made between the asymmetry of both the ethical encounter and the community of lovers, and the so called ‘visor effect’ of the spectre; between the alterity of the arrivant welcomed under unconditional hospitality, and the alterity of the spectre welcomed in hauntology; and between the unavowable of the inoperative community, the unconditional secret and the secret of what is hidden, buried alive, within the crypt. Throughout the course of this chapter, I also point towards how each of these theories and concepts are applicable to my literary analyses of Burns’s oeuvre.

## **2.2. Community**

### **2.2.1. Being-with**

In order to fully engage with the communitarian theories from which I conduct my literary analyses, as well as the work of Jacques Derrida on concepts such as autoimmunity and hospitality, it is essential to grasp the dominating ideas that these theories both respond to and critique. This involves going back both to the thoughts and concepts of German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, specifically those presented in his seminal work *Being and Time* ([1953] 2010), and the work of French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas whose critique of Heidegger is from where communitarian theory is born.

To start, it is important to deconstruct the notion of ‘Being-with’, as this concept is both at the core of Heidegger’s phenomenology, and in turn, key to understanding the communitarian response. Equally, as Burns’s novels so profoundly explore the relationship between the individual with their community, they too, in many respects, act as a response to certain ideals of individualism and authenticity that have roots in Heideggerian philosophy. The concept stems from Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* – a term that in German means both ‘being-there’ and ‘being-here’ but is used by Heidegger to refer to our involved existence in

the world ([1953] 2010, *passim*). Prior to Heidegger, one's identity was understood as something constant and not altered through changes in our experiences and responses to them – the “always already and constantly present” subject: or simply the “self” (Heidegger ([1953] 2010, 112). In contrast, Heidegger pursued a phenomenological response to questions of identity. His portrayal of *Dasein*'s ‘Being-in-the-world’ shows how a subject always already belongs to the world, whereby the world is to be understood as a phenomenon. As others form a part of this world, a subject cannot be understood in isolation as the pure inner subjectivity of the Cartesian *Cogito*.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, the common position that sociality is extrinsic is dismissed (Heidegger [1953] 2010, 113). Heidegger sought an existential-ontological interpretation of the mode of being *Mitdasein* (‘*Dasein*-with’ or ‘Being-with’); he argues the case that others are no mere embellishments to an objective reality Heidegger ([1953] 2010, 115). In his 1925 lecture, he elaborates, “[t]he tool I am using is bought by someone, the book is a gift from ... the umbrella is forgotten by someone” ([1985] 1992, 239). Even the objects unknown to us point to others. Importantly, for Heidegger the term ‘others’ is no simple contrast to the ‘I’ – it is not to say “everybody else but me” ([1953] 2010, 116). On the contrary, ‘others’ refers to those whom I myself am a part of. Heidegger stresses that the ‘with’ of ‘Being-with’ does not mean that others are objectively present; it is not categorical, but existential. The world of *Dasein* is always already shared with others: “Being-in is *being-with* others, and it is a necessary condition of *Dasein*'s existence. The inner worldly being-in-itself of others is *Dasein-with* (*Mitdasein*)” ([1953] 2010, 116; emphasis in the original). It becomes clear how others are encountered phenomenally from within this world, rather than by means of a theoretical opposing.

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<sup>13</sup> From Descartes's famous ‘cogito, ergo sum’ – ‘I think, therefore I am’ – the ‘Cogito’ in philosophy comes to stand for the principle that existence is grounded solely in the act of thinking. (Interestingly, this exact expression was not used by Descartes himself, but was rather subsequently attributed to him. Nonetheless, the idea can be deciphered from his claim that “the proposition ‘I am, I exist’ [*ego sum, ego existo*] must be true whenever I assert it, or think it” (Descartes [1641] 2006, 25).

Accordingly, we can say that ‘Being-with’ is an essential, not circumstantial, determination of *Dasein*. It is only possible to be alone subsequently, as a deficient mode of ‘Being-with’. Interestingly, this point is supported by communitarian theorist Jean-Luc Nancy, who writes, “[t]he individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community ... the abstract result of a decomposition” (1991, 3). Equally, just as one can be alone whilst also amongst others, ‘Being-with’ does not depend on the factual presence of other people. Being-alone whilst in the presence of other people occurs when one’s ‘Being-with’ is encountered as alien. These modes of being are said to be only possible due to the fact that *Dasein* has the essential nature of ‘Being-with’ ([1953] 2010, 118). Heidegger argues that ‘Being-with’ must be understood in terms of the phenomenon of care and concern, for we always find ourselves as involved participants in the world. He discusses social institutions which care for people as necessary due to the deficient modes of concern seen in everyday being: “*Being for-, against-, and without-one-another, passing-one-another-by, not-mattering-to-one-another*” ([1953] 2010, 118; emphasis in the original).

Regarding, then, what Heidegger calls the positive modes of concern, he outlines two possibilities. The first is where concern takes over that which needs taken care of. This he calls a ‘leap in’ for the other. Whilst this mode is considered positive in the sense that it is not a deficient mode of ‘Being-with’, he nonetheless deems it inauthentic (that is, still not truly ‘mine’) for one becomes either dependent on or dominated by another in their taking hold of responsibility. In contrast, the second positive mode of concern authentically returns care to the other. This he calls not a ‘leap in’ for but a ‘leap ahead’. He discusses how this mode of concern allows people to form authentic alliances when working together which free the other to be revealed to oneself. Both positive kinds of concern are governed by considerateness and tolerance, whereas deficient modes are guided by inconsiderateness and indifference ([1953] 2010, 119). As we shall see, Heidegger’s apparent focus on the drive to understand the other



in ‘authentic’ terms stands starkly at odds with sociality as depicted by Levinas. Also of particular note is his depiction of positive modes of concern as governed by tolerance, for this brings it in line with what Derrida terms ‘domestic’ or ‘conditional’ hospitality (1994, 216-7) – a concept to which I shall return later on in this chapter.

According to Heidegger, our basic possibilities are dictated by social norms, for we are always already thrown into the world. We learn how to use the things which surround us in the shared world in the same way as the others do, which includes customs, tastes and practices. As Heidegger explains:

We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way *they* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge. But we also withdraw from the ‘great mass’ the way *they* withdraw, we find ‘shocking’ what *they* find shocking. ([1953] 2010, 123; emphasis in the original).

What results from deficient modes of concern is that “[t]he everyday possibilities of being of *Dasein* are at the disposal of the whims of others” ([1953] 2010, 122-3). Importantly, these others are indefinite others, not necessarily present nor defined, and are referred to by Heidegger as the ‘they’ [*Das Man*] ([1953] 2010, 123). It seems that every action, every mood, and every understanding is shaped and constrained through the interpretation, or “dictatorship” of the ‘they’ ([1953] 2010, 123). Accordingly, it is evident that individual autonomy is necessarily socially bound. Further, Heidegger depicts how we “fall prey” to social normativity ([1953] 2010, 175). That is, when making individual decisions regarding actions, our responses are unavoidably shaped by the ‘they’. The inescapability of social pressure in shaping our possibilities is brought to the forefront on a number of occasions, at different levels and to varying degrees in Burns’s fiction. Indeed, these ideas will be particularly relevant for my analysis of her most recent novel *Milkman* (2018) in chapter five.

The term ‘publicness’ is used by Heidegger to denote social normativity thus defined, with reference to public moods, public media and even public transport. ‘Publicness’ is said to be founded on the distanciality created in the space between oneself and others and the ‘levelling down’ (reducing) of our possibilities – something which is said to dominate all interpretations. It is insensitive to differences, making everything supposedly known and manageable to all ([1953] 2010, 123-4). What results is that *Dasein*’s own responsibility is removed from it, with the ‘they’ claiming every decision as its own. However, in this claim lies too the denial of responsibility, for every decision is both made by the ‘they’ and by no one. As Heidegger asserts, “[e]veryone is the other, and no one himself” ([1953] 2010, 125). This level of conformism Heidegger calls “inauthenticity” ([1953] 2010, 125).

According to Heidegger, in order to avoid the ‘levelling down’ of conformity, one must take responsibility for these socially normative determinations: one must “seize upon” one’s existence ([1953] 2010, 126). To be authentic is to clear away concealments and discover the world in one’s own way: to recognise the world as ‘mine’. That *Dasein*’s being is not fixed by anything essential – that is, because one is thrown into the world, all possibilities are necessarily contingent – is said to be both the cause of anxiety and the source of dignity, for it opens the space for an authentic response. It is here that the tension lies between fundamental ontology and ethics as first philosophy. In the chapters to come, I hope to reveal how Burns’s exploration of this tension allows her novels to function as critique of the Heideggerian focus on authenticity.

### 2.2.2. From Ontology to Ethics

Levinas reverses the Heideggerian drive for authenticity with the inescapable claim of ‘being for the sake of others’ (1994, 126). As we have seen thus far, Heidegger’s emphasis on ‘Being-with’ represents a radical departure from Enlightenment thought in the questioning of the privileged position of the subject. This becomes the starting point first for Levinas’s radical

ethics of alterity, and later for Nancy and Blanchot's post-phenomenological discussions of community. Whilst for Heidegger the move is from epistemology to ontology, for Levinas it is from ontology to fundamental ethics. Levinas accuses Heidegger of remaining too concerned with identity, authenticity and 'mineness', and thus of failing to rid phenomenology of the Husserlian obsession with the transcendental ego. Levinas radically decentres the subject in his move away from a focus on understanding and grasping totality, towards a respect for alterity and difference. Echoing Heidegger, it is precisely the proximity of the world and others that demands a necessarily intimate relation to it. However, whilst Heidegger acknowledges how 'Being-with' is essentially being for the sake of others, he insists that for authenticity to be achieved, this condition must be overcome. For Levinas, in contrast, it is our relation as being for the sake of others that defines the ethical encounter.

The ethical demand is said to be inescapable: "To be dominated by the Good is precisely to be excluded from the very possibility of choice" (Levinas ([1968] 1987, 35). The demand is archaic in the sense that it is prior to all questions or deliberation. Nancy for his part explains how, "before recognition there is knowing: knowing without knowledge, and without 'consciousness', that *I* am first of all exposed to the other, and exposed to the exposure of the other. *Ergo sum expositus*" (1991, 31; emphasis in the original). For Levinas, archaic exposure makes one both vulnerable to and answerable for the other, and is described as "a passivity more passive than any passivity: filial, previous, pre-logical subjection, a one-way subjection which it would be wrong to understand on the basis of a dialogue" ([1968] 1987, 135). The other is thus in a superior position. Levinas's emphasis on the passivity and asymmetry of the ethical encounter will prove crucial to an understanding of both Nancy's depiction of the 'inoperative community' and Blanchot's account of the 'community of lovers'.

### 2.2.3. From Ethics to Community

The influence of both the Heideggerian essential determination of *Dasein* as ‘Being-with’ and the rupture of the inescapable ethical encounter is evident on a number of levels in communitarian theory. Indeed, Nancy describes the rupture of totality in terms of Heidegger’s distinction between the ontical and the ontological, that is, between a being’s specific realities, and Being in the deeper sense of underlying structures (1991, 6). Blanchot for his part depicts how the very impossibility of being a separate individual means that one first experiences oneself as always already an exteriority, “as an existence shattered through and through, composing itself only as it decomposes itself constantly, violently and in silence” (1988, 6). Following this argument, the individual is no longer the building block of community, but a derivative of its dissolution, or in Heideggerian terms, a deficient mode of ‘Being-with’. Just as Levinas stresses that the relation of one to the other precedes any understanding, Nancy describes how originary sociality means that no singularity exists without other singularities, and this, he claims, is community (1991, 28). Accordingly, singularities (which are not the same as individuals) can be said to be the *atoms* only in so far as community is the *clinamen* – that is, “an inclining from one toward the other” (Nancy 1991, 3). In agreement with Heidegger, Nancy argues that by focusing on an inward-looking exploration of the individual, theories have largely neglected to explore the individual’s inclination outside itself, “over the edge that makes up its being-in-common” (Nancy 1991, 3). Again, we are reminded how we are never alone in our being alone: “the logic of the absolute violates the absolute” (Nancy 1991, 3).

The communitarian departure from both Heidegger and Levinas lies in their discussion of the relational nature of singularities in terms of communities. According to Nancy, “Being itself comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness ... as *community*” (1991, 6; emphasis added). Ecstasy, used in the Heideggerian sense of an outside-of-itself, or ecstatic projection, is described by Nancy as refusing the possibility of absolute immanence both in

terms of individuality and collective totality. Nancy claims that what individualism and communism have in common is their denial of ecstasy: “*Community, or the being-ecstatic of Being itself?* That would be the question” (1991, 6; emphasis in the original). Community, then, is ecstasy. This idea is also echoed by Blanchot who writes that community “proposes or imposes the knowledge (the experience, *Erfahrung*) of what cannot be known; that ‘beside-ourself’ (the outside) which is abyss and ecstasy without ceasing to be a singular relationship” (1988, 17). Whilst stressing the impossibility of defining the term, Blanchot describes ecstasy as a kind of communication which reveals the falsity of separate individuality, and opens singularities to alterity. In accordance with Nancy, Blanchot argues that, in contrast, everyday liberalism separates singularities, and reduces them to individuals (1988, 18).

These concepts will be paramount for my analysis of *Milkman* (2018) in chapter five. Indeed, a naïve reading of the novel may appear at first to depict a young girl’s desperate attempts to preserve her individuality or authenticity by resisting the social pressures of her community. However, I hope to demonstrate how a closer reading of the text reveals not only the falsity of notions of authenticity, but also how the protagonist moves towards a recognition of this falsity, and an openness to alterity.

#### 2.2.4. Death and Finitude

Importantly, both Nancy and Blanchot lay emphasis on the fact that the community called into being is a finite community of finite singularities; it is shaped by death and finitude. It is important then to return to the Heidegger and Levinas’s discussions on death and finitude from which these communitarian notions evolved. Heidegger maintains that the possibility of a distinctive disclosure lies in anxiety, for anxiety individualises. In so doing, it brings *Dasein* back from its ‘falling’ and reveals authenticity and inauthenticity as possibilities of its Being. Further, according to this position, it is specifically anxiety in the face of death that “frees one *from* ‘nullifying’ possibilities and lets one become free *for* authentic possibilities” ([1953]

2010, 239; emphasis in the original). The authentic response to the anxiety of death is said to be anticipation, which, Heidegger writes,

reveals to *Dasein* its lostness in the *they-self*, and brings it face to face with the possibility to be itself, primarily unsupported by concern that takes care, but to be itself in passionate anxious *freedom toward death*, which is free of the illusions of the *they*, factual, and certain of itself. ([1953] 2010, 225; emphasis in the original)

Levinas criticises Heidegger's concept of being-toward-death as too concerned with one's own death, and in contrast introduces the idea of being-for-beyond-my-death (Levinas [1989] 1996, 129). Levinas prioritises one's responsibility for the death of the Other who transcends one's own temporal existence, a move beyond the ontology and facticity of *Dasein*. He writes that "to renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work is to envisage this triumph in a time without me" ([1972] 1987, 92). In this sense, it is a movement towards transcendence. Fear for the other is no longer a fear of one's own death, but rather for all the violence one may cause simply by existing. In other words, it is the fear of occupying someone else's place with the *Da* of my *Dasein* (Levinas [1989] 1996, 131). As Maria Dimitrova explains, Levinas reveals how on meeting the other "I become aware of infinity and in this way I am made to realise my own finitude" (2010, 35).

Similarly, Nancy argues that the truth of Heidegger's investigation into being-towards-death is not that death reveals individual authenticity, but rather that death reveals Being-together, or Being-with. Whilst Heidegger insists that one's death is one's 'own most possibility', Nancy highlights how the ipseity of the individual is essentially dissolved in its death, revealing the *I* to be other than an individual subject (1991, 14). Further, he insists that "death is indissociable from community, for it is through death that community reveals itself – and reciprocally", as community is "the presentation to its members of their mortal truth" (Nancy 1991, 14-5). Importantly, what Nancy prioritises is not the significance of one's own

demise but, echoing Levinas, the significance of the death of others. Interestingly, Derrida, too, makes a similar observation when he writes “there is no friendship without this knowledge of finitude” (1989, 29). In accordance with this idea, Blanchot explains how,

[w]hat calls me most radically into question? Not my relation to myself as finite or as the consciousness of being before death or for death, but my presence in the proximity of another who by dying removes himself definitively, to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the Openness of a community (1988, 9).

Community, which is always a community of mortals, and a community of others, is thus said to be revealed through the death of others (Nancy 1991, 15). This is why the community called into being is said to be necessarily a finite community of finite singularities. Levinas’s philosophy is thus removed of its transcendental element (although as we shall see, transcendence in this sense is not necessarily at odds with Nancy and Blanchot’s insistence on immanent dispersal). Moreover, these reflections also connect to a further aspect of Nancy and Blanchot’s depiction of the inoperative or unavowable community: the impossibility of making a work out of, or on, death.

### 2.2.5. The Operative Community and Autoimmunity

It is useful here to clarify Nancy’s determination of the operative community, in order to later distinguish it from the inoperative community. The operative community insists on commonality, immanence (in terms of self-enclosure) and communal fusion. In Nancy’s words, “the fully realised person of the individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person” (1991, 13); a person devoid of specificity and alterity. The result of the operative community is thus the aggressive purging of extraneous elements and difference. Jacques Derrida refers to

this principle of sacrificial self-destruction in terms of the concept of ‘autoimmunity’, which he describes as “that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, ‘itself’ works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its ‘own’ immunity” (Borradori 2003, 94; emphasis in the original).

Immunity is the law which oversees our own biological defences, and as we know, the very same thing that protects us is also something that destroys. What we cannot protect ourselves against is our own defence systems. When immunity begins to attack itself is when it is said to be an autoimmune response. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida describes how the living ego, too, is autoimmune:

To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within ... it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once *for itself and against itself*. (1994, 177; emphasis in the original)

Thus, it is not difficult to see how this logic works at the level of the individual, the community, and the nation – and this is something we see exemplified across Anna Burns’s oeuvre (though most prominently in *Little Constructions* (2007)). One example given by Derrida of the principle of autoimmunity are actions taken by America’s administration following the events of 9/11, whereby, under the guise of protecting liberal democratic freedoms, information was hidden, true intentions were disguised, and the very same freedoms were restricted (Borradori 2003, 86). Moreover, the very event itself may be understood as an example of autoimmune logic, for the terrorists themselves were trained to fly in the States, and used US planes, bombs, cell phones and computers. Derrida describes this response as “a Cold War in the head” (Borradori 2003, 92). A more recent example would be governmental and social responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, writing at the height of the pandemic in 2020, Kim



Worthington draws attention to the “growing public discontent” with policies that limit personal freedoms, whereby the policies were depicted as “worse than the disease itself” (2021, 212). Protesters were seen holding what he describes as “chilling” messages with an overtly biological theme: “sacrifice the weak” and “natural immunity” (2021, 212). Something Worthington underscores, however, is that any silencing of such protests would appear to be “tantamount to denying one the cornerstones of liberal democracy, the (autoimmune) right to self-critique” (2021, 212).

In his analysis of the concept of autoimmunity, Willaim Mitchell draws attention to what he describes as the “bipolar character” of the foundational metaphor of the body politic – that is, its reversibility (2007, 282). According to Mitchell, the politics of the body and body politics cannot be discussed in isolation. Interesting, he explains how, contrary to intuition, the metaphor originated not in a biological context, but in a socio-political one – indeed, the Latin *immunitas* refers to a legal exemption. Perhaps more interesting still is how immunology utilises numerous terms from political discourse: “invaders and defenders, hosts and parasites, natives and aliens, and of borders and identities that must be maintained” (2007, 282). Mitchell claims that the result of this bi-polar metaphor is that a situation is produced “in which there is *no literal meaning*, nothing but the resonances between two images, one bio-medical, the other political” (282; emphasis in the original). This recognition is crucial for understanding a way out, so to speak, of autoimmunity. Indeed, Mitchell references Derrida’s insistence that “a mutation *will have* to take place” (Borradori 2003, 106; cited in Mitchell 2007, 283; emphasis in the original). As Mitchell himself puts it, “[i]n other words, we have something to learn here. Preestablished certainties are exactly the wrong medicine” (2007, 283).

In the chapters to come, I discuss the oppressiveness, patriarchy, constant fear, communal policing and kangaroo courts portrayed in the communities in which Burns’s novels are set as clear examples of autoimmunity. Moreover, across her entire oeuvre we see this

autoimmune logic equally at play in the characters' own psyches, whereby the barriers they put up to try and protect themselves from their darkest external realities become not self-protective, but self-destructive. In the words of our protagonist in *Milkman*: "I'd been an active player, a contributing element, a major componential in the downfall of myself" (2018, 178).

#### 2.2.6. The Inoperative Community

Whilst the operative community insists on commonality and imminence, the inoperative community – which is always elective – is founded on alterity and exposure. It is described as a community of those who have nothing in common except the truth of their own mortality. As Nancy writes, "finitude *co-appears* or *compears* and can only *compear*" (1991, 28; emphasis in the original). Moreover, as Jean-Pol Madou elaborates, "the community is the only place where the infinity of alterity responds to the call of finitude" (1998, 65). The non-belonging of the inoperative community corresponds with Derrida's use of the expression 'I am not one of the family', which is said to stand for the

condition not only for being singular and other, but also for entering into relation with the singularity and alterity of others. When someone is one of the family, not only does he lose himself in the herd, but he loses the others as well; the others become simply places, family functions, or places or functions in the organic totality that constitutes a group, school, nation or community of subjects speaking the same language. (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 27)

Where the operative community relies on bonds found in "the glorification of the earth, of blood, or even race" (Blanchot 1988, 46), the inoperative community embraces non-belonging, difference and singularity. This distinction is especially relevant if we return to the context of Irish and Northern Irish identity and community. For instance, Declan Kiberd highlights how, in the early twentieth century,

two kinds of freedom were available to the Irish: the return to a past, pre-colonial Gaelic identity, still yearning for expression if long-denied, or the reconstruction of a national identity, beginning from first principles all over again. The first discounted much that has happened, for good as well as ill, during centuries of occupation; the second was even more exacting, since it urged people to ignore other aspects of their past too. (1995, 286)

Thus, the choice was, to some extent, between the “glorification of the earth, of blood, or even race” or a move towards a dangerous reconstruction of identity that may indeed be understood in Heideggerian terms. With this in mind, the *Northern* Irish identity was subsequently constructed in a space between two terms: between difference – in the sense of *not* being Irish according to either of these determinations – and belonging – in the sense of belonging to the United Kingdom. Interestingly, the very same demarcations of identity are equally what define the divided communities in the North. Whilst belonging is seen as that which unites a community from the inside, difference is understood as that which determines its borders – there is no space for difference *within* the boundary lines. This tension between belonging and non-belonging in communities is a central theme in Burns’s novels. We are frequently met with characters whose desire to belong, together with the fear of the consequences of not belonging, is so deeply ingrained and internalised that it prevents them from even imagining the possibility of forming any other kinds of bonds. There are, however, fleeting moments of hope to be found scattered throughout the books that point towards a possible reconstruction of community.

Building on this idea of non-belonging, and returning to the theme of finitude, Blanchot makes a parallel between the inoperative community and what he calls the unworked community – a community that refuses to exploit death. According to this position, making a work on death – by mystifying it or making claims to teleology – allows for death to lose, in Nancy’s words, “the senseless meaning that it ought to have – and that it has, obstinately”

(1991, 14). Death should not be considered in any way a productive or operative project. As one is exposed to the finitude of the other, what is recognised is simply the contingency of death, demystified. Interestingly, Giorgio Agamben draws our attention to the modern state's resistance to such communities; he explains how "[w]hat the State cannot tolerate in any way ... is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging (even in the form of a simple presupposition)" (2003, 85). Again, this sentiment is echoed throughout Burns's novels wherein we witness how so long as deaths are manageable – that is, when they are about 'The Cause' or 'The Border' – they have very little effect on the community. However, when confronted with deaths that the community cannot comprehend from within the given rhetoric, what results is a certain unsettling feeling amongst community members. Interestingly, there is even a moment in *Milkman* (2018) when a confrontation with the meaningless of death brings the otherwise heavily divided community together, if only for a moment.

#### 2.2.7. Hospitality

As highlighted thus far, the inoperative community is distinguished from the operative community in its openness to others, or to the Other, which is contrasted with the operative community's desire for absolute imminence. To be open to alterity – to the 'outside' – requires hospitality. This said, it is important to recall the proximity of the other. As Mike Marias notes, and in line with Levinas, "the other is not just community's outsider, but its insider, one's neighbour. Put differently, the neighbour is a stranger, just as the stranger is a neighbour" (2021, 186).

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida contrasts unconditional hospitality (an openness to alterity without limitations) with what he calls domestic hospitality. Accordingly, domestic hospitality means to "welcome ... with anxiety and the desire to exclude the stranger, to invite the stranger without accepting him or her" (1994, 216-7). This kind of hospitality could be described as a

kind of tolerance (and we may recall here how Heidegger, too, depicts positive forms of concern as governed by tolerance ([1953] 2010, 119)). Interestingly, Derrida defines tolerance not as a *condition* for hospitality, but rather as its *limits*. He writes, “[i]f I think I am being hospitable because I am tolerant, it is because I wish to limit my welcome” (Borradori 2003, 127). Derrida also highlights how tolerance has “biological, geneticist or organicist connotations” – for foreigners, or those who do not share our language, culture or customs, are accepted only up to a certain threshold. It is a limited, or *conditional* form of hospitality, and the kind we are certainly most acquainted with on personal, communal and political levels. What results is the condition that foreign guests strictly follow the written and unwritten cultural and political rules that govern the host’s way of live. In Derrida’s word, “[t]olerance is a conditional, circumspect, careful hospitality” (Borradori 2003, 128).

Key to understanding domestic hospitality as such is Derrida’s discussions of the concepts ‘guest’ and ‘parasite’. In *Of Hospitality*, he explains how

hospitality, reception, the welcome offered have to be submitted to a basic and limiting jurisdiction. Not all new arrivals are received as guests if they don’t have the benefit of the right to hospitality or the right of asylum, etc. Without this right, a new arrival can only be introduced ‘in my home,’ in the host’s ‘at home’, as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, 59)

Although Derrida does not mention Heidegger explicitly, I suggest that his critique of ‘domestic’ or ‘conditional’ hospitality may be understood as a critique of the Heideggerian drive to bring the other into the realm of one’s own understanding – into *my* world, *my* house, or *my* language (which, as he so famously claims, is the “house of Being”, and where Being “dwells” (1978, 217). Equally, the imagery of the host and the parasite reinforces the biological metaphor of autoimmunity as previously discussed.

In contrast to domestic hospitality, what Derrida describes as “pure and unconditional hospitality, hospitality itself” (Borradori 2003, 127-8) is not merely *tolerant* of the invited foreigner, but rather,

opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited, to whomever arrives as an absolutely foreign visitor, as a new arrival, nonidentifiable and unforeseeable, in short, wholly other. I would call this a hospitality of visitation rather than invitation. (Borradori 2003, 127-8)

The use of the word *visitation* instead than invitation is not incidental, and, as I shall explore in greater depth later, is integral to understanding Derrida’s work on hauntology – for the spectre is to be understood as both a *revenant* and an *arrivant*. According to Derrida, whilst the invited guest is both expected and on time, visitation “implies the arrival of someone who is not expected, who can show up at any time” (1999,70). In *Aporias* Derrida elaborates that unconditional hospitality concerns

the absolute arrivant, who is not even a guest. He surprises the host – who is not yet a host or an inviting power – enough to call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies. (1993, 34)

We begin to see how the very organicist notions that found our conditions for domestic hospitality and tolerance are called into question by the absolute arrivant. In *Specters of Marx*, the immigrant is discussed as an example of the absolute arrivant. The immigrant, according to Derrida,

belongs to a time of disjunction ... a new thinking of borders, a new experience of the house, the home and the economy. ... One should not rush to make of the clandestine

immigrant an illegal alien or, what always risks coming down to the same thing, to domesticate him. To neutralize him through naturalization. To assimilate him so as to stop frightening oneself (making oneself fear) with him. He is not part of the family, but one should not send him back, once again, him too, to the border. (1994, 174)

Importantly, Derrida insists that pure hospitality demands we welcome the “nonidentifiable” other prior to any specification – echoing Levinas, the absolute other is both faceless and nameless. Yet, for the alterity of the other to be respected, we are required to recognise the other in their singularity. Michael Naas draws our attention to what he terms “a negotiation between seemingly contradictory imperatives” inherent to Derrida’s depiction of unconditional hospitality:

the imperative to unconditionally welcome the other before any knowledge, recognition, or conditions, indeed before any names or identities, and the imperative to effectively welcome someone in particular and not some indefinite anyone, someone with a name, an identity, and an origin. (2005, 9)

Accordingly, it is also important to recognise the singularity of the event, which is so closely tied to the singularity of the arrivant. Indeed, the singularity of the event requires a singular response. As Derrida writes, “hospitality must be so inventive, adjusted to the other, and to the welcoming of the other, that each experience of hospitality must invent a new language” (Derrida 1999, 101; quoted in Naas 2005,10).

This idea of “inventing a new language” links our discussion of hospitality with the role of writing and analysis, and the approach that I take to reading the novels of Anna Burns in the following chapters. Relevant here is Derek Attridge’s depiction of “hospitable reading” in *The Work of Literature*, whereby the singular response to the singular event of literature allows the alterity of a text to hold communal and ethical significance (2017, 280-305). Indeed, Naas

insists that it is not simply the case that deconstruction reflects upon hospitality, but rather it is “a thinking that *is* hospitality” (2005, 11: emphasis in the original). According to Naas, deconstruction necessarily remains unconditionally hospitable to something – be it Justice, the Other, the arrivant or the event – without trying to level it down or pull it into a certain world of understanding, in other words, without trying to make it *mine* in a Heideggerian sense.

Derrida is, no doubt, wise to the potential dangers of such an unconditional hospitality; he underscores how “suspending or suppressing the immunity that protects me from the other might be nothing short of life-threatening” (Borradori 2003, 129). This potential violence is very much connected to the dissymmetry or nonreciprocity of this relation, and is something also apparent in the Levinasian ethical encounter, which I shall address momentarily. Whilst Derrida acknowledges the fact that hospitality thus defined would be “practically impossible to live”, organise or write into law (Borradori 2003, 129), the point he is trying to make is that the thought of, or an *experience* of, pure hospitality is necessary for understanding the concept of hostility in any form. Without such an experience, “we would not even have the idea of the other, of the alterity of the other ... We would not even have the idea of love or of ‘living together (*vivre ensemble*)’ with the other in a way that is not a part of some totality or ‘ensemble’” (Borradori 2003, 129). That is, we would not have an idea of *community*.

#### 2.2.8. Asymmetry, Communion and Communication

From here, it is important to return to the concepts of asymmetry and nonreciprocity which define Levinas’s ethical encounter, Nancy’s inoperative community, Blanchot’s unavowable community, and are equally central to Derrida’s understanding of unconditional hospitality. For both Heidegger and hermeneuticists such as Gadamer, the relation with the other involves a phenomenological reduction of the other’s alterity in the attempt to achieve an anonymous



objectivity.<sup>14</sup> According to Levinas, however, transcendence means a movement towards the Other as non-identical, and requires a parting from the contingent world into which one has been thrown. It is for this reason that the Other cannot be considered as a mere reflection of one's own self-consciousness (Levinas [1989] 1996, 132). Any attempted relation based on equivalence or reciprocity, or a sublation of this dissymmetry, equates to mystification. The Other appears from beyond the horizons of one's world; it is for this reason that the Other is described as transcendent. Ethical encounters, therefore, take place on borderlines – as we shall see, this too is a recurring theme in Burns's narratives.

Since the Other is outside every reference and cannot be recognised within one's own world, sensibility – contrary to Husserl's phenomenology – is to be understood not as a relation of knowing, but of proximity. For Levinas, we no longer respond to the call of *abstract* Being, but to the inescapable call of the *human face* of the other. Levinas depicts the philosophical reflection of the project of ontology as removing the transcendental ego with the aim of grasping non-intentional lived experience (Levinas [1989] 1996, 127). In contrast, the non-intentional *pre-reflective* ethical consciousness is described as homeless: "One comes not into the world but into question" (Levinas [1989] 1996, 129). Similarly, Georges Bataille depicts how "[t]he sufficiency of each being is endlessly contested by every other. Even the look that expresses love and admiration comes to me as a doubt concerning my reality" (1985, 172). Both Nancy and Blanchot, building on Levinas's ethical encounter, put a similar emphasis on the dissymmetry of the inoperative or unavowable community. For Blanchot, however, the nonreciprocity is experienced not as an ethical demand, but as what he describes as a "pure movement of loving" (Blanchot 1988, 411).

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<sup>14</sup> See Gadamer (1989).

The significance of this dissymmetry is particularly underscored in Nancy and Blanchot's discussions of the concepts of communion and communication. In the drive for absolute immanence, operative communities engulf singularities within the totality, with the result being the violent purging of alterity. Blanchot describes this drive for immanence as "a tendency towards a communion" or a "fusion" of its members that results in the illusion of "a unity" or "supra-individuality" (1988, 6-7). In contrast, Nancy emphasises how *being-in-common* is not a common being – it is revealed not in fusion or communion but in dislocation. It is for this reason that Blanchot describes the inoperative community as a negative community, or a community of those who have no community (1988, 24). This view is also echoed by Agamben when he writes that "[w]hat hampers communication is communicability itself; humans are separated by what unites them" (1993, 81). Furthermore, the communication that stems from this separation should neither be understood as a bond nor a dialogue. As Agamben explains, "[t]aking-place, the communication of singularities in the attribute of extension, does not unite them in essence, but scatters them in existence" (1993, 18; emphasis in the original). Similarly, Nancy explains how communication lies in the between "you *and* I", with the *and* in this expression implying neither union nor juxtaposition, but exposition. What is revealed through communication is the alterity and ungraspability of the Other (Nancy 1991, 29; emphasis in the original), explained by Blanchot in terms of the "principle of incompleteness" (1988, 5). This principle does not entail that there is a lack in need of completion, but rather – and again echoing Levinas – that one puts oneself into question (Blanchot 1988, 5). As Blanchot explains, "[i]nsufficiency cannot be derived from a model of sufficiency. It is not looking for what may put an end to it, but for the excess of a lack that grows ever deeper even as it fills itself up" (1988, 8). This principle is key to understanding Blanchot's depiction of the community of lovers.

### 2.2.9. The Community of Lovers

Blanchot reminds us that, "[f]or the Greeks, according to Phaedrus, Love is nearly as ancient as Chaos" (1988, 40). He introduces the idea of the community of lovers as an occurrence of the unavowable community, questioning,

[h]ow not to search that space where, for a time span lasting from dusk to dawn, two beings have no other reason to exist than to expose themselves totally to each other – totally, integrally, absolutely – so that their common solitude may appear not in front of their own eyes but in front of ours, yet, how not to look there and how not to rediscover ‘the negative community, the community of those who have no community’? (1988, 49)

As we saw with the ethical encounter, the community of lovers is experienced as a rupture demanding both response and responsibility. Nancy states that as community is not based on lack, love cannot be said to complete community, but rather, as it takes place on its limits, it exposes community in its unworking (1991, 38). Thus, it becomes clear that for the community of lovers to be inoperative, love must not be understood as a communion but rather as exposure. The rupture is thence experienced as a splitting of singularities in this shared exposure. The dislocation of love is described by Blanchot as a “strangeness”, through which each becomes estranged both from themselves and from each other in their intimacy (1988, 47). Just as the ethical encounter is ungraspable, the community of lovers is described as a moment which neither the terms “love” nor “desire” can fully encapsulate, and in which two or more beings are torn from their facticity and thrown towards each other (1988, 47). As Madou elaborates,

[p]assion and the Law, while in no way identical, both reveal an infinite attention to the Other [*l’Autre*], an attraction for an other [*autrui*]. This attraction seems to be even

more irresistible inasmuch as an other cannot be reached [*rejoint*]. So it goes – both for love and for friendship. (1998, 62).

The parallel between the ethical encounter and the community of lovers thus seems clear, yet the distinction is somewhat blurred. Indeed, Blanchot writes that “love may be the stumbling block for ethics, unless love simply puts ethics into question by imitating it” (1988, 49). What Blanchot seeks to explore is that which Levinas omitted – namely whether passion defies all laws (1988, 43). Levinas insists that ethics is anterior to ontology, and thus anterior to law, for it calls one into a question of responsibility for the Other which can neither be reduced nor regulated through language or understanding. Blanchot goes further to describe a “lethal leap” avowed by love, whereby the passions are evoked and wherein the pull is even stronger than in the ethical response (1988, 44). It is neither a “leap in” nor a “leap ahead” in a Heideggerian sense, but rather an inescapable and eternally incomplete leap towards an Other who can never be grasped. Importantly, Blanchot is not equating ethics with passion, nor the ethical leap with the leap of love, but rather he suggests that, in its excess, the lethal leap of love appears to “eclipse” all others (1988, 44).

As has already been discussed, an important element of the ethical encounter, and one which links the ethical with passion, is passivity. Levinas describes how through this encounter one is made an irreplaceable and inescapable “hostage” to the other ([1968] 1987, 133). A connection may be made here with Derrida’s depiction of unconditional hospitality, for “pure passivity” is defined by Levinas as a responsibility for the death of others, and is neither reciprocal nor dialogical [1968] 1987, 135). Interestingly, Sheri Hoem highlights how Blanchot, too, privileges passivity in much of his writing (1996, 55). Moreover, and again in a similar vein to Levinas, Blanchot describes the community of lovers as a consensual “prison community” (1988, 49). The danger of the move to “pure” or radical passivity, then, is violence. For Levinas, radical passivity – expressed in the passive form of command *me* rather than ‘here

I am' – requires one to answer even to their persecutor. Derrida for his part describes how, “the witness-witness, the one who sees, is in principle passive, as passive as the camera that he can never be” (Derrida 1995b, 34). The nonreciprocity and passivity of this relation is thus equally relevant to Derrida’s discussion of the ‘visor effect’ in relation to hauntology (1994, 6), which is something I shall return to in the second part of this chapter, and will prove key to my analysis of a certain suit of armour in Burns’s *Little Constructions* (2007) in chapter four.

#### 2.2.10. Violence, Desire, Love and Ecstasy

What unconditional hospitality, the ethical encounter and the community of lovers have in common then, is an unexpected potential for violence. This being said, Deborah Achtenberg identifies how Levinas overcomes this potential violence through a recapitulation of our understanding of desire (2014, 32), which I claim links well to Blanchot’s principle of incompleteness (1988, 5). According to Levinas, desire, which is metaphysical, is distinguished from need, which is ontological. Where need reflects the will to self-completion, desire is directed away from the self towards absolute alterity, and so the Other can never be located within the self. Levinas goes so far as to describe how, in desire, one is hollowed out by the Other (1969, 4). The dislocation of the Other from the self is something that is maintained in desire thus understood. As Levinas writes, “desire for the other, sociality, is born in a being that lacks nothing, or, more exactly, it is born over and beyond all that can be lacking or that can satisfy him” ([1972] 1987, 94). One’s own needs or interests are not at play in this opening responsiveness and responsibility. Love is thus understood by Levinas not as a will to unity but to plurality. Importantly, physical violence is overcome in the ethical since the rupture of this movement is described in terms of an *essential* violence in which one is changed not through destruction but through an opening (Achtenberg 2014, 36). In the words of Blanchot, it is experienced in “knowing he can kill her, but choosing to caress her” (1988, 55). As will become evident in the chapters that follow, whilst most relations between characters in Burns’s novels

are by no means inoperative, in chapter five, I explore how this tension between violence and love is unravelled in the portrayal of maybe-boyfriend and chef's secret homosexual relationship in *Milkman* (2018).

Reflecting on Achtenberg's analysis, I suggest that the apparent tension lies in the movement from ecstatic projection in the Heideggerian sense – which is also the sense in which Nancy claims that community *is* ecstasy (1991, 6) – to the ecstasy felt in passion. According to Nancy, Bataille's lovers seemed unable to escape the opposition of private and public, and so his account presents a subject which “ends up being engulfed alone in its own ecstasy” (1991, 36). Ecstasy in the sense of ecstatic projection, however, is what dislocates the lovers from each other and themselves so that even when the love is shared, the total union of one with the other is revealed as an impossibility. Blanchot describes this element as “the *lie* of that union which always takes place by not taking place” (1988, 49; emphasis in the original).

Interesting, a similar account of love is well illustrated by feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray in what may be interpreted as a warning made against ecstatic fusion, or ontological communion. Irigaray is responding to the commonplace idea, grounded in antiquity though the work of Plato and Aristotle, that love results in ‘oneness’. In contrast, what Irigaray argues for is the necessity to keep an essential distance between oneself and the other in sexual relations, in order that the other's alterity be respected (2001, 18-9). Such is a clear echo of the Levinasian recognition that the Other can never be fully grasped, can never be *mine*. According to Irigaray, this recognition is “the necessary foundation for a new ontology, a new ethics, and a new politics, in which the other is recognized as other and not as the same: bigger or smaller than I, or at best my equal” (1995, 19). We may conclude, then, that ecstasy felt in desire is what causes the drive for fusion; the danger is allowing this desire to result in the ontological communion with, or consumption of, an other's subjectivity. As Nancy puts it, “ecstasy comes at a price: at the risk of being nothing more than an erotic or

fascist work of death, ecstasy passes through the inscription of finitude and its communication” (1991, 39). This notion of ontological communion or consumption is also a recurrent theme across Burns’s entire oeuvre but will be particularly relevant in my analysis of the character Amelia’s traumatic experiences of sexual assault in *No Bones* (2001) in chapter three, and the character John Doe’s consumption of his murder victims in *Little Constructions* (2007) in chapter four.

As previously mentioned, in contrast to communion, the community of lovers – as an occurrence of the inoperative community – is founded on communication. A significant difference between philosophies of ethics and those of ontology or hermeneutics lies in ethics prioritizing the ‘saying’ over the ‘said’. The ‘saying’, according to Levinas, is beyond all experience (1998, 71). The ethical subject is opened to the other prior to any utterance – it is beyond the ontological, as one does not try to grasp the other and pull them into one’s own world of understanding. The ‘said’, that is, written word and determinations, is described as insincere and contaminated, and as forming a curtain between me and the other (West 2010, 185). Whilst I largely disagree with Levinas’s dismissal of written word (something I shall explore at greater length in chapter six in reference to Derrida’s dismissal of speech act theory) I suggest that his insistence on the priority of the ‘saying’ to some extent resonates with Blanchot’s recognition of the unavowable in the community of lovers – for it maintains a “secret behind which hides execrable excesses” (1988, 47). Indeed, Blanchot insists that the community of lovers cannot be named or defined, but rather should be understood as a movement “that attracts the beings in order to throw them towards each other ... according to their body or according to their heart and thought, by tearing them from ordinary society” (1988, 47). What communication reveals is the ungraspability of alterity.

Something that strikes us on reading Burns’s fiction is the extent to which moments of true communication are difficult to find, with many of the stories revolving around the absence

of communication, miscommunication or spiralling rumours. Noone really says what they mean, and most conversations appear to take place primarily for the purpose of trying to decipher what each other might be hiding. In *Little Constructions*, this absence of communication is drilled home when we are told of the character Jotty's therapy sessions during which, for over a year, bar discussions of dates and payments, not a single word is shared.

#### 2.2.11. From Dusk to Dawn: Immanence and Transcendence

The final tension to be explored between the ethical encounter and the community of lovers rests on an understanding of immanence and transcendence. It is clear that for Levinas, the ethical encounter is transcendent in that ethical actions are directed beyond one's death. Levinas insists that "there is a vulgarity and a baseness in an action that is conceived only for the immediate" and further that "[t]o act for far-off things ... is no doubt, the summit of nobility" ([1972] 1987, 93). In contrast, the community of lovers is said to last "from dusk to dawn" (1988, 49). Both Nancy and Blanchot stress the transitory nature of the inoperative community, experienced in its ability to dissolve itself as if it never existed. It is, in Blanchot's words, "eternally temporary and always already deserted" (1988, 53). In so far as it involves an openness to alterity and a movement towards the other beyond the limits of one's own horizons, the inoperative community insists upon transcendence. But transcendence in this sense is neither mystical nor futural. In so far as it is a finite community founded upon the finitude of its so-called members, the inoperative community insists upon immanence – it has no future nor communal history, and cannot be projected in time. However, immanence thus understood is distinct from the self-enclosure of the operative community. Importantly, the transitory nature of the community also links back to the inoperative community's resistance to violence. In Nancy's words, "[c]ommunity is ... resistance itself: namely, resistance to



immanence ... (resistance to the communion of everyone or to the exclusive passion of one or several: to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity)” (1991, 35).

Whilst few examples can be found in Burns’s novels of inoperative communities or communities of lovers, a reflection on the transitory nature of these relationships allows us to identify fleeting moments that may indeed be interpreted as such. Most of these moments, however, are to be found in just one novel – *Milkman* (2018). This being said, I hope to demonstrate how Burns’s critique of the operative communities itself allows for a critical space to open up wherein a community of readers may be able to envision other types of bonds. Also of note is how the temporality of the inoperative community, together with its resistance to mystification, very much aligns with Derrida’s depiction of the ‘democracy to come’ as necessarily unrealised, and thus forever differed (Derrida 1994, 81). I shall return to this idea in part two.

## **2.3. Secrecy**

### **2.3.1 The Secret in Literature**

In his work, *Transmission and the Individual Remix*, novelist and literary theorist Tom McCarthy begins with a reference to a 1975 German electronic pop song. He does so because, in his words, “here, as elsewhere in my writing, I have nothing to say” (2012, loc.39).<sup>15</sup> This statement holds a certain resonance with Blanchot when he reminds us of Wittgenstein’s recognition, present in its absence in the *Tractatus* (1990), that one has to speak in order to be able to remain silent (1988, 56). A close reading of a text is less, then, about uncovering intended meanings which writers have carefully scattered beneath the surface, and more a case of “listening in on listening itself” (McCarthy 2012, loc. 39). Moreover, McCarthy traces the

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<sup>15</sup> This publication is without page numbers as it was published digitally. Loc. refers to the location in the Kindle edition.

origins of literature effectively back to nothing, or a “blind spot off the map and out of time”, yet he maintains that its “retrieval is both impossible *and* the sole true task of any good writer ... an unsolvable quandary that leads Blanchot to tie writing to the act of suicide” (2012, loc. 221; emphasis in the original).

From this observation we may conclude that both secrecy and silence play an important role in literature on a number of levels. First, as Roland Barthes highlights in reference to what he calls the ‘hermeneutic code’, the secret dimension to a text is related to its formal properties (1974, 19). As McCarthy explains, the hermeneutic code is comprised of all the parts of a text which “constitute an enigma and lead to its solution”: this includes its inventiveness, alterity, sense of strangeness and ungraspability (2021, loc. 203) – interestingly, all concepts which equally apply to the inoperative community. Moreover, Derrida describes the form of a text as the secret that “we *speak* of but cannot say” (Derrida 2001, 58; emphasis in the original); thus the form of a text – like the inoperative community – is unavowable.

In literature, enigma, secrets and gaps are often used as textual devices, with secrets resolved, partially resolved or ultimately unresolved as the reader progresses through the text. From this perspective, there is, it seems, a secretive dimension to all literary works. This claim is supported by Attridge, who writes of ergodic texts that,

part of the secret, a secret on the surface, not one that can be uncovered: ... is an essential and obvious aspect of a work’s singularity; it plays an important part in the reader’s experience; and yet it remains irreducible to meaning. ... It takes place every time the work is read as a non-meaningful event – or, to be more precise, as an event whose meanings remain undecidable and inexhaustible. (2021, 30)

Moreover, according to Derrida, literary works open a space which allows us to understand the fundamental quality of the secret as such, in that the logic of the secret closely resembles the

logic or structure of narrative. This structure involves the double process of concealing and unfolding. In accordance with this idea, Hannu Poutiainen describes the process as the “double-dealing of the voice. Addressed to the audience, these words reveal; addressed to the reader, they reveal that to reveal is to conceal; and it is in the voice that this dissimulative revelation takes place” (2021, 165).

This being said, in “Passions”, Derrida stresses that the quality of the secret “*exceeds* the play of veiling/unveiling, dissimulation/revelation, night/day, forgetting/anamnesis” (1995a, 26; emphasis added). This claim connects with his depiction of the novel as a unique discourse in that it refuses to be fully penetrated, allowing for ‘unconditional’ or ‘absolute’ secrets: those that are never to be revealed nor resolved (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 57). As Attridge elaborates, “[w]e must banish ... any idea of the secret as a truth that is hidden but could be uncovered” (2021, 28). Indeed, in *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida describes the absolute secret again in terms that correspond with the unavowable of the inoperative community. He writes,

[i]f I am to share something, to communicate, objectify, thematize, the condition is that there be something non-thematizable, non-objectifiable, non-sharable. And this “something” is an absolute secret, it is the absolutum itself in the etymological sense of the term, i.e., that which is cut off from any bond, detached, and which cannot itself bind; it is the condition of any bond but it cannot bind itself to anything - this is the absolute, and if there is something absolute it is secret. (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 57)

Furthermore, according to Derrida, literature is the only discourse that tolerates the unconditional secret: it is a space that holds “the infinite power to keep undecidable and thus forever sealed the secret of what it says” (2006, 18).

Through its engagement with secrecy, literature is also said to be unique in its inexhaustible reserve of expanding meanings. For, as Derrida writes, “we never finish with this secret, we are never finished, there is no end” (2001, 58). Equally, in resisting interpretation, there lies the inevitable possibility of misinterpretation. For instance, whilst discussing the role of secrecy in *Tintin* comic books, McCarthy describes how within the stories, “narratives are bought and sold, stolen and substituted, or twisted out of shape until, turned inside out or back to front, they mutate into other narratives – even when no one is trying” (2011, loc. 184). As we shall see in the chapters to come, this is equally an apt description of the circulation and life of rumours in all the communities in which Burns’s novels are set, but especially those of *Little Constructions* (2007) and *Milkman* (2018). As the narrator of *Little Constructions* explains, “rumours and only rumours were the *lingua franca* of this town” (287; italics in the original).

Additionally – and again this is a distinguishing feature of Burns’s work – successful texts are said to be loaded with a certain reticence in the form of obstacles and misdirection. This idea is encapsulated in what Nicholas Royle terms the ‘cryptaesthetic resistance’ of a literary text (2014, 43). Royle defines several incorporated meanings within this term. Firstly,

[i]t is a compound that refers to the capacity of a literary work variously to combine the cryptic and the aesthetic, secrecy and the senses, hiddenness and beauty. What is happening in a literary text, and what is beautiful, sublime, or uncanny, is doubtless in some sense all on the surface; but what constitutes an event, an experience of the senses, or of the beautiful and so on, is never simply a given. The cryptaesthetic force of a work requires a reading or countersignature that responds to what is elliptical, oblique, hidden away even in the obvious. (2014, 48-9)

From this description, first of all, we are met with the idea that the act of reading a text is in a way an act of countersigning – an idea that is key to Derridean hauntology, and to which I shall return later in this chapter. Equally, though, in his use of the expression “hidden away in the

obvious”, Royle alludes to the idea of the purloined letter. The concept originates in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story of the same name ([1844] 1978), which sparked a serious debate both within psychoanalysis and literary criticism (see Muller and Richardson 1998). The unnamed narrator of Poe’s story details a letter with potentially explosive content which is stolen from the Queen’s residence; an imitation of the letter is thence placed where it lay – in plain sight – on the Queen’s desk. The letter’s thief – a mathematician but also a poet – then himself hides the letter, again in plain sight, this time in his own office. It is turned inside out to conceal both its contents and its seal. Whilst the police are unable to find the letter as they search in hidden places, the detective, paying heed to the thief’s poetic side, discovers the letter in a public space – in a card holder – and just as the thief did in the Queen’s residence, substitutes the letter with a fake. The contents of the original letter are never revealed.

Relevant to our current purposes are both Lacan’s interpretation of the story ([1966] 1988), and Derrida’s deconstruction of Lacan’s account (1987). Lacan focusses on four essential features of the letter in Poe’s story: its invisibility, its nullability, its indivisibility, and its prolonged or diverted itinerary. We are met with the conclusion that the letter stands for the signifier-without-a-signified, that remains unread yet retransmitted, and “will always arrive at its destination” (Lacan [1966] 1988, 53). Additionally, he places an emphasis on the possessive hold that the letter seems to have on anyone in its possession (something he claims is expressed in the story through femininity). In his critique of Lacan’s reading, Derrida argues both against Lacan’s quest for truth within the letter (which he reduces to castration – a truth that is fully present in its absence) (1987, 469) – as well as his insistence that it will always arrive where it is destined. The letter, according to Derrida, “does *not always* arrive at its destination and since this belongs to its structure, it can be said that it never really arrives there, and that when it arrives, its possibly-not-arriving torments it with an internal divergence” (1987, 489; emphasis in the original). Derrida dismisses the notion that the *truth* of the story can be revealed; that the

letter is indivisible. In contrast, he suggests that there is always writing “before the letter” and so the letter can only be considered as part of a chain of letters that never arrive where they were destined (1967, 54). Communication, then, is to be considered not a transmission of truth or certainty, but rather an infinite “play of possibilities” (Derrida [1972] 2004, 76). Equally pertinent here is Royle’s depiction of the novel as a “bizarre but deeply complex ‘tale of visual punning’”, whereby

[t]he visual would have to do not only with what is recounted or represented (places, characters, events, experiences), but also with the words and blanks on the page (*the play of the letter*, spacing, formal disposition and division of text, homonymy, anaphora, echo and refrain, strange resemblances, repetitions and doublings of all sorts, both ‘within’ the text and in the intertextual world beguilingly ‘outside’ it). (2021, 38; emphasis added)

These observations will be especially relevant when it comes to my analysis of tablets girl’s hidden letters in *Milkman* (2018) in chapter five, but equally with regards to my study of Derridean ‘free-play’ in chapter six (Derrida 1988).

Interestingly, and very much in line with Derrida’s reading of Poe, Royle also connects the cryptaesthetic resistance of a text with the biological concept ‘protective mimicry’, claiming that it pertains to the literary works ability to “immunize itself against being simply received, assimilated, appropriated” which, he claims, is “intimately linked to the idea of the secret as what does not belong” (2021, 44). This element allows the reticence of a text to align with both the non-belonging of inoperative community, but also with questions of immunity.

There is a clear application of Royle’s depiction of the first meaning of cryptaesthetic resistance to Burns’s entire oeuvre. In *No Bones* (2001), for example, the reader may struggle to decipher events from delusions, characters from spectres, and lived trauma from traumatic

projections, while being repeatedly faced with the task of piecing together storylines from absences, doublings and repetitions. Whilst in *Milkman* (2018), the story is told in part through what is not told, and remains in many respect a story of that which did not happen. Interestingly, these observations also connect *Milkman* with Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death* (1994), and in particular Derrida's comments regarding the debate as to whether or not the narrated events really took place (Derrida 2001, 74). As Derrida explains:

In a way, it is not necessary to have faced a firing squad (and survived) to think and to say the possibility of the impossible. And yet there was testimony, because there was a dated event. But this event is a nonevent; in this event, Blanchot tells us that, ultimately, nothing happened. (2001, 74)

Indeed, building on this idea, J. Hillis Miller describes how literature “depends on the possibility of detaching language from its firm embeddedness in a social or biographical context and allowing it to play freely as fiction” (2002, 60). Such reinforces the connection to be found between the cryptaesthetic resistance of a text and the undecidability and irreducibility of Derridean ‘free-play’ (Derrida 1988, 116), which in turn connects both with the role of ironic language in literature. I return to this idea in chapter six wherein I suggest, in reference to Burns's novella *Mostly Hero* (2019), that the contingency and undecidability of irony and humour allows for an ethical discourse to emerge from the margins.

The second meaning Royle gives of the cryptaesthetic points towards the notion of the psychoanalytic concept of the crypt – a concept that shall prove paramount to my reading of Burns, and to which I shall return momentarily in reference to Derrida's foreword to Abraham and Torok's re-visitation of Freud's notorious ‘Wolfman’ (1986a). The final sense given to the term aligns the meaning of cryptaesthesia with a kind of telepathy (2014, 49). This idea ties in closely with the way in which Burns's fiction explores tensions surrounding the apparent binaries of inside/outside, private/public and psychological/political. Equally, there is a certain

sense in which the formal properties of both *No Bones* (2001) and *Milkman* (2018) give the reader access to the protagonists' thoughts, and so the novel allows for a kind of telepathic reading. On the other hand, this image is somewhat reversed in *Little Constructions* (2007) where, whilst the borders are still blurred, the narrator appears *almost* capable of accessing the thoughts of the readers themselves. Nonetheless, this apparent accessibility is countered by the novels' resistance to interpretation brought about by Burns's complex writing style. In Derrida's words, "no border is guaranteed, inside or out" (Derrida 1979, 78).

Thus, Royle's depiction of cryptaesthetic resistance as a kind of telepathy also corresponds with the Derridean conception of the secret as being like a letter – at the same time both open and sealed (2008, 131). Accordingly, we may conclude with Derrida that "the readability of the text is structured by the unreadability of the secret ... by the inaccessibility of a certain intentional meaning" (1992, 152). Literature is thus a materiality that refuses to be penetrated. In the words of McCarthy, writing works by

[t]he scattering, the loss; the change coming from somewhere *else*, some point forever beyond reach or even designation, across a space of longing; the surge; coherence that's only made possible by incoherence; the receiving which is replay, repetition – backwards, forwards, inside-out or upside down, it doesn't matter. (2012, loc. 314)

Or as Miller suggests, reading consists of "crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane or partition dividing the sides" (1987, 7). Importantly, however, whilst the secret of literature is sealed in that it is impenetrable, it is at the same time something open. Indeed, it is not difficult to make a connection here between the revealing and concealing of the secret, the open structure of the text, and the openness of the inoperative community, which, as we know, is not formed on commonality and fusion but on difference and dislocation. In Derrida's words:



the secret of the secret ... doesn't consist in hiding *something*, in not revealing the truth of it, but in respecting the absolute uniqueness, the infinite separation of that which ties me or exposes me to the unique, to the one as to the other, to *the One as to the Other* (2008, 122-3; emphasis in the original)

### 2.3.2. Secrecy and Community

In addition to the correlation to be found between the dislocation of the inoperative community and the division of secrecy, there is also a space for secrecy within communities thus defined. The inoperative community allows both for secret sharing and secret keeping. Here, we are presented with the idea of non-belonging based on “the sharing of what is not shared” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 58). Indeed, non-homogenising communitarian bonds can be revealed in the secret as an example of ironic interrupted language. As a discourse that welcomes ironic language, this secret can be found in literature. With this in mind, in chapter six, I analyse a correspondence that may be found between the role of humour and irony in fiction and the rupture depicted in both ethical and communitarian encounters: a rupture I propose that may open up a space for non-homogenising communities to be brought into being.

The very fact that Nancy talks of the inoperative community as ‘un-working’, that Blanchot describes the community of lovers as ‘unavowable’, and that both depict it as a community of those who have no community, reveals the significance of both absence and secrecy in communitarian theory. It is not an anti-community, but to some extent a non-community, and one of “interruption, fragmentation, suspension” (Nancy 1991, 31). The idea that the community in question is a community of absence is equally reflected in Derrida’s objection to the use of the term ‘community’. He questions: “Why call it community? Just to conform to what certain of our friends have attempted to do, to Blanchot’s ‘unavowable’ community or Nancy’s ‘inoperative’ one? I have no qualms about these communities; my only question is, why call them communities?” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 25).

We begin to see how the community of those who have nothing in common is unavowable in that it cannot be grasped nor fully encapsulated in words. This element of secrecy links back to what Derrida refers to as the sharing of the ‘unconditional’ or ‘absolute’ secret. Importantly, he reiterates that it is a sharing not based on commonality, but on difference and dislocation. Derrida explains that,

[s]omehow, this secret that we speak of but are unable to say is, paradoxically, like good sense in Descartes, the best shared thing in the world; but it is the sharing of what is not shared: we know in common that we have nothing in common. (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 58)

Just as the unavowable community is inoperative, so too the purpose of a literary text lies in its un-working. As McCarthy says, for literature to have value, it must, “appreciate, with vertiginous exhilaration, the unique and ultra-paradoxical condition that’s at once its blessing and its curse: namely, that it only works because (as Blanchot so profoundly understood) it doesn’t work” (2012, loc. 232-44). Relevant here is Blanchot’s connection made between writing and death. Blanchot describes how,

[a] death, by definition, without glory, without consolation, without recourse, which no other disappearance can equal, except perhaps for that disappearance that inscribes itself in writing, when the work which is its drifting is from the onset the renunciation of *creating a work*, indicating only the space in which resounds, for all and for each, and thus for nobody, the always yet to come words of the unworking. (1988, 46)

Blanchot’s use of the expression “always yet to come” allows his depiction of literature as unworking to resonate with Derrida’s discussions regarding the role of secrecy in democracy, and the idea of the ‘democracy to come’. Derrida describes how “[a]lthough democracy ought to guarantee both the right to answer and the right not to answer, in fact it

guarantees neither the one nor the other” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 26). Democracy holds on to principles of freedom of speech but is increasingly swamped with one-sided mass media; it also requires the possibility of individual privacy, and yet demands an obligation to answer questions in the public place. Indeed, we are reminded how the refusal to answer in court can lead to imprisonment. As we shall see in my literary analysis of *Milkman* (2018) in chapter five, the absence of the right *not* to answer is in part the cause of middle sister’s ostracization and ‘beyond-the-pale’ status, for what bothers the community most is her silent refusal to answer their questions. Also relevant here is the community’s upset at the idea of the character Jotty going to therapy in *Little Constructions* (2007) – that there might be some secretive part of her psyche that the community is both unable to grasp, and unable to control. Whilst Heidegger’s depiction of the dictatorship of the ‘they’ resonates here – whereby we are told how every action, every mood, and every understanding is shaped and constrained by social norms – the response called for is distinct. Rather than a fraught protection of one’s own authenticity, we are given the impression that one ought to respond to this demand for transparency with an openness to the alterity of others. Indeed, for Derrida, the right to secrecy is about respecting singularity, acknowledging that “the singular is singular, that the other is other” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 58).

As Derrida insists that the secret is about non-belonging, the denial of the secret is said to be “a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy... if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space. Belonging – the fact of avowing one’s belonging, of putting in common – be it family, nation, tongue – spells the loss of the secret” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 59). In this way, the relationship between secrecy and community also links with my previous discussion of Derrida’s account of the concepts of hospitality and autoimmunity, for the desire for belonging results in self-destruction. In *Rogues*, Derrida argues that it is the very constitutive logic of democracy that means it inevitably falls prey to autoimmunity, for it

is a concept that “is inadequate to itself, word hollowed out at its centre by the vertiginous semantic abyss that comprises all translations and opens on to all kinds of autoimmune ambivalences and antinomies” (2005, 72). The democracy to come is autoimmune in the same way that absolute or unconditional hospitality is. It requires an unconditional openness to the unknowable guest/parasite – to secrecy *as such* – at the risk of sacrificing its own ipseity. Thus, in many respects, Derrida’s work on the role of secrecy in democracy ties in closely with his discussions regarding the role of literature. Indeed, in “Passions”, Derrida famously says, “[n]o democracy without literature; no literature without democracy” (1995a, 28). The interplay of concealing and revealing, and the space for the absolute secret in literature reflects the true democracy’s protection of both the right to free speech and the right to remain silent (Derrida and Attridge 1992, 33).

In recent times, there has been a public drive for absolute transparency within democratic states, whereby secrecy is associated with corruption and conspiracy. Clare Birchall describes how,

[o]pen government is the new mantra and *modus operandi*. It’s championed not only for the access to, and participation in, governance it affords the public, but for the ‘transparency capital’ it bestows upon the organization or individual advocating it.

Transparency has become a sign of cultural (as well as moral) authority. (2011, 8-9)

Indeed, when public enquiries reveal the extent to which politicians reject the very rules and legislations they themselves have laid out, or violate the democratic rights of others they proclaim to protect, a demand for transparency would appear to be the only rational way forward. However, the (hidden) cost for an insistence on total transparency may be the loss of the right to secrecy. Elaborating on Derrida’s equation of the denial of the right to secrecy with totalitarianism, Birchall explains how,

[a] regime that embraces transparency will only ever be able to go so far before it tips over into totalitarianism because of its parallels with surveillance, particularly when extended to citizens. Resisting the call to be transparent to the state is, then, automatically registered as a sign of guilt. But if the regime doesn't go far enough, if it shrinks back from applying transparency to its own actions, the regime meets the charge of totalitarianism coming the other way (for acting covertly, autonomously and without an explicit mandate). (2011, 12)

Birchall argues that the apparent tension results from a broad misunderstanding of the relationship between transparency and secrecy. With the two concepts taken to be antonyms, we define ourselves politically as either advocates for transparency (democracy), or for secrecy (tyranny). According to Birchall, however, and drawing on Derrida, “far from being inimical to each other, they are symbiotic” (2001, 12). She depicts how the liberal democracy, in its demand for transparency, quashes the singularity – “the singular possession of the singular secret” – of individual subjects of which it is comprised: one's secrecy is “dissolved in the light of the common forum” (2001, 13). What Birchall proposes is a redefinition of the tension between transparency and secrecy as not an either/or dichotomy, but rather as a conjunction – “the ‘and’ between transparency and secrecy” (2001, 19). Democracy must allow for both free-speech *and* the right to remain silent; for revealing *and* concealing.

Interestingly, in his foreword to López and Villar-Argáiz's collection *Secrecy and Community in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Fiction*, Miller, too, focusses on the conjunction. He writes, “[t]he truly problematic term in this title, however, is the little word ‘and’. ‘And’ in what sense? As in indication adjacency? ‘And’, ‘and’, ‘and’ in a list? Or does ‘and’ in this case indicate some closer bond between things that *must* go together” (2021, foreword). To stay within the ‘and’ between two terms is to stay within the aporia (Birchall 2001, 13). It is a recognition of the singularity of the event, and the singularity of the individual – a singularity expressed most

profoundly in literature. Moreover, this is precisely the project of Derridean deconstruction – to deconstruct preconceived binaries and oppositions. As Derrida says of *différance*: it is “neither *this* nor *that*; but rather this *and* that” (Derrida 1995d, 161; emphasis in the original). Indeed, as I argue in chapter six, what deconstruction reveals is that it is not when concepts, contexts and texts are clearly defined, transparent and present that the values of democracy are upheld, but rather when boundaries and borders become more porous, blurred, and less defined. This points in drilled home in Hélène Cixous’s description of the project of deconstruction. Cixous questions,

[h]ow does Derrida read a text? Whether it is fiction or drama, he will never have read the whole or part of a volume. He stitches on the other veil (as he puts it in *Voiles* (*Veils*)) but also pinches from it (*il pique*). A genius in him guides the blind man he is, unerringly guides his hand, his beak, his quill, his stylus, his syringe towards the worm (*vers le ver*) or the *vein*. He learns a text by ear, hears the secret cry of a being of language. Besides, he only likes texts, works, corpuses which have the word, which sign, which conceal yet leave traces of the keys, which have well-kept secrets. (2012, 2-3; emphasis in the original)

It is precisely these traces of “well-kept” secrets that I shall follow in Burns’s oeuvre.

### 2.3.3. Secrecy and Hauntology

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida writes, “[a] secret always *makes* you tremble” for it indicates that “some trauma will insist on being repeated” (2008, 55; emphasis in the original). The relationship between secrecy, trauma and repetition is something Derrida explores at great length in reference to the project of hauntology. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida coins the term hauntology to depict how the repeated return of ghosts from the past traverse both current and yet to come thought, writing and interpretations. It is depicted as “[r]epetition *and* first time,

but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time*, makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history” (Derrida 1994, 10; emphasis in the original). Moreover, it is said to be a “semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy” (Derrida 1994, 6). The term hauntology stands in contrast to ontology (just as ‘deconstruction’ stands in contrast to Heideggerian ‘destruction’); as ontology is the theory of being, hauntology looks to deconstruct preestablished binaries of being/non-being by paying heed to spectrality (1994, xvii). It acts as an intentional near-homophone to the word ‘ontology’ (something heard more clearly in the French *hantologie* and *ontologie*). It is a project that engages with the conjunction of revealing *and* concealing, transparency *and* secrecy, but it does so in terms of visibility and visitation. Indeed, Derrida writes of the spectre that it is “the *frequency* of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible. And visibility, by its essence, is not seen, which is why it remains *epekeintesousias*, beyond the phenomenon or beyond being” (Derrida 1994, 125; emphasis in the original).

Derrida describes the spectre as “what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects – on an imaginary screen where there is nothing to see” (Derrida 1994, 125). Engaging with spectres in literature requires the reader to confront those unresolvable, absolute or unconditional secrets that hold the potential to rupture any sense of certainty, both within and beyond the text itself. As Derrida writes: “One always inherits from a secret – which says ‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’” (1994, 16). Indeed, Colin Davis draws a parallel between Derrida’s depiction of literature as the only discourse that allows for the unconditional secret and the role of hauntology in literary analysis. He depicts how,

[c]onversing with spectres is not undertaken in the expectation that they will reveal some secret, shameful or otherwise. Rather, it may open us up to the experience of

secrecy as such: an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know. (2021, 377)

In this respect, the spectre may be understood as a deconstructive force that looms somewhere between life and death, presence and absence, being and non-being (Derrida 1994, xvii). The connection that arises between the role of the spectre according to hauntology, and the unknowable or unavowable of the unconditional secret is something further supported by Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and Katarzyna Wieckowska, who stress how “[a]n encounter with the spectral results in and perhaps from the condition and acceptance of the state of unknowing” (2017, 9). Interestingly, of note here is how the aporia of the spectral in hauntology in turn echoes Derrida’s arguments made against speech act theory. This is something I shall explore in more detail in chapter six.

Equally relevant here is how Derrida’s depiction of the presence *and* absence of the spectre in terms of visibility – with the spectre described as “the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible” (1994, 6) – further connects the spectre with the asymmetry of both the ethical encounter and the community of lovers. This is especially apparent when considering what Derrida names the ‘visor effect’ of ghosts: for “[d]econstruction is just visiting – and from visitation one passes quickly to the visor” (1995b, 29). The visor effect refers to a spectre’s ability to see without itself being seen. Derrida describes it as a “spectral asymmetry” whereby “this spectral someone other looks at us; we feel ourselves being looked at by it, outside of any synchrony, even before and beyond any look on our part” (1994, 6). Just as Levinas wrote of the ethical encounter, the look of the spectre is said to be “a priori: neither present nor absent ‘in the flesh,’ neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met” (1994, 84). In the same way that one is not able to meet the gaze of the spectre, so too, in Michelle Ballif’s words, “the ethical relation to the wholly other necessitates a certain blindness” (2014, 464). We may conclude with Levinas, then, that we



cannot *not* respond to this primordial look of the spectre – the absolute Other – for no response is still a response. As Derrida puts it,

[t]he point is right away to go beyond, in one fell swoop, the first glance and thus to see there where this glance is blind, to open one's eyes wide there where one does not see what one sees. One must see, at first sight, what does not let itself be seen. And this in invisibility itself. For what first sight misses is the invisible. (1994, 187)

Derrida refers to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – perhaps the most famous haunting in modern consciousness – in order to illustrate the disruptive potential of the spectral effect. He describes how “everything begins in the imminence of *re*-apparition” (1994, 2; emphasis in the original). Thus, the spectre is always “a question of repetition” for it “*begins by coming back*” (1994, 11; emphasis in the original). It is the repeated return of the spectre that is said to reveal the present as necessarily, yet incomprehensibly, intertwined with the past (Derrida 1994, 61), or in Hamlet's famous words, that time is “out of joint” (Shakespeare [1603] 2003, 126; cited in Derrida 1994, 61). Derrida describes how “[f]urtive and untimely, the apparition of the specter does not belong to time, it does not give time, not that one: ‘Enter the ghost, exit the ghost, re-enter the ghost’” (1994, xix). Spectrality thus described is the very “*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*” (Derrida 1994, xviii; emphasis in the original). Importantly, in that it disrupts our understanding of the living past and the living future, the spectre is therefore to be understood as both a ‘revenant’ and an ‘arrivant’. We are told how it

*arrives*, it questions with regard to what will come in the future-to-come. Turned toward the future, going toward it, it also comes from it, it proceeds *from* [*provient de*] the future. It must therefore exceed any presence possible only on the basis of the movement of some disjoining, disjunction, or disproportion. (Derrida 1994, xix; emphasis in the original)

Time is therefore revealed to be not chronological, but anachronistic (with the preface ‘ana’ resonating this sense of repetition). As Derrida suggests,

[b]efore knowing whether one can differentiate between the specter of the past and the specter of the future, of the past present and the future present, one must perhaps ask oneself whether the *spectrality effect* does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other. (1994, 48; emphasis in the original)

Addressing the spectre’s return is therefore said to be necessary for understanding the composition of histories, for, as Peter Buse and Andrew Stott explain, the way in which historiography reveals its objects is necessarily “incomplete and out of time” (1999, 17). With this in mind, Lorek-Jezińska and Wieckowska elaborate how in “collective contexts, spectrality, melancholia and trauma bear upon the processes by which groups, communities or nations construct their versions of the past and the future and engage in cultural practices of commemoration or forgetting” (2017, 15). It is in this respect that Derrida insists that “the dead can often be more powerful than the living” (1994, 48).

The role of the spectre in terms of ‘commemoration or forgetting’ will prove fundamental to my literary analyses in the following chapters. All of the communities in which Burns’s novels are set are marked by both experienced and inherited trauma, with most of the community members suffering from short-term memory loss, repression or traumatic projection. In both *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007), for example, the act of forgetting seems to function as something of a survival mechanism, and is presented as perhaps the easiest way of coping given the sheer frequency of traumatic events. Something we witness in all of her novels, however, is how the past can continue to affect both individuals and communities when apparently forgotten memories come back to haunt. On the other hand, in *Little Constructions*, we are warned against the act of simply constructing cultural artefacts or

building memorials for the past, rather than listening to these spectres, when “pro-gang supporters” seek to turn the Doe house into a “Miss Havisham Museum” (Burns 2007, 263).

#### 2.3.4. Hauntology, Deconstruction and the Literary Text

Derrida also provides insight into how hauntology may act as a tool of writing, analysis and interpretation, that is to say, the process of deconstruction itself. In his analysis, Derrida explicitly links the logic of the spectre with the project of deconstruction when he writes,

[t]he spectral logic is de facto a deconstructive logic. It is in the element of haunting that deconstruction finds the place most hospitable to it, at the heart of the living present, in the quickest heartbeat of the philosophical. Like the work of mourning, in a sense, which produces spectrality, and like all work produces spectrality. (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, 117)

Similarly, in *Specters of Marx*, he underscores how “the logic of the ghost ... points toward a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity or actuality* (either present, empirical, living – or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non-presence)” (1994, 78; emphasis in the original). This correlation between the project of hauntology and deconstruction is further supported by Katy Shaw who highlights how “[b]oth are founded on an accepted instability, both defy fixed form or meaning, and both operate in profound defiance of binary oppositions” (2018, 8).

The reason that hauntology is especially appropriate for the analysis of literary texts is that literature is necessarily haunted. According to Derrida, “everything that we inscribe in the living present of our relation to others already carries, always, the signature of *memoirs-from-beyond-the-grave*” (1989, 29; emphasis in the original). As was said of the purloined letter, there is always writing “*before* the letter” (1967, 54; emphasis added). He thus defines writing as “cadaverised like the beast playing dead and melding with foliage” (1993, 206; cited in

Royle 2021, 43). Derrida's *Memoires: For Paul de Man* offers a clear example of "cadaverised" writing – it is a text written following the death of, and thus in memory of, Derrida's good friend and fellow literary theorist Paul de Man. The haunting of this text, which itself deals directly with the theme of (impossible) morning, could not be more apparent. We read,

the figure of this bereaved memory becomes a sort of (possible and impossible) metonymy, where the part stands for the whole and for *more than* the whole that it exceeds. An allegorical metonymy, too, which says something other than what it says . . . It speaks the other and makes the other speak, but it does so in order to let the other speak, for the other will have spoken first. It has no choice but to let the other speak, since it cannot make the other speak without the other having *already* spoken, without this *trace* of speech which comes from the other and which directs us to writing as much as to rhetoric. (1989, 37–38; emphases in the original)

This description also corresponds with Blanchot's depiction of the cadaver in literature as "a shadow ever present behind the living form" (1989, 257). For this reason, literature is said to be spectral in form: it is "neither spirit nor body and both at the same time" (2008, 223). In his monograph on Seamus Heaney, Ian Hickey elaborates on this idea when he says that,

[t]hrough literature, and therefore language, the spectral past begins to suture itself within the present. The interweaving of the past and the present through spectres of the past makes the present difficult to distinguish as being totally original. It can instead be looked upon as a sort of simulacrum, a copy of a copy which has inaugurated something new that has trace elements of the past within it. I would argue that writing is this – a haunted body through which a multitude of voices speak at the same time. (2022, 11)

This idea of literature being "a copy of a copy" is also expressed by Royle who writes, "[t]here is no limitation to imitation, to having one's words haunted by another or others" (2021, 40).

Haunting is thus connected to the idea of inheritance, for “we inherit language in order to be able to bear witness to the fact that we are inheritors” (Derrida and Stiegler 2002, 132). Literature thus understood is therefore the site of both difference and *différance* – or the differed presence. Like the spectre, it is always “a question of repetition” for it “*begins by coming back*” (Derrida 1994, 11; emphasis in the original). Indeed, as Buse and Stott note, “like writing, ghosts are associated with a certain secondariness or belatedness” (1999, 8).

It is precisely the belatedness of the ghost, and the belatedness of writing, that demands both a response and an ethical responsibility. For to inherit is to transmit a “remembrance of the future” (Derrida 1989, 29). Derrida describes the weight of this responsibility as follows:

Whatever one may think of this event, of the sometimes terrifying failure of that which was thus begun, of the technoeconomic or ecological disasters, and the totalitarian perversions to which it gave rise ... whatever one may think also of the trauma in human memory that may follow ... whether we like it or not, whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot not be its heirs. ... There is no inheritance without a call to responsibility. (1994, 114)

As time is anachronistic, this responsibility extends “beyond all living present” (Derrida 1994, xviii). Just as Levinas determines responsibility as directed towards the Other who transcends one’s own temporal existence ([1972] 1987, 92), so too Derrida determines the spectre as “the future, it is always to come” (1994, 48). What Derrida adds to Levinas’s account, however, is the conjecture that this responsibility is not only to the future, but also to those past – that is, to the dead. It is a responsibility to the

ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds

of exterminations, victims of oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism. (1994, xviii)

Derrida names this responsibility ‘justice’, which he maintains is intimately tied with the spectral logic. “To be just” he claims, reaches “beyond the living present in general – and beyond its simple negative reversal” (1994, xix). Moreover, Derrida contends that “[i]nheritance is never a given, it is always a task” (1994, 54). Whilst there exists a correlation between the passivity of the ethical encounter and the inoperative community and the asymmetry of the spectral effect, our response to the call of the spectre is thus to be understood as necessarily involved. To inherit, then, is not to simply receive but in many respects to inhabit. In Derrida’s words:

That we *are* heirs does not mean that we *have* or that we *receive* this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but that the *being* or what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not. And that, as Hölderlin said so well, we can only *bear witness* to it. (1994, 68; emphasis in the original)

Interestingly, as was said of unconditional hospitality, Naas elaborates on what it means to bear witness to the event when reading a text in terms of a “negotiation between seemingly contradictory imperatives” (2005, 9). Accordingly,

to read a text in the terms the text itself lays out, as if in response to the ontological question “Who or what are you?” – to read according to all the respected and time-honored protocols of interpretation and good scholarship, emphasizing the historical context, the original language of the text, the hidden assumptions and presuppositions, and so on, but then to try to discover another logic organizing the text, beyond the intention or self-conscious presentation of the author, something that would not be a truer, more definitive answer to the question “*Alors, qui êtes-vous?*” “Who are you,

Plato” or “Who are you, Heidegger?”, but an open question that would invite us to rethink the tradition and countersign it in our turn. (2005, 12; emphasis in the original)

We may recall here how Royle described the reading required of cryptaesthetic texts also in terms of a countersignature. Importantly, Derrida insists that to countersign defines what it means to be alive. In *For What Tomorrow ...* he writes how,

[l]ife – being-alive – is perhaps defined at bottom by this tension internal to a heritage, by this reinterpretation of what is given in the gift, and even what is given in filiation. This reaffirmation, which both continues and interrupts, resembles (at least) an election, a selection, a decision. One’s own *as* that of the other: signature against signature. (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004, 4; quoted in Naas 2005, 14)

As we shall see, the idea of the countersignature is relevant both in chapter three with regards to my analysis of the character Vincent and the transcription of trauma in *No Bones* (2001), as well in chapter five when I question the true pen of tablets girl’s letters in *Milkman* (2018).

By now it should be clear how approaching literature from the perspective of hauntology forces us to confront not only unacknowledged spectres – that is, historical amnesia – but also alterity itself, as the spectre is to be understood as the absolute Other. Indeed, as Hickey suggests, “[n]ot only is a text haunted, but if the reader is exposed to a text then a conversation begins between the reader and the spectres that dwell within it, we encounter the spectral other” (2022, 10). Therefore, I propose that an engagement with literature reveals the productive potentialities of the literary imagination to converse with spectres, blurring the preconceived boundaries between the ‘living past’ and the ‘living future’, and thus uncovering the entanglement of inheritance and responsibility. As readers, we must learn not to silence spectres but to listen to them, engage with them and respond to them, for their imposition is not on the dead but on the living. As Derrida writes, “the more life there is, the graver the

specter of the other becomes, the heavier its imposition. And the more the living have to answer for it. *To answer for the dead, to respond to the dead*” (1994 136; emphasis in the original). Again, this engagement with spectres involves both a *response* and a *responsibility*. It is a matter of accepting accountability, by

an engagement that selects, interprets, and orients. ... by a decision that begins by getting caught up, like a responsibility, in the snares of an injunction that is already multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory, divided – therefore an inheritance that will always keep its secret. And the secret of a crime. The secret *of* its very author. (Derrida 1994, 116; emphasis in the original)

The connection between an involved reading and the spectrality of literature is beautifully expressed by Hannu Poutiainen when he describes how, “[t]o mediate is to read, and to read is to suffer a haunting: by voices that come into one’s ear, by events that take place in one’s mind, by ghostly bodies that crowd, swarm, flutter about one’s own” (2021, 167). In both of these extracts, we are reminded of the fact that there is never just one spectre, for the voices are always multiple, which itself echoes Derrida’s definition of deconstruction as “more than one language” (1989, 15). The result of responding to this imposition, therefore, is not that concepts and borders become clearer and more defined; in contrast, we are met with a multiplicity of possible meanings and interpretations. Importantly, an engagement with such voices holds the potential to “map out the possibilities of different futures by uncovering the hidden spaces of silenced others” (Lorek-Jezińska and Wieckowska 2017, 11). Particularly relevant here is a connection made by Royle between the response to the heterogeneous voices in a text, and the response of a community, for the voices we hear are those of “the vocation of a commonality at once already urgent and to come, of voices and cries, human and non-human, alive, dead and not yet born” (Royle 2021, 49).



Given its involvement with ghosts, hauntology certainly seems especially apt for the analysis of fiction that engages with gothic tropes, above all, those of transgenerational hauntings and fractured subjectivities. This is certainly the case across Burns's oeuvre. As Ruth Parkin-Gounelas proposes, "[i]f social realism in fiction is the genre of presence, the Gothic has long been recognised as that which elides the distinction between presence and non-presence – or rather the genre of disappearances and re-appearances" (1999, 131). Similarly, Schultz describes how,

[l]ike a palimpsest, two paintings on one canvas, the Gothic (this spectral genre) brings together two modalities and two temporalities in one moment – the myth is made real; the past is made present. The narrator instructs readers how to recognize, and perhaps more importantly how to accept, radical heterogeneity. (2014, 146)

However, it is important to recall how Derrida depicts *all* writing as necessarily haunted. Whilst at times these spectres take the form of ghosts in an obvious sense, often they go unnamed or encrypted and are thus only present in their absence. In *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007), for instance, we encounter (to some extent at least) quite literal hauntings, whereas in *Milkman* (2018) the spectres that haunt the text, whilst both present *and* absent, are far more difficult to decipher. Schultz's mention of "radical heterogeneity", however, allows a connection to arise with my previous discussion of hospitality, for as Derrida writes, "as soon as there is some specter, hospitality and exclusion go together" (1994, 141). An openness to alterity, and to the *singularity* of a text – which is at the same time an openness to the call to responsibility of the spectre – requires an experience of unconditional hospitality. In Derrida's words,

absolute hospitality, the "yes" to the *arrivant(e)* the "come" to the future that cannot be anticipated—which must not be the "anything whatsoever" that harbors behind it those too familiar ghosts, the very ones we must practice recognizing. Open, waiting for the

event *as* justice, this hospitality is absolute only if it keeps watch over its own universality. ... a waiting without horizon of expectation. (1994, 211; emphasis in the original)

Taking all of the above into consideration, I maintain that hauntology is especially productive as a tool for the analysis and interpretation of Northern Irish literary texts. This is in part due to a common concern with transgenerational conflicts and traumas, and in part to a concern with borders. Additionally, the history of the island may be described as spectral in terms of structure, in that the past remains ever present as a trace. Schultz makes a similar observation when he describes the ghost that haunts the modern Republic of Ireland and the North as “[a]n ever-present and seemingly everchanging historical narrative that, like a palimpsest, brings together past and present moments to bear upon one another” (2014, 8). Moreover, Schultz maintains that “sectarian violence will inevitably return because political and cultural differences still haunt Northern Ireland” (2014, 137). This being said, I propose that new and innovative literature may open a space for a confrontation with unspoken spectres. Indeed, whilst the trope of a haunted present is common from Celtic folklore through to the Irish Gothic, Schultz draws our attention to the fact that in recent Irish fiction, “haunting is imagined as a productive vehicle for moving the nation out of the past rather than for keeping it there” (2014, 14). This is, I believe, precisely the way in which Burns engages with spectrality in all of her novels.

### 2.3.5. The Crypt

Very closely connected to Derrida’s account of hauntology is the psychoanalytic notion of the crypt. Indeed, both concepts deal with the secrecy that underscores the inheritance of past traumas, as well as the haunting presence of spectres. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida alludes to the process by which the crypt is constructed when he writes,

the cadaver is perhaps not as dead, as simply dead as the conjuration tries to delude us into believing. The one who has disappeared appears still to be *there*, and his apparition is not nothing. It does not do nothing. Assuming that the remains can be identified, we know better than ever today that the dead must be able to work. ... There is also a mode of production of the phantom, itself a phantomatic mode of production. As in the work of mourning, after trauma, the conjuration has to make sure that the dead will not come back: quick, do whatever is needed to keep the cadaver localized, in a safe place, decomposing right where it was inhumed, or even embalmed as they liked to do in Moscow. Quick, a vault to which one keeps the keys! (1994, 120; emphasis in the original)

The crypt is thus understood as a kind of tomb, constructed in mourning, which both conceals and keeps safe unfronted phantoms and secrets. Importantly, in so far as hauntology is about justice, it is also about mourning, which is considered more originary than death. In an interview in 1990, Derrida goes so far as to say “I mourn therefore I am” (1995c, 321). As Ballif explains,

the address to, with, from the dead other is always already the very condition of possibility for the address ... mourning, the impossible work of mourning, haunts the possibility of the address, constituting the ethical relation between the self and the other, the otherness of the self, and the otherness of the other. (2014, 456)

Accordingly, we begin to see how mourning, too, requires an ethical response. Just as inheritance is described as “never given, always a task” (Derrida 1994, 54), so too mourning is depicted as “not one kind of work among others. It is work itself” (Derrida 1994, 121).

In Abraham and Torok’s *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word*, two modes of mourning are distinguished: ‘introjection’, which is depicted as normal mourning, and ‘incorporation’, depicted as pathological mourning (1986, 111-5). Introjection is described as the process

which, by means of an extension or expansion of the ego, the other is appropriated and the love-object becomes the same as the self. Importantly, this process is deeply connected to the development of language and is described as a “topographical shift” in the ego (Abraham and Torok 1986, 125). In contrast, in incorporation, which comes about when “*words* fail to fill the subject’s void and hence an imaginary thing is inserted into the mouth in their place” (Abraham and Torok 1986, 128-9; emphasis in the original), the ego takes the unnameable other in but at the same time keeps it separate and unfronted. It remains unfronted “in order to compensate for the lost pleasure and the failed introjection” (Abraham and Torok 1986, 113). The reason this mode of mourning is deemed pathological is that the object, once incorporated, becomes a destructive force, and returns to prey upon the ego.

Where both Freud and Abraham and Torok describe incorporation in terms of cannibalism, in his forward to the book, Derrida deconstructs the binary to reveal that neither is ever experienced in isolation: “everything is played out on the borderline that divides and opposes the two terms. From one side, the other; from one inside, the other; one within the other, and the same outside the other” (1986a, xvi). It is, however, the process of incorporation and not introjection which is said to respect the alterity of the other (1986a, xiv). From this perspective, the process of introjection may be understood as a kind of *ontological* cannibalism not far removed from the communion of the operative community, in which the other is engulfed, appropriated and mystified. Incorporation, on the other hand, demands a rethinking of the self, for it involves “the paradox of a foreign body preserved as foreign but by the same token excluded from a self” (Derrida 1986a, xvii). There are certainly echoes to be felt in this description with my previous discussions of the tension felt between the singularity of a text and the importance of context, as well as the imperative of unconditional hospitality to welcome both the indeterminate abstract other, and a singular other with both a name and human face.

The notion of the crypt is key to Derrida's reading of incorporation. The crypt is to be understood as a kind of tomb which conceals (and conceals the concealment of) unfroneted phantoms and secrets. The language of the crypt is described by Derrida as a "certain foreign body ... working over our household words" (1986a, xxv), and is said to reside in the crypt as "words buried alive" (1986a, xxxv). It is important, however, to distinguish the crypt from the Freudian unconscious, for hidden in the crypt are not the exiled, repressed thoughts or desires of the conscious, but rather someone else, an absolute other, buried alive; the living dead. In Derrida's words, "the inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but *as* dead, one we are willing to keep, as long as we keep it, within us, intact in any way save as living" (Derrida 1986a, xxi; emphasis in the original).

Like the spectre, the crypt is present only in its absence. We are told that "[n]o crypt presents itself. The grounds [*lieux*] are so disposed as to disguise and to hide: something, always a body in some way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and to hide the disguise: the crypt hides as it holds" (Derrida 1986a, xiv). Interestingly, whilst the crypt is said to be "carved out of nature", it is equally said not to belong to a natural space. In contrast, it is described in terms of "the striking history of an artifice, an *architecture*, an artifact (Derrida 1986a, xiv; emphasis in the original). It is, therefore, both natural and artificial. Thus, the crypt is necessarily connected to cultural practises of commemoration and forgetting. It is both and at the same time an internal symbolic space and external public square: it is a "more inward forum like a closed rostrum or speaker's box, a safe: sealed, and thus internal to itself, a secret interior within the public square, but, by the same token, outside it, external to the interior" (Derrida 1986, xiv). It is topographically both somewhere and nowhere, inner and outer; an "undiscoverable place" (Derrida 1986a, xi).

Derrida describes the structure of the crypt as erupting from dislocation, through which the secret is created in its division: "'I' can save an inner safe only by putting it inside 'myself,'

beside(s) myself, outside” (Derrida 1986a, xiv). Interestingly, the liminality of the topography of the crypt is described in terms that hold an uncanny resonance with the topography of Northern Ireland. It is described as “a place *comprehended* within another but rigorously separated from it, isolated from general space by partitions, an enclosure, an enclave. So as to purloin *the thing* from the rest” (Derrida 1986a, xiv; emphasis in the original). Equally, a connection can be made here with the significance of public and private spaces in communities, which, as we shall see, presents itself as a recurring theme throughout Burns’s entire oeuvre. The apparent dialectic of the notion of inside and outside will also be of particular importance in my analysis of literary examples of the crypt in the chapters to come.

The crypt is also described by Derrida as both a “cryptic fortress” and a “labyrinth” in its resistance of interpretation through the fracturing of the symbolic (Derrida 1986a, xx). Indeed, whilst buried in the crypt are the living dead, it is at the same time the safe place of the absolute secret, for we are told that “[w]hat is at stake here is what takes place secretly, or takes a secret place, in order to keep itself safe somewhere in a self” (Derrida 1986a, xiv). It is not a riddle to be solved, but an encrypted secret that can never be deciphered, or secrecy as such. In accordance with this idea, Davis writes of the crypt that “it is a structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” wherein the spectre buried within “pushes at the boundaries of language and thought” (2021, 389). This element of dislocation experienced in mourning, as well as the fracturing of language in the crypt, is something I suggest Burns captures brilliantly in her use of fragmented narrative voices. Whilst this feature is certainly most prominent in *No Bones* (2001), where the story is told from multiple disorientated perspectives, and with a mix of first-person and third-person narrative, it is, nonetheless, a feature of all of her novels.

From here, we may also decipher an element of a haunting trauma which surpasses one’s facticity – the crypt is, after all, the living dead. Abraham and Torok describe this aspect

of the crypt as the “transgenerational consequences of silence ... the unwitting reception of someone else’s secret” (1994, 168); whilst Royle describes it as “transgenerational haunting” (2014, 49). Also of note here is Derrida’s depiction of these haunting transgenerational secrets in terms of a “parasitic inclusion” (1994, xvi) – an expression that necessarily draws us back to the concepts of both hospitality and autoimmunity, and the guest and parasite.

According to Abraham and Torok, the crypt – or the “different substitute phantom object” – is said to act as “a constant reminder of the other object that has been lost and the circumstances of its sudden disappearance” (1994, 114). Thus, the connection to my previous discussion of the role of secrecy in literature could not be more apparent, for Abraham goes so far as to say that “what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of the others” (1987, 287). The unspeakables therefore hold the potential to “determine the fate of an entire family line” (Abraham and Torok 1994, 140), with the significance extending beyond the individual. As Nicholas Rand underscores in his introduction to Abraham and Torok’s *The Shell and The Kernel*:

Whether it characterizes individuals, families, social groups, or entire nations, silence and its varied forms – the untold or unsayable secret, the feeling unfelt, the pain denied, the unspeakable and concealed shame of families, the cover-up of political crimes, the collective disregard for painful historical realities – may disrupt our lives. (1994, 21)

The lasting effect of untold secrets is certainly something familiar to both the Republic of Ireland and the North, where victims of institutional abuse continue to fight to this day both for their stories to be told, and for the omissions in their official records to be revealed.<sup>16</sup> These collective silences and untold secrets relate to strict abortion laws, Mother and Baby Homes,

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<sup>16</sup> For an overview of the complex role of silence in Irish language, culture, society and institutions, explored through the lens of contemporary Irish fiction, see M. Teresa Caneda-Cabrera and José Carregal-Romero’s 2023 collection *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak*. Also of note is Noelle Brown’s play *Postscript* which deals specifically with institutional concealment and silence surrounding the realities of the so-called Mother and Baby Homes.

sexual abuse both within the Catholic church and within the home, and paramilitary and state violence during the Troubles.<sup>17</sup> It is worth stressing here, however, where Derrida departs from Abraham and Torok – for rather than it being the case that such secrets are unsaid because they are deemed too shameful or disruptive to be put into words (and thus the role of the psychoanalyst would be to uncover and detangle them), according to Derrida, hidden in the crypt is an undefined structural openness understood as secrecy *as such*.

That the crypt is said to be a labyrinth also points to the idea of misdirection and misinterpretation – an element that is key my analyses of the crypt in all of Burns’s novels. Something that comes to mind here is Derrida’s discussion of meaning, signification and interpretation in *Limited Inc*, whereby we see the force of the sign break away from, and extend beyond, both the context and the intent of the writer or the speaker (1988). As Buse and Scott explain, “no signification can be unproblematically sutured to the originary context of its production, as the sign is haunted by a chain of overdetermined readings, mis-readings, slips and accretions that will always go beyond the event itself” (199, 12). I shall return to themes of signification and context in chapter six.

With the crypt described as both as an “architecture” and a “cryptic fortress” (Derrida 1986a, xiv; xx) we are equally met with the idea that the self acts as a kind of grounds keeper that patrols the fortress with one objective – not to allow anyone in. Further links to secrecy are revealed in the passivity of this guarding act, for we are told that “incorporation keeps still, speaks only to silence or to ward off intruders from its secret place” (Derrida 1986a, xvii). This silent guard finds a perfect embodiment in the protagonist middle sister’s silent refusal to answer to the community’s questions in *Milkman* (2018) – a refusal that leads to the community

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<sup>17</sup> With regards to the Troubles, victims have recently faced yet another barrier in their quest for justice with the UK’s recent passing of the controversial ‘Legacy and Reconciliation’ act, which grants conditional immunity for Troubles-era crimes – terms which have been ruled by the High Court in Belfast to be in breach of international human rights. See: Graham and McClements (2024).



defining her in terms of the living dead. Additionally, this description also takes us back to the inescapability of the operative community, as well as Derrida's insistence on the right not to answer.

Finally, just as hauntology is to be understood as the way in which we engage with spectres in haunted texts, so too the crypt has clear applications for the study of literature. As Jodey Castricano notes, "in Derrida's work, the crypt functions as both the model and method (theory) – the structural machine or formal principal of a poetics" and further, that "writing, textuality, the phantom, and haunting are not only interrelated; they are inseparable" (2021, 6; 29). With this in mind, in the chapters to come, I explore numerous possible examples of literary applications of the crypt from Burns's oeuvre. In my analysis of *No Bones* (2001) in chapter three, I consider Amelia's secret box of collected items she calls her 'Treasure Trove'; Mary Dolan's dead baby that she pushes around in a toy pram; and Vincent's deconstructed dead father. In chapter four we shall see how Burns's second novel *Little Constructions* (2007) is riddled with crypts. I choose to focus on just four: the kitchen cupboard, John Doe's secret box, the community centre, and the pseudo-mother crypt. Whilst in chapter five, in reference to *Milkman* (2018) I look at just two: a decapitated, one-eyed head of a cat, and a set of letters hidden inside an old rag doll. Finally, the example I briefly explore in chapter six is something of a parody of a crypt, hero's survival kit – a poorly hidden box of graphs. I suggest that analysing these objects, spaces and constructions in Burns's stories from the perspective of the crypt allows for conclusions to be drawn regarding individual and collective trauma, individual and collective identity, and individual and collective memory. Importantly, these conclusions take us back once again to where we started: to the concept of community.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

To conclude, throughout the course of this chapter I have drawn on connections that can be identified across a broad range of theories that are not often considered alongside one another

– from ontology to ethics, ethics to community, and community to hauntology. Equally, I have sought to elaborate how each of these theories have a particular role in a deconstructive approach to literary analysis, as well as how they are especially apt for the analysis of Irish and Northern Irish literature. More specifically still, I have pointed towards the ways in which I shall apply this theoretical lens to a close reading, or deconstruction, of Burns’s oeuvre. While Heidegger’s ontology is motivated by a drive for understanding, and a desire for authenticity, Levinasian ethics insists on a respect for alterity and difference – a respect which is equally called for in communitarian theory. However, where Levinas depicts our relation with the Other as a transcendental ethical command, Nancy and Blanchot describe it in terms of a transient community – “eternally temporary and always already deserted” (Blanchot 1988, 53). Finally, Derrida’s discussion of hospitality, autoimmunity and democracy allows connections to be made between the inoperative community, the project of hauntology, and the notion of the crypt – all of which require a recapitulation of our understanding of transparency and secrecy not as binaries, but as “symbiotic” (Birchall 2001, 12).

## Chapter Three: “We didn’t come back to get you. You came back to get us”: Borders, Spectres and Crypts in Anna Burns’s *No Bones*

### 3.1. Introduction

Anna Burns’s first novel *No Bones* (2001)<sup>18</sup> won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize in 2001 and was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2002 – great feats for a debut novel. However, unlike her most recent work of fiction, *Milkman* (2018), it has received very little in terms of serious academic attention despite achieving critical acclaim at the time of its publication. This being said, Maureen Fadem’s 2015 publication *The Literature of Northern Ireland: Spectral Borderlines* includes a highly enlightening chapter on *No Bones* (137-81), as does Matthew Schultz’s 2014 collection *Haunted Historiographies: The Rhetoric of Ideology in Postcolonial Irish Fiction* (129-63). Whilst Fadem’s chapter approaches the novel from the perspective of what she calls a “poetics of doubt” (2015, 144), Schultz focuses on Burns’s critique of gothic inheritance as a means of confronting the reemergence of violence (2014, 134). Very much related to both of these studies is a chapter in Australian academic Caitlin McGuinness’s doctoral thesis, titled *Secret Passages: Concealment and Escape in Contemporary Fiction from Northern Ireland*, in which she discusses the role of secrecy in relation to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival, the concept of souveniring and the abject (2010). Interestingly, all three scholars acknowledge the importance of the spectre in their analyses, and all three reference the work of Derrida. Whilst my own analysis interacts with these studies on a number of levels, (specifically, with Fadem’s observations on the role of memory, Schultz’s reflections on the nature of transgenerational violence, and McGuinness’s analysis of what she coins the “gothic carnival” (2010, 164)), what I aim to add to the discussion are insights drawn from a reading of the dominance of borders in the novel from the perspective

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<sup>18</sup> Referenced hereafter in this chapter as *NB*.

of communitarian theory, as well as an application of the concept of the crypt. Finally, Fiona McCann's comparative study of violence and dissensus in *No Bones* and *Little Constructions* adds particular weight to my analysis of the way in which *No Bones* blurs the boundaries of public and private, and political and domestic disputes (2014a) – something explored further still in chapter four.

### 3.1.1. Introduction to the Novel

*No Bones* tells the story of the greatly tormented life of Amelia Lovett and her peers growing up in Ardoyne in Belfast during the Troubles. The title of novel (whilst also referring to a specific area of Ardoyne known as the Bone) alludes to the expression “make no bones about it”. As McCann notes, “this is what the characters must learn to do – get on with things in spite of the damaging context in which they live” (2014a, 27). The novel begins with the outbreak of the conflicts in 1969, when Amelia is seven, and ends with the Peace Process in 1994. As Seán Hewitt writes in his review for *The Irish Times*, this is also a “world full of dead bodies” (2018, n.p.). From the outset, the reader is immersed in a world of political and domestic violence and witnesses the gradual disintegration of the life of the protagonist into anorexia, alcoholism, extreme paranoia, and psychotic episodes. According to Fadem, “[w]hile Burns’ narrative is in various ways ambiguous, violence is one theme about which she is absolutely clear” (2015, 140). This violence is both political and personal, external and internal. Indeed, McCann’s describes how,

[t]he trauma which Amelia and the other characters experience is to be seen as a multi-layered one, made up of a series of publicly harrowing events (sectarian murders, oppressive British army presence, police brutality, explosions and bomb attacks) and a set of distressing private ones (beatings, incestuous rape, substance abuse, alcohol addiction, nervous breakdowns, suicide), all of which combine in a lethal cocktail of

destruction and self-destruction from which the characters struggle to recover. (2014a, 24)

Just as the violence and trauma trespasses the boundaries of political and personal, so too does the resultant self-destruction.

The novel is divided into twenty-three chapters, told from the multiple disorientated perspectives of a number of characters (with a mix of first-person and third-person narrative). The dates of the chapters often correspond with important dates in the conflicts, yet the titles mostly reference private disputes (for example, the chapter titled “The Pragmatic Use of Arms, 1973” (*NB*, 53-65) details a bloody fist fight between neighbours). These deflected historical references are also scattered throughout the text itself. As McCann explains,

[t]he incursion of violence into the private sphere is explored through the displacement of the signifiers of war onto the personal realm (“hunger strike” referring to anorexia; “safe house” to a place free from danger for the psychologically fragile Amelia; “battles” to Amelia’s fight against alcoholism). (2012, 74)

We are thus immediately faced with a blurring of boundaries between political and domestic violence. As Burns herself remarks in an interview with Lisa McGee, the novel is “much more about Amelia surviving her own family than surviving the Troubles ... The outside society is very much a reflection of the inside family, and of the self-destructive warring parts of Amelia herself. Nothing exists in isolation” (McGee 2001, n.p.).

Whilst Burns’s fragmented narrative and unique writing style means the novel does not entirely fit into the genre of ‘historical fiction’,<sup>19</sup> McGuinness draws our attention to the parallels that can be found between the storyline of *No Bones* and the Ardoyne Commemoration

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<sup>19</sup> Although the novel certainly takes place in the real setting of Ardoyne, and interacts with real historical events during the Troubles, the disorientated perspectives and fragmented narration, together with the focus on private, often internalised story lines, allows the novel to disrupt our expectations with respect to this genre.

Project's 2002 publication regarding deaths that occurred in Ardoyne during the Troubles. She explains how,

[i]n a fascinating intersection of history and fiction, a close comparison of *No Bones* and the report reveals the extent to which Burns' work makes use of real figures and events from the period. Local landmarks, such as the burnt-out 'Logues' bar feature in both publications, and the manner of death of several characters in *No Bones* bear a strong resemblance to those recorded in the report. (2010, 53)

The accuracy of Burns's depiction of the trauma and violence that this community experienced is, in this respect, unquestionable. That said, I believe part of the success of the novel lies in the way in which Burns regularly forces the reader to question the reliability of each one of the perspectives they are presented with. Therefore, the presumed boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred both within the context of the novel, and the historical reality the novel reflects. I suggest that the reader is frequently misdirected and misled, whilst faced with constant reminders of the fallibility of both individual and collective memory.

In *No Bones*, Burns employs a number of gothic tropes – including transgenerational secrets, liminal spaces, the grotesque, hauntings, and nightmares – in order to explore the perniciousness of the culture of revenge and retribution that penetrates every area of life in Belfast during the Troubles, including the domestic. Amelia's gradual fall into anorexia, alcoholism and eventually psychosis results in an increasingly fragmented narrative time and place, echoing Derrida's depiction of time (and writing) as a trace structure (1976, 61), during which she finds herself repeatedly met by the ghosts of her past. As highlighted in chapter one, Burns is not alone in embracing the gothic trope of the haunting presence of past traumas in order to address the trauma of the Troubles; see, for example, Deirdre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* (1996)), or Capossela's *Trouble the Living* (2023). Importantly, what I believe all three writers aim to do is not simply to exorcise the past in order to break the violent legacy,

but rather to engage with these spectres so as to reimagine a different possible, yet incalculable, future. Moreover, as Schultz observes, “[t]he popular assumption that unless we know the past we are condemned to repeat it often appears reversed in Ireland” (2014, 136). Indeed, it is not difficult to see how, more often than not, instigators of violence call upon ancestral voices for justification. It is, however, this “culture of revenge” (Schultz 2014, 149) in Northern Ireland that Burns and others draw into question – spectres, when listened to, work not to take us back, but to move us forward.

This shift away from the cyclical nature of Northern Irish violence is indicated in *No Bones* when Amelia voices her unease with her mother’s “fighting rules”:

Rule Number One: (a) Don’t start fights. (b) If someone else starts them, get stuck in ... Rule Number Two: Never run away ... it may not be much but when you’ve been murdered, and you will be, you’ll at least have done your best and you won’t have run away. (*NB*, 82-3)

As Schultz highlights, Burns “suggests an alternative way of dealing with the persistent call for retribution by placing Amelia at odds with familial ideology” (2014, 150). We do, however, have to persevere until the novel’s conclusion before seeing any indication as to what such an alternative may look like in practice (and even then, what we receive is little more than a supposing).

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the role of borders, specifically focusing on an application of the notions of hospitality and autoimmunity, as well as depictions of consumption. I look at how the novel interacts with these concepts at both individual and communal levels. Whilst I do not directly address the topic of secrecy, I do explore literary constructions of crypts in the novel – the site of secrecy as such. From here, I briefly delve into the significance of spectres, before addressing the novel’s conclusion. As is the case with all of

Burns's fiction, both the form and content of the novel is incredibly cryptic as it moves between the boundaries of revealing and concealing, of presence and absence, of remembering and forgetting – or the trace of the *fort/da*.

### **3.2. Community Borders, Violence and Death**

#### **3.2.1. Borders**

Ardoyne, where the novel is set, is a predominantly Catholic district in Belfast, surrounded by Protestant communities. In fact, as previously mentioned, the title of the novel alludes to an area known as the Bone, which is a further subdivision of the district of Ardoyne. The district finds itself encircled by borders which, in a newspeak-esque manner, are given the name “peace lines”. These troubles-era borders, which include walls, fences and closed roads, were first established in 1969, the year of the outbreak of the conflicts, and the year in which the novel begins. To this day, however, ninety-seven peace-lines remain in place in Belfast, covering a total distance of 30.5 km (García Alcaraz, 2023). The significance of the borders present in the novel, as well as the reality the novel reflects, does not, then, remain in the past. Moreover, the metaphysical presence of boundary lines goes so far as to border off individual family homes. The novel's introduction, for instance, sees the Lovett family hiding in the living room of their house at night, with the children under the table, and the windows and doors boarded up. We are told of ominous whispering “others” outside who attempt to remove the boards, whilst the family face the looming threat of having their house burnt down by their own neighbours (*NB*, 6). This shared fear of exteriority, which is expressed in terms of nation, city, community and family, is exemplar of the operative community's drive for self-enclosure, or absolute immanence. The terror incited by these silent strangers in the dead of night echoes the overarching fear of the outside, alterity and difference that dominates the community's narrative. In addition to the very real barricades and historic divides, I hope to highlight in my analysis how the novel also addresses more symbolic boundaries, such as those between public



and private spaces, internal and external conflicts, and inner and outer selves. Indeed, I suggest that this intentional blurring of boundary lines lies very much at the heart of all of Burns's novels.

The first indication we get of just how closed off and insular this community really is comes on the second page of the novel, where we see seven-year-old Amelia Lovett playing with caterpillars and chatting with her friends. One friend, named Bossy, announces both the news of riots in Derry and the rumour that there would likely be similar outbreaks in Belfast, too. We read, "[o]f course they'd heard rumblings. Everybody'd heard rumblings. But the rumblings had been about Derry, which was another country, another planet. What had Derry got to do with Belfast and with them?" (*NB*, 3). Whilst the borders that surround this community are clearly heavily localised, it is also clear how broader political borders are themselves reflected within the district of Ardoyne where the community, too, is heavily divided, often street by street.

The novel's concern for borderlines is further brought to the forefront in the third chapter, titled "In the Crossfire, 1971" (the year that riots broke out in Ardoyne). In this chapter, Amelia and her classmates are asked to write competitive poems about peace to commemorate the 'Special Day of Hope', (which, incidentally, we are told also fell on 'Spy Wednesday', and so peace is unquestionably equated with internal vigilance). Amelia, now aged nine, writes first a poem about a "a boy on a bike who grows up into a man driving a train who gets killed by a tractor" (*NB*, 36), followed by another about an aggressive swelling river and floating dead bodies (37). Yet more telling still is that we are told how "the children ... spent more emotional time on their borders than they'd done on their poems about peace" (37). The contents of these borders are themselves both violent and unquestionably symbolic, featuring staircases, fangs and teeth marks, potatoes, cowboys and Indians, scalps and bonfires, whistles and binlids and "rows and rows of tiny soldiers, lining up and searching rows of tiny little men" (37-8). They

symbolise a chain of interconnected and often inherited, local and international traumas that encroach on the children's lives from the outside in. Also of note is how on completion, these so called "peace efforts" were "collected and solemnly put under lock and key" (38) – kept securely in a safe place.

That the symbolic dictating borders constructed in the novel (and indeed, in the historical reality that the novel brings to life) extend from the national to the familial equally calls to mind the communitarian depiction of the operative community as founded on concepts of blood, nation, native soil or family ties (Nancy 1991, 15). In the chapter titled "Mr Hunch in the Ascendant, 1980" – which is dedicated the childhood memories and ongoing psychosis of Amelia's school friend Vincent, and to which I shall return in greater detail later in this chapter – the character Billy captures the insistence on blind loyalty felt in such a community. He cries,

[t]he truth of the matter is ... you should always love your family. Never blame your relatives, no matter what it is they once did ... The family was good ... the extended family was even better but best of all was the holy community – provided it was only of one specific kind. (*NB*, 150-1)

Another particularly telling moment as to the ontological strength of these divisions can be found in the chapter titled "Echoes, 1979". Here we see Amelia and her friends, now young adults, participating in an integrated work placement. A dispute breaks out and, in a moment of uproar, the boys from both sides of the sectarian divide almost unite, (ironically in a shared dismissal of the idea of sexual discrimination). We are told how,

[a] roar of protest went up from all the boys and it was then they noticed that, as Protestants and Catholics, they were standing a bit too close together. They didn't like that and right away began to fix it. They pushed and shoved and cursed with little words

like ‘Watch it Fenian bastard’ and ‘Fuck off Orange dirtbird’ being thrown around. (*NB*, 110)

The idea of standing to close is clearly something incomprehensible.

### 3.2.2. Hospitality

Equally pertinent to the role of borders in the novel is the concept of hospitality. The community’s shifting interactions with Amelia’s English cousin, James Tone, are of particular relevance in this regard. James is said to have been conceived in Ardoyne, but born and raised in London. His parents are depicted as neglectful, abusive and, for the most part, silent. In November 1969, he is stationed with the British army in Belfast, where he is received with something of a hero’s welcome. We are told how “[e]veryone came out to greet him. He was given tea and bread, tea and cake, tea and biscuits, tea and crisps, tea and lemonade, tea and cigarettes. Tea” (*NB*, 11). On this tour, he is met with a similar level of hospitality at the Lovett family residence: he is welcomed as both an exciting, exotic outsider, but with the warmth of family member. At this point, he is not yet recognised as an Other in the significant way – that is, in a way associated with partition. However, on his second tour, which comes after a serious escalation in violence and brutality of British soldiers, we see how the ideological and communal narrative has changed. Thus, the ‘over the water’ distinction takes on new significance. The community therefore sees his presence in a new light, and they are no longer, by any stretch of the word, hospitable: “Stones were thrown, binlids banged, whistles blown, bare hands were used, ‘m-u-u-r-dher’ yelled most especially at night” (19). James’s role in the city, too, also changes accordingly. We see him somewhat numbed to his surroundings, and relentlessly on edge: he “used walls as protection, or children, and took constant aim at everything” (20). With the rhetoric of the army having been stationed to help broker peace being more and more difficult to believe, it would seem that James’s given identity (together with that of the British army which he represents) changes from that of a guest to a parasite.

This shift is also reflected in the Lovett family's response when he goes to visit them for a second time, where he's told, "[y]e're an English bum. We don't want ye here no more" (26).

Following this encounter, and after later being completely ignored by his aunt in the street, James is followed and murdered by the character Jat McDaide, who is said to have overheard that he may have been in possession of Wolfe Tone's watch. The watch that is stolen from James, however, neither once belonged to Wolfe Tone, nor was the family heirloom pocket watch about which the rumour was first intended. This scene not only highlights the extent that James's communal identity has changed, but equally underscores the potential violence that a conditional or domestic hospitality, in a Derridean sense, may represent. As discussed in chapter two, when a community allows for only conditional hospitality, "a new arrival can only be introduced "'in my home,' in the host's 'at home', as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine" (Derrida 2000, 59). In contrast, if a community is open to unconditional hospitality, the arrival of someone from outside holds the potential to,

call into question, to the point of annihilating or rendering indeterminate, all the distinctive signs of a prior identity, beginning with the very border that delineated a legitimate home and assured lineage, names and language, nations, families and genealogies. (Derrida 1993, 34)

Undoubtedly, a community cannot be expected to maintain a hospitable attitude towards a foreign army, stationed on the pretence of keeping the peace, yet shooting bullets at the very people they are supposed to be protecting. But the case of James, if we abstract him from the army he represents, and take him rather as a singularity apart from the collective, is still interesting to consider, particularly because James himself is, in many respects, 'one of the family'. Indeed, as Fadem comments,

[i]t is not a little ironic that this figure – beaten by his mad British father, neglected by his “dead” Irish mother, later finding himself enlisted by the British state to defend the nearest reaches of its empire in Ireland – feels he is going “home” in crossing the colonial border from England to Ireland, and is then murdered not long after by members of the Belfast family whose hostile, war-ravaged arms he runs toward. (2015, 141)

Of further significance, then, is James’s hybrid identity, for he is both Irish and English, a stranger and a neighbour, part of the family and part of the enemy forces – and yet none of these labels at the same time. Fadem describes him as a “partitionist Irish ‘mulatto’” and “a hybrid figure who merges place and body and stands in the frantically liminal space between partition, colonialism, and nationalism” (2015, 140). This image is reinforced by the double meaning to be found in the very first sentence spoken of James in the novel; that he was “conceived in a half-house” (*NB*, 10). As well as not himself fitting into the binary logic on which this community’s identity was hinged, we are also told that he “didn’t understand the significance of being English in Ireland at all” (25). A similar level of ignorance is reflected in one of James’s fellow soldiers who, during his first visit to the Lovett’s house, asks “[w]ho’s Wolfe Tone?” (18).<sup>20</sup> This lack of understanding, or apparent naivete regarding the conflicts, gives further significance to the stolen watch.

Wolfe Tone (1763 - 1798) is an infamous figure in Ireland’s history. He is said to be the father of Irish Republicanism and was a key protagonist in trying to bridge the Protestant

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<sup>20</sup> The idea that many British soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland were unaware of the historical and social context of the conflict is not uncommon. In an interview with the journalist Oisín Feeney, former Royal marine Chris Thrall explains that he neither understood the difference between Protestant and Catholic, nor between Ireland and Northern Ireland prior to arriving in Belfast. Thrall suggests that whilst extensive training and lectures were provided on the military practicalities of patrol, very little was explained in terms of context. He explains, “we called it ‘over the water’, or we just called it ‘Ireland’ ... to us ... that’s Ireland, this is England, right? We weren’t, like, politically motivated”. The impression that Thrall came away with after the training, however, was unquestionably politically motivated: that the Protestants were on their side, whilst the Catholics were the enemy (Oisín, 2023).

and Catholic divisions in society in order to unite the population of Ireland towards the common cause of independence.<sup>21</sup> Like James in the novel, Tone also existed in something of a liminal space. Equally, there is a certain sense in which, like Wolfe, the hybrid nature of James's character forces the two warring communities to come together, if only for a second. However, the irony lies in the fact that James Tone knows nothing of the history that inadvertently lives on in him, and his presence in Belfast is almost incidental. Whilst James is very aware that he was not in any way related to the famous Wolfe Tone, and that his family did not inherit Tone's watch, what he fails to recognise is that he has nonetheless inadvertently inherited the traumas, the violence, and the conflicts of his ancestors. Whilst he wants to offer this watch as a means of tying a bond with his otherwise detached cousin (something of a pathetic echo of the political in the personal), encrypted in this watch lies what will become the significance of his own imminent death.

McGuinness's analysis of the trope of 'souveniring' also brings new insights in this respect. She suggests that the "souvenir functions as a link to a preferred association between subject and place, overriding the grim realities of the subject's actual lived experiences" (210, 169). It serves both as a means of diverting attention away from one's surroundings and of projecting lived trauma onto inanimate objects. Importantly, McGuinness highlights how both the object and the practise are highly secretive, and describes the process as creating a "safe space around the self" (210, 169). It is interesting to note how her choice of words echo those used to outline the construction of the crypt. What results from the process, according to McGuinness, is the appropriation of these souvenired objects by means of the fetishisation and commodification of Irish history. When Jat McDaide murders James so as to steal the sought-

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<sup>21</sup> Tone is quoted as saying, "[t]o subvert the tyranny of our execrable Government ... to break the connection with England, the never failing source of our political evils, and to assert the independence of my country – these were my objects. To unite the whole people of Ireland, to abolish the memory of our past dissensions, and to substitute the common name of Irishmen in place of the denomination of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter – these were my means" (O'Brien 1893, xi).

after watch, the significance of the history that the watch represents is reduced to the commodity itself. Whilst James's murder is described in the novel as "just another of those motiveless crimes that were going on all over the place" (*NB*, 28), it may be interpreted as Burns's warning of the brutal outcomes of souvenirizing the past. As McGuinness concludes, "[t]his fetishization values the supposedly original remnant, the desired sign of authenticity, over the historical complexity of that past event and also over the real presence of the present in the form of human need" (2010, 189). I suggest that this observation to some extent reflects the Heideggerian drive for authenticity over the communitarian respect for alterity. Equally of note is how, later on in the narrative, we see the revolutionary's name souvenirized once again, when Bronagh names her youngest son Wolfe Tone.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2.3. Autoimmunity

Just as we saw with communitarian depictions of the operative community, this particular community's obsession with borders is in part what drives its autoimmune response. As delineated in chapter two, Derrida defines the concept of autoimmunity as "that strange behavior where a living being, in quasi-*suicidal* fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself *against* its 'own' immunity" (2003, 94; emphasis in the original). As is the case with all of Burns's novels, in *No Bones* this autoimmune response can be identified within the community, within families and within the internal lives of many of the characters themselves.<sup>23</sup> We begin to see the cracks within the community's own defensive systems as early on as chapter one, when, to pass the time whilst hiding under the table, Amelia suggests playing a guessing game as to what had been hit by the bombings that night. We are told how Amelia, "[t]ry as she might ... couldn't think beyond the chapel and the school" and

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<sup>22</sup> The rest of Bronagh's sons are also named after renowned Irish revolutionaries: Kevin-Barry, Patrick-P and James-C.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, that the political is mirrored in the psychological is an idea I shall explore further in chapter four, when analysing her second novel, *Little Constructions* (2007).

further that “[t]here was no doubt about it. They both deserved to be blown up” (NB, 5). The chapel and the school undoubtedly symbolise both the centre of the community and supposedly protective spaces – that the children fantasise about these community centres and safe houses being blown up is immediately revealing, for the heart of the community is presented as the heart of its disease. This image is reinforced later on in the narrative as we learn how knee-cappings, shootings, social ostracization and constant surveillance of community members were all commonplace in Ardoyne – acts committed under the guise of keeping the community safe.<sup>24</sup> The autoimmune response of the community is reflected in the psychological toll it takes on its members. Whilst we witness how the vast majority of characters begin to attack themselves from the inside out (in the form of eating disorders, addiction and self-destructive behaviour), others, like Bronagh and Mick Lovett, project this psychological turmoil onto a relentless aggression towards those around them. We also see a number of characters capitalising on the general acceptance of violence, for no matter the crime, it could always be understood from within the general given rhetoric.

Indeed, the extent of the community’s control over its own narrative is particularly evident in the extent to which individual community members internalise its norms. Every conflict is interpreted as connected to the borders that both divide *and* define them. One example occurs when, after the violent outbreak at the aforementioned cross-community youth training programme, all the young people involved are interviewed whilst in A&E. Amelia explains,

I told them there had been cries of Fenian, Taig, Billy Boys, Remember, general effin’ and blinding’ and No Pope Here. ... I didn’t witness what happened with the Black &

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<sup>24</sup> This depiction is equally portrayed in Burns’s latest novel, *Milkman* (2018), which I address in chapter five.



Decker, I didn't touch any of them breezeblocks and – were they stupid? – of course it was about the Border. (NB, 116)

This particular conflict, however, was actually sparked largely due to the character Bronagh's divergence from gender norms, which are themselves further binaries and barriers that dictate behaviour in the community. These particular binaries, however, act silently and go largely unseen as they fall outside the one *significant* divide. Amelia and her peers thus displace the true border at the centre of this conflict onto the capitalised Border; the one and only binary they feel truly able to grasp.

This is very much connected to the way in which the community deals with death. When deaths are manageable – that is, when they are about 'The Cause' or 'Border' – they have very little effect on the community members, who are themselves quick to forget and move on. They are both expected and understood. However, when confronted with deaths that the community cannot comprehend from within the given rhetoric, there is a certain sense in which we witness characters forced to face up to what Nancy calls "the senseless meaning that [death] ought to have – and that it has, obstinately" (Nancy 1991, 14). Two such instances occur in the chapter titled "Miscellany and Drift, 1978". As the title suggests, during this chapter we are met with a melange of four occasions of violence, and three deaths, all overlapping, yet none specifically connected to each other nor in any direct sense connected to 'The Cause'. The narrator sets the scene as follows:

three things came together the way three things generally do and produced a fourth, unexpected thing. Some in the know though, said that was a load of rubbish, that the

fourth had nothing to do with the other three, that it was a long time coming, but in the end, it would have happened anyway. (*NB*, 87)<sup>25</sup>

Two of these deaths provoke an unsettling feeling within the community, yet the third is accepted and understood, as are the knee-cappings that are utilised to justified it. Interestingly, 1978 was the year in which the notorious La Mon restaurant bombing took place, during which an IRA incendiary bomb killed twelve civilians (see Coogan 2002, 384-451). The first of the deaths in this chapter, however, takes place not in an upmarket hotel, but in something of its nightmarish equivalent – the derelict bar known as ‘Logues’. Also in contrast to the Le Mon bombing, this death is both largely unintended and brutally meaningless, for it results from a group of youths deciding to play Russian Roulette. 16-year-old Rob McCormick is the first to pull the trigger on himself, and immediately drops down dead, whilst all those watching in the bar are sprayed with his blood (96). The second death is the suicide of the Sinn Fein treasurer who, having spent all of the money he was supposed to be guarding, and in fear of the deathly consequences, decides to take his own life. The third death is a murder and takes place within the walls of yet another “tin-shack, sawdust-on-the-floor drinking club” known as ‘the Saunders’ (101). Here, the character Micky Lovett (Amelia’s older brother) kills Brendy McDaid. As Micky was seeking personal vengeance for not being consulted as to the murder of his cousin, James, earlier in the narrative, he decides that, as a proportionate response, the murder of the culprit’s own cousin could easily be justified. We are told how, “[h]e used the logical, linear grown-up side of his brain ... and came to the conclusion that the killing wouldn’t arouse conflict, altercations or any sort of controversy, just so long as it was essential and in the interests of The Cause” (101).

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<sup>25</sup> There is also, I believe, to be found in this quote an intentional ironic echo of discussions regarding the relationship between the British colonisation of Ireland, the Irish War of Independence, Partition and the Troubles: “three things came together the way three things generally do and produced a fourth, unexpected thing” (*NB*, 87).

The community responds to the first two deaths with a kind of speechless dismay:

They grew silent and heavy and lowered their heads and got depressed. All in all, they had no idea, couldn't figure out, why one person would choose to kill himself to stop someone else from doing it to him, or why a 16-year-old might not want to live another sixty or seventy years. (*NB*, 104)

For the reader, the irony lies in how these deaths are, to a great extent, more comprehensible than those of paramilitary violence. In the case of the treasurer, the only alternative was the violent end he would have inevitably met at the hands of the IRA, whilst for the youths, we may be reminded of the war-torn surroundings of their present, together with a generally accepted lack of any hope for the future. The unsettling feeling expressed by the community, however, is contrasted with the equally silent yet totally unphased response (or lack of response) to the death of Brendy McDaid. Whilst Micky believed that it would be understood as within the community's general interests, we are told how "[a]ll the neighbours knew ... without asking any questions, that when it came to feuds and personal grievances, some things were best left forever unsaid" (104). Without taking the anticipated steps to connect the death with 'the Cause', Brendy's murder remains nonetheless understandable as it falls into the community's acceptance of the norms of vengeance – clearly a further aspect of its unacknowledged yet heavily endorsed autoimmune defences systems. At the joint funeral held for Fallon, McCormick and Brenden, we read how "[e]veryone said wasn't it terrible, wasn't it awful, wasn't it a waste, wouldn't it always be remembered? But it wouldn't. And it wasn't. Everything got eclipsed, always got eclipsed, by the next, most recent, violent death" (104-5).

#### 3.2.4. Consuming Bodies

The constant presence of political, communal, familial and personal violence in the novel also aligns with the communitarian warning made against communion or ecstatic fusion. Mick

Lovett and his partner Mena's association of the excessive consumption of food with sexual intercourse is especially relevant in this respect, as is the rest of the family's general acceptance of their choosing to have intercourse both in shared spaces in the family home, and often virtually on top of other family members and neighbours. The chapter in which we are exposed to this behaviour is titled "Troubles, 1979" – just as is the case with the conflicts in Northern Ireland, it is undoubtedly a diminutive term given the sheer scale of the violence witnessed. Mick and Mena, after initiating sex in the living room, leaving to the kitchen to eat rotting cold curry and rice with their bare hands, (for "[t]hey believed in keeping sex and food close, very close – but when it came down to it, they still had to be separate" (*NB*, 120)), proceed to attempt to rape Amelia on the stairs with a fire poker. The horror of this scene lies not only in the severity of the act itself, made so much worse given that the main perpetrator is Amelia's own brother, but also in how violently her own self-protective barriers have been violated. Mick and Mena's grotesque overconsumption, first of the rotting food, but immediately followed by Amelia's body, is contrasted with Amelia's intentional self-starvation. Amelia's anorexia is itself an echo of both the hunger strikes being encouraged in Amelia's school at the time in the novel, and the very real hunger strikes undertaken by political prisoners throughout the Troubles (as well as during the Irish War of Independence). Whilst these historical references are themselves not mentioned in the novel, they are undoubtedly present within the mind of the reader. As Magennis observes, both hunger strikes and cases of anorexia are to some extent a way of exerting control in the face of a total lack of power and agency (2010, 101). In this respect, by means of exposing the opposition of consumption and starvation, Burns further blurs the boundaries of the political and the personal.

This violent, contrasting image of the consumption of Amelia's starving body is brought to the forefront for a second time when the trauma of being almost raped by her brother is relived by Amelia in the form of a flashback. This occurs in the chapter titled "No Bones 1991-

1992". Here we see Amelia, who has been admitted onto a ward in a psychiatric institution in London, revisiting distorted traumatic past events and struggling to distinguish between being asleep and being awake. Whilst being violently force-fed in the real-world, she sees the face of her brother on the pinchers, with the image of the pinchers mirroring the image of the fire poker in the earlier scene. In this vision, Mick then proceeds not to rape Amelia, but to eat her. We read how "he was eating her calf muscle and he ate it, making neat little slapping laps. He sucked methodically and he kept his eyes closed and when he'd finished with her calf, he moved on to her thigh muscle" (*NB*, 277). Again, we see a parallel drawn between her brother's consumption of her body and the removal of her own will in the act of force-feeding, as the external threat of violence both physically and psychologically penetrates her internal traumatised sense of self, ignoring along the way all self-protective barriers Amelia may have tried to construct.

Importantly, this is not the only instance that Amelia is sexually violated in the novel. The second incident occurs in a chapter chillingly titled "War Spasms, 1988", during which we see Amelia visit her old classmate Bronagh with the intention of verifying a rumour about her brother (one that, on entering the house, she quickly forgets). Unbeknownst to Amelia, Bronagh was in that particular moment mentally preparing for the murder she was to commit later that evening, and her way of preparing for murder was to "get some obsessive-compulsive human contact, and the obsessive-compulsive drug of choice for Bronagh was dominating and very fast sex" (*NB*, 222). Throughout this scene, Amelia finds herself in a state of passivity, something the narrator describes as a "blank mode" (224). We read how "Amelia was at a funeral. She knew how to behave at funerals. She'd been to funerals, oh, many times before" (224).<sup>26</sup> The connection made here between rape and death reinforces the view that the violence

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<sup>26</sup> Such a reaction when faced with sexual assault is by no means uncommon, and is one we see to a greater extent in the protagonist of Burns's *Milkman* (2018). I shall return to this theme in chapter five.

of this violation is equally an act of refusing to recognise, and subsequently consuming, Amelia's singularity. As was the case with the first incident, this second attack is also closely intertwined with the contrasting images of food and consumption on the one hand, and starvation on the other. Additionally, and again in like manner to the first incident, it blurs the boundaries between public and private domains, and domestic and political violence.<sup>27</sup>

When Amelia arrives at Bronagh's house through the back door that leads straight into the kitchen, Bronagh is peeling potatoes and talking about sex, with her children subsequently bribed to leave with Mars bars. In contrast, we are frequently met with accounts of Amelia's own dizzily painful hunger pangs. Also on the kitchen table is a box of Semtex – itself an indication as to the explosive nature of the violence about to unfold both inside and outside the home (*NB*, 223). The sexual abuse moves from the kitchen to Bronagh's children's box room – itself a kind of liminal space, with no windows and barely enough space to stand in. At the end of the scene, it is revealed that the two of them are lying on top of mounds of decapitated jelly baby heads, for Bronagh's son James-C “thinks he hasn't killed them so long as he doesn't eat their heads” (229). Bronagh appears to find this endearing, for of course the consumption of the body results in the death of the object, and so, whilst giggling, proceeds to toss a handful of heads into her own mouth. The disturbing image left for the reader is thus how Bronagh has not only consumed Amelia's body – for “Bronagh's tongue then demanded, pushing itself in further, taking over and expanding to the back of Amelia's throat” (225) – but clearly, her head as well.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, in her analysis of the scene at Bronagh's house, McCann suggests that it may be interpreted as a parodic version of Yeats and Lady Gregory's 1902 play “Cathleen ni Houlihan” (2014a, 39).

<sup>28</sup> A connection may also be made here with the literal consumption of murder victims that we witness in Burns's second novel, *Little Constructions* (2007), which I discuss in chapter four.

### 3.3. The Crypt

This takes us on to the construction of crypts in the novel, which I believe lies at the centre of this inside/outside dialectic as depicted thus far. As discussed in chapter two, according to Derrida, the crypt results from the process of mourning known as ‘introjection’ and acts as an internal symbolic safe for absolute secrets. It is described as both a “cryptic fortress” and a “labyrinth” (Derrida 1986a, xx) that conceals “a structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future” (Davis 2011, 112-3). There are a number of objects and events in the novel that could be interpreted from this perspective (including James Tone’s watch), but I have chosen to focus on what I believe to be three most significant: Amelia’s ‘Treasure Trove’, Mary Dolan’s dead baby, and Vincent’s deconstructed dead father.

#### 3.3.1. Amelia’s ‘Treasure Trove’

I shall begin with Amelia’s secret box of collected items she calls her ‘Treasure Trove’. When we are first introduced to the box, it is said to contain, amongst other things, hundreds of coloured buttons, “a tiny tractor, a one-inch pitchfork, a white plastic sheep and a Black Queen chess piece” (*NB*, 15). The items in her collection are referred to as her toys, which itself echoes the idea of the crypt as a kind of plaything, which can be deciphered in Freud’s essay on (and Derrida’s deconstruction of) the notion of *fort/da* (Freud 1961; Derrida 1987). Our first encounter with these treasures is in the second chapter, when Amelia shows them to her English cousin James Tone: “‘My Trove,’ she said, ‘It’s called my Treasure Trove. It’s private but I’ll let you look if you want’” (*NB*, 15). At this stage, Amelia is not guarding her treasure; it is as if the space has been mapped out for the crypt, but it is yet to be filled in with encrypted trauma. It is private, but she is happy to reveal (in secret) the contents to her cousin, who himself represents an outsider to this enclosed community.

The second encounter we have with the box is in the chapter titled “Treasure Trove: 1972” (interestingly, 1972 is the bloodiest year of the Troubles). Amelia is now ten and her collection has grown. We read,

[e]very single night and every single day Amelia went upstairs to look at her treasure. She classified the precious belongings in it as Minor, Medium and Main. ... best of all by far were the thirty-seven black rubber bullets she’d collected ever since the British Army started firing ... She kept these thirty-seven, six-inch long, one-and-a-half-inch thick rubber bullets, along with all the other classes of the treasure, in a big battered suitcase under the bed. It was marked:

Amelia Boyd Lovett Owns This

Private Property

Keep Out. (*NB*, 41)

Hidden under her bed, in an old suitcase (perhaps a family heirloom), this secret box is both inner and outer, public and private. Unlike before, Amelia now guards this box, which is locked with a key she always carries on her person. It would appear that she is acting as the groundskeeper to the crypt. Already these items symbolise, and substitute, a number of interconnected traumas, both hers and not hers. Indeed, we are told how many of the objects were found, collected or sometimes even “dug up here and there along the way” (43), undoubtedly pointing to the idea of unearthing (and later encoding and reburying) transgenerational trauma.

It is not difficult to decipher how at least an aspect of what is encrypted in her prize treasures – the thirty-seven bullets – is the trauma of the conflicts themselves.<sup>29</sup> The exact significance of most of the other items, however, goes largely untold. This being said, the

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<sup>29</sup> Collecting rubber bullets was a common pass-time for children during the Troubles (Duffy and McClements 2019, 44).



significance of the Black Queen is to some extent revealed to the reader. We learn how it had been taken by Amelia during a game of chess with her brother Mick who lost, and in response, proceeded to try to throw her out the window. So already the Black Queen stands in for the trauma of being almost thrown out of the window, which itself stands in for the violent way Amelia was treated by her brother in general. In this chapter, Mick takes the chess piece from Amelia and tries to behead it with a penknife (an echo, perhaps, of the Republicans' desire to remove the head of state). In her attempt to rescue the queen, Mick is quick to snatch up her bullets, too. What Amelia imagines Mick may be doing with her prize treasure when taken to his bedroom is particularly revealing. We read how,

[f]rom behind the wood came the secret finishing touches of concealment, the comings and goings and clickings and closings that had Amelia beside herself with worry. ... Finally, an isolated lock locked shut and, with her bullets, now his, in some invisible place he now wanted them to be, Mick could afford to dander to the door and open it.  
(NB, 47-8)

Once his, Mick is also in control of Amelia's narrative. He intentionally misguides their mother's interpretation of the mercury tilt switch (a switch commonly used to control motors of pumps), as being a primer charger, that is, the switch that sets off bombs. Amelia, however, insists the switch held no significance to her, claiming that, on the contrary, she simply felt sorry for it. Not only does this element of misdirection draw attention to the idea of the crypt being like a labyrinth, but also to how her Treasure Trove is both dead, in the sense of dead rubber bullets, but also very much live, and, ready to explode from significance.

Something particularly interesting here, however, is the structure. The Black Queen is a memory, standing in for a trauma, but one that receives further significance only after this violation: it does not become fully encrypted until her rubber bullets are gone, for it is only then that it substitutes them, together with their own encrypted traumas. We may recall how

the crypt is said to erupt from dislocation, with the secret created in division (Derrida 1986a, xiv). Once returned to her, Amelia takes the queen and locks it away in its own, separate box. She wants to keep it – but to keep it separate – and describes it as a “Mick thing” (*NB*, 52), for there is now a part of Mick now buried in her crypt, too. The Black Queen has thus become something like a cypher.

We encounter Amelia’s Treasure Trove for a third time in a later chapter titled “Waked, 1989”, in which Amelia attends the wake of her sister Lizzie, who has committed suicide. Amelia discovers a group of children who may or may not be related to her, playing with her rubber bullets – itself a clear example of the passing on of transgenerational traumas. Amelia confiscates the bullets from the now wailing children, and frets about what to do with them next. She questions,

[s]hould she saw them into pieces ... chop them up and burn them ... Should she give them to some authority? But what authority should she give them to? Sinn Fein? ... The Royal Ulster Constabulary? ... the British Army? ... Couldn’t she remember it was the British Army who had fired the bullets in the first place?” (*NB*, 242-3)

Instead, she shoves them in her rucksack (itself already packed full of traumas, including the t-shirt of her dead sister), and decides, having taken a joke made by her younger sister seriously, to throw them into the Irish sea. In a moment of fury one of the children then throws half-a-brick at Amelia – another act of violence – which, unphased, she simply takes and shoves alongside all the rest of her traumas in her rucksack to be thrown into the sea together. Following the blurring of boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ which takes place in her doubt as to which authorities to hand the bullets over to, Amelia’s choice to discard her old treasure in the space in-between Belfast and London, where she is headed in an attempt to escape her suffocating surroundings, represents another attempt to bury her traumas in a liminal space. Also of note is that after having taken her sister Lizzie’s “stony fist” in her own hands (237)

Amelia's hands, too, are described as "dead" (241). This, together the fact she is repeatedly mistaken for Lizzie no matter that they are at her wake, both further blurs the boundaries of dead and alive, and points towards the process of incorporation. On the other hand, the way in which Amelia's sister Josie says to Ameia, contrary to her own claims that she will be either in Liverpool or London the next day, "[y]ou'll be here. You'll be nowhere" (240), hints at the process of introjection, whereby Amelia acts as the crypt's silent guard. The final episode in which we encounter this treasure trove is during one of Amelia's later drug induced sleeps/psychotic episodes during which she is confronted by numerous ghosts of people from her past. I shall return to this scene monetarily.

### 3.3.2. Mary Dolan's Dead Baby

A further object worth exploring from the perspective of the crypt is the still-born baby kept in its amniotic sac and wheeled around in a pram by Mary Dolan. The chapter in which we encounter this object is titled "Babies, 1974", and takes place when Amelia and Mary are both about twelve.<sup>30</sup> The chapter begins as follows:

Mary Dolan had her baby someone said. There'd been problems with it coming out, maybe because of all the age she was. Her da was still pretending he'd nothing to do with it and her ma was still not noticing. Nobody got in the doctor.

She started to wheel it about in an old toy pram, pushing it up Brompton Park, round the corner, down Highbury, round the corner, up Holmedene, round the corner, down Strathroy. They said she worked her way along the whole row of streets until she reached the barricades. Then she turned and came back. Again and again and again.

(NB, 65)

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<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, in 1974, the year that this chapter is set, a series of UVF car bombs in the centre of Dublin claimed thirty-four lives. One of the recorded deaths was that of an unborn child, whilst another was that of the daughter of a survivor, who, as a result of the trauma suffered, was stillborn at full-term just three months later (Kilfeather 2005, 220).

This is precisely what Mary Dolan is doing when Amelia crosses paths with her whilst on her way home from school. The two then have an unnerving interaction with some soldiers on patrol. The first thing we notice is how the way in which this episode takes place holds certain resemblances to a dream sequence – the road is quiet and deserted, soldiers appear as if from nowhere and in silence, and we are told how time, too, is distinctively (although not unusually) out of joint: “[a]s usual, everything was fast-motion and slow-motion at the same time” (68). To add to this kind of nightmarish feeling, Mary is constantly nodding at Amelia without speaking, in an almost ghost-like way, affirming something but saying nothing. Also of note is how the soldiers direct all their questions at Amelia – it is almost as if no one else is even able to see Mary. Amelia for her part describes how Mary “stopped *dead*, in the middle of the road” (65; emphasis added),<sup>31</sup> whilst as the soldiers approach the girls, another gets up from behind a wall and says to Amelia (not to Mary) “Bang ... You’re dead” (68). With both characters described as dead, and with Amelia being the one trying to prevent the guards from looking inside the pram, the reader may begin to question whether the crypt also belongs to Amelia. Indeed, Derrida writes of “the crypt from which the ghost *comes back*” that it “belongs to someone else” (1986a, 119; emphasis in the original), whilst Abraham and Torok depict it as “the unwitting reception of *someone else’s* secret” (1994, 168; emphasis added).

After the soldiers have left, Amelia mistakes the dead baby in Mary’s pram for a bomb. She explains how she “peered at the grey package. There was definitely strings or thick wires, you know, just under the surface”, and questions “[w]as it a bomb? What did a bomb look like?” (*NB*, 69). Therefore, just as we saw with the mercury tilt switch and rubber bullets, the contents of the pram are both dead and very much *live*. It is also mistaken for a doll by the guards, for the pram is, after all, a *toy* pram, which again echoes the idea of the crypt as being

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<sup>31</sup> This observation may hold further significance with regards to speculative conclusions reached later in this chapter.

an object of play. Furthermore, that the pram is described as old hints at signs of inheritance, or transgenerational haunting. As we saw too with Amelia's Treasure Trove, part of what is interesting here is the repeated element of misdirection and misinterpretation, which corresponds with Derrida's description of crypt as being like a labyrinth. Additionally, the route that Mary repeats wheeling the baby up to the barricades and back again may represent both the tendency to repeat trauma, and how the spectre is always a "question of repetition" for it "*begins by coming back*" (Derrida 1994, 11; emphasis in the original). We may notice, too, how her route always stays within, if not bounces off, the boundary lines.

Equally important is the fact that the revelation to Amelia as to the true contents of the pram takes place in a location topographically both somewhere and nowhere – in "Logue's crumbling backyard" (*NB*, 68). This derelict bar is described as the place where "by convention, all bizarre, subliminal, dark behaviours of the inhabitants of the area were always and forever carried out" (88) – it is, then, somewhere that is both dead *and* alive. Once in the backyard of the bar, and so both at the same time inside and outside, Amelia pulls back the hood of the pram, unwraps the object she believes to be a bomb and discovers Mary's still-born child encased in a kind of "thick putty" (69). This image resonates with Derrida's depiction of the contents of the crypt, that "the inhabitant of a crypt is always a living dead, a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but *as* dead, one we are willing to keep, as long as we keep it, within us, intact in any way save as living" (Derrida 1986a, xxi; emphasis in the original). When Amelia asks Mary what she put her baby in – she cries, "[h]ow can you not know? It's a bag! You put you baby in a bag!" (70) – Mary responds that it was God who did it, for what Amelia takes to be a bag is actually the amniotic sac.

The image created is as disturbing as it is powerful. Whilst Mary has psychologically buried her dead baby which she mourns (paradoxically, by refusing to bury it), it is important to remember that, according to Abraham and Torok, hidden in the crypt is not the dead other

itself, but the gaps and secrets they have left behind. Given both the historical context of the novel as well as the fictional histories of the characters involved, there are numerous possible interconnected traumas encrypted in this object: problematic abortion laws, institutional violence against women, Mother and Baby Homes, sexual abuse and incest, and victims of paramilitary violence – all traumas that are intimately tied to the process of mourning.

Also of note here may be the two references made to ducks in the episode: first of all, we have the “cord of rattles in the shape of ducks” stretched across the pram, some of which were “hanging over the side” (*NB*, 66), and secondly, when Amelia pulls back the hood of the pram, she describes seeing “a curled-up foot, webby, like a duck’s” (69). This could perhaps be a nod to what is known as “sitting duck syndrome” in psychiatry, a term used to describe the condition of an increased vulnerability to revictimization of victims of incest and sexual abuse, of which one of the symptoms is said to be “socialization to atypical object relations” (Kluft 1990, 168-9). Perhaps what Burns is reminding us of here is how both Amelia and Mary are susceptible to revictimization in this respect. Importantly, this vulnerability could equally translate to the that of the traumatised community as a whole.

The scene ends with Amelia leaving Mary alone with her pram in the derelict bar. As she climbs through the hole on her way out, she hears Mary call after her “just once, and not at all loud ... ‘Amelia’” (*NB*, 70). Importantly, Amelia does not look back.<sup>32</sup> The image of Mary’s young pregnancy, traumatic loss, and still-born child become recurring themes in the later psychotic episodes of the character of Vincent.

### 3.3.3. Vincent’s Deconstructed Dead Father and The Carnaval

The chapter dedicated to Amelia’s old friend Vincent – which, despite being the longest of the entire book, appears as something of an aside or detour from the main storyline – begins in a

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<sup>32</sup> This farewell is, however, reversed later on in the narrative when we meet Mary for the last time at Lizzie’s wake. Here it is Mary, and not Amelia, who does not look back.

psychiatric hospital, where Vincent has been admitted, and subsequently moves between conversations with his psychiatrist Parker on the ward and delusions of a carnival scene with creepily gothic surroundings. McGuinness interprets this chapter in reference to Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, suggesting that it functions as a space to act out an alternative reality, and one that connects public and private violence. In Bakhtin's words, "[c]arnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (Bakhtin 1984, 34; quoted in McGuinness 2010, 181).<sup>33</sup> What is more interesting still is the link that McGuinness makes between the carnival and the secret, that "its display of what has previously been unacknowledged or repressed means that the secret functions as a motivating force behind carnival's structures and intentions" and further, that it "exists between the borders of reticence and disclosure in the same manner that a secret does" (2010, 181).

The stalls at the carnival in Vincent's delusions include: "How To Sit With Your Depression" (which, unsurprisingly, had the smallest crowd); "Death And Half-Death"; "Falling Off the Roller Coaster!"; "GetOutOfTheWay's Dodgems"; and, the stall with the longest queue, the "Identify The Body display". It is at this final display that we get a glimpse of Vincent's dead father, but there is a lot to work through before we arrive. If previous episodes felt nightmarish, this one pushes the idea of a nightmare to its extreme. Not only is time disrupted, but we are met with the possibility that this whole scene is itself a case of repetition. Even whilst in the institution, there is no clear distinction between delusion and reality, with Vincent's psychiatrist, Mr Parker, appearing first as Vincent's dead father, and later wearing the sparkling outfits Vincent once encountered in a comic as a child. In both realities, Vincent repeatedly draws lines on his arms with a red pen that is often confiscated but easily reacquired.

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<sup>33</sup> I shall return to Bakhtin's discussion of the carnivalesque in chapter six, when addressing Burns's novella *Mostly Hero* (2014) and the topic of humour and irony in literature.

He is both tracing his father's stab wounds and marking the places where he is touched by other people. Each time he is touched seems to act as a violation of the barriers he has constructed to protect himself from the threat of other people and his increasingly violent surroundings. As the chapter continues, we, too, begin to retrace these lines of trauma.

In order to make sense of the carnival episode, it is necessary to first address the scene we encounter around the middle of the chapter, formally separated from the rest of the text by the use of smaller font size (*NB*, 156-63). Here, the reader is taken back in time to see Vincent as a young boy, with the events taking place after both the loss of his father, who was stabbed to death as a result of sectarian violence, and the loss of his mother's unwanted second baby. We learn how Vincent was often left alone for increasingly long periods of time, and repeatedly told not to leave his room "for the Devil is down there" (157). No doubt, what we have here is a quite literal Freudian *fort/da* episode. His mother leaves him, and then returns, and then leaves, and then returns, over and over again. He is left with only a bucket to defecate in and "Special Treats" to eat (157) – the capitalisation of which is the first indication that these items, too, have become encrypted with significance. The reason his mother leaves is for matters of a "self-imposed penance" (159) from what appears to be either a makeshift abortion or a bloody filicide of her baby, carried out in her bedroom using, it seems, a pair of knitting needles (again, and in like-manner to the fire-poker scene, a disturbing overturn of the assumption that what is domestic is also that which is safe). Thus, the trauma that Vincent suffers is in many respects inherited from the process of mourning that his mother undergoes, not only for her child (itself connected to oppressive religious and societal ideals) but also for her husband (Vincent's father).

In response to this sequence, Vincent, like the child named Ernst in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961), plays a game of presence and absence, though not with a spool, but rather with imaginary people appearing from within the wallpaper. It is during these periods of



isolation in his room, in his mother's absence, that the visions of the man he calls Mr Hunch, together with Hunch's murder gang, begin. Vincent calls them into being as a means of protection, and their identities become Vincent's own most protected secret. Moreover, by naming the leader of this gang "Hunch", we receive the message that the character himself stands in for the trace of an unacknowledged secret.

There are a number of objects and memories encountered in this section that later appear twisted, fragmented and mutated in Vincent's psychotic episodes. These include: the Special Treats; "glittering costumes" (*NB*, 158); Marry Dolan's skipping rope; two dogs "stuck together backwards" (161); a squashed moth; a dead baby; and Vincent's dead father who is also the feared baker with a "sewn up face" (159). Moreover, the very carnival itself is an echo of a carnival Vincent first sees in a comic he looks at in his mother's absence. Whilst looking at the comic, he also mistakes the sounds of shovels digging a grave outside his window for the sound of a carnival. We begin to see how Vincent's psychotic episodes later in life circle around the repetition of, but also the introjection of, childhood trauma. The ending of the flashback to Vincent's childhood is therefore also significant in this respect, for we are told of the first time that his mother returns to no greeting from Vincent, a moment described by the narrator as "[t]he first time of how it'll be from now on" (162). As a result of his games of *fort/da*, Vincent, like Ernst, has found a way to deal with the disappearance of his mother: "She can go on her pilgrimages. She can disappear forever. Vincent's not afraid" (163). Vincent thence displaces the distress triggered by his mother's absence onto his objects of play, which include his own psychological constructions.

Back at the carnival scene, we witness Vincent, following Mr Hunch's instructions, setting up his own rifle stand. Whilst his stall, like the fifty-seven other rifle stands at the fair, did contain rifles (mostly Armalites – the IRA's iconic weapon of choice), it is here that we see

some of the familiar objects and memories from his past resurface. His prizes, “in descending order”, include,

Special Treats, Mere Flesh Wounds, Two Dogs Stuck Together Backwards and a Dead Moth squashed by a Boy’s Bare Foot. There was also mustard coloured-sand, flowers moving on wallpaper, a million rounds of ammunition, complete funerals and so much more. (*NB*, 152)

What is noticeably absent, however, is any mention of “abortions, difficult labours, early breakings of water or knitting needles to get rid of things” (152). This omission underscores the displacement that has taken place.

With the description of the carnival and Vincent’s stall, something that immediately comes to mind here is Derrida’s depiction of the crypt in terms of an “inward forum” (1986a, xiv). In ancient Rome the forum was an open, public space used both for debates and public meetings as well as spectator combats. It was also commonly lined with market-place stalls. Vincent’s carnival, then, is an inner private construction of this public space – an *inward* forum. With Vincent displaying the encrypted objects buried within this crypt, again – as we saw too with Amelia’s suitcase – we are met with the image that they are both public and private, open and closed. In Vincent’s case, however, we have the added detail that they are only on display in Vincent’s own psychologically constructed, liminal space. Also of note is how Vincent arrives at the carnival, for we are told how “he knew the door would be locked so he didn’t try to open it. He went through it in the usual way” (*NB*, 137). He enters this safe place, then, not physically, but psychologically, and without unlocking the door.

Several jarring, and incredibly significant things take place during this carnival scene. The first concerns Mary Dolan. When Vincent goes over to Mary, he finds himself having to piece together what she is saying from the fragments of that which is said which (just like the

route she took with the pram) is repeated “quickly over and over” (*NB*, 139). We are to understand that Mary is to have a second child, one that she intends to name Dawn, and that she does not know what to do. Neither does Vincent, who we are told only knows about bombs and guns (and so babies continue to be confused with bombs). Vincent suggests that Mary get the baby out of her, so she reaches in and pulls it out, displaying it on her thumb. It has Amelia’s brother Mick’s face. What happens next is that Mary’s father turns up to beat Mary for having someone else’s baby but is unable to get the baby off her as it is tied on with rope. Interestingly, not only does this rope connects with Vincent’s childhood memories of Mary with a skipping rope when she is attacked by dogs, but it also holds an uncanny resemblance to the pool of thread in Freud’s account of *fort/da*. After having seen her father, Vincent urges Mary to put the baby back. She does so by sliding it back inside her on a tea tin (again, transforming something domestic into something grotesque). The baby is thence out of sight, although remains disturbingly present in its absence. What we have is a kind of substitution of the presence and absence of the mother key to Freud’s reading of *fort/da*, with the presence and absence of the baby. Given the circumstances, we may question as to whether this episode, too, is not a projection of Vincent’s own trauma regarding his mother’s abortion, which is something that Mr Parker himself hints at. It remains, nonetheless, a possibility that Mary really was to have a second baby, one that is not this time the result of incest, but rather sexual abuse (a possibility hinted at by the ducks in the pram earlier on). These questions arise once more when the reader is taken to Lizzie’s funeral and introduced to a child named Dawn – an episode to which I shall return momentarily.

As the boundaries between the psychiatric hospital and the carnival become increasingly blurred, we hear Mr Parker insist that “there doesn’t have to be this inner war”, to which Mr Hunch responds, “[o]f course there does” (*NB*, 137). Whilst Vincent initially turns away from the “Identify The Body display”, for there was “something too previous, too raw on

the shinbone, too Concentrated Panic Stage about the Identify display” (138), it is at this particular display where Vincent must inevitably unearth the crypt of his dead father. Vincent keeps the memory of his father inside, within the carnival crypt, but like Amelia’s Black Queen, his father, too, is to a great extent kept separate. The name of the display itself holds certain similarities with Derrida’s depiction of the process of mourning, that

[i]t consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead ... One has to know ... Now to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies – for it must stay in its place. In a safe place. (1994, 9; emphasis in the original).

Whilst Mr Hunch is the one to first encourage him to go over to the display, it is Mr Parker who is subsequently holding him as he feels himself regress to being five years old and visualising his mother upstairs with the dead baby. Parker and Vincent agree to look in together. What is inside is described by Hunch as “case of spaghetti-fication” (165): the process by which an object is compressed and stretched vertically in strong non-homogenous gravitational fields. It thus becomes clear that hidden in this crypt is not only the corpse of his father, but at the same time a memory, and one that has become twisted and fragmented with the passing of time. We read,

[i]t was hardly like a father, more as if a five-year-old had tried to put a father together, alone, untutored, but creatively, by himself. There were rags and rubbish and graveclothes and clay clumps, all sewn together with lengths of thick black thread. There was a bruised puffy skin, striped and black and blue through the make-up, smatterings of stains from a hundred and fifty-three knifewounds. There were stripes along his face, stripes along his throat, about his back and front and everywhere. Could this have been a person? thought Vincent. He sniffed. No baker smell there. (*NB*, 165)

Back in the hospital, Vincent is aware that Mr Parker is leaving. He is then medicated, and escapes in his mind back to the carnival, clutching in his hand the red pen given to him by a nurse named Kayo. The Inner Circle, we are told, were happy now as “with Parker now gone, they could stay hidden, forever, amongst all the murder gangs” (166).

It goes without saying that the significance of this carnival scene is convoluted. Indeed, even after the corpse has been identified, we are still left with a number of unanswered questions. First of all, it is unclear as to whether Vincent’s vision of Mary is constructed or connected to a memory. As the boundaries become increasingly blurred, it is also no longer clear who is real and who is fiction; nor who is alive and who is dead. And finally, it seems particularly strange that Vincent neither sees nor mentions Amelia Lovett.

### **3.4. Preliminary Conclusions**

#### **3.4.1. Amelia Lovett and Mary Dolan**

From the very opening chapter in *No Bones*, we are told how Vincent and Amelia were classmates and friends. Yet in the entirety of Vincent’s chapter, there is no mention whatsoever of Amelia. The fact that this seems strange, I believe, is not incidental, for it forces the reader to question everything they know about Amelia and her friends thus far. On moving between previous chapters and the chapter dedicated to Vincent, what immediately jumps out are Amelia’s interactions with Mary Dolan. There are several indications which signal that the reader is being intentionally misled with regards to these characters’ identities.

First, I’d like to return to the scene in which Amelia encounters Mary Dolan pushing her toy pram. As I mentioned earlier, throughout the course of this scene no one else seems able to see or hear Mary. Almost all the attention is directed towards Amelia. She describes how “[t]he soldier looked at the pram. Then he turned to me. Not to Mary. To me. The pram was beside me” (*NB*, 67). When the soldiers leave, it is Amelia, and not Mary, who pushes the

pram away. The image created of Mary, who remains mostly silent throughout the whole encounter, is either ghost-like or dead. When Amelia first comes across her, we are told how Mary “stopped dead in the middle of the road” (65), and that she had “pus on the scabs” on her head (66). She then begins to nod at Amelia, affirming something, but without saying anything except the occasional “baby”, and when the soldiers approach, we read how she “opened her mouth but her tongue lay dead on her lip” (67). Additionally, whilst Mary repeats the word “baby”, what Amelia seems to hear is the word “bomb” (68) – for her, what lies under the hood of the pram is something explosive.

The second interaction between Amelia and Mary Dolan occurs in the chapter titled “Waked, 1989” during which Amelia returns to Ardoyne for her sister’s funeral. Here at the funeral Amelia meets a young girl called Dawn who gives her one of Lizzie’s old t-shirts. Amelia describes Dawn as resembling, at the same time, her brother Mick and Jat McDaide, who is both Mary Dolan’s cousin and the man who killed Amelia’s cousin, James Tone (curiously, the first person she tries to show her treasure trove to). It is not clear as to whether this child is truly present at the wake, or rather represents something of a haunting presence. Indeed, it seems plausible that the reason Amelia sees both these faces in the face of Dawn is because this particular spectre stands in for a number of convoluted and interconnected traumas, of abuse, violence, death and mourning. As Amelia tries to take herself away from the distressing scenes at the wake, Mary Dolan appears as if from nowhere. She opens the gate, crossing the threshold and, initially ignoring Amelia, takes Dawn’s hand to lead her away (echoing the moment that Dawn took Amelia’s hand earlier on). What happens next is that Mary silently walks with both Dawn and Amelia to “the very edge of the area” (*NB*, 244), where Amelia watches her go, before herself turning back towards Ardoyne. There are no indications that anyone else sees or interacts with either Dawn or Mary, and Mary’s presence is, once again, ghost-like and for the most part silent. The closing scene of this chapter is

something of a reversal of the way that Amelia parted from Mary in Logues backyard when they were twelve. We read,

‘Mary?’ she said, distracted, but this time Mary said nothing. She kept Dawn’s hand, and Dawn, still looking like Jat McDaide and like Mickey Lovett also, waved one last time and then mother and daughter were gone. Amelia stood on the edge, looking and hoping for Mary to reappear. (244-5)

Mary and Dawn disappear as quickly and mysteriously as they first appeared, and Amelia leaves the border of Ardoyne by bus.

Initially, on re-reading these two passages alongside one another we are met with the possibility that Mary Dolan is no longer alive, and exists in the text as a spectre, appearing first to Amelia on the streets of Ardoyne, then to Vincent in his nightmarish imaginings, and finally one last time to Amelia again at her sister’s wake. This interpretation certainly resonates with her depictions as both dead and ghost-like. It does not, however, account for the fact that Amelia is entirely absent from Vincent’s visions, nor for the way that Amelia is depicted as the one pushing the pram (for whilst Mary is not seen by the soldiers, the pram is). Moreover, if Mary Dolan was once alive and now passed, and so not in any physical way present to Amelia and Vincent, it remains unclear as to how it is that there is such a specific continuity from Vincent’s delusions to Amelia’s visions, with the second child being named Dawn in both.

### 3.4.2. The Real Case of Ann Lovett

This takes us on to a second speculation that may be drawn, and one that gives further meaning to the novel’s intertextuality with real historical events. I propose that the fact that Amelia is named ‘Lovett’ necessarily connects her with the real historical case of Ann Lovett. Ann Lovett was a girl from County Longford who, in 1984, died aged fifteen alongside her baby whilst giving birth alone beside a grotto in the rain. Her death came just four months after the 1983

abortion referendum, which made laws regulating abortion in the Republic of Ireland amongst the strictest in the world.<sup>34</sup> The shocking and tragic circumstances of her death, made ever more poignant by the fact that she lay beneath a shrine to the Virgin Mary, in part triggered the protest movement that would eventually see the successful 2018 vote to lift the ban on abortions in the Republic of Ireland (with the laws in Northern Ireland changing accordingly the following year). Her tragedy also continues to provide inspiration for a number of prominent poets, writers and artists in Ireland and abroad.<sup>35</sup> That Burns has chosen to name the family at the centre of this novel Lovett is unlikely to be incidental given the significance that names seem to play in all of her work. For instance, in this particular novel, we have the character of Marionetta portrayed as the one who acts as a puppet for her husband's demands, Hunch standing in for the trace of a repressed secret, Dawn representing a new beginning, and Amelia as the one who ultimately ameliorates.<sup>36</sup>

Interestingly, though, it is not only the name that connects Ann Lovett with the character of Amelia. In an interview conducted with Ricky McDonnell, Ann Lovett's former boyfriend, he describes how after Ann's death her mother invited two of her friends to the house to take some "momentums" from her bedroom (Boland 2018, n.p.). Whilst in her bedroom – one that she, like Amelia Lovett, shared with her sister – a small suitcase is discovered hidden under her bed. Inside they find what the journalist describes as "the kinds of personal treasures teenage girls hoard" as well as two handwritten letters – one addressed to Ricky, and a second without a name (Boland 2018, n.p.). There are further echoes here of the purloined letter, as the Lovett's were said to have then taken this letter to Ricky in secret, with the Catholic curate Fr Quinn soon

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<sup>34</sup> Whilst Northern Ireland was not affected by the referendum, abortion had been criminalised in Northern Ireland since 1861.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Paula Meehan's poem "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" (in MacKillop and Murphy (eds.) 2006, 414-5); Siobhan Dowd's novel *A Swift Pure Cry* (2006); Mary Noonan's collection of poems *Stone Girl* (2019); Anne Madden's painting *The Death of Ann Lovett* (on show at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in Dublin in October 2023); and director Ciaran Creagh's 2022 film *Ann*.

<sup>36</sup> The significance of names is something I look at in greater length with regards to her novel *Little Constructions* (2007) as well as her novella *Mostly Hero* (2014).



after instructing him to burn it (Boland 2018, n.p.). What is particularly intriguing here is that the interview in question was not published until 2018, some seventeen years after the publication of *No Bones*. Nor have I been successful in finding reference to this suitcase or these letters in any other source. While it is therefore incredibly difficult to ascertain whether Burns would herself have even heard of these details, it is nonetheless impossible to ignore the disturbing similarities the story holds with her portrayal of Amelia in the novel.

Given these textual clues, I suggest that it is possible that we as readers are being intentionally mislead or misdirected with regards to the identities of Mary Dolan and Amelia Lovett. In other words, that whilst we are presented with two separate characters, what we really have is one subject's displacement of trauma.<sup>37</sup> Whilst this interpretation would to a great extent disrupt the reading of the novel in its entirety, it seems nonetheless plausible to conclude that it is Amelia who has suffered the interconnected traumas related to the stillborn child, and has projected these onto a psychological construction of her own in a case similar to the "displacement theory" that Mr Parker refers to in Vincent's chapter (*NB*, 155). According to Freud, displacement occurs when a subject shifts the emphasis away from something deemed dangerous and significant onto something seemingly of little import, or to the replacement of something significant with an impression or an illusion (Freud [1933] 1965, 49-50). We may be reminded here of how Amelia often describes Mary, both directly and indirectly, as being "stupid" (68). This would indeed account for the fact that the two occasions that Amelia and Mary are together, Mary's presence is not acknowledged by anyone else, and also how Amelia is not present in Vincent's visions, which, as I have already drawn attention to, is the longest chapter in the book. For following this interpretation, when Vincent sees Mary he sees Amelia, as they are one and the same person. Moreover, when analysed in this light, we become aware of how often the presence of children or

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<sup>37</sup> Similar conclusions are reached with regards to the characters middle sister, tablets girl and tablets girl's sister in my reading of *Milkman* (2018).

babies is associated with Amelia's traumas, with the fact that the second rape scene takes place on top of a child's bed covered in decapitated jelly baby heads taking on further significance still. Additionally, with Vincent seeing the face of Mick Lovett in Mary Dolan's second baby during his visions of the carnival, we are immediately taken back to Amelia's description of the stolen chess piece, the Black Queen, as being a "mick thing" (52). Moreover still, further importance may be given to Mick's decapitation of the Black Queen when the act is mirrored in Bronagh's consumption of the jelly baby heads.

This speculative conclusion is supported by how prominent the theme of substitution is throughout the novel. In Amelia's case, it begins with the game of chess she plays with Mick as a young girl and continues right through until she is intermittently mistaken for both her sisters at Lizzie's wake. Other characters, too, would appear to substitute each other in the story line. This is seen most notably in the characters of Jat and Mick who seem to undergo a convoluted chain of violent substitutions. First, Jat kills Mick's cousin for a watch that was meant for Mick; next, Mick kills Jat's cousin as a tit-for-tat response; Mick then impregnates Jat's other cousin, Mary, to which Jat responds by beating him to death; and finally, Jat then takes Mick's place in the house with Mena, whilst most probably, it seems, having relations with her daughter. This theme of substitution is more prominent still in both of Burns's later novels, and is something I address in the chapters to come. The significance of 'displacement theory' could, however, point to a third plausible conclusion.

### 3.4.3. Vincent, Displacement and Writing Trauma

Of particular importance here is the way in which the entirety of Vincent's chapter blurs the borders between reality and fiction. Vincent is convinced that the psychiatrist Mr Parker is "just a figment" (*NB*, 142), whilst Parker is adamant that all of the characters he has visions of are but his own psychological constructions, including, that is, those that we know to be characters in the wider plot (for instance, Mary Dolan, Mick Lovett and Jat McDaide). Nonetheless,

Vincent insists, “[t]hey’re not me. They’re a life apart from me every time!” (145). Perhaps this cry could be a sign that the process of mourning undergone is not incorporation, but introjection; that he has taken the spectres in, but that he is keeping them separate. Interesting, though, Vincent’s response here bears an uncanny resemblance to Burns’s own account of her relationship to the characters she writes in her novels. Burns claims that her characters come to her in a way that is best described as a haunting. In the aforementioned interview for the *Seamus Heaney Centre*, Burns elaborates,

I turn up at my desk and I wait for my characters. It is they who find me ... I discover the book as I write it and frequently I am surprised, even astonished, by what they bring to me. *They are their own people*. There are no guarantees here. That’s the bargain. There is no bargain. They call the shots. Also, they don’t like being rushed and they won’t stand for desperation. Of course I love it when they come, for then I fall into that whole happy, delicious world – *their world* – and have a nice time playing about in there, that is, until they decide, ‘That’s it.’ They always leave first. (McWade 2020, n.p.; emphasis added)

This being said, Vincent’s world is anything but “happy” and “delicious”. Throughout Vincent’s chapter, we witness how the cuts on his father’s body are transformed into pen marks on Vincent’s own body. I suggest that this retracing of his father’s wounds may symbolise the transformation of unspoken trauma into writing. Vincent’s psychiatrist, too, is heard suggesting that, one day, he may choose to write a story about them (*NB*, 155). What I am proposing, then, is that the whole telling of the story is actually a fragmented and mutated literary recreation of Vincent’s own story. From this perspective, the character of Mary Dolan could well represent the displacement of the trauma of Vincent’s mother’s make-shift abortion and his subsequent isolation in his bedroom. This would give added significance to the echo of the *fort/da* when Mary Dolan takes her baby in and out of her on the end of skipping rope. It may also then

account for the sheer number of reverberations of the *fort/da* scattered throughout the text, from as obvious as Bronagh's son repeatedly throwing a plastic bottle from his pram, with his mother retrieving it each time (202) to the subtlety of the secret Bernie tells Amelia with regards to her eating disorder: "The sums are extremely simple" she says "[a]ddition something in, subtract the same thing out" (264). Equally of note is that Bernie's secret is shared in the chapter titled "Babies, 1974". The secret could also, then, be interpreted as a kind of rule for displacement in general: a trauma is taken in and subtracted back out – it is the very same trauma, only in a fragmented, mutated form. Indeed, as Derrida writes of repression, it "doesn't destroy, it displaces something from one place to another within the system" (2008, 8).

This interpretation of Vincent's role in telling the story also bares certain similarities with Fadem's observations regarding Burns's writing style. Fadem describes how Burns "develops a poetics of doubt through which the past is refracted and registered as madness, vacillation, hesitancy, fragmentation, forgetting, self-reflexive interrogation, and a desperate and dogged uncertainty regarding the truth claim" (2015, 145). This observation also corresponds with Burns's own reflection that "[n]on-fiction didn't much attract me. It felt like it might not be true" (McWade 2020, n.p.). Fadem concludes that Vincent's depiction as a madman is intended as a representation of a certain common resistance to accepting as truth the unbelievable yet harrowingly accurate accounts of life in terrorised communities. However, my own conclusions suggest that the textual clues point towards the idea that something far more subtle is at work here.

### **3.5. Hauntings**

In the chapter titled "The Present Conflict, 1983", we see Amelia get in a car with a man named Janto – the start of what was to be a date. Janto proceeds to spout aggressive sexist and racist slurs, leaving Amelia questioning what it was that attracted her to "this angry boy-person in the first place" (*NB*, 192). She concludes that Janto reminded her of her (now dead) father. It is

here that we are told how, for the first time, Amelia makes “a follow-through connection – that something or someone, once familiar in the past, can make a comeback again and again in the present” (*NB*, 193). This moment acts as something of a foreshadowing of the hauntings that are to follow.

Amelia first starts seeing the spectres of people from her past when her breakdown is triggered by the sound of children outside a supermarket in Camden in 1991, (to where she fled in a failed attempt to escape the traumas of Belfast). In this episode, she describes how the borders between London and Belfast become blurred; we are told how “[s]he was having dual realities again, right here in front of her. As well as being in Camden Town in London, she was also on Belfast’s Crumlin Road” (*NB*, 251). She even imagines Halloween masks, which are themselves so closely associated with the provisional IRA, onto the reflections of the children in the window. Indeed, for Amelia “[t]he sound of children was like the sound of terrorists” (256). Also of note is the title of the chapter in question, “Triggers, 1991”. This same year, Downing Street was bombed by the provisional IRA, a recognition that evokes the double meaning of the word “triggers”, pointing both towards gunfire and breakdowns. Equally significant is that Crumlin Road – as highlighted in chapter one – was the famous interface between the Catholic and Protestant districts in Belfast. It is both a borderline and an in-between, liminal space.

The ghost that stands out to Amelia is that of her old school friend Roberta who we know was killed by a car bomb in 1975. That same night, despite having heard the news, Amelia went out dancing with her friends. She never attended the funeral, because, in her words, “how many funerals was one expected to attend” (*NB*, 251). Roberta’s apparition in this scene may lead us to recall the poem she was not permitted to write on the Special Day of Hope/Spy Wednesday. This poem was to be about staircases: “I went upstairs Amelia ... Then I came downstairs. Then I went upstairs again. Then later on I came downstairs. Then I went upstairs

backwards, then I came downstairs sideways” (33). It is a question of repetition, re-appearance and mutation.

Whilst trying to reorientate herself – which she describes as trying to “slot her religious geography into place” – Amelia sees “forks everywhere – left forks, right forks, middle forks and side roads” (*NB*, 253). She is both on a borderline and at a crossroads. Amelia also describes how time has become fragmented, with “everything becoming forgot” (253). Derrida’s depiction in *Specters of Marx* of the “disjoining, disjunction, or disproportion” of the spectral effect certainly resonates here (1994, xix). Amelia, in a state of utter distress, finds herself no longer able to find clarity as to where it is she herself has come from, nor where she is headed, and is terrified to answer people’s questions in fear of getting their “persuasion” or “inclination” wrong (253). As she continues to stand holding on to the railings outside the supermarket, Amelia becomes aware that even her posture reminds her of Belfast. We read how “[s]he was holding on to the grille, the way men do, the way men did, over and over, being searched, by soldiers, in her childhood” (255).<sup>38</sup> The searching eyes of those who are watching her outside the supermarket in London are, for Amelia, the very same eyes of surveillance she grew up with; always present but never seen. Yet in the closing lines of this chapter, we witness the security guard of the supermarket not searching her, nor accusing her, but rather instructing the children to gather up her shopping from the ground, with the elderly man and women who stopped to help still standing beside her for support. This moment of kindness and concern is totally misinterpreted by Amelia, who remains unable to view her surroundings outside of the

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<sup>38</sup> This image of Amelia clinging onto railings is one that is repeated in *Milkman*, when the protagonist middle sister and the character tablets-girl’s sister are both depicted as gripping on to railings towards the end of the narrative (Burns 2018, 259). Indeed, this is a scene I analyse in depth in chapter five of this thesis. Equally, though, a Joycean echo may be identified here. Just as Amelia finds herself paralysed and, despite having physically removed herself, unable to escape the traumas of Belfast, so too, at the end of Joyce’s short story “Eveline”, the protagonist is depicted gripping on to a barrier and unable to move in the docks where she had planned to escape Dublin for Argentina. This scene in “Eveline” symbolises her entrapment at the end of the story; that she was, in part due to a promise made to her mother, unable to escape after all. The grip that the past has on both characters is to a great extent what prevents them from moving forwards.

deeply ingrained binary logic of her past. To Amelia, “[t]hey were sentinels” (257) and in both senses of the word – guardsmen keeping watch, and indicators of the presence of disease.

Following this episode in Camden, Amelia is admitted into a psychiatric hospital where she falls in and out of long drug induced sleeps. It is here, in her dreams, that the spectre of Roberta continues to revisit. She appears first on the edge of a cliff some 400ft up – a particularly dramatic border line – and also on the edge of the old famine graveyard, again connecting past and present traumas. The landscape is incredibly gothic, with the sounds of bangings, howling, screamings, and animals fighting. Roberta says she is lost, Amelia is too. It is, in a way, at the same time both Belfast and not Belfast. Other figures, too, “familiar and not at all welcome” move towards her, “half-present, half-not-present” (*NB*, 259). It is here, on the edge of cliff that, having rescued Amelia from falling, Roberta repeats the question she originally asked her that afternoon before she was killed, “[a]re you calling on me, or am I calling on you?” (260). This time, however, there is clearly a double meaning.

After the cliffs, we see the spectre of Roberta reappear again and this time demanding to be “let in” (*NB*, 265). Amelia unlocks the door to what would appear to be a psychological space. Once inside, Roberta begins to frantically look through Amelia’s cupboards for some memory of herself or evidence that she once lived, but she, like the rest of the tragic deaths, has been largely forgotten. This does, however, prompt Amelia’s memory for a moment, where she pauses and looks up at Roberta in silence on the stairs. Roberta responds, “[a]bout time too” (265). Roberta then continues searching, with Amelia trying her best to keep out the way. Another ghost who appears during this episode is that of Danny Megahey, Amelia’s old friend who was murdered back in 1978. Amelia screams for him to leave – “I don’t remember you, Danny. I don’t remember anything and anyway, I’m not in Ireland. That’s all over. You have to get on with your life” – to which Danny responds, “[w]hat life’s that Amelia?” (an expression which is then repeated first by Roberta, and later by “a few other dead people” too (269)).

These memories, mourned, buried and encrypted, have indeed come back to haunt in the form of spectres. Roberta tells Amelia, “you won’t get rid of me you know until *I* decide to go” (261; emphasis in the original). We may recall here Burns’s own description of how her characters stick around, “until they decide, ‘That’s it.’ They always leave first” (McWade 2020, n.p.).

Also significant are the snippets of conversations Amelia hears amongst patients and nurses on the psychiatric ward. For instance, an argument is overheard between two black women, initiated with the cry of “[y]our ancestors sold our ancestors!” (*NB*, 271). Amelia is taken aback: “In Ireland, she knew, it was all about Green and Orange. In England, she had thought until now, it was all about Black and White. So what was this Black and Black thing?” (271). This argument threatens Amelia’s understanding of the only binaries through which she is able to make sense of the world; “frightened” she then retreats back into “Belfast” in her sleep (272). When she comes to a second time, she is sitting on the edge of a bed belonging to an intersex character named Jewels. Amelia gets it wrong again when she incorrectly assumes that Jewel’s anatomy was the reason for her being in the psychiatric institution. Amelia simply cannot understand the possibility of undefined boundary lines.

Amelia’s spectral encounters culminate when she tries to run from Roberta into her Aunt Dolour’s house through what she describes as “the communal door” (*NB*, 277). Here she sees a crowd of ghosts peering through the window at her: “They were her friends, her neighbours, some people from the area. Roberta was in front. All of them were dead” (277). We may here be reminded of Derrida’s description of the spectre as “more than one: the *more than one/ no more one*” (1994, xx; emphasis in the original). Inside the house she is faced with the ghosts of her dead parents, arguing about who will die first. They ignore Amelia’s cries for help as she re-lives the trauma of getting sexually assaulted by her brother, (whilst actually being force-fed back in the hospital in London). It is here on the stairs that we see her Treasure Trove for the last time. She knocks it out of the way, and the rubber bullets tumble silent and



dead down the stairs. The crypt has been disturbed, the contents spilled. After frantically aiming shots at the spectres with a gun she had pulled from Mick, she sees a sign on the door in front of her that reads “AUNT DOLOURS IS DEAD NOW” (279), but the door is unlocked so she runs inside. “She could live here”, she thinks, before dancing through two more closed doors, legs now septic, into a tiny closed-off dark room (279). But this room, too, is crowded, and the voice of her sister Lizzie is heard from inside. Lizzie says, “[w]e didn’t come back to get you, you came back to get us” (280).

This new hiding place, protected by several barriers, is also representative of the crypt. It is both inner and outer, hers and not hers, and a safe place where Amelia goes to escape her traumatic memories, but where inside she is forced to confront the very spectres she tried so hard to bury. This confrontation, however, after so many years of running, marks the start of her journey to recovery and a move towards the novel’s slightly more positive ending.

### **3.6. The Daytrippers**

The novel ends with the chapter titled “A Peace Process, 1994”, which opens with Amelia and her friends “watching something on the TV about a possible ceasefire” (*NB*, 333). This reference to the ceasefire, and the Peace Process that preceded it, serves as an intentional reminder to the reader of the harrowing historical backdrop behind the nightmarish episodes they have borne witness to thus far. In Fadem’s words, “[i]nstantaneously, palpably, the world enters the ambivalent nightmare of the text ... and the discourse of the story shockingly clicks into place as history” (2015, 162). In this chapter, we see Amelia return to where she comes from, in order to take the others out of where they come from, only to then return once again – a movement from outside to inside, inside to outside, and back again. She is not proposing to emigrate, but rather, to simply take a day trip. On her first suggestion of the day trip, Amelia is met with great resistance from her friends, for, in the narrator’s words, “[w]asn’t it bad enough trying to exist in your own house, trying to do a weekend in your very own surroundings” (*NB*,

298). But eventually they agree to go on the premise that “[i]t wasn’t as if their lives would be transformed by one, single, extraneous outing. It wasn’t as if their long-established, insular identities which they relied upon so heavily, could be ravaged and taken away from them just like that” (299).

As well as the title of this chapter, a further hint to the broader significance of the day trip occurs when we are introduced to Vincent’s Japanese wife, Kayo. Amelia expresses her surprise at how someone “[n]on-Bonian, non-Ardonian” is able to live in the district without being questioned as to their religion – an indication, perhaps, of the community’s movement away from the insular sectarian violence that Amelia was once so familiar with, and a move towards peace and tolerance (304). Interestingly, however, this is not the first time we meet Kayo. Indeed, Kayo was Vincent’s nurse whilst he was admitted in the psychiatric institution, and so is already present some fourteen years prior – she was always there, only not visible (or hidden in plain sight). Whilst an outsider, she came from far enough beyond the border that she was exterior to the dominating us/them divide.

On this daytrip, perhaps unsurprisingly, the friends constantly find themselves on the edge of cliffs. The first are on the mainland, and Amelia recognises them as the very same cliffs on which she previously confronted the spectre of Roberta. Kayo tells the group (although to deaf ears) the story of how two stones in the town were named after the two princesses who were murdered and thrown over the cliffs. From these cliffs, the group take a boat to Rathlin Island, where we are told “[t]here were cliffs, and more cliffs” (311). Once again, it is Kayo alone who understands the historical significance of the island, recognising it as the place of “many, many murders” (310). Yet again, however, no one listens. Just as we saw on the mainland, the cliffs that surround the island are, to Amelia, the very same ones on which she saw Roberta.

Whilst on the island, the group are repeatedly confronted by an angry local called Ambrose Gray who appears and disappears – in a fashion we are by now familiar with –and keeps aggressively telling them to go back to where they came from. Tired and hungry, and after splitting into two fractions, the group take what food they have managed to acquire to the edge of a cliff face. Unbeknownst to them, this particular cliff is called the “Cliff of Screaming” due to the many people that had been murdered and thrown off the edge over the course of the island’s history. There is a certain sense in which the groups’ trip to Rathlin Island represents a condensed history of Ireland played out in the space of a day – from crossing seas to inhospitable lands, to facing hunger, internal conflicts and divisions, and eventually ending, tentatively together, on the spectral borderline that has dominated their narrative for as long as they can remember. It is important to bear in mind how the Troubles can never be grasped in isolation. Indeed, as Stevenson writes, “[t]he island’s heritage is speckled with violent events, which serve as justifications for more violence” (1970, 32; quoted in Schultz 2014, 135). A similar observation is made by Fadem, who describes the groups’ gravitation to the cliffs as,

a gesture [that] takes readers through centuries of the Irish dead. As with the title chapter, these are conceptual journeys through Irish colonial history, to the time of the famine and, further still, to the sixteenth-century massacre at Rathlin and the Cliff of the Screaming, ultimately winding, full circle, back to the present Troubles and their dead, to the dead Roberta McKeown, and the living Amelia Lovett, and all they represent. (2015, 177)

In line with this reading, we are told how the group are drawn to the cliffs as if by an external force outside of their control. The narrator explains how,

there was something familiar about sitting, nervy, on the edge of such a borderline. They had felt the cliff’s pull and had gravitated naturally towards it. It afforded a relief and a

release that made perfect emotional sense to them. ... Something feels safe. Something feels like home. (*NB*, 319)

Here, on the edge of the cliff, and just as their breathing starts to return to normal, angry old Ambrose Gray returns yet again, this time screaming “My Cliff!” – although not, it seems, to the group’s surprise. We are told how, “[t]hey knew he would – for how could he not” (*NB*, 320). In Derrida’s words, the spectre is always “a question of repetition” for it “*begins by coming back*” (1994a, 11; emphasis in the original). This recognition also acts as a significant symbolic moment of change – for they have finally begun to grasp the fact that they cannot keep running away forever, for their trauma is always to come back. When the group finally board the boat back to the mainland – which is where the novel ends – they experience together a kind of recognition of the borders that have dominated their lives, although none of them yet have the answers as to how to move on. They question,

[w]hat if they hadn’t been able to leave? Or what if they hadn’t wanted to leave? What if Rathlin Island had also been their homeland? How could they have lived there and yet constantly not be on the defensive...? It was a difficult, scary question and as yet, none of the daytrippers had an answer to it. But it was brave of them to ask it. (*NB*, 321)

### **3.7. Conclusions**

Anna Burns’s *No Bones* provides a chilling account of life under partition in Northern Ireland. In Burns’s own words, the novel is,

one, big giant fight: voices out there, voices in here. The fact so many died reflects the reality of that particular period of time. It’s both about a specific historical period and about people and human relationships and how violence can emerge and be perpetuated and passed on. (quoted in Fadem 2015, 142)

This being said, whilst the accuracy of her telling of events should not be underestimated, I hope to have highlighted in this chapter how the conclusions that can be drawn from the novel reach beyond the community's borders. As underscored by Grossman, it is impossible not to see the "parallels with the desperate history of non-Serbs in Bosnia, or of Palestinian communities in Israel" in the novel's portrayal of events (2002, 12; quoted in Fadem 2015, 163). Indeed, Burns's own experience of violent surroundings was not limited to her life in Belfast. We may recall how, in the *Seamus Heany Centre* interview, Burns describes the council estate where she lived in London, which is where she started writing, as one riddled with violence and intimidation, wherein her and the other residents "were being left by the authorities to suffer the consequences of others' destructive behaviour" (McWade 2020, n.p.): undoubtedly an already familiar situation for Burns.

An analysis of *No Bones* from the perspective of hauntology first of all reveals how spectres – which are "always a question of repetition" (Derrida 1994a, 11) – can trespass both physical, metaphysical and temporal borders. The novel portrays how a communion with spectres (or the process of incorporation) necessarily results in a repetition of transgenerational traumas, a pervasive historical narrative, and the recurrence of violence. Indeed, Bronagh's children are described in the novel as, "doomed, by a legacy, by Ireland, by England, by prehistory, by everything that had gone on before them, always and forever to be one, four and six years old" (*NB*, 226). The narrator is intentionally ambiguous as to whether they are to die young, or whether they, as is said of the community of *Little Constructions*, are to be left forever in a "state of stuckness" (Burns 2007, 31). Equally, though, I believe what Burns is forwarding is the idea that a communication with spectres may allow individuals, communities and the nation as a whole out of its tormented past and stop the cycle of reemergent violence. As Schultz writes, "confrontation with the past (and the specters that are part and parcel of it) can lead to a stoppage of unproductive, malevolent haunting" (2014, 134).

By giving voice to the forgotten spectres of Amelia's lost friends, themselves symbolising the so many lives that were lost, not only as a result of the Troubles, but from every interconnected historical conflict that this island has faced, Burns forces the reader to acknowledge the lasting impact that spectres have on present and future generations, itself perhaps a first step towards making amends with the past. This is even more the case given the visible influence in Burns's writing of both Irish and international literary voices that preceded her. As Fadem explains,

[i]n the novel's resurrection of Joyce's collective of 'the dead', in locating these figures in a historical landscape from which they were criminally removed, Burns repeoples the nation and symbolizes the very necessary, and as yet uncollected, reparations for empire. (2015, 144)

It is not, however, simply a case of dragging the past back into the present imagination, only to subsequently push it back into the past. Rather, what I claim Burns is proposing is an engagement with these spectres, that will always be there, whether we acknowledge them or not. This requires first listening to their otherwise silenced voices, engaging with the impact they have on the present, and reimagining a future to come.

Very much connected to the role of spectres in the novel is the role of memory. For, as Derrida underscores, giving voice to spectres is also a "politics of memory" (1994a, xviii). Throughout the novel, we are repeatedly told how the characters both struggle with short-term memory loss and have learnt, as something of a survival mechanism, to quickly forget traumatic events and murdered loved ones. We see this most poignantly after the joint funeral of the characters Fallon, McCormick and Brenden, where we read how, "[e]veryone said wasn't it terrible, wasn't it awful, wasn't it a waste, wouldn't it always be remembered? But it wouldn't. And it wasn't. Everything got eclipsed, always got eclipsed, by the next, most recent, violent death (*NB*, 104-5). And again when, the day after the character Danny is murdered in a

senseless act of sectarian violence (the same night that he and Amelia kissed), we are told how, “[s]he’d forgotten about Danny Megahey. They’d all heard and forgotten about Danny Megahey. Already, he was not remembered. Already, he was gone” (183). Additionally, as readers, we are taken on a number of journeys that require us to piece together memories from the fragments we are given. For example, just as Vincent traces the memory of his father with a red pen, the reader must follow the traces of his own memories; and whilst the spectre of Roberta frantically looks for memories of herself in Amelia’s ‘safe house’, the reader, through Amelia, must piece together the circumstances of her death. Memory in the novel is described as “slippery” for “the least inattention and it might slip away forever” (*NB*, 76) – a reverberation, perhaps, of the Freudian concept of ‘fraying’ (Derrida 1972, 74) or Derrida’s depiction of the ‘trace’ (Derrida 1976, 62).

Connections may also be made here with another common theme we encounter in all of Burns’s novels: the role of sight, both in terms of surveillance and control,<sup>39</sup> but equally in terms of the denial of sight, or the inability to see that which is happening right in front of one’s eyes (especially when what is happening is violent). For example, when Amelia, aged seventeen, comes home to an upturned house we are told how she “still tried, by a massive effort of will, not to see anything and not to respond” (*NB*, 123); and after the deadly game of Russian roulette we read, “[o]f course there were no witnesses and when the police got round to questioning, they had to make do with no information, which was the most, usually, that they could ever get” (98). So not only is this community (either consciously or subconsciously) quick to forget, but we also witness how they try hard not to acknowledge their surroundings in order to resist transcribing what they see into memories, on both a personal and a communal level. Yet we are constantly met with the lasting impact that these memories – forgotten on surface level – continue to have beneath the surface. Indeed, Freud’s definition of memory

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<sup>39</sup> The theme of surveillance will be revisited in chapter five in reference to Foucault (1977; 1980).

rings true here, that it is “the capacity to be altered in a lasting way by events that occur only once” (1895; quoted in Derrida 1972, 77).<sup>40</sup>

As the novel drills home, one way that we continue to be affected by our past is when apparently forgotten memories are projected onto, or encrypted within, objects of play. Indeed, it is important to recall that hidden in the crypt, whilst encrypted, are also memories. We have seen how Amelia’s Black Queen stands in for a string of interconnected traumatic memories, including inherited traumas that lay undisturbed in the undergrowth; Vincent’s construction of the “Identify the Body Display” conceals the distorted memory of his father’s murder (as he approaches the display we are told how “[h]e suspected there was a blot somewhere in his memory and he looked to the others to see if they would help him” (*NB*, 148)); whilst what is encrypted in Mary Dolan’s dead baby pushed in a toy pram are the interconnected memories of sexual abuse and loss. Not only does *No Bones* help to reveal the unconscious consequences of trauma, but in disturbing these crypts, and in a way *partially* unearthing the encrypted memories concealed inside (for the secret is never revealed in its entirety), the novel itself engages in the very act of mourning it seeks to portray, with the reverberations of this act reaching beyond the literary context. As Fadem suggests, “Burns shows us that it is only through the ‘resurrections’ art makes possible that the colossal losses of empire, buried by political silencing and erasure, may finally be documented, acknowledged, understood, and mourned” (2015, 178).

I also hope to have uncovered how *No Bones* works towards the blurring of borders, binaries and boundary lines, including those between London and Belfast, ‘us’ and ‘them’, internal and external conflicts, present and past conflicts, presence and absence (or *fort/da*), and the living and the dead. In Derrida’s words, “the logic of the ghost ... points toward a

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<sup>40</sup> No page number is given for this quote.



thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic” (1994a, 78). Moreover, not only does the novel deconstruct the binaries that define Irish identity politics, but as I have already suggested, her innovative writing style disrupts the preconceived boundaries of historical fiction. As Fadem so beautifully expresses,

Burns’ middling surrealist politics of location encompasses the most patent transnationalism I have yet to observe in Irish letters. We see this in her unflinchingly brutal portrayal of a brutal world, her deployment of the grotesque as primary narrative mode, and the book’s visuality and absurdity, its postmodern nonlinearity and language play, her shunning of not only the predicates of Irish nationalism but also those of literary common law. (2015, 143)

My analysis of the character of Vincent is also key in this respect. Whilst on the psychiatric ward, Vincent overhears the seemingly disembodied voices of a group of psychiatrists discussing his diagnosis as “borderline” (*NB*, 143). The very naming of this diagnosis undoubtedly holds a significance beyond the personal. Once again, we are met with the reverberations of the external conflict in the internal breakdowns of the characters. Borderline personality disorder is, to be sure, a real psychological diagnosis, and one most commonly associated with adults who have suffered from childhood trauma or neglect (apt, then, given what we know of Vincent). Nonetheless, I believe what Burns is trying to emphasise here is not so much the symptoms of trauma-induced mood disorders (although her descriptions of Vincent’s psychotic episodes are certainly powerful in this respect), but rather how the haunting effects of trauma and mourning take place on the borderlines. Kristeva’s depiction of the borderline patient as abject may have pertinence here. In her famous essay *The Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva describes the abject as that which both threatens, blurs and trespasses borders. It is neither subject nor object, inside nor outside; “[w]hat is *abject* ... the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1-2;

emphasis in the original). The existence of the borderline patient, too, disrupts borders – both in the sense that they do not fit neatly into established diagnoses, and in that they deviate from society’s preestablished norms. At the same time, the patients themselves experience the borders of internal and external, or conscious and unconscious realities, as blurred. To return to Vincent, the scars of his trauma, which are retraced on his body and experienced in something of a psychological interface, allow his character to reveal the disruptive power of the abject to disturb, from the margins, those very same borders from which we make sense of the world and that so often define us.

Finally, through the slightly more positive ending, Burns is pointing towards a possible way out. As McCann notes “the reference to bones in the title and in the novel ... highlights the necessity and the difficulty of excavating the past in order to make sense of it and recover from it” (2014a, 27). We witness how a listening to and communicating with the ancestral voices of the past – with the “ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence ... or any of the forms of totalitarianism” (Derrida 1994, xviii) – may allow individuals and communities alike to be able to break the self-destructive violent cycles of trauma. As Fadem writes of Burns, “[s]he is genuinely ready to imagine a new, multinational, pluralist transnation, and to dwell there, leaving Irish nationalism in the past” (2015, 143). Whilst Burns refrains from dictating a clear solution, we may conclude with Amelia that, “[i]t’s an attitude of mind ... I must admit, I don’t exactly have it. But I’m sure it’s an attitude of mind and maybe it can be got from somewhere, somehow, further down the line” (*NB*, 321).

## **Chapter Four: The Political is the Psychological: Hauntology, Autoimmunity and the Construction and Fragmentation of Secrets and Crypts in Anna Burns's *Little Constructions***

### **4.1. Introduction**

Anna Burns's second novel *Little Constructions* was first published in the UK in 2007<sup>41</sup>, and later rereleased in 2018 following the success of *Milkman*. It was first released in the US in 2020. *Little Constructions* has received very little in terms of academic attention; in fact, to my knowledge, Fiona McCann's three comparative studies are the only publications on the novel to date (2014a; 2014b; 2016). Therefore, this chapter provides one of four studies in total, and the first non-comparative study of the novel. Whilst there are a small number of reviews to be found in online papers and literary magazines, it is important to note that the majority of these reviews were written after the publication of *Milkman*; thus, other than McCann's research, very little attention was given to the novel prior to this.<sup>42</sup> This may be in part due to Burns's incredibly unorthodox writing style and the novel's frequently diverging, fragmented and convoluted plot. As McCann suggests, "the traditional ordering function of narrative is sidelined ... in favour of a more disruptive approach" (2016, 43); or as Novey puts it in her review for *The New York Times*, "[Burns's] cascading descriptions of internal turmoil spiral the way the mind does" (2020, n.p.). Whilst we see a similar trend in both *No Bones* and *Milkman*, the relatable voices of the narrators in these novels to some extent provide a sense of reassurance from within the distressing and disorientating surroundings – or at the very least, we find ourselves with someone to hold on to. This is far less the case with the largely disembodied narrator in *Little Constructions*; solace is rarely found. This, in addition to the

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<sup>41</sup> Hereafter referenced in this chapter as *LC*.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, Lucy Ellman's review for *The Guardian* (2007) is the only review of the novel I have been able to find that was written prior to the publication of *Milkman* (2018).

novel's dark humour and disturbing stories of trauma and abuse, does not allow for easy reading. Readers may well be left feeling more than a little disturbed. Indeed, as Yacovissi writes in her review for *The Washington Independent*, "[t]he story is desperately in want of the humane voice that made *Milkman* such a delight ... Readers are held at arm's length, left to wander in this den of dysfunction for the longest time with no clear place to hang our heart" (2020, n.p.). Nonetheless, I believe that these characteristics of the novel are precisely what make it both groundbreaking and powerful, for, in Novey's words, "[i]t is a rare novelist who can approach the unspeakable with restorative humor, but Burns has a gift for dismantling and reconstructing things on her own quixotic terms, as she suggests with the perfectly chosen title for this book" (2020, n.p.). With this in mind, I propose that *Little Constructions* demands a certain willingness on the part of the reader to pay attention to the margins and listen carefully to the unspoken.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida writes that, "[a] secret always *makes* you tremble" for it indicates that "some trauma will insist on being repeated" (2008, 55; emphasis in the original). This tremble is precisely what is at stake in *Little Constructions*. The story is centred around secrets and vengeance within a fictional family of violent criminals known as the Does: "a family of neurosis, psychoses and Edgar Allan Poe horror stories" (*LC*, 56). It is set in a fictional town named 'Tiptoe' – known by the residents as 'Tiptoe Floorboard'. This being said, the criminal family bears uncanny resemblances with paramilitary groups – both the provisional Irish Republican Army (the IRA) and the Ulster Defence Association (the UDA) – the language is teeming with local idiosyncrasies, and it is not difficult to identify aspects of 1970s Belfast in the fictional setting: it both is, and is not, Belfast during the Troubles. In encouraging an abstracted reading of the events that take place, however, Burns not only blurs the preconceived boundaries of fiction and reality (perhaps to an even greater extent than in *No*

*Bones*), but equally allows the impact of the novel to reach beyond its ostensibly historical setting.

As the events unfurl, we find ourselves amidst tales of cyclical violence, trauma, sexual abuse, incest, ghosts, and therapy, wherein the fragmented narrative voice, plot, style, and structure of the novel reflect the fragmentation and self-destruction of both the internal lives of the characters, as well as the broader community itself. As American-British writer Lucy Ellman describes in her review for *The Guardian*,

[i]t has a gutsy nervousness that matches the subject matter, as if there is no way to write about violence and violation other than with comedy, digression, wordplay and other peculiarities. Her logic, verging on the insane, pinpoints the complexity of being human. (2007, n.p.)

As is clearly indicated by both the title of the novel and the name of the town in which it is set, addressing the role of secrecy is key to understanding the novel's significance. All the narrative threads are structured around secrets – from not being able to acknowledge dead bodies in kitchens, or the blood on one's hands, to family secrets of incest and abuse. The nameless and (mostly) disembodied narrative voice, however, who repeatedly calls herself merely a “bystander” (*LC*, 1), seems to have access to all of the community's secrets – even those that would appear hidden from the characters themselves. Yet we are also met with constant reminders that we are not receiving the whole truth.<sup>43</sup> Whilst the narrator claims to be simply reporting events – “I am not stupid” they say, “but I do not understand this world” (77) – they often provide their own analysis of both the outside appearances of things and the characters' inner psychological constructions. It becomes evident that they can even see into the

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<sup>43</sup> For instance, in chapter three when reporting the two Toms' reactions to a series of unwanted visitors to the gun shop, the narrator says, “[b]ut maybe that's not what happened for, you know, things can get muddled during the happening and during the after-happening – even for us bystanders” (*LC*, 35). Or after several pages detailing the events that led up to Judas supposedly saving his sister from the violent hands of their father in chapter seven, the narrator declares, “[h]ow protective. How potential. How fictional. How made up” (137).

characters' minds and access their thoughts, blurring the distinction between inner and outer selves, whilst reinforcing the concept that the inner psyche is a reflection of the outside society. This is made particularly apparent when, speculating as to the previous trauma experienced by a woman, beaten, and raped in the wasteland by young John Doe, the narrator admits how, "[i]t all became jumbled, ... I myself was incapacitated from unravelling things further. This was because, temporarily and accidentally, I fell into her head" (112). There are also times when they seem to even have access to the psyche of the reader, conveyed through the unsettling use of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person 'you' when, for example, they criticise the choice of so-called "trauma clothes" (249), or discussing the circulation of rumours (185). Similarly, when the narrator reveals certain secrets, we read comments such as, "I think you must have guessed that" (286), making readers question what they think they know. As Ruland writes in his review for *Los Angeles Times*, "[i]t's a dizzying ride" (2020, n.p.).

This chapter addresses the topic of secrecy in the novel, first briefly in reference to the communitarian depiction of the operative community, with a particular focus on the role of names and rumours, and later through the lens of Derridean hauntology. I discuss applications of the concept of autoimmunity, at both individual and communal levels, the so called 'visor effect' of the spectre, and literary applications of the crypt. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how Burns's *Little Constructions* reveals that the construction and fragmentation of secrets in the realm of the political is reflected in the realm of the psychological. This is something of an extension of Plato's recognition that if we want to understand what a just society would look like, we should examine the just soul. Moreover, in the same way that the state is structured like the unconscious, it is revealed how the unconscious is structured like the state. Interestingly, a similar observation is made by McCann when she writes that "the family (and, more generally, the private sphere) functions as a reflection of external dysfunction, danger and violence" and further that what Burns is reflecting on is how "an atmosphere of

pervasive violence comes to infiltrate every aspect of life, spilling over from the political sphere to contaminate the domestic sphere” (2016, 38; 43).

#### **4.2. Tiptoe’s Operative Community: Names, Rumours and Singularities**

In a similar manner to both *No Bones* and *Milkman*, the community in which *Little Constructions* is set functions as a clear example of the operative community – its overriding strive for absolute imminence means that the community is totally closed off from the outside world, and all of its residents live in constant fear of the threat of exteriority. In turn, this fear of the outside is thence used to justify violent acts committed within the community – so long as the acts conform to the general communal rhetoric, they can be grasped and thus rationalised. As McCann writes, “Burns is at pains to reveal how the chaotic omnipresence of objective violence generates multiple expressions of subjective violence” (2014a, 28-9). Indeed, the community’s fear of exteriority holds a significant potential for subjective violence. This is especially brought to the forefront in chapter six where we see John Doe, the head of the community gang, attack a woman he meets at a bus stop. The narrator explains how, to Doe’s mind,

[s]he wasn’t important ... I think she may even have been a foreigner – someone from some other town other than the splendid Tiptoe Floorboard. ... in the end – when he had to drag her along the street and up to the waste-ground to give her a beating – a foreigner was the only conclusion he could arrive at to explain her to himself. (*LC*, 109)

We are also constantly met with the residents’ fear of being labelled different. One disturbingly blunt example of this occurs in chapter ten when the Doe sisters turn up at Jotty’s house to warn her of the attention she has been receiving from the community for going to therapy. They effectively threaten her both with the prospect of an early grave, and with being buried alongside her abusive father, if she were to continue attending (*LC*, 203). Another example

occurs much later in the narrative, when we witness the previously unknown characters named ‘jealous’ and ‘Mary Ann’ (or just ‘Ann’, or perhaps ‘Mary’) so upset at seeing Julie carrying a feminine shopping bag of lingerie (244-56). Both of these examples equally reflect the community’s general fear of healing or moving beyond their apparent “state of stuckness” (*LC*, 31).

In this community, it is the Doe Family who dictate behaviour, social norms, and even communal truths. Whilst the sheer extent of conformity certainly reflects Heidegger’s fear of ‘levelling-down’ and ‘inauthenticity’, that the community is centred around this one particular family also echoes the operative community’s obsession with blood, race and family line. Equally pertinent here, though, is Derrida’s observation highlighted in chapter two, and explored in chapter three, that, when a subject considers themselves “one of the family ... the others become simply places, family functions, or places or functions in the organic totality that constitutes a group, school, nation or community of subjects speaking the same language” (2003, 27). The resultant blurring of singularities is further brought to the forefront in the novel through the intentionally confusing names given to the characters.

The head of this gang is named John Doe, whilst most of rest of the family have names that begin with the letter J – Jetty, Jotty, Janet, JesseJudges and JimmyJesus, to name but a few. From the outset, the narrator is intentionally concealing the true identities of the characters by assigning them all the name Doe. Equally, as McCann notes, the suggestion is “very clearly (but very uncomfortably) ... that for all their larger-than-life violent, psychotic tendencies, these characters are everyman and everywoman: J. Doe” (2016, 25). In US criminal investigations, the names John and Jane Doe are often used to refer to male and female unidentified corpses. This observation in many respects also foreshadows how the story will play out: John Doe is, from the outset, both dead and alive, identified and unidentified, whilst Jane Doe (Jotty’s missing niece) is constantly present only in her absence, and yet, at the end



of the novel, is revealed to have never existed at all. Through choosing to name these characters “Doe” – or, what equates to the same thing, refusing to reveal their proper names – we are thus introduced to one of the driving forces of the plot: the endeavour to identify the corpse.

Equally, what results from the names of the characters being so similar is that the reader becomes easily confused and may find themselves repeatedly mistaking the identity of certain characters involved in pivotal moments in the plot. Similar confusions, or substitutions, likewise result from certain characters pertaining the same name – as is the case of the two Toms – or characters that have names that rhyme – like Jetty and Betty, or John Doe and JohnJoe – or half rhyme – like Jetty and Jotty. Miller’s assessment of the ethics of reading certainly comes to mine here, where he describes “crossings, displacements, and substitutions, as inside becomes outside, outside inside, or as features on either side cross over the wall, membrane or partition dividing the sides” (Miller 1987, 7). Moreover, what is particularly interesting in this respect is that we are often told by the narrator how the characters themselves would mix people up, even when face to face. We are also told that it was commonplace for community members to confuse the protagonists of certain events, as so much of what was taken as fact in this town was directly acquired from out of the loudest rumours. As Schaub puts it in his review for the *NPR*, “[i]t seems as if Burns is deliberately throwing the reader off track in an attempt to illustrate the confusion and unreality that are the product of lives spent in the midst of unrelenting violence” (2020, n.p.).

In Tiptoe, “rumours and only rumours were the *lingua franca* of this town” (*LC*, 287; emphasis in the original). In the penultimate chapter, the narrator provides us with a number of comical definitions of ‘rumour’ supposedly taken from dictionaries:

a rumour is ‘a type of fish’. That’s according to one dictionary. It is ‘the shifting five minutes before dusk’, according to another. It is ‘false words on the air’, according to a third. It is ‘a calumniator for pouring treacle’ according to the fourth. The main thing a

rumour is, though, according to the one true source of definition, is a world people enter after they've fallen into, and can't be bothered crawling out of, some really big, man-made hole. (*LC*, 266)

The paragraph that follows this passage opens with the word "Gravediggers" (266), thus necessarily connecting the digging of rumours with the digging of graves. Indeed, one particularly disturbing example of the potential violence of rumours occurs shortly after this quote, when we witness Tom Cusack (also referred to as customer Tom), falsely identified as the perpetrator of child molestation due to rumours that were actually spread about Tom Spaders (gun shop owner Tom), despite no molestation of the sort actually having taken place. Tom Cusack is then tied to a lamppost and tar and feathered (with feathers hard to come by, the community opt for rubbish instead). Interestingly, this incident is then later rumoured to have been a lynching (269). The reader is thus inevitably forced to further question the reliability of the narrative voice, whose telling of events is all we have from which to reconstruct the goings on.

Also of note is that one did not need to be actually related to the Doe family to be considered a Doe, but could be a Doe by association, for "[i]t was shorthand – similar to the way crimes happened in war zones. All crimes in such places got connected with the war, lumped together with the war, as if they were part of it, as if they were because of it, and this happened whether they were because of it or not" (*LC*, 2-3). Not only is this telling with regards to control the Doe family had over the narrative of events in the community, but equally, we begin to see how, just as the private is presented as an echo of communal, the community in the novel stands in for the political in a broader sense, with the borders between the psychological, the communal and the political becoming increasingly blurred. As McCann observes: "the public space has become so suffused with violence that it has swamped the

domestic sphere and ... the various acts of violence which are carried out are so interrelated as to become indistinguishable" (2014a, 29).

A clear link can be made with Blanchot's famous novel *Death Sentence* (1948), in which J. is the only name given to the first female protagonist. In Blanchot's novel, the reader is made aware from the start that J. is dying from a terminal illness. This connection reinforces how the narrator's refusal to reveal the true names of the characters in *Little Constructions* is in some respects still an act of naming – they are named J., both already dead and eternally dying. What seems to bring J. back to life in *Death Sentence* is when the nameless narrator utters her first name. We read, "I leaned over her, I called to her by her first name; and immediately – I can say there wasn't a second interval – a sort of breadth came out of her compressed mouth" (Blanchot 1948, 20). This first name, nonetheless, is never revealed to the reader, and only expressed by the narrator of the novel in secret. We may interpret this act of naming as a momentary recognition of the singularity and alterity of the other, in contrast to what Nancy calls "the fully realised person of the individualistic or communistic humanism" which he describes as "the dead person" (1991, 13), a person devoid of specificity and alterity. In a similar vein, the narrator of *Little Constructions* describes how, "no pulse, no heartbeat means absolutely nothing. Often the people of Tiptoe had neither – it was the best way of keeping the safest, lowest profile in town" (LC, 274).

It is also possible to connect this back to the previously mentioned almost inevitability of confusing or substituting characters in the novel – for what lies on the hither side of substitution is the ethical insistence, underscored by both Derrida and Levinas, on the nonsubstitutability of responsibility, connected to the singularity of the event and the ethical encounter, but also the singularity of literature. Further connections may also be made with the revelation that the cemetery is teeming with both unnamed and wrongly named graves. Jotty's quest to identify the contents of one particular grave could in this respect be understood as a

desired act of naming and identification. Indeed, in Derrida's analysis of Blanchot's novel, he links J. to the French pronoun 'Je' (meaning 'I'), and explains how "this insistence is constantly remarked, remarkable, noticeable, especially, as in the case of every crypt, in its relationship to the law, in an interdiction" (2010, 149). The 'J' of the characters in *Little Constructions* is thus necessarily aligned with the first person 'Je' of the otherwise nameless narrator, whose role in both *prohibiting* but also *intercepting* becomes increasingly apparent.<sup>44</sup>

### 4.3. Secrecy, Hauntology and Autoimmunity

#### 4.3.1. Secrecy

Throughout the telling of the story, the narrator moves between revealing secrets – often followed by confessions that they shouldn't have – to intentionally concealing secrets from the reader. For example, when discussing the so called 'noises' (a psychological phenomenon to which I shall return to later), the narrator asks of the reader, "[a]s soon as you've taken in this information, let me know and I'll have this evidence destroyed immediately. This is top secret. Don't repeat what I'm about to tell you, or I'll be in trouble with everyone for sure" (*LC*, 91). Not only does this dialectic between revealing and concealing echo Derrida's description of literature as being like the structure of a letter, both open and closed (2008, 131), but equally, it reflects both the outward interactions of the characters, who themselves reveal stories, deny having revealed them, deny them having taken place, and then twist and fragment them, as well as the inner construction and fragmentation of secrets within the characters' psyches. Additionally, the narrator's description of the character Tom Cusack's use of language resonates with Nicholas Royle's depiction of the cryptaesthetic resistance of the literary text (Royle 2014, 43):

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<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, too, the J of the characters may point to the J of Derrida and Lacan's shared first name – Jacques.

he would start eliding and ellipsing, leaving vowels, then syllables, then words, then whole necessary sentences out. If he didn't leave them out, he condensed them, abridged them, according to some highly private, regulated system, trusting to the listener to be on the same wavelength as himself. The listener rarely was. (*LC*, 45)

It is hard not to hear these words as an indication of that which is to come in the novel. As the reader we are very much faced with the challenge of deciphering the heavily fragmented private language system employed by the narrative voice. This process of fragmentation both results from, yet at the same time perpetuates, the persistent presence of inherited traumas and violence in the community, the repetition of which we witness across generations, with the community seemingly “stuck in that sequence” (*LC*, 191).

This being said, it is helpful to recall here how, in *Passions*, Derrida stresses that the quality of the secret “*exceeds* the play of veiling/unveiling, dissimulation/revelation, night/day, forgetting/anamnesis” (1995a 26; emphasis added). Moreover, as explored in chapter two, the novel is depicted as a unique discourse in that it refuses to be fully penetrated, allowing for what Derrida describes as ‘unconditional’ or ‘absolute’ secrets: those that are never to be revealed nor resolved (2001, 57).

#### 4.3.2. “Time is Out of Joint”

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida claims that hauntology is a “semantics as much as ontology, psychoanalysis as much as philosophy”, and one which looks to deconstruct preestablished binaries of being/non-being, present/absent, visible/invisible (1994, 6; xvii). Hauntology is about confronting ‘unconditional’ secrets, experienced as, in Colin Davis’ words, “an essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know” (2021, 377). Thus, through an engagement with secrecy in literature, not only do we engage with a different sense of what it means to know, but equally what it means to *not* know. At stake here then are not

hidden secrets waiting to be revealed, but rather unresolvable secrets with shattering potential. As Derrida writes, “[o]ne always inherits from a secret – which says ‘read me, will you ever be able to do so?’” (1994, 16).

As was said in chapter two, and reiterated in chapter three, the spectre is described by Derrida as always “a question of repetition” for it “*begins by coming back*” (1994, 11; emphasis in the original). As in *Hamlet*, “everything begins in the imminence of *re*-apparition” (1994, 2). It is the repeated return of the spectre – or the “*spectrality effect*” – that reveals the present as necessarily intertwined with what Derrida terms the “past present” and the “future present” (1994, 48; emphasis in the original). Time is therefore revealed not to be chronological, but anachronistic. This experience of a certain disorder of time is certainly felt when reading *Little Constructions*. As Yacovissi comments, “[t]ime and chronology are slippery concepts in Burns’s world, and there is rarely a direct through-line to be had in any part of the story” (2020, n.p.). Indeed, as the narrative progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to decipher a chronology of story line – in part due to the narrator, herself reporting the events from a point roughly twenty years after they have passed, frequently moving forwards and backwards in time, and in part due to the so called “Jumbled Time Syndrome” that most of the characters appear to suffer from (*LC*, 39).<sup>45</sup> In McCann’s words: “time and space are constantly shifting, ceaselessly fluctuating, thereby reinforcing the topsy-turvydom of this fictional world” (2016, 43). Time, it seems, in line with Derrida and in the words of Hamlet, is *out of joint*, to the extent that, as traumatic events are repeated, readers themselves may begin to feel a sense that they, too, are suffering from such a syndrome. Ellman describes the experience of reading the novel

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<sup>45</sup> Throughout the novel we are introduced to a number of humorously named psychological disorders, such as ‘Jumbled Time Syndrome’ (*LC*, 39) and ‘Spatial Fragmentation Hallucination Syndrome’ (19). Burns is both parodying our tendency to pathologise different forms of behaviour by naming them but equally encouraging us to think critically about our commonplace desire to make complex realities levelled down and manageable.

as, “a bit like watching clothes in a tumble dryer and pretending they’re people: certain ones keep flopping back into view, and all of them seem to want to kill each other” (2007, n.p.).

There are also several episodes during which we get a sense that events that do not occur chronologically until the end of the novel have already taken place at the start. For example, the character Tom Cusack (also referred to as customer Tom), who is tar and feathered with rubbish at the end of the story, is seen by Tom Spaders (gun shop-owner Tom) with rubbish already stuck to his face some twenty years prior to it having happened: “Bits of loaves covered in pigeon feather, cigarette packets, cigarette butts, auld chewing gum wrappers, auld chewing gun too, all seemed to be stuck on the floor and on the counter and on top of Cusack also” (*LC*, 36). A second occurrence is when the narrator seemingly enters the mind of the woman that John Doe drags from a bus stop to the waste land to beat up. John Doe tells the woman that he has just buried his mother (who the reader later discovers is actually his aunt – although both mother and aunt are, at this point, still alive). What makes us question the passing of time is that, during this encounter, the victim is taken in her thoughts to a story supposedly told to her by a friend, of getting a lift from a man who was returning from what he thought to be his mother’s funeral, but had just been informed by what he thought to be his Aunt, that his Aunt was really his birth mother. The woman was then violated by the man driving the car. Again, we get the sense that this particular violation had somehow already happened. Whilst reinforcing the cyclical nature of trauma, the feeling of *déjà vu* that the characters experience provokes a similar feeling in the reader, and one which totally disrupts any sense of time and certainty. It is worth noting here Derrida’s comments in *Glas*, that “already [*déjà*], death has taken place, before everything” and further that “*I am* and *I am dead* are two statements that are indistinguishable as to their meaning, the *already* [*déjà*] that I am tolls its own death-knell, signs its own death warrant” (1986b, 79; emphasis in the original).

I suggest, as I have done in chapter three, that what these references support is the thesis that hauntology can help us understand the way in which histories are constructed. We are met with the message that the acts of silencing, concealing or forgetting spectres may be understood in terms of what Derrida describes as an autoimmune logic.

#### 4.3.3. Autoimmunity

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida explains how,

[t]he living ego is auto-immune ... To protect its life ... it is necessarily led to welcome the other within ... it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once *for itself and against itself*. (1994, 177; emphasis in the original)

It is not difficult to see how this logic works at the level of the individual (the psychological), but also those of the community and the nation (the political). An example of this logic given by Derrida, and cited in chapter two, is made in reference to actions taken by the US administration following the events of 9/11, whereby, under the guise of protecting liberal democratic freedoms, information was hidden, true intentions were disguised, and the very same freedoms were themselves restricted (Borradori 2003, 86). Importantly, Derrida describes this response as “a Cold War *in the head*” (92; emphasis added). In a similar way, we may recall how, in an interview with Lisa McGee, Burns describes how in *No Bones* “[t]he outside society is very much a reflection of the inside family, and of the self-destructive warring parts of Amelia herself. Nothing exists in isolation” (Lisa McGee 2001, n.p.). The same can certainly be said of *Little Constructions*. The novel begins with Jetty Doe entering the community’s gun shop, demanding a rifle, and inadvertently triggering gun shop owner Tom’s breakdown, which will be the first of many more to come.



Indeed, very much connected to the role of secrecy in both the form and content of the novel is the part that secrecy plays within the community, and the resulting self-destruction that ensues. Just as we saw with the narrative voice, the community's very existence lies somewhere between the dialectic of revealing and concealing communal secrets. The bond of the community is founded on, and propelled by, secrets of violence, trauma, and vengeance, often inherited and cyclical, and almost always unfronted. Yet at the same time, certain secrets are revealed by community members in the form of rumours, and certain others, whilst not acknowledged, we may say are open – the kind that require the act of “knowing and not knowing” (*LC*, 72). This act goes so far as to enable community members to ignore atrocities that are happening right in front of their eyes: we are told how “witnesses to violence suddenly go blind and deaf and completely insensate and never notice anything” (116).<sup>46</sup> Similarly, characters seem unable to make simple deductions even when the evidence presents itself as obvious. As Janet insists whilst on trial for being an accessory to murder: “I already told you. Of course he came in with blood on his hands. But I thought he just had blood on his hands. I didn't know. I thought it was just blood, y'know, just blood, y'know. Blood” (280). The haunting presence of unfronted secrets, the refusal to acknowledge open secrets, and the fact rumours were taken for truth all contribute to the community's autoimmune responses.

The narrator describes how John Doe could to some extent sense how his efforts to resist exteriority were starting to act as a causing factor of both his and the Doe gang's pending downfall. We are told that,

[a]ccording to Doe, because he had to block out the Noises of his neighbours, his own place was cracking up. All windows, all doors had to be closed and barred, and all light

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<sup>46</sup> This is something we also see in both *No Bones* (2001) – for instance, when Amelia, aged seventeen, comes home to an upturned house we are told how she “still tried, by a massive effort of will, not to see anything and not to respond” (Burns 2001, 123), and in *Milkman* (2018), in which certain characters in the novel are quite literally blinded for seeing what they are not supposed to see.

coming in from outside covered with dark hangings. Hence it was chaos. At any moment now, there might be a Doe-house-collapse. (*LC*, 95)

This same sense of imminent implosion is echoed in a description of John Doe's internal mental state; that "his compartmentalised mind was busting all its boxes because he was still trying to compartmentalise it, even though clearly there was no room for any further divisions to take place" (209). The Doe family house therefore may be taken to symbolise both the community (the political) and the psyche (the psychological).

Located in the garden of the Doe house was "The Community Centre", the name given to the gang's headquarters – a barricaded old tool shed with hundreds of underground tunnels. Interestingly, any outside threat is not itself made explicit, but rather exists only in the abstract fear of informants (those who, in secret, reveal secrets), and the police to whom these informants may go (although it is suggested that the police themselves are largely considered within the dictates of the gang, and even a part of the Doe family themselves, for they are referred to as Johns "police relatives" (*LC*, 84)). Furthermore, it does not seem to be the case that there is any kind of gang warfare or rivalry, nor do we get the impression that the gang is striving to protect their community from outside control (both things we may expect given the clear connections that can be made with the roles of both the provisional IRA and Ulster Loyalist paramilitary groups during the Troubles). In fact, we very much get the impression that all the people that are tortured and murdered in the Community Centre, and buried in its underground tunnels, are not only members of the community (Doe by association), but often even blood relatives of the Doe family itself. Immediately, then, what lies at the *centre* of this community is its very self-destruction. We are thus met with an intentional blurring of internal and external threat, and internal and external conflict.

Yet more revealing still is the disclosure that John Doe, in an attempt to demonstrate his dominance over them, would literally eat his murder victims. This act is both an echo of

the Heideggerian drive for *mineness*, that is, for pulling the other into my world of understanding, and a brutally literal form of communing with the dead. We read how, “[h]e used to eat these men – small symbolic bits, understand – just to make a point of who had gained possession” (*LC*, 95). That he is said to eat “small symbolic bits” is not incidental. Nor, I suggest, is the use of the word “possession”, together with the fact he can no longer keep them down: we are told how, “[l]ast time he’d eaten one, he had to leave the shack, tiptoe round the back, and vomit the man back out” (95). This observation invites an interpretation of this apparent act of communion in reference to the two modes of mourning outlined by Abraham and Torok (1986, 111-5). Indeed, it is worth recalling that whilst hauntology is about justice, it is equally about mourning. Interestingly, after being incarcerated, the rest of the gang members explain to a reporter that the reason they started to eat their murder victims too was to prevent them from receiving a funeral – that is, to prevent them from being appropriately mourned (151). As outlined in chapter two, Abraham and Torok depict ‘introjection’ as normal, or healthy mourning, in contrast to ‘incorporation’ which is deemed pathological, for it is understood that once the object of mourning is incorporated, it comes back to prey upon the ego (1986, 111-5). If the murder victims were to have been incorporated in this way, this may indeed account for the sheer amount of spectral activity in the community centre shed.

However, in Derrida’s forward to Abraham and Torok’s book he deconstructs the introjection/incorporation binary to reveal that neither is ever experienced in isolation: “everything is played out on the borderline that divides and opposes the two terms” (1986a, xvi). As we have said, according to Derrida, it is the process of incorporation, and not introjection, which is said to respect the alterity of the other (1986a, xiv). From this perspective, in contrast to Abraham and Torok’s reading (as well as Freud’s on which it is based), introjection can be understood as a kind of ontological cannibalism, as the other is engulfed, appropriated, and mystified. To return to the novel, when the strength of the internal

reverberations means that John Doe can no longer keep his victims down, he vomits them back out, not inside the shed, but still inside the Doe family garden – somewhere both inside and outside, at home and not at home, visible yet not in sight. This ties in with an essential aspect of Derrida's reading of incorporation – the notion of the 'crypt' – a concept already explored in previous chapters, and to which I shall return to momentarily. Reading the novel from the perspective of the crypt gives further significance to the Doe Community Centre shack.

Additionally, given the presence of the corpse, John Doe's act of vomiting in a liminal space, and the echo of the uncanny to be found in the at home/not at home dichotomy, Kristeva's articulation of the abject may also be pertinent here. The abject, according to Kristeva, is the response of horror or vomiting one experiences when exposed to the corpse due to the resultant dissolution of the self/other, subject/object binaries and the threat such a dissolution poses to the social order (Kristeva 1982, 63). The corpse is said to reveal not the meaning of death in any linguistic sense, but in its pre-linguistic material experience. Kristeva underscores how "[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (1982, 4). Importantly, whilst her description of the abject particularly resonates with the uncanny, Kristeva insists that it remains distinct for, whilst the uncanny is the experience of the familiar in the unfamiliar, the 'heimlich' in the 'unheimlich', the abject is said to result from a "failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory" (1982, 5). From this perspective, John Doe's consumption of the corpse may itself stand in for the dissolution of the subject/object dichotomy, whilst his act of vomiting the corpse back out into the liminal space behind the community centre shed may represent his traumatic confrontation with his own material mortality. Indeed, it certainly seems to be a trigger point for the increasing disruption to social order that ensues. Moreover, as Derrida said of the process of incorporation, the abject, too, is experienced on the *borderline*. Kristeva's depiction of borderline patients (1982, 47-51) is certainly applicable to the character of John

Doe, whose disturbing relationship with his mother is more than a little unsettling. Not only does he describe his mother as the “Mother of God” whilst proudly displaying tattoos that read “Mother of All Virgins” and “Mother Most Chaste” (*LC*, 114-5), but he also repeatedly pretends to bury her corpse and mourn her death in performance-style funerals: “having her dead by pretending she was” (115). Kristeva’s depicts how,

[c]onstructed on the one hand by the incestuous desire of (for) his mother and on the other by an overly brutal separation from her, the borderline patient, even though he may be a fortified castle, is nevertheless an empty castle. The absence, or the failure, of paternal function to establish a unitary bent between subject and object, produces this strange configuration ... An empty castle, haunted by unappealing ghosts – “powerless” outside, “impossible” inside. (1982, 48-9)

The fortified Community Centre shed does well to symbolise John Doe’s fortified, empty, haunted castle. Yet his experience of the abject, as portrayed in the liminal vomiting sequence, reflects how, like the Doe family residence, the fortifications of the shed are under imminent threat of collapse.

#### **4.4. Hauntings, Judas and the ‘Visor Effect’**

##### **4.4.1. “Quaintly Subjective Territory”**

Before moving on to discuss the construction of crypts, it is productive to consider the presence of spectres in the novel. Tiptoe Floorboard is said to be situated “in quaintly subjective territory” (*LC*, 144), so much so that we are told that “the Doe Executive took their belief in ghosts and in demons and in other discarnate essences very deadly seriously” (27). The constant reference to ghosts and shadows in the novel somewhat blurs the distinction between what may appear to be literal haunting, and the haunting presence of transgenerational secrets – a

distinction we saw equally disrupted in *No Bones*. However, in this chapter, my interest lies predominantly in the latter.

The first indication that the hauntings may hold significance beyond the supernatural comes in the narrator's own analysis given in chapter two, although guised in the form of questions. The narrator asks,

[s]o what was going on? Do we have a psychoanalyst or a psychoanalytic psychologist or a psychophysiological profiler or even an unaccredited enthusiast with Jungian leanings in the building who could perhaps do a bit of maturity work for us here? Is it about stuckness? A state of sickness? Did these men perhaps leave school before they'd learnt enough and should have? Or is it just that they couldn't get themselves individualised and thus had intermingling mythic mirages, not only in their dreams but in their waking lives as well? (*LC*, 31)

The way in which the narrator ironically makes jest at the idea of analysing the community from a psychoanalytical perspective actually links the haunting of the community with one of the many psychological dispositions suffered by most of its members, known in the novel as "Spatial Fragmentation Hallucination Syndrome", and said to be "the real reason behind people who walk into doors" (20). Tellingly, the effects of this syndrome are described in terms akin to those used in the passage just cited: it leaves a person "infantilised", without speech and in "a state of stuckness" (20). How the syndrome comes about could also easily be extended from the level of the individual to the communal. The narrator elaborates by proposing the following scenario: "You're having a hard time, say, because something not very nice happened to you once. It was a big thing, and although it's supposed to be over, in your body and in your head and from the way you now look at the world, it's not bloody over, it's still going on" (20). Undoubtedly, there are echoes to be found in this passage both of Post-Good Friday Agreement Belfast and the stories of survivors of institutional violence. Further still, when first introduced

to the syndrome, we are told how Tom Spaders (gun shop owner Tom) read about it in a magazine left in a hospital by someone who had died – it is passed on, then, in language from the dead to the living, or from the living past to the living present, and subsequently traps the community in the cyclical return of violence and trauma. This observation provides further support for the idea that it is not the documented ghosts and shadows that are of most importance when considering the hauntings in the novel, but rather the appearance and reappearance of past secrets. Present in their absence, these secrets may be interpreted as spectral other(s) haunting the pages of Burns’s fiction.

#### 4.4.2. The Visor Effect

In light of this, perhaps the most revealing aspect of haunting in the novel is the presence of an ancient suit of armour – first stolen from “that Museum in Moscow after Moscow had stolen it from Venice who had stolen it from those Flemish people” (*LC*, 106) – in which the character Judas (John Doe’s son) often hides in order to watch what is going on without being seen: “breathless, shadowless, as insubstantial as he could muster” (106). Here the reader is likely taken in thought to the apparition of Hamlet’s father, who we are told appears armed “from top to toe” (Shakespeare [1603] 2003, 105). Although, with the son and not the father inside the armour, what we have is a kind of dream logic reversal of the scene, (one of many in text). Also significant is how Judas, unlike Hamlet’s father, always wears the visor down. Relevant here is Derrida’s discussion of the so called ‘visor effect’ of the spectre; interestingly, a discussion also made in reference to Hamlet. The visor effect is described as a “spectral asymmetry” that “interrupts all spectrality”, “desynchronizes” and “recalls us to anachrony” (think ‘Jumbled Time Syndrome’) because “we do not see who looks at us” (Derrida 1994, 6).

There is a clear connection to be made with the narrator’s own questioning of the role of ghosts in the community, during which they make reference to “that woman who turns you to stone just because you have a peek at her, and has – if you could credit it – snakes standing in

for the auld hair” (*LC*, 31). Medusa is, after all, the ultimate one whose gaze can never be met. It is worth noting here that a similar asymmetry is certainly felt with respect to our interaction with the narrator of the novel – as readers, we feel ourselves constantly observed, and often even personally judged. Further still, the entire novel is constructed by the narrator’s observations of events from the position of a ‘bystander’, yet they themselves remain an invisible, disembodied voice. Similarly, the writer has created an overwhelming sense of constant surveillance within the Doe community, with the residents knowing first-hand the potential consequences they would face if they were to step out of line. Just as we are met with the impossibility of ever seeing the face of the narrator, so too the members of the community are unable to meet the gaze of the one who is telling their story.

Also of relevance here is the broader context out from which this novel was written, that is, Northern Ireland during the Troubles. We may recall how the British army often remained hidden behind barricades and lookout posts when firing shots, and how paramilitary groups on both sides donned masks and balaclavas to hide their identities. Whilst constantly under surveillance, there was a sense that one could never see the face, or meet the gaze, of the perpetrators. One specific story immediately comes to mind. Richard Moore was only ten years old when, in 1972, a captain of the Royal Artillery shot a rubber bullet into his school playground, blinding him for life (see Moore 2009). The school was aware that there was an army outpost that looked out over the school (and so were under further surveillance still by their teachers to ensure they did not step out of line) but the soldiers themselves remained always hidden. In an interview with Oisín Feeney, Richard talks of the idea that, due to the impossibility of seeing the soldier who shot him, the figure of the soldier existed as a kind of shadow hanging over his life, and one that dictated his future (Feeney 2021, n.p.). Moreover, despite going on to meet the captain in question (with whom he went on to publicly forgive



and build a surprising friendship) his blindness means he will never be able to look him in the eye (McKinney 2022, n.p.).

There are certain parallels to be identified between the visor effect of the spectre, and Foucault's discussion of surveillance in reference to the panopticon – a prison design which allows all inmates to be under constant surveillance by one unseen observer in a central tower. According to this design, the prisoner is thus “seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (1995, 200).<sup>47</sup> With this in mind, the fact that the one spying from behind the visor in the novel is named Judas holds further significance still. The name Judas has more than one meaning; not only does it refer to the ultimate betrayer (we may recall how towards the end of the novel Judas is revealed, ironically to everyone's disbelief despite being named ‘traitor’ at birth, to be the sought-after informer), but in French, a judas is also a peephole or spyhole, from which we get the English ‘judas window’ – the type of window used in prisons to allow the prison guard to see in and observe prisoners without themselves being seen.

Perhaps more interesting still is Derrida's use of the double meaning of the name in his famous work *Glas* (1986b) – a work he himself describes as a “sort of wake” (1986b, 164). *Glas* combines a reading of Hegel's philosophical works with a commentary on the autobiographical writings of French novelist Jean Genet (another J.). The commentaries, which run alongside each other in two columns, are frequently interrupted by *judases* or *jalousies* – observations often written in different font and size, so both internal and external to the main body, which act as windows or peepholes to the other parallel text. In turn, these observations allow for a certain correspondence between the two. Miller describes the structure of *Glas* in the following terms:

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<sup>47</sup> I shall return to Foucault's discussion of surveillance and the panopticon in chapter five, in reference to *Milkman* (2018).

[I]f the end was in the beginning, twice over, once on the right and once on the left, it was also that neither circle was closed upon itself, but always already supplemented or interrupted, not to say outflanked and inverted by its opposite number and by an abyssal sequence of treacherous peepholes (or *judas*) tracing many a lateral passage between inside and outside, out and in. (2016, 188; emphasis in the original)

In many respects, this description is equally applicable to the novel in question. Perhaps Judas, spying from behind his visor, plays a similar function in *Little Constructions* to Derrida's *judases* in *Glas*. Judas provides (betraying) peepholes of correspondence between the literary work and the literary theory which it seems to embody, as well as between the fictional town and the outside reality it echoes, the internal and external realities of the characters, the living and the dead, and past, present and future conflicts. Judas's role is both to invert and blur the boundaries of fiction/theory, inside/outside, and psychological/political.

Interestingly, Miller suggests that Derrida most likely modelled *Glas* on Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (2016, 138).<sup>48</sup> Likewise, it is not difficult to spot the influence of Joyce on Burns's writing too, not only here, but in her entire oeuvre. In addition to certain turns in plot, the influence is most visible both in terms of style and word play. Additionally, Burns's apparent love of somewhat simple plots that are nonetheless difficult to follow due to her embrace of fractured, cyclical narratives is equally Joycean. This is something I would claim both situates her within the Irish canon and allows her to stand out from amongst her contemporary peers. Just as the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake* presents two overlapping parallel stories – of dreams and reality – and the Derrida of *Glas* provides two overlapping parallel analyses – of Hegel and Genet – so too, the Burns of *Little Constructions* writes, by means of an interaction between literature and literary theory, the two overlapping parallel accounts of

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<sup>48</sup> Similar observations are made by Peter Manhon in his book *Imagining Joyce and Derrida: Between Finnegans Wake and Glas* (1971, 3-14).

psychological and political breakdowns, with all three writers blurring the inside/outside binary, albeit in different ways.<sup>49</sup>

Returning, then, to the suit of armour from inside of which Judas spies, and reading through the lens of hauntology, we may first observe how the object itself is of the past, both in the sense that it originated from a chain of historical conflicts, and later that it became a (stolen) inherited family heirloom – one that at the same time belongs, and does not belong, to the Doe family. It stands in for both international conflicts, and internal intergenerational family disputes. Yet it is also in many respects futural, for hidden behind the visor is the gaze of the one who will ultimately determine the family's fate – a gaze that can never be met, itself standing in for the gaze of the Other, or of the absolute secret.

Additionally, with Judas hiding inside, the suit of armour takes on the image of being something of a plaything. This aspect further connects it not only with the visor effect of the spectre, but also with the idea of the crypt as being like an object of play (Freud 1961; Derrida 1987). Interestingly, right after we are told of Judas hiding inside the suit of armour, the narrator also reveals that, as a child, he may have been the subject of a quite literal game of *fort/da*, but one that ends in molestation.<sup>50</sup> The episode goes as follows,

[i]t was as if someone had tied Judas up, and had left him a while, then come back,  
then gone away, then come back, then gone away, then come back, when by now  
Judas would be screaming, and this time they'd stay and do some kissing of him

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<sup>49</sup> With the character of Judas not only connected now to the peephole, but also the *jalousie* window (a window composed of two parallel glasses) French writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel *La Jalousie* may also hold some significance here. The novel tells the story of a jealous husband (the silent unnamed narrator) who spies on his wife through the slats of the *jalousie* windows, which, like peepholes, allow the husband to watch in silence without himself being seen. He is thus intentionally playing with the double meaning of *Jalousie* in French, which both refers to the *jalousie* window and jealousy. The plot of *Little Constructions*, too, is unquestionably one driven by acts of jealousy and retribution. Additionally relevant here is the unreliable role of the narrator in *La Jalousie* – present in the story only in his absence – for the reader is never quite sure as to which events have taken place and which are merely his suspicions. Events are blurred with imaginings, just as facts are blurred with rumours in *Little Constructions*.

<sup>50</sup> The reason I say he may have been, is that the narrator introduces the episode with the expression "it was as if", and ends with the question, "how could he remember a supposing?" (*LC*, 106).

when he didn't have full words because he hadn't reached the age of even being a child yet. He was infant. He was infant of infants. (*LC*, 106)

Of note here is Derrida's suggestion that the game of *fort/da* that the child plays, which at first stands in for the presence of the absent mother, and later stands in for the presence and absence of anything subsequently – be it the mother, the spool, or the dead – eventually manifests itself in writing. Derrida calls this the “auto-bio-thanato-hetero-graphic scene of writing” (1987, 336). Furthermore, he depicts writing itself as an act of mourning, for “everything that we inscribe in the living present of our relation to others already carries, always, the signature of memoirs—from-beyond-the-grave” (1989, 29). From this perspective, the novel *Little Constructions* may be taken as an example of such an impossible mourning inscribed in writing.

To go back to Judas's depiction as “infant of infants” (*LC*, 106), it certainly resonates with Abraham and Torok's depiction of the family secret as that which cannot be revealed, the something other which is passed down from generation to generation when the child incorporates the parents' absences (1994, 171-5). Further support for this interpretation lies in how, once in the suit of armour, Judas could be heard repeatedly mumbling three words – “habitable, uninhabitable, inhabitable” (85). These words appear to echo the proximity/distance of the *fort/da* relation, but could equally stand in for “at home, not *not* at home, not at home”, with clear connotations of the concept of the uncanny. Of note here is that the English translation of the German word ‘heimlich’, which stands in contrast to Freud's ‘unheimlich’ (uncanny, unfamiliar, not at home), can be both ‘familiar’ but also ‘in secret’, and so these mutterings may also stand in for the deconstruction of the dialectic of revealing and concealing.

It is worth noting how the concept of intimacy may act a mediating term between the dialectic of revealing and concealing. The intimate relation, whilst often founded on the sharing

of secrets, equally demands a respect for singularity. I would argue, however, that one would struggle to find any such examples of intimacy in the novel. Indeed, as McCann highlights in her analysis of the scene in which John Doe attacks the woman at the bus stop, not only does it blur the boundaries between public and private violence, but equally we are met with the victim's recognition that "in this town, the only form of contact available between individuals is inherently violent" (2014a, 39). This is in part due the incessantly violent landscape that surrounds them and the resultant anxiety expressed by all of the characters of letting their guard down, in part to the community's obsession with surveillance and control, and in part to the general fear of the disruptive power that secrets hold. Derrida's claim that the secret is about non-belonging may also be pertinent here, for in his words, "[b]elonging – the fact of avowing one's belonging, of putting in common – be it family, nation, tongue – spells the loss of the secret" (2001, 59). In this way, the relevance of secrecy to intimacy also links with the concept of autoimmunity, for we begin to see how the desire for belonging results in self-destruction: "if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space" (Derrida 2001, 59).

Judas's mutterings could, however, just as plausibly be translated as "presence, a non-present absence, absence", which necessarily conjures the image of the spectre. As Derrida writes of the spectrality effect that, "even when it is there, that is, when it is there without being there, you feel that the spectre is looking, although through a helmet; it is watching, observing, staring at the spectators and the blind seers, but you do not see it seeing, it remains invulnerable beneath its visored armor" (1994, 124). This image is certainly reinforced later in chapter twelve, when Judas is described as "oiled castors":

You open a door, he's there. You close the door, turn round, there he is again. You open a wall cupboard, he's squashed into the top shelf of it. In the name of God! And look – there he is again. He was back in the house from wherever he'd disappeared

to out of it, and he wouldn't declare himself. He was still in the armour and had sidled in, inch by inch, little movement by little movement. (*LC*, 241)

This passage not only draws attention to Judas's persistent, silent stalking presence and absence – itself particularly ghost-like – but also, unlike the ghost of Hamlet's father, and in line with what we are told of the spectre, Judas refuses to declare himself. That he also appears in cupboards takes on further signification in relation to the construction of the crypt.

#### **4.5. The Crypt**

As detailed in previous chapters, the crypt, according to Derrida, is said to be constructed as a result of the process of mourning known as incorporation. It is depicted as a tomb which conceals and guards unfronted secrets. Particularly relevant here is the element of a haunting trauma Abraham and Torok describe as the “transgenerational consequences of silence ... the unwitting reception of someone else's secret” (1994, 168). From this angle, the crypt takes the place of the lost object, acting as a persistent reminder of the unexpected and unaccounted for events that lead to its sudden disappearance (Abraham and Torok 1994, 114). Derrida discusses this haunting element of the crypt as like a “parasitic inclusion” (1986a, xvi) – an expression that necessarily draws us back, once again, to the concept of immunity. Additionally, there is a clear connection to be made with the role of secrecy in literature, for, according to Abraham “what haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of the others” (1987, 287).

Abraham and Torok's description finds particular resonance when we learn how the Doe sisters often turn up at Jotty's house incapable of acknowledging the blood on their hands (something of a reversal of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking episodes). The narrator describes how, when “trying to regain their memory whilst sitting bloody in their armchairs, [they] dread

the secret, uncontrollable side of their nature that once again took possession of them, and know that sometime in the past, something unspeakable must have gone on” (*LC*, 172). Such unspeakables are said to hold the potential to “determine the fate of an entire family line”, the significance of which necessarily extends beyond the individual (Abraham and Torok 1994, 140). As Rand writes in his introduction to *The Shell and the Kernel*,

[w]hether it characterizes individuals, families, social groups, or entire nations, silence and its varied forms – the untold or unsayable secret, the feeling unfelt, the pain denied, the unspeakable and concealed shame of families, the cover-up of political crimes, the collective disregard for painful historical realities – may disrupt our lives. (1994, 21)

And so, yet again, we are reminded that what can be deciphered in the psychological extends to the political.

It is worth recalling here, however, where Derrida departs from Abraham and Torok. As highlighted in chapter two, for Derrida, rather than it being the case that such secrets are unsaid because they are somehow too shameful to be put into words, hidden in the crypt is an undefined structural openness understood as secrecy *as such*. As was said of the secret in literature, buried in the crypt is not, therefore, a riddle to be solved, or a fractured symbol to be sutured back together, but encrypted secrets that can never be fully deciphered, absolute Others – for there is no end to the work of mourning.

The first hint we get that *Little Constructions* is riddled with crypts is when we are told of objects one keeps hold of, in fear that someone else might get happiness from them (reminiscent, perhaps, of the connection made between the jalousie window and jealousy). As the narrator explains,

[y]ou store it, along with all the other things you took and didn’t want, and you put them in the attic, in the cupboards, in the corners, in the coalhole, under the floorboards, in

*huge padlocked boxes* under the stairs. They're all around you, covered in dust and increasing atmospheric pressure, and you're in the middle and you're sure to be remembered and, by the way, don't worry if these things rot. There are always more things to be had. (*LC*, 18; emphasis added)

Whilst there are a multitude of objects in the novel that can be interpreted as constructions of crypts, in this chapter, I shall focus on just four: the kitchen cupboard, John Doe's secret box, the community centre, and the pseudo-mother crypt.

#### 4.5.1. The Kitchen Cupboard

The first and most obvious construction of a crypt in the novel involves the Doe family's interaction with a certain kitchen cupboard: "you know that cupboard in the kitchen? It's the cupboard that everybody has that they don't know what to do with. What should they put into it? they wonder. We all wonder" (*LC*, 96). The narrator talks of how – unlike the other cupboards which are mentally organised – this cupboard ends up "stamped with 'No Definition'" (97). Like the characters in the novel, it is named, then, by means of the denial of a proper name. That this cupboard represents the (autoimmune) psyche is made comically obvious:

It craves an identity and because you won't give it, it becomes – and it serves you right – the enemy within.

It seeps discontent.

And neglect.

And depression.

And, finally, murderousness every time you enter the kitchen. (*LC*, 97)



However, it is not until the cupboard is “tagged and sorted” (97) that we begin to see how the crypt is constructed. We are told that this cupboard “was for earplugs” and so, “thank goodness – no shadows or hidden trauma there” (97). Evidently, the irony here lies in the fact we know this not to be the case, for the earplugs themselves have substantial symbolic significance for the Does. Earplugs formed part of the defence against the so called ‘Noises’ that affected most of the Doe family: the inability to bare the sound of other people. Other defences were to be found in putting radios on full volume, constantly running washing machines and hoovers, and the act of imitation. The ‘Noises’ seemed to spread like something of a virus amongst the Doe children, passed from eldest to youngest and across generations. For some children, the phenomenon stopped, and was replaced with violence tendencies, for others there was little escape. For John Doe, they returned after thirty years of reprieve. In chapter four, when John goes to the cupboard for earplugs, he finds it empty, representing the idea of the crypt as hiding both something and nothing. We are also told how, without these earplugs, “Doe was now going bananas with twenty phantom dead men” (*LC*, 104). Thus, the ‘Noises’ themselves would appear to stand in for some unspeakable transgenerational trauma, passed down through the family line, connected to the abstract fear of the outside penetrating into the Does internal sense of being, a fear itself connected to the fear of letting down one’s guard (51). The earplugs, then, stand in for the Noises, themselves already encoded, and the cupboard is the space mapped out for the crypt, substituting the trauma of the absence of earplugs. Later in the narrative, we see the cupboard both padlocked and actively avoided due to its growing in psychological pressure.

The image of the increasing symbolic significance of the cupboard is reinforced when we are told how,

any talk of the kitchen cupboard would lead one to talk about the space at the end of the space and to spaces chopped up into smaller disturbed abutting angled places and about

the sort of people who need to abide in those split-off nook and cranny upside-down corners or in places of transit, like staircases, for some strange, fragmented, demented reasons of their own. (*LC*, 97)

We see this description further reverberate when the narrator describes how so many of the characters in the novel were prone to “storing things in the space at the end of the space, stuffing unpleasant what-nots into mental kitchen cupboards” (279). The final mention of the cupboard is when Jotty, obsessed as to the whereabouts of her missing niece, enters the Doe family residence under the conviction that “this cupboard held the key” (233). Unbeknownst to Jotty, however, the now padlocked cupboard “at that moment was empty of anything at all” (233).

#### 4.5.2. John Doe’s Secret Box

On a number of occasions, we are met with the image of John Doe, naked, downstairs doing “his little business” with a “secret box” (*LC*, 93). Whilst the reader remains in the dark as to the exact contents of the box, as well as what exactly it is that he does with it during this repeated ritual, we are given several clues as to its significance. Firstly, as we have been told that John Doe collects souvenirs or trophies from his murder victims, we may assume that this box is where he stores them. Perhaps all he does with the box is simply look at them – a self-reminder of his dominance over them, and a warning to the reader of the violent potential of the Heideggerian drive for authenticity. Or perhaps it is also a way of keeping a part of his victims alive whilst concealing them in a safe place. Secondly, Janet (John’s wife) reveals to the undercover police officer known as Betty, that it is always prior to intercourse, both with her and with her sister Jetty, that he would go downstairs, naked, and surround himself with the contents of his box (102). That he insists on carrying out this ritual before intercourse again reinforces the idea that the contents of the box somehow reassure him of his dominance over and consumption of his victims. Equally, though, we may speculate as to whether the trauma John Doe experienced when discovering that his aunty was really his mother is encrypted in,

or twisted around the objects in the box, for in some respects, sleeping with his wife's sister itself acts as a repetition of this particular transgenerational secret.

Yet for Janet, the significance of the box, and the secret it hides, *is* his current affair with her sister, and so acknowledging the box involves acknowledging this open secret, or her “‘knowing and not-knowing’ situation” (*LC*, 103). When asked by the police officer as to the kind of secrets hidden in the box, Janet quickly responds with, “[n]ormal ones, the type everybody has”, before proceeding to tell her that the box was for making explosives (103). This, she claims, was also the reason John was naked – a “standard precaution to take whilst making bombs” (103). For Janet, dynamite was much easier to grasp than the truth of her husband's affair. This description, however, also denotes the explosive nature of the absolute secrets hidden in this crypt, itself a recurring image in all of Burns's novels. Interestingly, the police officer then interprets this new information as tying John Doe's actions to “some bigger transatlantic or international picture. After all, there's no separation. Even God said that” (*LC*, 104), further blurring the distinctions between internal and external conflicts, and local and global hostilities. Additionally, Janet's misdirection, which leads to the police officer's misinterpretation, well reflects Derrida's description of the crypt as a “labyrinth” in its resistance of interpretation through the fracturing of the symbolic (Derrida 1986a, xx).

#### 4.5.3. The Community Centre Crypt

As previously mentioned, the Community Centre is a shack in the Doe backyard that functions as the gang's headquarters. The walls that surround and protect this shack well reflect the barriers that the broader community has tried to construct in pursuit of absolute immanence, and the tunnels dug underneath allow the centre, at the same time, to mirror the psyche, which buries, encodes, and encrypts trauma. Equally, the fortifications represent Derrida's description of the crypt as a “cryptic fortress” (1986a, xx), with barriers constructed to keep the secret safe:

“[w]hat is at stake here is what takes place secretly, or takes a secret place, in order to keep itself safe somewhere in a self” (1986a, xiv). The narrator gives us the following description:

The Community Centre ... was a tinshack lumber room, a romper room, a raucous room, a room of noisy disturbances taking up the Doe back garden. But this was only the iceberg tip. ... it was the tool shed multiplied by a hundred, with most of the multiplications taking place underground. ... It was a building of the brick-iron-cage-corrugated-steel-concrete-fortified-with-something-else-breezeblock type. You needed a password to get in and permission to get out, and once inside, you were expected to speak in a code language that was changed every week. Every so often a certain number of the uninitiated were brought in, and this would be at night-time. They never left in the same condition, and sometimes their bodies never left at all. (*LC*, 79-80)

What we are presented with, then, is a fortified building constructed in the garden of the Doe’s family residence (both inside and outside, at home and not at home), but with tunnels dug deep underground concealing victims of violence in a state of almost dead. On the one hand, with the shed described first as a lumber room – a room used for storing unused furniture – we are immediately met by the idea of underground storage of unwanted baggage. Indeed, echoing the commonplace metaphor for Freud’s understanding of the unconscious, the shed itself, we are told, is but an “iceberg tip” (79). Its description as a romper room, however, holds a double significance. First, a romper room is the name given to a playroom for very young children, which draws us back once again to the notion of the crypt as being like a plaything. The Romper Room is, however, also the name of a famous American children’s TV show, aired between 1953 and 1994, and whose name the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) adopted to refer to their own torture chambers during the Troubles. The beatings, rapes and murders that happened within these ‘romper rooms’ thence became known as ‘romperings’ (Dillan and Lehane 1973, 277). Interestingly, in *Little Constructions*, what takes place in the Community Centre romper

room is not only the torturing and murdering of possible informants, together with the concealing of their bodies, but also the telling of ghost stories and the playing of Ouija boards. The Does substitute the brutal reality of the corpses of those who die at their hands with play. Yet equally, if we follow Derrida's depiction of the crypt, the living dead hidden inside are at the same time absolute secrets – those which the community try so hard to protect themselves against – or secrecy and alterity as such. We may say that this otherness exists in words when it is written into the singularity of the novel.

With this in mind, it is significant that when the police raid the shack – and in a sense, unearth the crypt – the secrets buried inside are not simply revealed and decoded. Instead, we witness the police bagging the dead bodies as well as the many objects found within the shack and the tunnels underneath (themselves already many times encoded). Thus, further boundaries are constructed, and further encryptions made, with a new significance now wrapped around the objects that surface, both open and closed.

#### 4.5.4. The Pseudo Mother Crypt

Perhaps the most revealing application of crypt, however, involves the character of Jotty (John Doe's sister), her obsession with the whereabouts of her niece, and John Doe's constructed pseudo mother crypt. Jotty is convinced that the body of her missing niece, Jane Doe, is secretly buried in one of the coffins at the community's cemetery, and she soon becomes fixated on the idea of digging it up. The coffin in question has been buried during one of John Doe's repeated pseudo funerals held on multiple occasions for his mother, no matter that his mother is very much alive, in a mental asylum, and is also not his mother.<sup>51</sup> What immediately comes to mind here are Derrida's comments in *Specters of Marx*, wherein he delineates the three aspects that

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<sup>51</sup> His true mother is the woman he believes to be his aunt, who, like his mother, is also still very much alive, and also in a mental asylum.

comprise the deconstruction of the spectre (mourning, language and work). With regards to mourning, Derrida explains how,

[i]t consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead ... One has to know ... Now to know is to know *who* and *where*, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies – for it must stay in its place. In a safe place. Hamlet does not ask merely to whom the skull belonged (“Whose was it?” the question Valéry quotes). He demands to know to whom the grave belongs (“Whose grave’s this, sir?”). Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one *has to know* who is buried where. (1994, 9; emphasis in the original)

Jotty goes through all the official sources to no avail, and to great mental toll. We are told how she began to believe that “someone could easily be hidden behind a cushion, squashed into a teapot, put in ridiculously small boxes, spaces getting tighter and tighter” (*LC*, 258) – words that not only reflect her worsening mental state, but equally echo those used to describe the construction of crypts. Indeed, with so many objects functioning as crypts in the story, there is a sense in which she is surrounded by objects with dead people squashed inside. At this stage, the reader may well have suspicions themselves as to the whereabouts of Jane (suspicions first stemming, of course, by her being named from the outset ‘Jane Doe’, or ‘unidentified corpse’), but the narrator’s description of her internal turmoil here gives clear hints that the crypt has already been constructed. We are told how her “disturbed mind” began “making coffins out of everything – fridge? kitchen cupboard? washing machine? stereo? vacuum cleaner? eggcups? thimbles?” (278). Almost all of these objects can be traced back to other literary crypts constructed in the novel. Additionally, her franticness also reinforces the urgency of her need to know *who* and *where*. After being turned away once again by the local police force, Jotty asks the narrator to help her dig up the grave to reveal who is buried inside.

Another aspect worth noting is that, earlier in the narrative, when Jotty's sisters turn up at her house making death threats, (for the first time *without* blood on their hands), they threaten to bury her in "the third grave" – their dead father lay in one, the second was reserved for the mother (still alive) but the third remains both empty and unassigned (*LC*, 203). Though not made explicit, we may assume that this "third grave" is the very same plot that Jotty is now so desperate to dig up. And so, in many respects this grave has already been mapped out for Jotty; it is both hers and not hers, internal and external, empty and yet filled with significance.

Both Jotty's desperate attempts to search for her missing niece, as well as her backstory of being a victim of incest and rape, very much connect her character with the myth of Demeter, the goddess of agriculture. Demeter, we are told, was swallowed by her father, and bore a daughter to her older brother Zeus. Her daughter, Persephonie, was taken by Hades to the underworld, leaving Demeter to frantically search for her, but to no avail. After nine days, and with the help of Hekate, Demeter locates her daughter in the underworld – where she is subject to reside for half of every year (Burkert 1985, 222). During the periods of Persephonie's absence, Demeter enters a period of mourning, preventing the growth of crops, with her absence and presence then accounting for the seasons.<sup>52</sup> If we take the myth of Demeter as a story of mourning, we may interpret the underworld in this myth as symbolising the unconscious, with Hades acting as something of a groundskeeper of the gate of Erebus. Moreover, the cyclical repetition of Persephonie's presence and absence, very much connected to life and death, echoes the role of the spectre in blurring these binaries.

With Jotty interpreted as playing the part of Demeter, the narrator now takes on the role of (a very reluctant) Hekate. In Greek mythology, Hekate is most known for being the goddess of crossroads, and specifically the crossroads between the land of the living and the land of the

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<sup>52</sup> For a full translation of the myth, see Foley (1994).

dead. However, she is also depicted as the goddess of boundaries, graves, ghosts, and even necromancy – all of which are underlying themes in the novel.<sup>53</sup> Moreover still, Hekate is often depicted wielding a torch, due to her role in finding Persephone, a key, again alluding to her role in unlocking the underworld, and also a sword, as she fights alongside the Olympian Gods.<sup>54</sup> We may recall how during a chaotic scene in the Doe family residence wherein Tom Spaders (mistaken for John Doe) is stabbed, a woman mysteriously appears, bearing a sword and with the ability to walk through people (recall how Derrida writes of spectres that “they pass through walls” (1994, 36)). This woman is given the name ‘Sworden’ and is said to reach into the armchair where dead John is sat on dead Jetty, and to pull out two dead babies – for “[t]here are always babies” (*LC*, 233). We therefore move from the image of the narrator playing the role of Hekate to playing the role of Sworden, with the discovery of the two babies in the armchair in some respects foreshadowing the secret story behind Jotty’s missing niece and what is really hidden in the crypt.

When first confronted, the narrator insists that helping Jotty would be “outside (their) jurisdiction” (*LC*, 286) – reinforcing their insistence that they are merely a bystander. The narrator then proceeds to describe an internal conflict wherein, against one’s own better judgement, a part of you “goes unannounced into the Blueprint in the dead of night while you’re snoring, and it breaks open all the ‘Do Not Tamper’ boxes and changes the rules around” (286). We almost get the impression that the real reason the narrator is so reluctant to dig up this grave is that their own trauma or secrets may themselves be kept safe within the very same plot. Succumbing to Jotty’s pleas for help, the narrator reflects, “I thought I was immune to that. / I can’t understand why I’m not immune to that” (286), yet again calling to mind the question of

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<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, Hekate is also said to be the goddess of magic, or *pharmakeia* (see D’Este and Rankine 2009). This holds further significance still for my analysis of the role of humour in literature provided in chapter five, during which I interact with Derrida’s reading of Plato’s *Pharmakon* (Derrida 1981).

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Pirner’s iconic painting *Hekate* (1901).



immunity when the narrator's own self-protective barriers begin to de-construct as they finally start to let their guard down. It is precisely in this moment that the narrator reveals the secret previously alluded to, "about Jotty and another of those shadows"; a secret the narrator recognises as holding the potential to destroy her (227). We discover that Jane Doe, the missing niece, never actually existed, and that Jotty has substituted the trauma of her own lost son, who we can assume was either taken away at birth or did not survive, together with the so called "long menstruation", with the idea of a niece of the same age (287).<sup>55</sup> As this niece was supposed to have gone missing when the son would have been the same age as Jotty when she was raped and impregnated by her father, the niece thus stands in for the trauma of both her lost son, as well as the abuse, violation and incest she suffered at the hands of her own father. Also of note is the way in which Jotty seems unable to acknowledge her very real, "physically provided for but emotionally neglected" niece and nephew, Julie and Judas – a case described by the narrator as yet another instance of "Not Knowing But Knowing" (278). Accordingly, the construction of the absent niece may also stand in for the unfronted abuse that her actual niece and nephew suffer right under her nose.

To return to the part played by the narrator, we have witnessed a significance shift from their initial insistence that they do not understand, together with their (ironic) refusals to provide interpretations, to their active role in both literally and figuratively digging up crypts at the end of the novel. The narrator claims that they expected the coffins to be empty – "just another mother fantasy":

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<sup>55</sup> Whilst unclear as to whether Jotty's baby was taken from her and/or died, there is a certain correspondence to be identified here with the hugely secretive institutionalised violence of the so-called "Mother and Baby Homes" and "Magdalene Laundries" in both the Republic of Ireland and the North. A report released in 2021 revealed significantly higher infant mortality rates for babies born in Mother and Baby Homes in Northern Ireland. Moreover still, around 31% of infants were subsequently taken from Mother and Baby Homes and transferred to Baby Homes, where the mortality rates were even higher – in one particular Baby Home they were as high as 50% during the 1920s. For those that survived, the majority were put up for adoption (whilst the report refrains from the use of the term "forced adoption", it does acknowledge that mothers were left to feel they had no choice). (McCormick, O'Connell, Dee and Privilege 2001, 16-7). This is an issue I shall return to in my final conclusions in chapter seven.

I was hoping it would be nothing. Or else some irrelevant thing. Or maybe, if it had to be relevant – as in painful – it would be one of those poor pet dogs or stolen turtles or giant Madagascar poodle beetles he’d dragged out of the house and up the hill with his rifle for their final walks. (*LC*, 288)<sup>56</sup>

However, what they find in the coffins, a case described as “kill two birds with one stone”, is “bomb material” (288) belonging to the Fifth Faction, intercepted by John, and now in some ways interdicted by the narrator.<sup>57</sup>

We are told that John first hid the objects in the Doe family house, “in and around various cabinets, cupboards, settees, armchairs, under dressing tables, inside suits of armour, and when he ran out of space in the house, naturally they went into the tunnels underneath” (*LC*, 289) – stuffed, then, inside already constructed crypts of which the significance is by now spilling over – before finally making use of the cemetery. The contents of the coffins are, in many respects, both dead and alive, or the living dead, and have explosive potential. This “bomb material” includes not only booster charges and fuses, but also a series of objects,

pieces of paper with ‘Go’, ‘Stop’ and ‘Get ready, Get Steady’ written on in pen, old rags, milkbottles, beerbottles, consignments of empty coffee jars, sugar hooks, salt hooks, black tape, bell wire, pink rubber gloves, something primed in a glove compartment ... six-inch stilettos, black berets ... red nail polish – *looking good, oh, looking good!* – baseball bats when nobody ever played baseball, a few rounds of ammunition and – why ever not? – a handgun in each and every coffin as well. (*LC*, 288-9; emphasis in the original)

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<sup>56</sup> Here the narrator is referring back to the occasions when Jotty’s father would take the family pets on ‘walks’ to be shot, leaving Jotty distressed and searching for them for hours on end. This act, it seems, was later carried out by John Doe, and then again by Judas, John’s son. Thus, the missing niece is connected to yet a further trauma for Jotty, and one that has been passed on to, or inherited by, future generations.

<sup>57</sup> We may recall how Derrida remarks on the significance of the ‘I’ in the crypt to lie in “interdiction” (2010, 149).

We may speculate as to whether these objects are similar to the trophies or souvenirs that we are told John would take from his murder victims, (with the word ‘souvenir’ holding connotations of both remembrance but also a ‘keepsake’, that is, to keep safe). Nonetheless, the exact significance of each of these objects is not immediately clear; the Real, the secret, remains absolute. That they were intercepted, however, reminds us of how the encoded secrets hidden within the multiple crypts constructed in the novel hold implications beyond the community with which we have become acquainted, and importantly, beyond the current generation.

#### **4.6. Conclusions**

In like manner to both *No Bones* and *Milkman*, after so much destruction on all levels, it comes somewhat as a surprise when the novel ends on a slightly more positive tone. Twenty years on, the Doe’s family residence has been raided, John Doe is dead, Jotty and Tom Spaders are enjoying reignited love, and the community gun shop has been converted into a bra shop. The rest of the gang leaders are in prison, even reflecting on the futility of their committed crimes. Just as *No Bones* ends with a reflection on the danger of borders, and, as we shall see, *Milkman* ends with the protagonist jumping boundary lines, *Little Constructions* ends with the community holding meetings and discussions on their future plans, whilst beginning to quite literally “knock down walls” (*LC*, 296). However, something we see in this particular novel that we do not get to the same extent in the other two is Burns’s subtle but significant critique of the way in which the trauma of the Troubles was initially dealt with – that is, the political response – which itself echoes critiques made throughout the novel of certain style of ‘armchair therapy’ – that is, the psychological response. Indeed, according to McCann, something Burns underscores are “the very real dangers of forgetting why conflicts exist and of mishandling their resolution” (2016, 43). For the danger of viewing the political as the personal is that we

may assume that the way out is to reduce the gun shop to a bra shop, so to speak.<sup>58</sup> The ending lines read as follows: “But guess what. You could have knocked me down with a feather, had I not already been dematerialising, at the rush of ‘New Free Trial!’ Emotional Word Centres, unashamedly popping up amidst all these novel multiplications overground” (296).

What Burns is criticising, then, are merely surface level solutions, such as replacing old clothes with new ones, learning words for emotions rather than experiencing the emotions themselves, or simply naming syndromes and making diagnoses. Indeed, I would suggest that contemporary wellness culture relies on similarly overground strategies. We may recall here a series of comically titled self-help books given to Jotty and subsequently discarded (*LC*, 180). I would agree with McCann when she suggests that what Burns is criticising in these books is the way in which they claim “to tackle a number of only very vaguely-linked issues (sex, spirituality, emotional responses, child abuse) in a glib, facile manner” (2014a, 35). These superficial solutions stem perhaps from a desire to return to a so-called normality, but, as the narrator herself questions in an aside, “if you’ve been abused, ‘What’s normal?’ And if you haven’t been abused, ‘What’s normal?’ And are both ‘normals’ meant to be the same thing?” (219). In contrast, what I believe Burns to be forwarding is the idea that psychoanalysis, which is not the same as silent armchair therapy, could provide a model for social change, and under the surface psychological and political healing.

Importantly, whilst “being-with specters” is described by Derrida as “a *politics* of memory” (1994, xviii; emphasis in the original), it is not simply a case of building memorials or museums, or making cultural artefacts from trauma, which keep spectres fully encased in the past, and only in the context of the past. A result of pretending that the past has no impact

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<sup>58</sup> McCann suggests that the transformation of the gun shop into a bra shop is the “metaphor of trauma as clothing” which, she claims “significantly underlines [the] manner in which the psychological impact of violation, although intrinsically linked to the victim, can be shed, divested, just like a piece of clothing” (2016, 39). In contrast, I would argue that it is precisely this idea that Burns is making fun of here.

on the living present nor on the future yet to come is that often communities, too, are kept in the cyclical repetition of past traumas; an eerie reminder of which can be found at the end of the novel when the “pro-gang supporters” seek to turn the Doe house into a “Miss Havisham Museum” (LC, 263). For our past secrets do make us tremble. In Derrida’s words,

we tremble in that strange repetition that ties an irrefutable past (a shock has been felt, a traumatism has already affected us) to a future that cannot be anticipated ... We tremble from not knowing, in the form of a double secret, whether it is going to continue, start again, insist, be repeated. (Derrida 1995b, 54)

With this in mind, further conclusions may also be drawn with regards to the role of repression, on both psychological and political levels. We are told that Jotty actually “loved” her repressions, “for it was only when she was in them that she could manage to get anything else done” (190). The piecing together of repressed memories, in contrast – “broken reality returning in jigsaw pieces to resemble itself” – is described as painful (190). Repression, then, is a way of coping. More revealing still, however, is a conversation police officers have about Jotty’s community-assigned label as “the repressed one” (215). The two police officers decide to look up the word ‘repression’ in a reference book, and find “repress, to constrain, to put down, to banish to the unconscious, to have a tendency to repress unacceptable thoughts and feelings etc.” (216). It cannot be denied that all the characters on some level engage in such an act. Moreover, Derrida himself discusses repression in terms of an autoimmune logic when he writes how, “repression in both its *psychoanalytical sense* and its *political sense* ... ends up producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm” (2004, 99; emphasis added). Particularly interesting, though, is the definition for the word ‘repressors’ they inadvertently find (and subsequently dismiss) underneath: “a protein which binds to an operator site and prevents transcription of the associated gene” (216). The narrator is quick to comment that, “we don’t need that one, not unless we’re determined to get into some extended,

metaphysical conceit here” (216), with the irony lying in the fact that this seems to be exactly what the book sets out to do. It would appear, then, that what is at stake in this traumatised community, and in the traumatised individuals of which it is made up, is not so much the *repression* of trauma and the surrounding shameful secrets (the Freudian definition), but rather a process closer akin to the repressor protein. With this comes the idea of the hereditary recessive gene that, when it is not transcribed, skips generations. Such holds a clear resemblance to Derrida’s depiction of the role of the spectre when he writes, “by definition, they pass through walls, these *revenants*, day and night, they trick consciousness and skip generations” (1994, 36; emphasis in the original). Perhaps this is what the narrator is pointing towards when they talk of the “diabolic hand-me-downs” that were “normal practice” in Tiptoe Floorboard (175). Equally, we may recall the title of a lecture held at the Leprechaun Museum, which the narrator suggests was “community action-based and to do with humans”: “*If You’re a Woman and Your Mother Was Mentally Ill – You’re Fucked*” (198; emphasis in the original). However, with the spectre of trauma understood to be inherited rather than repressed comes the message that it may be treatable – and this is something I shall explore at greater length in chapter six. For now, it is worth returning to Derrida’s interpretation of the crypt, as emphasised in chapter two, that it is not so much a hiding place of repressed desires, but rather a safe place that conceals secrecy as such. Indeed, the novel’s ending makes it look as though the secrets are out in the open on the surface level, yet the significance of the encrypted objects remains forever out of reach.

From here, conclusions may also be drawn with regards to the concept of hospitality, for, in Derrida’s words, “as soon as there is some specter, hospitality and exclusion go together” (1994, 141). *Little Constructions* does well to warn of the dangers of the totalising fear of exteriority, and the autoimmune response that results. In contrast to the principle of exclusion we see at play in the novel, Derrida depicts how an openness to alterity, to the ‘outside’, to the

neighbour and also to the stranger – which is at the same time an openness to the call to responsibility of the spectre – requires an *unconditional* hospitality (2001, 127). Of note here is how the character Tom Cusack is actually described by the narrator both in terms of a neighbour *and* a stranger (*LC*, 264). Indeed, as highlighted in chapter two, approaching literature from the perspective of hauntology forces us to confront not only unacknowledged spectres – that is, historical amnesia – but also alterity itself, as the spectre is to be understood as the absolute Other. Such a task reveals the productive potentialities of the literary imagination not to silence spectres, but to listen to and converse with them, blurring the preconceived boundaries between the ‘living past’ and the ‘living future’, and thus uncovering the entanglement of inheritance and responsibility. This aligns with Derrida’s imperative placed upon scholars to undertake “an engagement that selects, interprets, and orients ... an injunction that is already multiple, heterogeneous, contradictory, divided – therefore an inheritance that will always keep its secret” (1994, 116).

As a site which allows for the experience of secrecy and alterity as such, literature thus holds the potential to map out different possible futures. Indeed, McCann describes how, by engaging with innovative modes of representation in *Little Constructions*, Burns’s fiction participates “in the opening up of new perspectives through which the past, but also the future, can be questioned, (re)shaped and (re)written” (2016, 34). We may also recall how, in reference to *No Bones* (2001), Schultz too draws our attention to the fact that in recent Irish fiction, “haunting is imagined as a productive vehicle for moving the nation out of the past rather than for keeping it there” (2014, 14). Importantly, nonetheless, the truth of a community otherwise lies in *différance* in the Derridean sense, for any fully realised democracy will necessarily suffer from autoimmunity, whereas the so called “democracy to come” will remain always unrealised, and thus forever differed. Although at the end of the novel we witness the residents of Tiptoe momentarily unite when, on witnessing the raid of Doe family residence, the “communal

energy is heightened” (*LC*, 264), they do so in the kind of ecstasy equated with the operative community; experienced as an ecstatic fusion rather than an ecstatic projection. Indeed, it is telling how the narrator uses the capitalised term ‘Folk’ to describe the crowd that had gathered, with clear reverberations of the Heideggerian use of the word ‘Volk’. This communal energy is thence unsurprisingly rechannelled back into their familiar fear of exteriority. In contrast, Derrida calls on the “‘scholar’ of the future, the ‘intellectual’ of tomorrow” to “learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet” (1994, 221).

Whilst we are left with no clear picture of what the future may hold, hope can still be found in Burns’s critique of surface level solutions in *Little Constructions*. Indeed, as Ruland explains, the novel is,

a prayer not just for the people of Tiptoe Floorboard, but for towns just like it all over the world, scarred by violence and transformed into a place where the dead walk alongside the living, the living enfold themselves in little constructions, and the currency in which the community traffics is shame that stems from a trauma that refuses to be named. (2020, n.p.)

I suggest that what Burns is proposing (not only here, but in all of her novels) is that the path to transcending the self-protective/self-destructive identity politics at individual, communal, and national levels lies not in *communion*, but rather in a direct confrontation and communication with spectres, recalling how – “[a]ssuming that the remains can be identified” (Derrida 1994, 120) – “the dead can often be more powerful than the living” (Derrida 1994, 48); for the political is the psychological.



## Chapter Five: (De)constructing Communities, Unearthing Crypts and Blurring Borders in *Milkman*

### 5.1. Introduction

In her infamous review of the novel for *The Telegraph*, critic Allison Pearson describes *Milkman* (2018)<sup>59</sup> as “[o]ne of the oddest, most impenetrable novels ever to win the Man Booker Prize” (2018 n.p.). Despite being intended as a critique of the novel, these words inadvertently underscore the reasons for the novel’s success – it is groundbreaking, unique and beautifully complex, both in terms of style and subject matter. Indeed, as *Los Angeles Times* writer Devers highlights, “[i]t should go without saying that a novel with the setting of Northern Ireland in the late 20th century should not be an ‘easy’ read” (2019, n.p.). Similarly, as Magennis expresses, “[i]f it is not light reading, it is *heavy* reading, which suggests a kind of affective power: a thick, soupy density which requires powers of concentration and forbearance” (135, 2021; emphasis in the original). Anna Burns’s distinctive style, developed in her previous three works, is, I would claim, mastered in *Milkman*. The narrative voice of the novel is as compelling as it is witty – we face the disturbing truth of the brutality of the social landscape, yet at the same time, as Morales-Ladrón notes, “[i]n spite of the seriousness of the issues addressed”, we experience unexpected laughter in dark places (2023, 3). Malone suggests that “her linguistic mastery gives her an overwhelmingly powerful presence that constitutes the entirety of the novel; the voice is everything” (2021, 7). Whilst in the words of Irish novelist Claire Kilroy, “*Milkman* has its own energy, its own voice” (2018, n.p.). There are certain similarities in terms of style, focus and narrative fragmentation to be found with Irish writer Eimear McBride’s 2013 award-winning novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* – in never, for example, revealing the name of the protagonist whose voice moves the narrative,

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<sup>59</sup> Hereafter referenced in this chapter as *M*.

and wherein, as Anne Enright puts it, “language becomes its own kind of object” (2013, n.p.). Part of what sets *Milkman* apart, however, is Burns’s move beyond the protagonist’s self-destruction towards a recognition of the dangers of the resurgence of violence. In so doing, Burns reveals to the reader something of a glimmer of hope for social change – a hope felt more strongly here than in her previous three works.

Since winning the Man Booker Prize in 2018 (making her the first and only Northern Irish writer to be awarded the prize), *Milkman* has received a great deal of critical interest and international recognition. What is evident from the diversity of the approaches taken to the analyses of the novel is the extent to which *Milkman* blurs preconceived boundaries of genre. It has been described as (unconventionally) historical (Crum 2018), dystopian (Callan 2023; Sweeney 2018) psychological (McKinty 2018), a historical psychological fiction novel (Madhu 2021), hysterical realism (White 2021), avant-garde (Ojczyńska and Pietrzak 2019), modernist (Ward Sell 2019), Beckettian (Kilroy 2018), picaresque (Malone 2019), an aesthetic narrative (Deiana 2022), a postcolonial gothic novel (McMann 2023), a Troubles novel (Jenkinson 2023), a post-agreement novel (Santos Brigida and Pihno 2020), a coming-of-age tale (Sweeney 2018), and a novel inextricably linked with contemporary feminist activism (Ní Éigearthaigh 2020; McGuire 2023). Similarly, it has been approached from a number of different perspectives, including Irish studies, trauma studies, memory studies, genre studies, feminist literary studies, cultural studies, secrecy studies, postcolonial studies, affect theory, international relations, sociology, linguistics, psychology, and political philosophy. Indeed, the present chapter interacts with a variety of these previous studies on a number of levels, with a particular interest in (but not limited to) Morales-Ladrón’s application of Foucault’s discussion of bio-power and the panopticon to the role of surveillance in the novel (2023), Wielechowski’s analysis of gossip in the novel as a form of non-traditional archival practise (2021), and Deiana’s interpretation of the novel as an “aesthetic narrative” (2022). Nonetheless, the

innovativeness of this chapter lies in the fact that it is both the first communitarian study of the novel, as well as the first approach to the role of secrecy from the perspective of the crypt.

*Milkman* tells the story of a young woman coming of age in an unnamed Northern Irish city during the Troubles. However, unlike Burns's first novel *No Bones*, in which the violence and destruction of the Troubles is, at first, constant and explicit, in *Milkman* everything is shrouded in secrecy. In this respect, it holds a closer resemblance in style to Burns's surreal second novel, *Little Constructions*. Indeed, as Madhu comments, "[s]ymbols from *No Bones* reappear" but "stripped of their signifiers" (2021, 68). Whilst set during a time of violent conflicts and social and political turbulence, Miller, writer for *The New Yorker*, insists that, "the conflict that most preoccupies this novel flares not between republicans and loyalists or between Catholics and Protestants ... but between the girl and her community" (2020, n.p.). In accordance with this idea, this chapter examines the interconnectivity of the characters alongside the novel's exploration of a more abstract notion of community, rather than focusing on historicity. With reference to ontology, ethics and communitarian theory, I apply the following concepts to a close reading of the novel: *Being-with*, conformity, autoimmunity, death and finitude, the ethical encounter and the community of lovers. The oppressiveness, patriarchy, and constant fear portrayed in the community of the unnamed Northern Irish city in which *Milkman* is set is discussed as a clear example of an operative community. Also key to this analysis are the concepts of private and public spaces, and inner and outer selves. I propose that, despite the apparent inescapability of the hegemonic community, examples of inoperative communities can be found – not as fixed, projected or transcendental relations but rather as transient occurrences – founded upon a confrontation with death, trauma, exposure, heterogeneity and shared vulnerabilities. These are relations of non-belonging based on the sharing of what is not shared. Close attention is paid to the characters 'maybe-boyfriend' and 'chef's secret homosexual relationship as an example of Blanchot's community of lovers.

From here, I turn to a discussion of the role of secrecy both within this relationship and as a literary device in the novel, before moving on to an analysis of the different roles that the secret plays, both in terms of plot and style. Very much connected to the role of the secret, I also discuss the role of rumours and gossip in the community in which the novel is set. Finally, an application of the notion of the crypt highlights the unconditional or absolute secrets of the text – those that remain unsolved.

#### 5.1.1. Introduction to the Novel

In *Milkman*, Burns depicts a few months in the life of a young woman growing up in an unbearably noisy and inescapably stifling community; a community described by Schwartz in his review for *The Nation* as “a place of surreal cruelty and denial so steadfast it amounts to magical thinking” (2019, n.p.). The exact location of this community, whilst bearing a striking resemblance to Belfast, is decisively unnamed. This being said, Taylor has gone so far to identify the district, from a combination of characters’ speech, the landscape, and the divided neighbourhoods, to be the Catholic, Irish nationalist community of Ardoyne (which is also where Anna Burns grew up, and the setting for her first novel, *No Bones*) (Taylor 2018, n.p.). Similarly, while the year is never directly specified, we can ascertain, from a combination of the socio-political surroundings and inter-textual references to pop songs and films, that the events the protagonist is reflecting upon are supposed to have taken place sometime towards the end of the 1970s (Taylor 2018, n.p.). Thus, the socio-historical setting of the novel is undoubtedly the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Even so, the conflict itself also goes unnamed: where we might expect to read ‘Protestant’ or ‘Catholic’, we have ‘the right religion’ and ‘the wrong religion’; in place of ‘Britain’ and ‘Ireland’, we have ‘our side of the water’ and ‘over the water’ or ‘over the border’; ‘RUC’ and ‘the British army’ become ‘defenders-of-the-state’ and ‘state forces’; and in place of the ‘IRA’, we have ‘renouncers-of-the-state’ – all of which are more commonly reduced to the tribal identifiers ‘them’ and ‘us’. Not only is this part of the

innovativeness of Burns' writing style, but it equally reflects the secrecy of the community in which the novel is set. As the protagonist explains, "'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" (*M*, 22).

Also of importance in terms of location are specific areas within and on the edges of the district itself. There is 'the usual place' which is the district's cemetery; the 'most popular drinking club' where the protagonist goes out; the 'ten-minute area', a creepy, deserted, and likely dangerous area on the edge of the district that takes ten minutes to cross and is bordered by barricades; the 'parks & reservoirs' where the protagonist likes to run, but also known (although not acknowledged) to be an area too dangerous to go at night; the 'red-light street' where young people go to cohabit out of wedlock; and 'dot-to-dot places' where anything could happen.

The characters, too, go unnamed. This includes the protagonist, who is the narrative voice, and is retelling the events some 20 years after they have passed. In dialogues, depending on who she is speaking with, she is referred to as 'middle sister', 'middle daughter' (sometimes simply 'daughter'), or 'maybe-girlfriend'. We also know that the community at some point begins to identify her as 'the girl who walks' or 'the one who reads'. For matters of clarity, however, I shall refer to the protagonist henceforth as simply middle sister. In an interview with Moraif, Burns suggests that the

lack of proper names adds to the atmosphere and tension in the book, to the sense of paranoia, the under-the-surface panic and unease, even if it also seems to offer an apparent protection to the characters of their real selves against the surveillance world they are living in. (2019, n.p.)

Other unnamed characters of note include: ‘longest-friend’ (her longest friend); ‘maybe-boyfriend’ (the young mechanic she is unofficially dating); ‘chef’ (maybe-boyfriend’s closest male friend, who is eventually revealed to also be his lover); ‘ma’ (middle sister’s mother); ‘Milkman’ (not actually a milkman, but an incredibly sinister high profile renouncer-of-the-state); ‘real milkman’ (her mother’s closest friend, and also the community’s milkman); ‘third brother-in-law’ (who is kind and also middle sister’s running partner); ‘first brother-in-law’ (who is unkind and perverted); ‘Somebody McSomebody’ (often propositioning middle sister, and always turned down); ‘tablets girl’ (a relentless poisoner); ‘shiny girl’ (also known as ‘tablets girl’s sister’); ‘the pious women’ (who are both the gossips and the healers); and ‘the issue women’ (a marginalised feminist group).<sup>60</sup> It is worth noting that Milkman (who the book is named after) is one of just two characters whose nicknames are capitalised (the second being Somebody McSomebody, which is clearly a comical play on a real name). Although at first, we imagine this to be case because of his high-ranking status in the community, it actually becomes a subtle clue as to a secret revealed towards the end.

Whilst the events of the novel are not told in chronological order, with the novel beginning more or less where it ends and with small pieces of the story revealed gradually and often in scattered fragmentations, we can, nonetheless, decipher a fairly clear plot in the form of a chain of events. This is largely thanks to what Taylor describes as the “density and tightness of the plotting behind the narrator’s apparently rambling performance” (2018, n.p.). The story goes as follows: during her usual walk home from her evening French class, and whilst reading *Ivanhoe*, Milkman offers middle sister a ride, which she declines. This marks the start of his persistent stalking of her, with him appearing outside buildings she is in, next to her whilst she runs in ‘parks & reservoirs’, and on her walks home. With one exception – which occurs the

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<sup>60</sup> From here on, all characters’ names will be written without inverted commas, and with the exception of Somebody McSomebody and Milkman, in lower-case, as this is how they appear in the novel.

day before Milkman is killed, and so the day before the novel begins – she never gets into his car. Nonetheless, rumours erupt and spiral in the community (initiated, it seems, by first brother-in-law) that she is both having an affair with Milkman and cheating on him with her own maybe-boyfriend. Rumours also develop in maybe-boyfriend's district that he has kept a part of a car which could have had (although it did not have) a flag or emblem from 'over the water'. A combination of the effects of these rumours, middle sister's resolute silence and Milkman's inadvertent death threats causes tension to brew in her relationship with maybe-boyfriend. The community's persistent quest for answers and Milkman's constant stalking presence also takes its psychological and physical toll on middle sister, only to be made worse by her being poisoned by tablets girl, (who also poisons her own sister and a man she mistakes for Hitler). Once recovered, middle sister is accused by the community of being an accessory to tablets girl's murder, which, we learn, was carried out by Milkman – not on behalf of the renouncers-of-the-state who also wanted her dead, but ironically on her own (unwitting) behalf. Having recovered, middle sister tries to repair what she had with maybe-boyfriend, only to discover his secret relationship with chef, before feeling so defeated that she does what she had fought against for so long and finally gets into Milkman's car. The following day, to middle sister's relief, the papers report that Milkman has been killed by 'state-forces' (after accidentally shooting several others, including real milkman, a bin-man, two bus drivers, and a road sweeper). On this same day, she is threatened with a gun by Somebody McSomebody in the toilets of the drinking club, which is where the novel begins. The novel ends a day later, with a slight but significant atmosphere of hope and restoration as middle sister returns to run in the 'parks & reservoirs' with third brother-in-law.

*Milkman* is commonly labelled as a Troubles novel, to the extent that Belfast writer Rosemary Jenkinson has attributed the recent rise in retrospective Irish fiction to what she calls the "Anna Burns effect" (2023, n.p.). I am more inclined, however, to agree with Santos Brigida

and Pihno's depiction of the novel as an example of post-Agreement literature in that it "exercises the tensions inherent to the aftermath of the Peace Process": that is, "it moves backwards towards the future" (2020, 440; 439). Heidemann's demarcation of post-Agreement literature, whilst published two years prior to the publication of *Milkman*, is nonetheless pertinent here. According to Heidemann, post-Agreement literature refers to a body of texts "whose formal-aesthetic expressions not only draw upon but also deviate from the preceding generations of contemporary Northern Irish writers" and that "are engaged in a quest for multiple subject configurations, as reflected in their formal experimentation with characters that duplicate one another, and narrative techniques that defy chronological movement and closure" (2016, 5). In so doing, such texts – of which I would include *Milkman* – have the ability both to question the official rhetoric of a "fresh start" in Belfast (one which Heidemann associates with what he calls the "titanicisation" of the city in its attempt to shift the historical focus from one sunken tragedy to another) and at the same time conjure the spectres that continue to haunt its streets. In Heidemann's words: "there is a spectre of invisible, institutional(ised) mental and cultural divisions that haunt Northern Ireland, those that aesthetically foil the writers' (and thereby their characters') attempts to surge forward" (2016, 12).

The novel's lack of referentiality also points to the fact that Burns's novel may not be solely directed towards the facticity of the violence during the Troubles, but rather, as Claire Kilroy proposes, "Burns's targets are more insidious forces: the oppressiveness of tribalism, of conformism, of religion, of patriarchy, of living with widespread distrust and permanent fear" (2018, n.p.). Moreover, I suggest that the intentional ambiguity surrounding both time and place allows the events to take place simultaneously in Belfast in the 1970s, and anywhere, anytime. In Burns's own words, "[a]lthough it is recognisable as this skewed form of Belfast, it's not really Belfast in the [1970s] ... I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of



totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions” (Schwartz 2019, n.p.). For this reason, McKinty describes the novel as “psychological and sociological not historical” (2018, n.p.), whilst McMann defines Burns’s intentional ambiguity as a “defamiliarizing technique” that “complicates the novel’s relationship to history” (2023, 137). There is a certain sense in which this element of secrecy also gives the novel a dystopian feel, as if it were pointing to an imagined future rather than a historical past.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, as Piątek writes, the novel is,

remarkable, not so much for revealing the historical truth about the experience of young women growing up in the Troubles, but for developing the author’s own form of language, of a traumatic realism, to communicate this experience with a poignancy which is beyond the reach of any historical account. (2020, 107)

Equally, this interpretation reinforces the appropriateness of the application of a more abstracted communitarian lens as a means of analysis.

## **5.2. Community in *Milkman***

### **5.2.1. Being-with**

*Milkman* is written in a style not dissimilar to a first-person stream of consciousness – not linear in time, the narrative flows quickly and often from one event to another with connections made seemingly in the there and then of telling the story.<sup>62</sup> Yet it is obvious from the very opening of the novel that the protagonist, whose consciousness we seem to have (at least limited) access too, is no pure inner thinking Cogito, but is rather existentially entwined with the others that surround her and who comprise the world into which she has been thrown. As already noted,

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<sup>61</sup> For a detailed analysis of the way in which Burns adapts and innovates the dystopian genre, see Callan (2023).

<sup>62</sup> To clarify, it is *not* written as a stream of consciousness, but her reflective, fragmented and circumlocutory style certainly shares features normally associated with this literary form. In fact, I suggest that what prevents us from fully accessing the narrator’s consciousness is not so much a question of writing style, but rather – a theme I believe lies at the centre of the novel – the fact that the protagonist, too, finds herself “inaccessible” (*M*, 177).

all the characters we are introduced to are named in accordance with their familial relations, the roles they play in the community, or determinations of them as defined by others. What becomes clear from the outset, nonetheless, is the discord felt between the protagonist's sense of self and her sense of community. Whilst structured as though it were an inward-looking exploration of the individual, the success of the novel lies in its exploration of the individual's inclination *outside* itself. Additionally, there are many indications that middle sister's increasing isolation results not from any originary individuality, nor a deficient mode of *Being-with* in a Heideggerian sense ([1953] 2010, 118), but rather, I would suggest that her apparent isolation is a clear example of what Nancy describes as, "the experience of the dissolution of community" (1991, 3). Moreover, it becomes increasingly evident that her alienation from her community is forced upon her by the community itself. As she insists, "[i]t wasn't that I fell into the difficult zone. It was that I was pushed" (*M*, 205).

### 5.2.2. Conformity and the Operative Community

The first-person narrative voice, speaking from within the suffocating surroundings of the unnamed Northern Irish city during the Troubles in which *Milkman* is set, thus appears at first to be a perfect embodiment of the individual's struggle for Heideggerian authenticity in a world that demands conformity. Social normativity in this community dictates not only behaviour, tastes, relationships, names, and language, but even thoughts and feelings: in Heidegger's words, "[e]veryone is the other, and no one himself" ([1953] 2010, 125). The extent of this levelling down of possibilities is made evident in middle sister's description of social constraints in chapter one, where we read,

[a]s regards this psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed, matters didn't stop at 'their names' and at 'our names', at 'us' and 'them', at 'our community' and 'their community', at 'over the road', 'over the water' and 'over the border'... There was food and drink. The

right butter. The wrong butter. The tea of allegiance. The tea of betrayal... 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. (*M*, 24-5)

This extract reveals how, in Burns's own words, "[t]he individual, for the sake of survival, is required to be subsumed into the collective" (Moraif 2019, n.p.). It is not difficult to identify echoes here of Heidegger's depiction of the dictatorship of the *they*, yet it is also clear that conformity in the novel is closely tied to the concept of community and, moreover, that this particular community is founded upon tacit political and religious ideology. Moreover, as Danaci suggests,

by portraying a young woman's story in the midst of the Troubles from the first-person point of view and following her recovery from her trauma, Burns's narrative operates on a dual spectrum by focusing on a personal tale of coping with the communal oppression, accompanied by an account of political tension and distress and its repercussions on the society and the individuals in the background. (2020, 294)

In the passage which leads up to the previous quote, middle sister provides an explanation of the community's "unspoken rules and regulations" in reference to the prohibition of certain names in their district as an example of the extent of the community's silent control. Whilst there exists a couple who keep, amend and update the banned list, we are told that, "[i]t was the spirit of the community going back in time that deemed which names were allowed and which were not" (*M*, 22) and further that "[t]heir endeavour was unnecessary because we inhabitants instinctively adhered to the list" (23). In fact, the list, "for years before the emergence of the missionary couple, had been excellently capable of perpetuating, updating and data-holding its own information itself" (23). We begin to get a sense of how control in the community is so engrained that it becomes a kind of self-control (indeed, I shall return to this observation later on). Names were banned not due to their original nationality, but because they

were said to have become, “infused with energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict, enjoinders and resisted impositions” (23). The reader is then provided with a humorously extended list of over forty names not allowed in her community, including Nigel, Jason, Jasper, Lance, Percival and Earl of Rupert, and in which “Peverill was banned twice” (23). Girls’ names do not feature on this list because, it was thought, “the name of a girl – unless it should be Pomp and Circumstance – wasn’t politically contentious” (24). That girls’ names held no power corresponds with the position held by the community that girls’ stories, too, were unimportant.

The control of names also reflects a wider insistence upon absolute immanence; that is, the desire to rid the community of any extraneous elements and protect it from the threat of exteriority. This brings it in line with Nancy’s depiction of the operative community, as outlined in chapter two (1991, 13). Names, after all, are to do with identity, and the communal identity of the operative community stems from commonality and communal fusion. We may recall how none of the characters are ever actually called by their first names in the novel (just as characters in *Little Constructions* were, for the most part, named J. Doe). In addition to adding to the cryptaesthetic resistance of the text, there is also a certain symbolic violence in the denial of the name. Morales-Ladrón makes a similar observation when she writes,

the nameless protagonist stands for anyone, who could be dissolved into a collectivity of others and who are not seen as individuals but as the role they perform and how they relate to each other. Consequently, the use of nicknames and euphemisms are a means of language with which to exert violence and evade truth. (2023, 7-8)

Indeed, language, too, is something heavily controlled by the community, making both a barrier against the possibility of true communication, as well as restricting and shaping understandings and interpretations. As we saw with names, certain words are banned due to being quintessential ‘over-the-water’ words – the example given ironically being

‘quintessential’ (*M*, 21) – whilst certain others simply do not exist in the communal vocabulary, one example being ‘shame’ (53). Although middle sister expresses her resistance to this communal fusion, it is longest-friend’s immediate response which encapsulates its success:

“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?*” “Yes,” said friend. (*M*, 201; emphasis in the original)

Also relevant here is Derrida’s phrase – said to be his own private translation of Gide’s indictment of the family – “I am not one of the family” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 27). As outlined in chapter two, Derrida uses this expression to stand for the “condition not only for being singular and other, but also for entering into relation with the singularity and alterity of others” (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 27). In *Milkman*, although middle sister does not identify herself as truly belonging to the community into which she has been thrown, and desperately tries to resist the communal fusion on which the community is founded, she nonetheless finds herself entirely incapable of describing others in any other terms than their familial, social or occupational relations. This includes her self-interpretation – she is ‘middle sister’, ‘middle daughter’, or ‘maybe-girlfriend’. In Derrida’s words,

[w]hen someone is one of the family, not only does he lose himself in the herd, but he loses the others as well; the others become simply places, family functions, or places or functions in the organic totality that constitutes a group, school, nation or community of subjects speaking the same language. (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 27)

Morales-Ladrón analyses this level of silent, communal control in the novel in reference to Foucault’s discussion of the panopticon and bio-power in his seminal works *Discipline and*

*Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (1978). The Panopticon, as briefly addressed in chapter four, refers to Jeremy Bentham's architectural prison design which allows all inmates to be under constant surveillance by one unseen observer. What results is a type of internalised disciplinary practise that functions in a way closely aligned to the role of communal policing in novel, whereby individuals have no choice but to act as though they are being watched even when they are not. From this perspective, Morales-Ladrón draws our attention to the part that individual community members play both in terms of surveillance and the subsequent wide-scale control of the community. She describes how "the character-inmates of this community are deindividualised and disempowered by a controlling self-other that continually shifts its function from surveiller to surveilled" (2023, 5). Similarly, Danaci draws on Foucault's discussion of the state's unspoken yet communally enforced binary with regards to normal or abnormal behaviour to help us understand the community's stigmatisation of those who do not conform. She explains how, "turned into an apparatus of the power (whether it is the state or the [IRA]) the community assumes the roles of the gazer, controller, and fixer of the middle sister" (2020, 298).

In this community, those who do not conform, known as the local 'beyond-the-pales', are viewed by the community as a threat to absolute immanence. In common usage, the expression 'beyond-the-pale' is employed figuratively to refer to something outside the bounds of acceptable behaviour. In the context of Irish history, however, it holds greater significance and political and religious connotations. Its use in the novel is therefore not incidental. The term 'pale' is derived from the paling fence used to close off enclosures, and it was later used to refer to areas considered safe and enclosed. In Ireland, in the late middle-ages, the 'Pale' or the 'English Pale' was the part of Ireland directly ruled by the English government. To be 'beyond the pale', then, was to be outside the boundaries of English rule, in what was deemed the savageries of rural (Catholic) Ireland. What is interesting here is its use in a Catholic Irish

Nationalist district in the North (already ‘beyond the pale’ in historical terms) to refer to those who stand out or do not conform to the norm. In an expression used to reinforce local boundaries, what we have is an intentional blurring of boundaries on a broader scale. Equally, though, by the community adopting a word once used by outside rule to oppress them and employing it to no other means than to oppress themselves, they are, in a way, inheriting and continuing a legacy of subjugation.

‘Shiny’ is used to refer to those ‘beyond-the-pales’ with an unsettling positive outlook. ‘Shiny’ stands in contrast to the darkness which represents the community and is key to understanding what it is that makes certain characters different. This corresponds with their ability both to see what they are not supposed to see, and also to see light in the darkness. As I propose later on in this chapter, this distinction also correlates with an openness to alterity. The reasoning behind the community’s resistance to alterity is emphatically articulated by middle sister when she says,

[t]ake 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. As for the environment, that too would object. (*M*, 89)

In this community, non-conformity, or “refusing to belong” (Morales-Ladrón 2023, 7), is dangerous, with this danger enforced through communal policing and kangaroo courts and perpetuated by constant fear and paranoia. Gossip in the form of rumours and excessive fabrications of events also plays an important role both in terms of surveillance and ensuring that no one steps out of line. The result of non-conformity (real or imagined), or of being

classified as different, ‘shiny’ or ‘beyond-the-pale’ – a fate met by the protagonist herself – was “not in having your feelings hurt upon discovering others were talking about you” but “having individuals in balaclavas and Halloween masks, guns at the ready, turning up in the middle of the night at your door” (*M*, 28). The community’s constant attempts to stifle alterity mean that examples of ‘shiny’ people in the novel are, however, few and far between. Moreover, these characters still face the risk of having their identities engulfed. In the words of middle sister,

the truly shining person coming into this darkness ran the risk of not outliving it, of having their own shininess subsumed into it and, in some cases – if the person was viewed as intolerably extra-bright and extra-shiny – it might even reach the point of that individual having to lose his or her physical life. (*M*, 90)

A revealing moment of the community’s insistence on conformity and the purging of difference can be found in the description of an occurrence in middle sister’s evening French class. The teacher reads her students an extract of prose in which the sky is not described as blue, and is met with uproar from the whole class: they are said to be “disturbed, and not a little” (69) by the prospect of the sky being anything *but* blue. We read,

“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. And now it was time, we thought, to give our spokespeople and ourselves a jolly good round of applause. (*M*, 70; emphasis in the original)

As we continue reading it becomes clear that it is not so much the case that they are unable to see, or at least not unable to comprehend the possibility of seeing, but rather that they are unable to express, or admit to what they might see if they allowed themselves to open themselves up



to the possibility of difference. Firstly, this is because it does not conform with what they believe they are supposed to be seeing, and secondly because, in middle sister's words, "this type of detail would mean choice and choice would mean responsibility and what if we failed in our responsibility?" (70).

Burns's choice of the word responsibility is pertinent here, and represents how the rupture of both the ethical encounter and the so called 'community of lovers' is said to demand both response and responsibility. As Levinas says, it is impossible *not* to respond to the call of the other, for to refuse to respond is itself a response; such is the "impossibility of denying, a negation of negation" (1998, 34-5). The class's response, however, is one of contestation. And so, when the teacher encourages them to look at the sunset, one which that night contained little if any blue at all, she is met with more adamant cries of "Blue!" and "*le ciel est bleu!*" (*M*, 73; emphasis in the original). As middle sister expresses,

[s]o no. After generation upon generation, fathers upon forefathers, mothers upon foremothers, centuries and millennia of being one colour officially and three colours unofficially, a colourful sky, just like that, could not be allowed to be. (*M*, 73)

Importantly, this sunset is the second that middle sister has seen. The first was with maybe-boyfriend just days prior to her French class, during which she says she saw colours for the first time: "blending and mixing, sliding and extending, new colours arriving, all colours combining, colours going on forever, except one which was missing, which was blue" (77). Middle sister describes this experience as something changing either within her or outside her, and questions, "was it a safe something or a threatening something? What was it, really, I was responding to here?" (77). I suggest that this fleeting experience, repeated in the French class (which Magennis describes as "one of the most significant moments in the novel" (2021,155)), represents a momentary openness to alterity. Even her classmates, whilst fighting against it, feel a sense of rupture and dislocation not dissimilar to how Blanchot describes exteriority, "as

an existence shattered through and through” (1988, 6). Whilst the class fight to quickly suppress this feeling out of fear of what it might mean, middle sister does allow it to resonate with her for a while, and it is not until a strange encounter with a dead cat on her walk home that the feeling is subdued. A similar openness to alterity is that which comes to distinguish certain other characters as holding the potential for inoperative communities. I shall return to this idea momentarily.

### 5.2.3. Autoimmunity

The dangers of non-conformity lead us on to the community’s principle of sacrificial self-destruction, or autoimmunity (Derrida in Borradori 2003, 94). As Ní Éigeartaigh highlights, in internalising given binaries, community members find themselves trapped “within its illogical, endlessly self-generating, Kafkaesque dystopia” (2020, 44). With this in mind, first of all, I wish to explore the concept of autoimmunity in reference to the community, in which the impossibility of absolute immanence results in the destruction of the community from within. But it is also interesting to consider the autoimmune response of middle sister herself who relentlessly tries to protect her interiority from the threat of unwanted invasion, yet unwittingly plays a significant part in her own destruction. Indeed, I propose that Burns’s depiction of this response acts as a criticism of philosophies of authenticity and individualism.

First, to begin with the community, its self-destruction consists of kangaroo courts,<sup>63</sup> knee-cappings, tar and featherings, “multi-bruised people walking about with missing digits who most certainly had those digits only the day before” and, ultimately, killings (or “disappearances”) (*M*, 119). Streets are described as both “the streets” and “the battlefield” (112). Indeed, we are told that, “[d]rinking, fighting and rioting were run-of-the-mill,

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<sup>63</sup> The reverberations of the extent of the potential violence of these internally governed justice systems is still being felt across Northern Ireland, with its particular significance for women only recently coming to the surface. Take, for example, the forced resignation of Sinn Féin Minister Jennifer McCann after it was revealed that she prevented a victim of rape by the hands of a senior IRA figure from going to the police in 1997. See: McDonald 2014.

customary, necessary even, as hardly to be discerned as mental aberrations” (114). The supposed real enemy – the ‘state forces’ – exists in the novel largely in its absence, with the closest encounter being the sound of the ‘click’ of their cameras in the woods, a sound which everyone knows it is their duty to ignore.<sup>64</sup> In quite a Foucauldian manner, the level and reaches of the state’s surveillance even in their absence, and the resultant heightened paranoia amongst residence, encourages a form of stringent self-censorship and communal policing. In the name of communal safety, community members, by embodying the role of the very same surveillance they strive to protect themselves against, begin to break away at the community from within its own boundaries.

Moreover, as middle sister explains, “by extension, – thanks to suspicion and history and paranoia – the hospital, the electricity board, the gas board, the water board, the school board, telephone people and anybody wearing a uniform also were the enemy” (*M*, 114). Key here, of course, is mistrust in the hospital, for like calling the police, going to the hospital “could be viewed as imprudent” (219). Indeed, when middle sister finds herself poisoned by tablets girl and in desperate need of medical attention, her mother’s mention of the hospital was taken “as a bombshell” (228). With suspicions high, rumours rife, judgments harsh, and hospitals out of bounds, and with those in charge baring weapons, the community’s immune response can accurately be described as autoimmune: “a principle of self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection” (Derrida in Borradori 2003, 87). When longest-friend

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<sup>64</sup> In her 2022 study of the novel, Deiana cites these camera clicks as an example of how Burns reveals the reach of the community’s surveillance in the otherwise “apparently mundane sensory details” (8), the kind of details, she claims, would go amiss from a more structured or ridged approach to a study of the conflicts. Deiana is herself an International Relations scholar. Her compelling study of the novel aims in part to highlight the role that subversive works of literature like *Milkman* could have in encouraging a new approach to conflict studies: one less concerned with arbitrary boundaries and academic rigour. She concludes that “cultivating reading as a willingness to be stopped in our tracks and to feel the trouble(s) around us perhaps can help us challenge the rationalist fantasies that not only limit our view on the complexities of conflict, but also reproduce enduring practices of violence under the cloak of expertise and solutions” (39). This is another way in which the novel works towards the dissolution of boundaries.

pronounces to middle sister that she has officially been determined by the community as ‘beyond-the-pale’, the very language used reinforces this interpretation. Middle sister explains, “it seemed I’d fallen into some grid, maybe the central grid, *as part of the disease, the rebel-infection*” (66; emphasis added). We are reminded too of her realisation that she was pushed. The reason for her being labelled as an outcast was her habit of reading books while walking – something considered “creepy, perverse, obstinately determined” (200) and more dangerous than Semtex. In longest-friend’s words,

[s]emtex isn’t unusual ... It’s not *not* to be expected. It’s not incapable of being mentally grasped, of being understood, even if most people here don’t carry it, have never seen it, don’t know what it looks like and don’t want anything to do with it. It fits in – more than your dangerous reading-while-walking fits in. (*M*, 201; emphasis in the original)

The fact that the very thing which is destroying the community from within is shrouded in secrecy will connect with the second section of this analysis.

A further element of the community’s autoimmune response is revealed in the character tablets girl – the “girl who was really a woman who went around putting poison in drinks” (*M*, 214). The community attempts to grasp her actions, and it is generally agreed that her reasons for poisoning must be related to ‘feminist issues’, although she herself never expresses anything of the like. Just as girls’ names do not hold the same power and history as boys’ names do, women’s issues, too, are considered non-dangerous and non-serious. And so, in order to make her manageable, understandable, and unthreatening – for, after all, she was just a “tiny”, “titchy”, “wee girl” (*M*, 26) – the community, although very much disliking her, largely leave her to her own devices. No longer one of *us* in the significant sense but, despite her constant random murders and attempted murders, she was not considered a genuine threat. As middle sister explains,

tablets girl was pretty much taken in the district's stride. Even if it were a jumpy stride, a paranoid stride, a poisoned stride, because people might get furious, they might want to kill her ... Menace that she was, in that different time, during different consciousness, and with all that other approach to life and to death and to custom, she was tolerated, just as the weather was tolerated, just as an Act of God or those Friday night armies coming in had to be tolerated. (*M*, 218)

Only when tablets girl starts to give her own explanations does the community decide she has to go, for it is then that "the communal ability to explain her was indeed getting complicated" (*M*, 219). In reference to the supposed motives behind her attacks, tablets girl talks of revenge for apparent killings in other worlds (revenge at least being something the community knows well). She also, however, insists that her existence is divided in two opposing selves, one a poisoner the other 'shiny'. Accordingly, there was no room for both selves to co-inhabit the one psychological space. Her 'shiny' self is described as "[s]ome split-off usurping aspect of herself" which she understood to be embodied in her sister (218-9). This, she explained, was the reasoning behind her repeated acts of poisonings.

There is an important sense in which tablets girl's own explanations for her poisonings turn her into an embodied representation of the operative community's autoimmune response. There is necessarily some level of conditional hospitality – an openness to the Other – for without it, her sister could not have got in. However, in insisting that her sister was an aspect of herself, it is clear that tablets girl has engulfed and appropriated her. Once taken in, she views her sister's alterity as a threat to her own interiority and ipseity and so, judging her to be not a guest but a parasite, she decides that her sister, now understood to be part of herself, was unacceptable. So given her difference, her shininess, tablets girl claims she has no choice but

to cut off the infected limb, so to speak: “from self-preservation ... given one part was a poisoner, the other part wasn’t a poisoner, her sister – had to go” (*M*, 219).<sup>65</sup>

It is equally evident that the self-destruction apparent in the actions of numerous other members of this community equally contribute the community’s own autoimmune response. This is brought to the forefront in middle sister’s discussion of ‘shame’ – a word, she claims, that does not yet exist in the community’s vocabulary. We are told how,

[g]iven it was such a complex, involved, very advanced feeling, most people here did all kinds of permutations in order not to have it: killing people, doing verbal damage to people, doing mental damage to people and, not least, also not infrequently, doing those things to oneself. (*M*, 53)<sup>66</sup>

We may be reminded here of the critique that Burns seems to be making in *Little Constructions* of learning words for emotions rather than feeling them (2007, 296). The other side of this is refusing to feel an emotion due to an (intentional) unfamiliarity with the word that names it.

In middle sister’s case, her self-destruction comes about through her desperate attempts and “extraordinary amount of energy” (*M*, 178) spent to resist the community’s penetration into her private life and inner sense of self. As she explains,

I didn’t understand the way of fixated energy then. It took its toll though, all that darkness and mutual games-playing, bringing with it the concomitant that even though the whole meat of my dissembling had been to keep separate by non-participation with them, here I was, making common cause with them. Too late I realised that all the time

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<sup>65</sup> Also of note is that there is something particularly ghost-like and haunting in descriptions of tablets girl which parallels the creepy presence (and absence) of Milkman. I shall come back to this idea later on in the chapter, specifically in relation to the role of secrecy and the haunting effect of the crypt.

<sup>66</sup> In her own analysis of this particular passage, Magennis makes a connection with the fact that shame was itself a further method of control – particularly placed on young women – and especially in places (like Ardoyne) dictated by Catholic morality. See Magennis 2001, 141-3.

I'd been an active player, a contributing element, a major componential in the downfall of myself. (*M*, 178)

Her recognition that she was inadvertently “making common cause with them” is particularly revealing here. She is so fixated on closing herself off to the pressures of the operative community that she is unable to open herself up to the possibility of any other kind of community, even when the potential is there. She pushes maybe-boyfriend out, and when real milkman (a true beacon of light in the novel) encourages her to speak to the so called ‘issue women’ (a feminist activist group), she refuses on the basis that being seen speaking to them would be the equivalent of social suicide.

Whilst middle sister’s response to the community’s internal surveillance system is to remain largely silent – as we read, “rarely did I mention anything to anybody. Not mentioning was my way to keep safe” (*M*, 5)<sup>67</sup> – it is not difficult to see how, in a certain respect, her silence, too, equates to her “making common cause”. Whilst initially presented as a form of self-defence, Morales-Ladrón highlights how “at the service of power, silence can be a potent device to control society, a means for disempowerment as much as a strategy for survival” (2023, 1). Magennis makes a similar observation when she describes how, “[n]ot only is [middle sister] largely silent because she does not feel she can speak but also because she does not have access to a lexicon that might describe her experience” (2021, 149) which, as previously mentioned, was largely due to the community’s strict control of language. As the narrative progresses, we begin to witness the extent to which middle sister’s silence takes a toll on her very sense of being: that “her self-imposed silence acts as a form of discipline that transmutes her into a docile body” (Morales-Ladrón 2023, 7).

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<sup>67</sup> In an interview with Allardice for *The Guardian*, Burns herself makes a similar claim when she says, “[t]here was the disconnection of thoughts and feelings ... I think that was my way of coping. I didn’t want to know, basically. I wasn’t alone in that. Lots of people didn’t want to know” (2018, n.p.)

A further element of middle sister's inadvertent self-destruction in the name of self-protection is her so-called "self-induced amnesia" (*M*, 66) or "*jamais vu*" (113; emphasis in the original) – a self-protective mechanism we saw also employed by the community in general in both *No Bones* and *Little Constructions*. As Drong elaborates: "*Jamais vu* is for middle sister a useful screen, a way of resetting reality, another protective barrier that she erects each time the circumstances threaten to pile up and overwhelm her" (2019, 9; emphasis in the original). *Jamais vu* (never seen), is said to stand in contrast to *déjà vu* (already seen): it is "the intense feeling that the current circumstances are novel and strange, despite the objective realization that they have indeed been previously experienced" (Burwell and Templer 2017, 1194; quoted in Drong 2019, 9). In middle sister's words, "something that should be familiar was not going to be familiar" (*M*, 66). In this sense, it is almost the inverse of the experience of the uncanny. Whilst herself able to recognise both the extent and function of these memory lapses, which equally involve surrounding situations and her own personal affects, it would appear nonetheless that – as was also the case with Amelia in *No Bones* – middle sister's surface level forgetting is something of an unconscious act, or at least a self-regulated behaviour that has been heavily internalised. Importantly, however, this "self-induced amnesia" is necessarily transitory and does not prevent these memories from holding a lasting impact beneath the surface. Again, it is not difficult to identify echoes of post-agreement Belfast here.

The result of a combination of Milkman's persistent pursuit and stalking, the community's constant gossip of their imagined affair, and middle sister's own fraught resistance, is that everyone around her begins to describe her as if she were almost dead: "almost-inordinately blank, almost-lifeless, almost sterile, almost-counter-intuitive" (*M*, 180). Maybe-boyfriend, too, makes similar comments, first that, "it was as if I was no longer a living person but one of those jointed wooden dollies that artists use" (193), and later that, "[i]t's that you don't seem alive anymore ... Always you've been hard to second-guess, but now you're



impossible” (286). We may be reminded here of Nancy’s description of the fully realised person of the operative community as the dead person (1991, 13): that the result of the constant suffocating penetration of the operative community into all aspects of a person’s life results in the collapse of singularities. Equally, though, I suggest that these depictions of middle sister, both in terms of the living dead and possessed, become vital clues for an analysis of the crypt in the final section of this analysis. For now, though, emphasis should be placed on the fact that middle sister’s apparent numbness and inaccessibility is not only perceived by those around her, but is also felt by middle sister herself. She expresses that whilst initially, the “under-the-surface turbulence” she felt confirmed to her that she was alive, eventually, her “seemingly flattened approach to life became less a pretence and more and more real as time went on” (177). Finally, she recognises that “this numbance from nowhere had come so far on in its development that along with others in the area finding me inaccessible, I, too, came to find me inaccessible. *My inner world, it seemed, had gone away*” (178; emphasis added).

#### 5.2.4. Authenticity: Inner and Outer Selves, Private and Public Spaces

This leads us on to a discussion of middle sister’s response to the community’s pressures, and a closer examination of the way the novel shatters the binary of inner and outer selves – as was the case with the concept of autoimmunity, this is a theme which proves of further significance later on with regards to the notion of the crypt. Taylor emphasises how in the novel, “[t]he public-political and the personal-political aren’t easily disentangled, and there’s no reason that they should be. But the plot complicates the reader’s – and the narrator’s – sense of the way they interact” (2018, n.p.). The same can be said for the relationship between the community and public and private spaces, and the community and inner and outer selves. A naïve reading of the way that middle sister deals with the community’s insistence on conformity would appear to be a desperate protection of her individuality – that is, what makes her special, different or authentic. This, it would seem, is her love of reading, especially eighteenth and

nineteenth century literature, and specifically while walking. Similar traits may be found in other characters, too, which also appear to resist the communal identity: for instance, there is maybe-boyfriend's love of car parts and third brother-in-law's obsession with exercise. Yet, as we read on, it becomes increasingly obvious that rather than comprising essential elements of their identities, these characteristics are actually embraced as a means of distracting themselves from the brutal truth of what is really going on around them. Indeed, as middle sister herself explains, "I did not like twentieth-century books because I did not like the twentieth century" (*M*, 5). Interestingly, Morales-Ladrón highlights how the twentieth century, "were times immortalised by Seamus Heaney in his well-known poem 'Whatever you say, say nothing', which endorses silence as a means of protection, since anything could be interpreted as a political statement" (2019, n.p.). When middle sister eventually agrees to give up "reading-while-walking", she insists, however, and again echoing Heaney, that what she cannot give up is her stubborn disposition. We are told, "I needed my silence, my unaccommodation, to shield me from pawning and from molestation by questions ... This was my one bit of power in this disempowering world" (205). So long as she continues to guard her internal selfhood from the external threat of the community, it seems that she is acting in correspondence with Heideggerian authenticity: trying her best not to fall prey to the dictating norms of the *they* (Heidegger [1953] 2010, *passim*). Yet, on a closer reading we begin to see how the novel is actually breaking away at the idea that there is a hidden authentic self to be protected from the totalising effects of social normativity, by dissolving the barrier between the inner and the outer self. In Derrida's words, 'no border is guaranteed, inside or out' (Derrida 1979, 78).

Before discussing this binary, it is worth noting the way in which the novel deals with the connected distinction between private and public spaces. Thus far, it is clear that the inescapability of the operative community transgresses even into private realms. Indeed, we witness middle sister checking "under the bed, behind the door in the wardrobe" in case "the

community was concealing itself in those tucked-away places too” (*M*, 178). However, it is interesting that the reason that the community finds her ‘reading-while-walking’ so disturbing is that she is conducting what should be a private activity within a public space. As longest-friend explains,

[i]t’s the way you do it – reading books, *whole books*, taking notes, checking footnotes, underlining passages as if you’re at some desk or something, in a little private study or something, the curtains closed, your lamp on, a cup of tea beside you, essays being penned – your discourses, your lucubrations. It’s disturbing. It’s deviant. It’s optical illusional. Not public-spirited. (*M*, 200; emphasis in the original)

In this sense, taking one’s private life into the public realm is disturbing and deviant, and not allowing the public realm to infiltrate one’s private spaces is equally disturbing and deviant.

Returning then to the notions of inner and outer selves, it becomes increasingly difficult to identify exactly what it is middle sister is trying to protect. A particularly telling passage is when middle sister talks of the community’s apparent capacity for telepathy:

everybody read minds – had to, otherwise things got complicated. Just as most people here chose not to say what they meant in order to protect themselves, they could also, at certain moments when they knew their mind was being read, learn to present their topmost mental level to those who were reading it whilst in the undergrowth of their consciousness, inform themselves privately of what their true thinking was about. (*M*, 36-7)

Thus, it is almost a given that these boundaries between inner and outer are somewhat fluid. Nonetheless, members of the community maintain a further distinction between the ‘topmost mental level’ of thought and the ‘undergrowth’ of consciousness. Milkman, too, on one encounter with middle sister in the ‘ten-minute area’, reveals that not only does he know

everything about her, but he also knows her thoughts – her inner self was easily accessible to him. Interestingly, in this episode, what Milkman actually gets wrong is the disconnect between intention and action – that whilst she had intended to enrol on a Greek and Roman class, she had signed up to French for matters of practicality – which is itself an interesting reverse of the norm (103). We are met with a similar idea when middle sister talks about shiny girl (tablets girl’s sister). As she explains,

[s]o shiny was bad, and ‘too sad’ was bad, and ‘too joyous’ was bad, which meant you had to go around not being anything; also not thinking, least not at top level, which was why everybody kept their private thoughts safe and sound in those recesses underneath.  
(*M*, 91)

‘Top-level thoughts’ are described as “unimportant, not secret, not vulnerable enough to be encrypted”, and they said to be easily accessible by “any of those Toms, Dicks and Harrys” (103). ‘Private thoughts’, on the contrary, are those to be protected. However, it is especially curious that we never get any indication as to what this ‘undergrowth’ might comprise. The characters would seem to constantly reassure themselves that the way they think and plan functions as a secret mask to protect their true inner selves. Nonetheless, a closer reading of the text reveals that this self-reassurance is itself the mask which hides how their apparent “not being anything” (91) on the surface penetrates further than is accounted for. Perhaps there is not actually anything below this level at all, and whatever needs to be protected is actually itself a *no-thing*. This idea is further developed during my discussion of the crypt for, as discussed in chapter two, the crypt is described by Derrida as “internal to itself, a secret interior within the public square, but, by the same token, outside it, external to the interior” (1986a, xiv).

### 5.2.5. Death and Finitude

As discussed in chapter two, community is said to be revealed through the death of others. In Nancy's words, "[d]eath is indissociable from community, for it is through death that community reveals itself – and reciprocally" (1991, 14). What distinguishes the inoperative community from its operative counterpart is the recognition that it is impossible to make a work out of death. As Nancy writes, "deaths are not *sublated* – no dialectic, no salvation leads these deaths to any other immanence than that of...death (cessation, or decomposition, which forms only the parody or reverse of immanence)" (1991, 13, emphasis in the original). Death is a constant theme in the novel, wherein most of the characters are said to have lost some, if not all of their family members. Moreover, there are numerous passages in the novel which reveal how the community both mystifies and works on death. Firstly, we may recall the incident when 'wee tot' – the youngest brother of Somebody McSomebody – falls to his death from his bedroom window. The rumour in the community is that he jumped from the window believing himself to be a superhero. Here we are told how,

you couldn't just die here, couldn't have an ordinary death here, not anymore, not of natural causes, not be accident such as falling out a window ... It had to be political ... Had to be about the border, meaning comprehensible. Failing that, it had to be out-of-the-ordinary, dramatic, something startling, such as thinking oneself a super-hero and accidentally jumping to one's death. (*M*, 145-6)

This same sentiment is expressed again when the community discovers that the 'renouncers-of-the-state' were not those responsible for tablets girl's death (no matter that they had indeed intended on carrying it out themselves). What shocked the community was not her murder, but rather that her murder was not 'political'. As middle sister explains, "[o]rdinary murders were eerie, unfathomable, the exact murders that didn't happen here. People had no idea how to gauge them, how to categorise them, how to begin a discussion on them, and that was because

only political murders happened in this place” (*M*, 237). That deaths must be manageable is also reflected in the fact that the district’s cemetery is communally known as ‘the usual place’.

This being said, there is one particular moment in the novel in which death is demystified, and the district confronts, in Nancy’s words, “the senseless meaning that [death] ought to have – and that it has, obstinately” (1991, 14). This happens when the community wakes to find that all their dogs have been killed, and are piled up, throats cut, for everyone to see. The practical significance of killing the dogs lay in their role as guard dogs, without which the conflict was returned to “close-up, face-to-face, early ancient hatred” (*M*, 97). Yet, as we read on, what came first for the community on the day they found their dogs killed was the “equally face-to-face local response. Mostly it was silence” (97). We may recall Blanchot’s insistence that death is precisely that from which you cannot make a work. In his words,

[a] death, by definition, without glory, without consolation, without recourse, which no other disappearance can equal ... when the work which is its drifting is from the onset the renunciation of *creating a work*, indicating only the space in which resounds, for all and for each, and thus for nobody, the always yet to come words of the unworking. (1988, 46; emphasis in the original)

Also significant here is the community’s practical response that followed, which again echoes Blanchot when he says that communication is neither speech nor silence, but exposure to death (1988, 25). The eruption of cries from the children pushes the adults to act, who “began to deal with the massacre, with the males – young men, older men, renouncers, non-renouncers, beginning to wade through the slimy, pelted mass” (*M*, 97). Just as we saw prior to the outbreak of violence at the community youth training programme in *No Bones*, this incident brings people together, if only for a moment, that normally stand apart. As the men work to return dead dogs to their rightful owners it is evident that what they have in common in this moment is the truth of their own finitude. Indeed, Nancy’s words ring true here, that community is “the

presentation to its members of their mortal truth” (1991, 14-5). Moreover, as quickly as this community is formed, it is dispersed: it is “eternally temporary and always already deserted” (1991, 53). We shall see later how this episode acts as a significant trauma for middle sister, and one which holds a symbolic presence in the formation of the crypt.

The final episode worth mentioning with regards to the response to death comes when Somebody McSomebody holds a gun to middle sister’s head in the toilets of the drinking club – which is the episode from where the novel begins. Surprising both herself and Somebody McSomebody, middle sister grabs the gun and hits him with it. She describes how,

[a]gain that long-ago phrase returned to me – *a recklessness, an abandonment, a rejection of me by me* – had returned to me. I was going to die anyway, wouldn’t live long anyway, any day now I’d be dead, all the time, violently murdered – and that, I now understand, gave a certain edge. It offered a different perspective, a freeing-up of the fear option. (*M*, 309; emphasis in the original)

Although there are certain echoes to heard here between middle sister’s use of the expression “a freeing-up of the fear option” and Heidegger’s insistence that anxiety in the face of death “frees one *from* ‘nullifying’ possibilities and lets one become free *for* authentic possibilities” ([1953] 2010, 239; emphasis in the original), I suggest this recognition equally marks a moment of change in middle sister’s relationships with other people. For although the novel opens with reference to this conflict, the particulars of this moment are not revealed until we move towards the novel’s conclusion, and so a connection is established between middle sister’s release from the anxiety of death, and her recognition of the possibility of different kinds of community at the novel’s conclusion. I address this realisation in further detail later on in my analysis.

#### 5.2.6. Inoperative Communities and the Ethical Encounter

As discussed in chapter two, the inoperative community is said to be founded not on commonality, but on exposure and an openness to alterity. Blanchot underscores how the rupture felt as a splitting of singularities is the experience of a shared exposure (1988, 47). This openness and exposure – felt as a rupture – is expressed in the novel in terms of the sight, both in the sense of being able to see what is clearly in front of you, but which you are not supposed to see, and in the sense of seeing difference, colour, or light, and expressing a positive outlook. As Magennis reflects, “[b]right colour is something which is pleasurable but is also dangerous – it makes the subject who wears it stand out, and, indeed, the acknowledgement of pleasure is also affectively difficult in Northern Ireland” (2021, 155). Earlier, we looked at how both maybe-boyfriend and teacher are able to see the multiple changing colours of the sunset as examples of just this; an experience, we said, that is momentarily felt by middle sister herself. Additionally, moments before the novel’s conclusion and middle sister’s recognition of the possibility of a different type of community, all the district’s children are seen dressed up, in the streets, dancing in what is described as “an explosion of colour” (*M*, 315). Similarly, tablet girl’s ‘shiny’ sister is distinguished in her ability to see light in the dark. What makes real milkman different, too, is his ability to see that which is supposed to be hidden. Indeed, the community ostracises him following an episode in which not only is he able to see the weapons buried in his garden, but he chooses not to ignore them. Instead, he unearths the weapons and displays them in the street for the rest of the community to see. The community, however, both refuse to see them, and are unable to subsequently speak of the real reason he is labelled ‘beyond-the-pale’. This is because the real reason is now connected the surrounding political landscape, or the so-called ‘unmentionables’. This is the true reason why real milkman is known as “the man who didn’t love anybody”, and not, for example, “the man who dug up weapons” (for by shouting at the children to get away from the weapons, he inadvertently made



them cry) (*M*, 140). It is also worth noting that when maybe boyfriend is attacked later on in the novel, and when tablets girl's sister is poisoned, both characters lose their sight. They are, like Oedipus, punished for seeing what they were not supposed to see.

Recognising real milkman's more open disposition in turn allows us to analyse the episode in which he comes across middle sister in the 'ten-minute-area' in terms of the ethical encounter. One evening whilst on her way home from her French class – the very same class in which she sees the sunset – middle sister comes across the head of a dead cat understood to have died in an explosion that happened there a few weeks before. Immediately after deciding to pick it up, Milkman appears as if from nowhere, and makes obscure death threats aimed at maybe-boyfriend. Real milkman, however, appears moments later, and finds middle sister both in a state of shock from her encounter with Milkman, and tightly holding on to the cat's head. We may note here how, as discussed in the chapter two, according to Levinasian ethics, the other appears from outside of one's own world, and from beyond one's own limitations (Levinas 1969, 56). When real milkman faces middle sister, he does not try to pull her into his own world of understanding, but rather approaches her on her own horizon. In the novel, this is physically illustrated with the characters standing on either side of the border between two areas – 'the usual place' (the cemetery) and the 'ten-minute area' (something of a liminal space). Real milkman immediately sees *and* acknowledges the cat's head – something Milkman was moments before unable to do – and when middle sister tells him what it is she is holding, his response is an unquestioning acceptance: "'Right', he said as if I'd said, 'It's an apple'" (*M*, 143). This could also be interpreted from the perspective of radical passivity – a readiness to listen to the ethical command that the naked face of the other brings. There is something pragmatic in real milkman's response, but pragmatic in dealing with something which itself is so un-pragmatic. In middle sister's words,

[i]t seemed, and again I liked this, that this exchange was taking place in that ‘*How can we get this done?*’ 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.<sup>68</sup> Real milkman, solemn, austere, yet here he was, giving me his time, bringing me hope, listening to me, taking me seriously. He had grasped all, he knew what I meant so that there were none of those enervating and exhausting questions. (*M*, 144; emphasis in the original)

I suggest that what real milkman grasps is precisely the ungraspability of the ethical encounter. In this moment of asymmetrical exposure, or radical passivity, in which real milkman moves towards an Other as non-identical and asks what can be done, a transitory inoperative community is called into existence. Nonetheless, as we saw with the episode with the dead dogs, it is dispersed as quickly as it arises, as the two characters never cross paths again in the novel. Being exposed to his ability to see, however – in a similar way to that of maybe-boyfriend and teacher – creates a subtle change in middle sister’s outlook. This is revealed in the fact that, when real milkman acknowledges the ‘click’ of a camera coming from an empty building as they pass, middle sister reflects,

[i]f he could acknowledge one of the unmentionables, also acknowledge he was unable to do anything to alter this unmentionable, maybe 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. (*M*, 145)

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<sup>68</sup> It is also interesting to note here that another thing that unites those characters distinguished for their positive outlook is their apparent pragmatic approach to ethics. As I address in the following chapter, this correspondence between pragmatism, particularly the kind of pragmatism outlined by Richard Rorty (1989), and an ethics of alterity is especially brought to the forefront when considering the role of humour and irony in fiction.

### 5.2.7. The Community of Lovers

Prior to discussing the role of the secret in the mostly untold relationship between maybe-boyfriend and chef, which I explore as an example of a community of lovers, it is interesting to briefly comment upon the apparent trend in this community of marrying the ‘wrong spouse’. Middle sister gives a number of explanations for this trend: the fear of falling in love only to lose your beloved to the grave; the fear of being alone; the fear of being forced into a marriage by the community; the “fear of oneself, of one’s independence, of one’s potential”; “the fear of losing control through letting the desired into your subsoil”; and finally the fear of having the one you truly love *not* killed, only for them to subsequently fall out of love with you (*M*, 225). As the community members decide that they cannot overcome these fears, that “[g]reat and sustained happiness was far too much to ask of it”, then marrying outside of love, “in guilt, ... in regret, in fear, in despair, in blame, also in terrible self-sacrifice was pretty much the unspoken matrimonial requisite here” (255). The result of this ‘matrimonial requisite’ is that individuals are turned into “buried-alive, hundred-per-cent, dulled-to-death, confined people” (271). This connection made between loveless marriage and death holds a certain correspondence with the idea that the fully realised operative community results in ontological death, or the engulfing of alterity. Almost every marriage we are told of in the novel is said to be a case of marrying ‘the wrong spouse’. As a constant reminder, middle sister is relentlessly haunted by the image of her eternally grieving sister on the day of the funeral, not of her husband, but of the man she truly loved.

A further example that brings marriage in the community in line with death is to be found in the brief description we receive of longest-friend’s wedding day, at which there was a shared feeling amongst the guests that they were “attending a joint funeral instead of one marriage” (*M*, 197). However, whilst we do not receive details of this particular relationship, the language used when describing the wedding remains particularly interesting. Unlike the

previous examples, we do not get the sense that this particular union is akin to death in the sense of losing hope, but rather that these two characters elect to stand together as they face their inevitable conclusions. It takes us back, first of all, to Irigaray's argument against the notion that the union of lovers creates "oneness" (2001, 18-9), as well as Blanchot's description of the "principle of incompleteness" as "the *lie* of that union which always takes place by not taking place" (1988, 49; emphasis in the original). For the image created of this funeral-marriage is a scene of two singularities, not brought together through fusion nor commonality, nor in guilt, regret or blame, but rather through the sharing of that which cannot be shared – the fact of their finitude.

There are two further relationships brought into being towards the end of the novel whereby two characters are seemingly thrown towards each other following near-death experiences. In the words of middle sister, "[d]eath is truthful, and 'ambushed and shot and nearly dead' is also truthful" (*M*, 213). First, there is the relationship between ma (middle sister's mother) and real milkman, to which middle sister's comment refers. When real milkman is mistaken for Milkman and is accidentally shot by 'state forces', ma opens up to middle sister for the first time. What she reveals is that her own marriage had also been a case of the 'wrong spouse', and that this together with her unrequited love for her longest friend, real milkman, had been the cause of so many years of suffering. Real milkman, too, finds his disposition altered on facing death. He becomes open, for the first time it seems, to the possibility of being loved by another. Death is truthful, then, in so far as it uncovers the untruth of the isolated individual, and reveals being as *Being-with*. Nonetheless, it should be clear by now that the novel stands against Heidegger's organic notion that anxiety in the face of death is what opens up the possibility of an authentic response ([1953] 2010, 225). Ma's newfound openness to the idea of love is not her seizing upon her possibilities and recognising the world as *hers*, but rather a recognition that the death of an Other is the only death that truly matters.

In the words of Blanchot, death is “the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the openness of a community” (1988, 9).

The second relationship is the reignited love between tablets girl’s sister and third brother (middle sister’s third brother). In another case of the ‘wrong spouse’, third brother is said to have left his childhood love out of fear and married someone else. The two are, however, thrown together again after her near death experience following being poisoned by her sister. That her death is the only death that matters to him is made evident in his actions, for he immediately rushes her to hospital (which, given that he has brothers who are/were ‘renouncers’, and that his sister – middle sister – is rumoured to be having an affair with the most wanted ‘renouncer’ of all, is certainly not a safe place for him to go) (*M*, 273-4).

Whilst these relationships certainly hold resonance with particular aspects of communitarian theory, I turn now to the one relationship that truly stands out as an example of Blanchot’s ‘community of lovers’: maybe-boyfriend and chef’s secret homosexual relationship. Readers are given only a small insight into this relationship when middle sister almost walks in on, and partially sees something, through a half-open door, that she is not supposed to see. The intention behind her trip had been to finally open up to maybe-boyfriend about everything that had been going on with her over the past weeks – being stalked by Milkman and receiving death threats; being gossiped about by the community with her own mother believing her to be having an affair with a married paramilitary; being shunned to the extent that she was unable to partake in normal public life; and being poisoned almost to death by tablets girl, whose own death she was now rumoured to have played a part in. However, on arrival at maybe-boyfriend’s house she finds herself halted by the sound of a conversation coming from the kitchen, the words of which she cannot quite make out. As she listens in from the hallway, with a view only of maybe-boyfriend’s back which is almost turned away from

her, the reader is able to piece together, in part, what has occurred prior to her arrival, receiving just a glimpse into this secret relationship of lovers.

Secrecy is at play in this scene on a number of different levels. First of all, chef and maybe-boyfriend are not aware that they are being watched – they assume that what is happening between them is happening in secret. Secondly, the reader is only able to access the event through the perspective of middle sister, whose own vision is obstructed by a part-open door: “with neither chef not maybe-boyfriend aware I was half in and half out the room” (*M*, 290). Thirdly, it becomes clear that maybe-boyfriend himself cannot see as he has had some kind of toxic substance thrown in his eyes. With maybe-boyfriend blinded, there is a part of the story which remains missing to him but becomes gradually available to middle sister, and thus to the reader. From the conversation being had, we are to understand that, in response to the community’s false rumours about maybe-boyfriend being a ‘state informer’ (based on false rumours of his owning a car part that contained a flag from ‘over-the-water’), one of his neighbours has come to the door and attacked him by throwing something in his eyes. What maybe-boyfriend is unaware of is that chef, presumably in retaliation for this attack, has stabbed the perpetrator. Therefore, what we are presented with in this scene is two singularities (maybe-boyfriend and chef) who have formed a secret community of lovers, but one which not only reveals to them the truth of their own finitude, but results in the near death of both, as well as a secret potential murder of another. In the moment that maybe-boyfriend is attacked, chef takes his life as the only life that matters. They are thrown together not in commonality, but in their shared exposure to death.

Additionally, the secrecy of their relationship reflects the unavowable of the community of lovers. This stands in contrast to maybe-boyfriend’s relationship with the protagonist, for whilst trying to resist labels and expectations by keeping their relationship within the ‘maybe category’, they have, inadvertently, named it – it is ‘maybe’. In so doing, the two have fixed

determinations on its boundaries (even if only in reference to what has not been determined). On the contrary, with chef and maybe-boyfriend their relationship exists not only outside of the public eye, but also outside of social normativity (for homosexuality was not accepted within the community in which the novel is set). In this sense, it is both anti-social and, given their totalitarian surroundings, certainly dangerous too. Nonetheless, the look that middle sister sees in chef's eyes, which is the moment she understands what it is that she has almost disturbed, is described as "intense, uncounched, for he believed himself unobserved, therefore no reason for couching – was one of love" (*M*, 292). As chef strokes maybe-boyfriend's face, we are reminded of Blanchot when he says that love is experienced as "knowing he can kill her, but choosing to caress her" (1988, 55). The notion of exposure is equally relevant here. Alone in the kitchen, these two are fully exposed to each other in their vulnerabilities, yet the exposure remains asymmetrical. Equally, the image created by maybe-boyfriend's loss of sight symbolises how there remains a space for secrets between them.

Secrecy also plays a complex role in the breakdown of the relationship between middle sister and maybe-boyfriend. Throughout the novel, the protagonist refers to the fact that the two rarely share personal details with each other. However, I suggest that – at least at first – this withholding does not necessarily come across as a potential boundary between them. Rather, in respecting the alterity of the other, they maintained a space for secrets and a necessary distance between them. However, the more middle sister tries to close herself off from *all* interpretation, and the more this sense of numbness penetrates her very being, the more maybe-boyfriend begins to demand answers. He also shows increasing frustration over the fact that middle sister insists on keeping their relationship a secret from her family, not allowing him to drive her to her front door or call by the house. As she gives him no explanation, his assumption is that she is ashamed. However, she indicates to the reader that the real reason is that she wants to save him from her mother's incessant questioning. As he is, according to his

mother's determinations, of the 'right religion' and the 'right age', she believes her mother would inevitably ask questions about the prospect of marriage and children. The tension that grows between them encourages both lovers to try to pull the other into their own world of understanding – to grasp the ungraspable – whilst at the same time themselves pulling away. In the end, middle sister is not hollowed out by desire, as Levinas suggests, but by the inescapability of the operative community (1969, 4).

An additional factor that would appear to play a part in the breakdown of their relationship is their underlying will to project it into the future. We are told that each time they discuss moving in together, or moving forward in their relationship, something changes in the dynamics between them. Nonetheless, they soon forget and have the conversation again. The inoperative community of lovers, in contrast, is said to last "from dusk to dawn" (Blanchot 1988, 49). All we see of chef and maybe-boyfriend's relationship is this one fleeting moment in the kitchen. Whilst this may be how it starts, how it ends remains untold. I suggest that this could imply that maybe-boyfriend's relationship with chef is established more in inorganic terms, whilst his relationship with middle sister eventually falls prey to saturated expectations.

### **5.3. Secrecy**

#### **5.3.1. Style, Narration and Plot**

The concept of secrecy is constantly at play in *Milkman*, especially with regards to Burns's unique writing style. As previously mentioned, the novel shares many features common to the stream of consciousness in literature: the narrative is not linear in time and flows quickly and often from one event to another, taking us both forwards and backwards several times within each chapter. Additionally, certain events are visited and revisited at different moments in the narrative. As I also said of *No Bones*, the style of the novel reflects Derrida's depiction of time as trace structure (1976, 61), referring to what is present but never seen, or in Spivak's words,



the “mark of the absence of a presence, an always-already absent present” (1976, xxxvi). This also corresponds with Frank Kermode’s assertion that the novels worthy of attention are those which “form associations of their own, non-sequential, secret invitations to interpretation rather than appeals to a consensus” (1980, 93). In *Milkman*, the chapters are long, the paragraphs are long, and the sentences, too, are long. Dialogues are often a mix of direct and reported speech, and sometimes intertwined with reported speech within direct speech. Furthermore, the novel begins almost, although not quite, where it ends. The language itself also holds a certain correspondence with the trace structure, and certainly adds to the ‘cryptaesthetic resistance’ of the text. Indeed, Schwartz describes the language in the novel as resembling a Cubist painting, with the result being “an uncanny narrative, one that is dreamlike and claustrophobic, hovering just above history” (2019, n.p.). Nonetheless, despite this apparent resistance, *Milkman* is by no means unreadable. Novelist and theorist Tom McCarthy’s words ring true here: it is “coherence that’s only made possible by incoherence; the receiving which is replay, repetition – backwards, forwards, inside-out or upside down” (2012, loc. 314).<sup>69</sup>

The full extent of the unreliability of the first-person narrator starts to emerge only once we fully engage with, in McCarthy’s words, “listening in on listening itself” (2012, loc. 39). From the very outset, the book is riddled with enigmas and gaps, with conditional secrets partially resolved as the story unfolds, and unconditional secrets never to be solved. As highlighted in chapter two, McCarthy describes how writing works in so far as it is unworking; it has no project, no hidden purpose, and so can never reach a state of realisation or completion (2012, loc. 232-244). From this perspective, what *Milkman* provides is an example of a *public* stream of consciousness (for the book is a public object) which, as discussed previously, negates the inner/outer distinction by making a point of saying that boundaries are fluid, and

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<sup>69</sup> This publication is without page numbers as it was published digitally. Loc. refers to the location in the Kindle edition.

that consciousness as a result is indeed accessible (at least to some extent). In Derrida's words, it is "superficial, without substance, infinitely private because public through and through" (1992, 170). And yet, somewhat ironically, on the year of publication the main criticisms the novel received were that it was "inaccessible", "impenetrable", "brain kneading", "relentlessly internalised" and "baffling".<sup>70</sup> Dwight Garner goes so far as to say, "I found "Milkman" to be interminable, and would not recommend it to anyone I liked" (2018, n.p.) It would seem that certain critics are themselves put off by the very same threat of difference and ungraspability that the novel seeks to challenge – a fear that both characterises the operative community, and results in the alienation of the novel's own protagonist.

The story itself is told in part through what is not told, in never, for example, directly revealing most of the characters' names, the name of the town in which it is set (although it bares obvious similarities to Ardoyne, in Belfast), nor even the surrounding political situation (which we know to be the Troubles). As Piątek writes, "the reality of the Troubles is lurking on the margins of the novel, it must be reconstructed from hints, scraps of information" (2020, 108), which itself echoes Derrida's insistence that it is those things in the margins which maintain the power to rupture any sense of certainty (Derrida 1982, xxviii). Similarly, Bartnik highlights how "the narrative realm proposed by Burns is (in)determinate, liminal in terms of time and space" (2021, 66). Nor does the protagonist middle sister ever find closure in voicing the story of what happened with Milkman. She tries once to tell her mother, who accuses her of lying, and opens up a second time to longest-friend who ironically responds, "I understand your not wanting to talk. That makes sense, and how could it not, now that you're considered a community beyond-the-pale" (*M*, 199).

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<sup>70</sup> Cited in Flood's article (2018, n.p.) and in Stefanou's article (2019, n.p.).

Moreover, the story of what happens with Milkman is largely a story of that which did not happen, especially with regards to the enigma of Milkman himself, who is introduced to the readers at the very beginning of the book as already dead. At this point there are no clues as to who he is, or why he was shot. In the opening chapter we read, “I didn’t know whose milkman he was. He wasn’t our milkman. I don’t think he was anybody’s. He didn’t take milk orders. There was no milk about him. He didn’t ever deliver milk. Also, he didn’t drive a milk lorry” (*M*, 2). Then there is his sinister, creepy presence. He appears as if from nowhere and disappears just as quickly. Even when he is not there, middle sister feels his presence in his absence. More significant still, however, is the lack of clarity regarding exactly what it is he is actually doing to middle sister. As we are told,

[a]t the time, age eighteen, having been brought up in a hair-trigger society where the ground rules were – if no physically violent touch was being laid upon you, and no outright verbal insults were being laid upon you, and no taunting looks in the vicinity either, then nothing was happening, so how could you be under attack from something that wasn’t there? (*M*, 6)<sup>71</sup>

We may be reminded here of Derrida’s interpretation of Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death*, that regardless of whether Blanchot himself was the protagonist in his story, and whether, as is heavily debated, it is fiction or non-fiction, “Blanchot tells us that, ultimately, nothing happened” (2002, 74). And yet the success of Blanchot’s prose lies in its ability to voice the impossibility of the possible in death. So too, on completion of *Milkman*, after being immersed in what seems like so much noise and personal and social upheaval, there is very much the sense that most of the events are themselves non-events, and the reader of *Milkman* may arrive at a similar conclusion to the reader of *The Instant of My Death*. Equally, this sense that nothing

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<sup>71</sup> We may also hear echoes of the 2018 #MeToo movement in this quote. For an inciteful exploration of the ways in which the novel interacts with this movement, see McGuire (2023).

has happened corresponds with McKinty's emphasis on the fact that "[i]n Belfast for many years there was a lot of not happening" (2018, n.p.). This idea is drilled home in a conversation with longest-friend in which middle sister insists that the community ought to mind their own business: "'[i]t's not to do with them and anyway, I haven't done anything.' 'Lots of people haven't done anything,' said longest-friend. 'And still they're not doing it, will always be not doing it, in their private coffins down at the usual place'" (M, 196).

### 5.3.2. Secrecy and Community

This clearly links, too, with the fact that what destroys the community both from within and without is shrouded in secrecy. This includes the 'state forces', the camera clicks, the 'renouncers', the 'kangaroo courts', the 'disappearances' – none of which are spoken of or acknowledged in the community, and all are referred to in the novel as 'unmentionables'. Longest-friend declares that the 'state forces', which have infiltrated, photographed and documented every corner of the "alienated, cynical, existentially bitter landscape" of their district, even take photos of shades, for "[p]eople here can be deciphered and likeness discerned from silhouettes and shadows" (M, 206). Burns's word choice in this passage immediately takes the reader once again to Foucault's description of the panopticon both in his famous *Discipline and Punish* (1977), but perhaps even more prominently so, to an interview he took part in titled "The Eye of Power" (1980). In this interview, Foucault describes how "the backlighting enables one to pick out from the central tower the little captive silhouettes in the ring of cells" (1980, 147). Additionally, the result is a certain blurring of boundaries between external and internal threat, and ultimately between 'them' and 'us'. In terms of location, too, everyone in the community knows there are certain areas that are too dangerous to cross, but nobody verbally acknowledges this fact. The 'ten-minute area' is one such place, which is considered so sinister that the time it takes to cross it cannot be included in normal calculations (M, 339).

The secret as to Milkman's identity is, however, *partially* resolved in an incredibly humorous way at the end of the book when, after his death, the community discovers that his name really was 'Milkman'. This news is said to shock and unnerve the community, for it shatters both the mystique of the paramilitary, and the mythical foundation of the community. From this revelation, too, comes new speculations, as to whether he ever really was the paramilitary figure he was said to be, "[o]r was it the case that poor Mister Milkman had been nothing but an innocent victim of state murder after all?" (*M*, 305). These 'unmentionables' which hold or fuse the community together are nonetheless components of the open secret which makes up the unacknowledged background of the story, namely ideology. Never spoken of, never acknowledged, the open secret in the novel reminds us of the pervasive power of ideology in general to create realities; a pervasiveness that always goes unrecognised.<sup>72</sup> As Althusser underscores, "one of the effects of ideology is the practical *denegation* of the ideological character of ideology by ideology; ideology never says, 'I am ideological'" (2001, 118).

Whilst officially middle sister is determined an outcast for her 'reading-while-walking', longest-friend makes it clear that what really upsets the community most is her stubborn refusal to answer their questions. Relevant here is Derrida's identification of the totalitarian space with the denial of the right to secrecy; as he claims, "[a]lthough democracy ought to guarantee both the right to answer and the right not to answer, in fact it guarantees neither the one nor the other" (Derrida and Ferraris 2001, 26). Indeed, middle sister herself refers to the district she lives in as a "totalitarian enclave" (*M*, 164). As previously mentioned, whilst middle sister agrees to give up her 'reading-while-walking', she sees her right not to answer as the one protection she has from the totalising and invading effects of the operative community.

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<sup>72</sup> The unspoken power of ideology very much connects with Foucault's observations on the unspoken power of control. For a more detailed application of Foucault to the novel, see Morales-Ladrón's 2023 study "On Docile Bodies".

Interestingly, though, when middle sister is poisoned by tablets girl, she has the startling sensation of some ghost-like something finding its way inside her: “I was woken by something invisible wisping into my bedroom, wisping up my bedclothes, getting in my open mouth and slipping down my throat ... ‘*It got in! It made its way in! They got in while I was sleeping*’” (221; emphasis in the original). The *it* in this cry would appear to refer to Milkman, whilst the *they* seems to refer to the community. Her initial analysis of the situation was: “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” (224). Again, we are met with the trespassing of boundaries of private and public spaces, and inner and outer selves. No matter that it was actually tablets girl who caused the sickness, the fact that Milkman had nonetheless found his way in is emphasised in wee sisters’ insistence that middle sister had become white, “‘like milk’, said oldest-youngest sister. ‘A bottle of milk’, said middle-youngest sister. ‘Like white milk that’s been painted extra white’, suggested youngest-youngest sister, ‘so that it glows in the dark’” (221). Importantly, this particular encroaching finds further resonance in the analysis to follow.

Very much connected both to her closed disposition and her questioning of the distinction between events and non-events, is middle sister’s recognition that talking was not something she even felt capable of doing at the time. We read,

I couldn’t see in those days how could I speak of this dilemma I now found myself in. It was that I couldn’t speak to anybody of anything partly because I wasn’t used to telling anybody anything, partly because I didn’t know how to tell or what to tell, partly too, because still it was unclear there was anything of accuracy to tell. (*M*, 64)

The power of this short excerpt lies in its ability to tell the untold. So many aspects of the oppressive nature of this community are revealed. First and foremost, we are met with the idea

that silence is weaponised as a means of oppression and control. As Morales-Ladrón identifies, “political control, mainly exerted by means of surveillance – of oneself and of others – regulates individual and societal behaviour through another form of discipline: silence” (2023, 4). Equally, it becomes ever more apparent that this control is gendered – we learn how, if no physical violence is experienced (the man’s game) then there is nothing at all to be said. Further still, we see how in this community, women’s stories (as is also the case with female names) are considered both powerless and insignificant – that even if one were able to articulate the violence she has suffered, it would undoubtedly be voiced to deaf ears.<sup>73</sup>

With this in mind, we may also recall the passage previously quoted wherein middle sister questions, “how could you be under attack from something that wasn’t there?” (*M*, 6). Yet as readers, the fact that middle sister is nonetheless under attack seems so patently obvious. How is it, then, that this threat is perceived? Interestingly, Deiana draws our attention to how the gendered violence of Milkman’s actions (which, despite not being physical, are violent nonetheless) are *felt* in the novel rather than seen – first, by the protagonist, and in turn by the reader (2022, 34-5). She describes how,

[i]t is through the entanglement of intimate and affective details that interlaced experiences of gendered violence and silence, and the complex emotional grammar they rely on, are rendered so vividly and therefore become knowable, although only through intuition and aesthetic knowledge. (Deiana 2022, 35)

Indeed, middle sister for her part describes how she had “a *feeling* for them, an intuition, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people” (6; emphasis added). Similarly, Magennis draws our attention to what she describes as a “difficult bind that [middle sister] finds herself in: she can feel that something is wrong but is unable to act on that feeling” (2021,

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<sup>73</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the gendered violence depicted in *Milkman*, see Madhu (2021).

140). To ‘know’ something does not necessarily equate to being able to voice it – indeed, what *Milkman* demonstrates is how stories can be told in aesthetic subtleties, in the ripples felt between the lines.

The final aspect of secrecy at play both in the community and in the novel is the role of gossip and rumour.<sup>74</sup> The community in which *Milkman* is set is incessantly noisy, with rumours taken as facts, and all interpretations of events determined by communal truths, even when the evidence of matter shows blatant contradictions. Morales-Ladrón depicts this element of the community’s self-surveillance as a form of ‘groupthink’; “the subsidiary component of a technology of power that fabricates and controls truths through rumour and fear” (2023, 8). An especially revealing example of this can be found in real milkman’s second most commonly used nick-name – ‘the man who didn’t love anybody’. It seems that this was to be his determination, fixed on him as the product of the combination of exaggerated rumours as to the cause of him not marrying and his apparently unprovoked shouting at children. For this reason, the community can neither talk of, nor acknowledge the fact that, other than delivering milk, his only activities involve selflessly caring for just about everyone who needs it. Rumours in *Milkman* spiral and mutate – just as stories do in *TinTin* (see McCarthy 2011, loc. 184) – so much so that not only does it become almost impossible for the community to decipher what lies beneath the rumour, but the rumour itself actually has the power to change or even create the circumstances they purport to describe. When confronting the very real effects that a particular rumour of her own creation had had, middle sister exclaims, “I was appalled at how easily an unguided thought, even one not expressed, could get plucked from the topsoil and

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<sup>74</sup> For an interesting analysis of how gossip functions as a specifically feminine form of guerrilla intelligence, see Wall (2023).



still manage successfully to get through. And now here it was – out – having a life of its own” (*M*, 188).<sup>75</sup>

Rumour also plays a part in the increasing alienation and dangerous categorisation of maybe-boyfriend as a ‘state informer’. Maybe-boyfriend, a mechanic by trade, is obsessed with cars, and hoards parts in every room of his house. On winning the super charger of a Bentley, he is ecstatic, and so are his close friends and neighbours. However, after one neighbour suggests that the car may have been from ‘over the water’, together with the prospect that there could be a flag from ‘over the water’ somewhere on one the parts – although not on *his* part – things start to take a different turn. There is no flag on the super engine, nor was there anywhere on the car, but the rumours in a way bring this flag, together with its symbolic significance, into existence. It is precisely this altering of reality that results in maybe-boyfriend being suspected of being an informer. The situation is only made worse by a maybe sister’s fabrications made in a desperate attempt to protect maybe-boyfriend from Milkman’s death threats. Middle sister invents a friend from ‘across the road’ and of the ‘wrong religion’ who supposedly won the part with the flag on it and was happy to send polaroids to prove it. Although it is not made explicit, we may assume that the attack made on maybe-boyfriend towards the end of the novel is a direct result of these fabrications – that is, for *not* having a flag on a part of a car that he *did not* win; for *not* being friends with people that *do not* exist from ‘over the road’; and for *not* holding in his possession *non-existent* photographs, purportedly documenting something which *never* took place.

Wielechowski provides an especially interesting analysis of the role of gossip in the novel as an example of non-traditional archival practices that, neither neutral nor temporal as

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<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, in an interview for the *Belfast Telegraph*, Burns’s comments about the comportment of some journalists, made in reference to rumours spread about her being bankrupt prior to winning the Man Booker, are strikingly similar to the way that gossip spreads in the novel. She explains how “[t]hings do get twisted, even here in interviews” (O’Doherty 2018).

typically imagined, actually work to support and reinforce official power structures (2021, 58-60). Wielechowski argues that the threat of violence associated with gossip holds the capacity to shape the very consciousness of the community; that memory is “potentially world-making” (63). In her analysis of the novel, she identifies what she calls a “paranoic affective loop” whereby “fear fuels paranoia, paranoia leads to gossip, and gossip in turn leads to more fear, with real instances of transgression and violence occurring in the space in between” (65). It is this loop that allows gossip to reinforce the demand for conformity even at the level of emotional affects. Wielechowski highlights how the controlling powers’ manipulation of the role of gossip in archiving lies in their ability “to frame social issues as individual problems” (67) – another means of driving the communal realm into the personal, the political into the psychological. Her analysis indicates that part of the success of *Milkman* lies in its ability to draw readers’ attention to the non-traditional archival devices that essentially create histories (58).

Very much connected to this observation, it is equally worth bearing in mind how middle sister herself, though cautious of engaging in everyday gossip, is speaking nonetheless from *within* this community. Everything we learn from the narrative voice is filtered through her understanding of events which, despite the temporal distance achieved due to her retrospective account, is almost certainly influenced by community hearsay. Firstly, this observation links back to the potential we have identified for texts to resist interpretation, but equally it points to the capacity of texts (and stories) to misdirect, together with the consequent inevitability of misinterpretations. This element of misdirection leads us on to an analysis of the crypt.

### 5.3.3. The Crypt in *Milkman*

As detailed previously, the crypt, as understood by Derrida, is a kind of tomb which conceals (and conceals the concealment of) unfronted phantoms and secrets. The crypt is constructed

as a result of what Abraham and Torok term ‘incorporation’, a mode of mourning which involves taking the unnameable dead other in, but at the same time keeping it separate and unfronted (1986, 111-15). There are two objects in *Milkman*, linked to two events, which are productive to analyse from this perspective. The first is a cat’s head found by middle sister in the ‘ten-minute area’, and the second is the character tablets girl’s hidden stash of letters stuffed inside a rag-doll and discovered after her death. Together, these examples, in their cryptic complexities and indecipherable elements, contribute to the unconditional secrets of the text. Moreover, as Santos Brigida and Pinho write of the novel, “one finds that mourning might be a form of non-violent and yet radically transformative political resource” (2021, 439). I shall begin with an analysis of the cat’s head, which arises in an episode that Clark suggests brings together the three main themes of the novel – walking, memory and violence (2022, 94).

#### 5.3.3.1. The Cat’s Head

Whilst walking home from her French class – the same class in which the students were encouraged to look at the sunset, and during which, in allowing herself to see more than just blue, she felt the sensation of change – middle sister enters the ‘ten-minute area’ where she finds a cat’s head. First of all, the very topography of the area immediately resembles Derrida’s discussion of the crypt: somewhere and nowhere, internal and external, buried but on the surface, and hidden within the public sphere (Derrida 1986a, xiv). The ‘ten-minute area’ is described in the novel as “a ghostly place” (82), “a dead, creepy, grey place” (139), a place “not for normal things” (101), and an “open awful place” (101). Yet it is both dead *and* alive; there is a bus stop where nobody gets on and nobody gets off, and shops that open and close no matter that nobody ever goes inside. Ma (middle sister’s mother) describes the area as “a place attempting perhaps to transcend some dark, evil happening without managing to transcend it and instead succumbing to it, giving in to it, coming to want it, to wallow in it” (*M*, 84). What actually happened to this place also remains something of an enigma – in fact

ma suggests it is possible that nothing happened there at all: “[i]t’s imaginary – that’s its provenance, meaning it has no provenance” (92). And so, middle sister finds a cat’s head in a place that it is both somewhere and nowhere, dead and alive, open and closed, public and private. She concludes that it must have been killed by a bomb that went off in the area not long ago, not a ‘state forces’ bomb, nor a ‘renouncers-of the-state’ bomb, but a Nazi bomb left over from World War II. As McMann notes, the gothic surroundings mean that “[m]iddle sister’s own present merges with the nightmare of history”, with bomb itself reminding us of,

the brutality, not just of the Second World War, but of two world wars, the Irish War of Independence, the Irish Civil War, the violence that defined Europe, at least in the twentieth century, and perhaps even the kind of global terrorism that would eventually come to characterize the decades following this evening. (2023, 139)

This bomb left the area both “disturbed within its own disturbances”, but at the same time “not particularly more dead than it had been before” (*M*, 82-3). As the area was already uninhabited at the time, it was thought that no one had been killed. However, on finding the cat’s head, middle sister corrects herself, for a death was in fact suffered in the explosion after all: that of a cat.

The first thing we notice about this head is that it is missing an eye, and so the reader is immediately taken in thought to the myth of the Odysseus and the Cyclops. As the story goes, Odysseus gets the giant Polyphemus drunk on wine, tells him his name is ‘nobody’, and stabs out his eye with a burning stake. The giant cries out for help from his fellow giants, but his screaming of ‘nobody’s hurt me!’ leads the giants to other conclusions. He is punished, so the story goes, for not respecting the rites of unconditional hospitality to his guests.<sup>76</sup> Echoing this

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<sup>76</sup> See Homer’s *The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles (1997)

myth, just as middle sister has the thought that no one was killed, she finds the one-eyed head of cat, the bomb's only victim. The cat's head therefore carries with it transgenerational trauma connected to current and past, local and global war and conflict. After finding the head, middle sister reveals to the reader how killing cats was a kind of norm in their community. Cats, in contrast to dogs, were assumed by the community (and in accordance with commonly founded superstitions) to represent unreliability, insincerity, and femininity; punished, then, like Polyphemus, for their apparent inhospitality. Also of note is that the head itself is swarming with insects – it is, in a way, both dead *and* alive, or the living dead.

What happens next is that middle sister's train of thought takes us back to the aforementioned episode in which the community awoke to discover that all of their dogs had been killed and piled up, throats cut, for everyone to see: "soldiers killed dogs, and the locals killed cats" (*M*, 100). At first what disturbed the children most by the pile of dead dogs was the fact that it appeared that the dogs were missing their heads: they cried, "Mammy! The heads! They took the heads! Where are the heads?" (96). In Freudian dream logic, cats represent dogs. Following this same logic, the singular head of a cat appears as an accurate negation for a pile of headless dogs. So already the cat's head becomes a symbol from the unconscious twisted around the trauma of the dead dogs.

However, it is made clear that the trauma of dogs, too, already stands in for something else. If we go back further into her train of thought, somewhere between discussing dead cats and dead dogs, middle sister tells the reader of the chilling message she took from watching the film *Rear Window* at the age of twelve. In the film, a dog is killed by having its neck broken, to which the owner responds with cries of, "[d]id you kill him because he liked you, just because he liked you?" (*M*, 89). This line sent shivers down her spine: she reflects, "[t]hey killed it because it liked them, because they couldn't cope with being liked, couldn't cope with innocence, frankness, openness, with defencelessness and an affection so pure, so affectionate,

that the dog and its qualities had to be done away with” (89). Thus, the cat’s head, which evidently embodies transgenerational trauma, stands too for the trauma of the dead dogs, which already stands for the trauma of watching *Rear Window*, and which itself represents the way that the community deals with alterity and difference in general. Additionally, McMann draws our attention to the parallels that can be seen between the transgenerational cause of the cat’s death, and that of the violence inflicted on middle sister. She explains how,

this particular cat does not die because of maliciousness but because of buried history – the bomb. Similarly, middle sister’s abuse and stalking is not a direct consequence of the brutality that structures her society but is rather an insidious element embedded within the patriarchal systems that, while part of the Troubles of Northern Ireland, also predates such violence. (2023, 140)

Furthermore, the missing eye of the cat may be said to foreshadow the fate of maybe-boyfriend and tablets girl’s sister who, we may recall, are, like Oedipus, blinded for seeing what they ought not to see.

Finally, that the crypt is described by Derrida as a labyrinth (1986a, xiv) points to the idea of misdirection and misinterpretation, made evident in the rumours that evolve regarding the reason that middle sister was spotted in the possession of a cat’s head. It is commonly accepted thenceforth that there was not just one head, but multiple cats’ heads, often carried in her pockets, and which she was said to cut up for purposes of dark magic. Also of note is the very fact that she was spotted in the first place, reinforcing how the ‘ten-minute area’ is both public and private, open and closed.

Thus, what we have now is a multiply encoded object that once belonged to a cat, and which was blown up in an already dead place by a bomb that had spent years buried underground. On coming across this object, middle sister describes feeling “jolted as I hadn’t

remembered ever feeling jolted, not understanding why either” (*M*, 100), which itself echoes Derrida’s depiction of the crypt erupting from an inner shattering. After going back and forth several times in deliberation and arguing with herself – “I could cover it, not leave it in this open awful place. *But why?*” (101; emphasis in the original) – she eventually decides to take it from the ‘ten minute area’ and to bury it somewhere green (somewhere alive). To return briefly once more to the scene with the dead dogs, when describing the community’s men retrieving the remains from the pile and returning them to their families, middle sister says, “I added shovels to them and in my head they were digging with these shovels” (98). We have thus moved from digging up numerous headless dead dogs to burying the singular head of a cat. There is a certain sense in which middle sister is acting in line with Antigone, Oedipus’ daughter, who, grieving the loss of her brother, defies the King in seeking that her brother receives a correct burial. Her actions are therefore undoubtedly connected to mourning. Moreover, the Greek name Antigone means ‘in place of one’s parents’, which echoes the role of substitution in this process, as well as the transgenerational nature of such mourning.

Middle sister conceals the head in a set of hankies. First, she wraps the head in her female hanky, the one she carried for “cultural, aesthetic purposes”, before wrapping it also in her male hanky, the one she carried for “practical purposes”, putting both, as she says, to “practical and symbolic use” (*M*, 101-2). The result is that the now multiply encoded object is hidden in cloths that are both hers and not hers, both feminine and masculine. What happens next, however, is that Milkman appears, like always, as if from nowhere. He stands beside her with the only barrier between them being “those hankies, with their dark, dead contents” which Milkman seems unable to see (102). What is particularly interesting here is that Milkman speaks in a kind of dream logic: he asks questions that are not really questions, and his message is never fluid. It is almost as if the unconscious is throwing together contrasting images, like transmissions and connections in a dream. We may be reminded of Colin Davis when he says

of the ghost that it “pushes at the boundaries of language and thought” (2021, 379). The threat Milkman delivers, which is clearly a direct threat to blow maybe-boyfriend up in a car bomb, is at the same time indirect, for it is encoded in reference to middle sister’s eternally grieving sister. It is direct but only in its absence. It is in this moment, too, that Milkman reveals that he has access to middle sister’s thoughts; that he has already transgressed the boundaries of public and private thoughts, and inner and outer selves. The results of the dream-like quality of both the landscape, as a kind of in-between place, together with the cryptic dialogue that takes place there, holds a resemblance to Pascual Garrido’s discussion of the disappearing bogs in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* (2013): a landscape that has “alternating periods of visibility and invisibility, its potential to disclose and to hide” and which reveals that there “is no clear-cut boundary between what is real and imaginary” (2020, 118-9).

Almost as quickly as Milkman vanishes, real milkman appears on the border between the ‘ten-minute area’ and the ‘usual place’ – the cemetery, also called “the busy cemetery”, “the no-town cemetery” and “the no-time cemetery” (*M*, 213). Thus, real milkman is also situated somewhere that is both dead *and* alive. Additionally, the very fact that the two characters are called ‘Milkman’ and ‘real milkman’ again plays with the blurring of boundaries between the real and the imaginary. Immediately, real milkman (unlike Milkman) sees the cat’s head, and offers to take it off her hands. As highlighted earlier, middle sister exclaims that “[h]e had grasped all” (144).

Real milkman suggests burying the head in his back garden; the very same garden in which he once found, dug up and revealed buried weapons that he was not supposed to see. There is a sense in which real milkman acts as the traditional Freudian, for he unearths and deciphers the unconscious. Yet the crypt is said to be a more inner forum than the unconscious (Derrida 1986a, xiv). What real milkman then does with the cat’s head is therefore also significant here. First, he empties out a billiard ball case, and places the head inside, thus



creating a further boundary. This placing also indicates that he is replacing an object of play with this now multiply cyphered object which conceals within a web of interconnected trauma. This act may also remind us of middle sister's initial interpretation of the cat's head as "a child's ball, some toy, a play-moneybag" (*M*, 93), and echoes the idea previously discussed of the crypt as a kind of plaything. The object is thus unearthed, encrypted, misinterpreted, encased and then buried once more, presenting the reader with an inexhaustible chain of multiple meanings; it is, so to speak, ready to burst with significance, just as the head itself is ready to burst from "insect activity" (*M*, 100).

With the cat's head interpreted in terms of the crypt, middle sister's desperate attempts to protect something within herself can be read in reference to the silent groundskeeper or guard. The community's description of her in terms of the living dead thus takes on new resonance:

A bit eerie, a bit creepy, they decided, adding that they hadn't noticed before but it was that I resembled the ten-minute area. It was as if there was nothing there when there was something there, while at the same time, as if there was something there when there was nothing there. (*M*, 180)

From this perspective, middle sister's response to this multi-layered trauma may be understood in terms of incorporation; although she has taken the trauma, this Other, within herself, it nonetheless remains separated and unfronted, guarded in the crypt. The complete significance of which remains, for the reader, ever out of reach.

#### 5.3.3.2. Tablets Girl's Letters

The second object in the novel which is especially fruitful to analyse from this perspective is the collection of letters written by tablets girl, and found hidden inside an old rag doll after her death. When middle sister is clinging to railings on her way home from the chip shop, for her

legs are once again too weak to support her (a combined result of social anxiety and recovering from being poisoned), she spots tablets girl's sister (shiny girl) doing just the same, but for loss of vision. It is during this encounter that tablets girl's sister explains how she discovered letters written, it seems, from one part of tablets girl to another. This idea echoes the explanations, as previously discussed, that tablets girl gives for her poisonings. Her explanations are based around the idea that her selfhood was divided into two, and that there was no room in her world for both sides. Whilst the renouncers ransacked her bedroom (her private space) looking for where she kept her poison, tablets girl's sister decided to look in the most unlikely place, a public space, namely the living room. There, on the sofa, where it had been for so long in plain sight it had become invisible, was a rag doll – a family heirloom, once loved, long ago discarded.

Two things are worth drawing attention to before moving on. First, that the object is again a plaything, and secondly, that it has been passed down from generation to generation, and so it may already stand in for an unspoken transgenerational trauma. Such corresponds with Royle's description of the "transgenerational haunting" of the crypt (2014, 49). Additionally, the way in which these letters were both hidden and found immediately draws the reader in thought to the psychoanalytic concept of 'purloined letters' as discussed in chapter two: letters sent in secret, stolen, substituted, and hidden in a plain sight.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, a connection may be made with the Derridean notion that the quality of the secret is like a letter: "a secret that is at the same time kept and exposed, jealously sealed and open like a purloined letter" (2008, 131). Similar, then, to the structure of the secret, tablets girl's letters are hidden in an object that is both visible and invisible, public and private, somewhere and nowhere. Also, as they are written from one part of her divided self who died (the poisoner) to another part who survived (the shiny girl), the letters themselves are in a way both dead *and* alive.

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<sup>77</sup> See: Muller and Richardson (1998).

Royle's comments are pertinent here, that the "cryptaesthetic force of a work requires a reading or countersignature that responds to what is elliptical, oblique, hidden away even in the obvious" (2014, 48-9).

As the episode continues, the contents of these letters are *partially* revealed. Importantly, however, this partial revelation does not disclose tablets girl's personal secrets, but rather brings to the surface the enigma of the novel's own secrets – those can never be resolved. The letters are addressed to 'Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie', the first real name to be revealed in the book (and only one of two to be revealed in total). Of note is that the etymology of the name Effie, a shortened version of Euphemia, comes from "well-spoken" – an observation that is especially ironic given the cryptic nature of what is written in the letters. On reading these letters, something likely to strike the reader from the outset is the jarring similarity in style between the way these letters are composed and middle sister's own distinctive narrative voice. We may also be struck by the content of the first letter (or the first part of the letter), which comprises a list of fears that markedly correspond to those middle sister has elaborated thus far. Next, we are met with the expression "the shudders, the ripples, our legs turning to pulp because of those shudders and ripples" (*M*, 263). Interestingly, this is the exact way that middle sister describes her physical response to Milkman's presence (and absence) throughout the novel (sometimes described as an 'anti-orgasm'), which is also the reason why she so frequently loses the use of her legs, (precisely the situation in which she finds herself in this moment in the narrative). The letter continues, "[n]ine 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" (263). It is middle sister, and not tablets girl, who makes constant reference to the fear of being watched. Equally, whilst the community (as far as we are aware) never describes tablets girl as numb, this has certainly been said on multiple occasions and by

a number of characters in reference to middle sister. From here, we are told of her greatest worry, described as,

that weird something of the psyche – for do you remember, our Susannah, that weird something of the psyche? Of Lightness and Niceness that had got inside us, that was inside us and which, as you recall, *possesses* us still? (*M*, 264; emphasis added).

We may here recall the feeling of lightness that middle sister had initially taken with her from her French class after seeing the colours in the sunset, but was quickly suppressed on entering the ‘ten-minute area’ the night she found the cat’s head. She described the feeling as “nice” and “valuable”, but it was soon taken over by thoughts of “What’s the point? There’s no point” (*M*, 101).

It then becomes clear that the part of tablets girl composing the letters is known to her as ‘Faithful Terror Of Other People And Not Just On Difficult Days’. There is, however, one loose piece of paper with correspondence from the other part of her, the side known as ‘Lightness and Niceness’. This is particularly revealing, and it reads as follows:

Dear Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie,

You don’t need me to tell you –

IT’S FRIGHTENING! O SO FRIGHTENING!

– that everything you see is a reflection of –

ALL SO TERRIFYING!

– your inner landscape and that you don’t have to –

HELP! HELP! WE’RE GOING TO DIE! WE’RE ALL GOING TO DIE!

believe in this inner –

MY STOMACH! MY HEAD! O MY INTESTINES!

– landscape. Instead we can –

REMEMBER OUR HELP KIT, SUSANNAH! OUR COMFORT KIT! OUR  
SURVIVAL KIT! (*M*, 267)

Reading (quite literally) between the lines we get the following warning: ‘everything you see is a reflection of your inner landscape and you don’t have to believe in this inner landscape’. Again, what results is a blurring of the borders of inner and outer, together with the message that neither the outer landscape, which is but a reflection, nor the inner landscape which it reflects (itself an absence), are to be trusted. The outer reflection is thus a reflection of an inner nothing. Also of note here are tablets girl’s cries of pain: “MY STOMACH! MY HEAD! O MY INTESTINES!”. Whilst tablets girl herself was not poisoned, these words are nonetheless clear echoes of the cries made by middle sister, actually poisoned, from her bathroom floor just days before.

To return then to the image created in this moment of the narrative, what we have is middle sister clinging to railings, facing tablets girl’s sister, who is also clinging to railings, presenting an almost mirror image or reflection. This image is reinforced by middle sister’s remarks that tablets girl’s sister was “tissue-paper thin, not only in her body but in every aspect of her” (*M*, 267). The reflection, however, is somewhat void – an empty, inner landscape perhaps. The two are also stuck in this position, for at one end of the street there are dogs fighting over chips (note how tablets girl’s sister co-appears with middle sister’s prior trauma), and at the other, two men fighting in silence. They thus appear trapped between real and surreal conflicts.

The question arises therefore as to what to make of the abruptly materialising connections that the unearthing of the crypt establishes between these three characters – tablets girl, tablets girl’s sister and middle sister. Whilst I maintain that this connection represents one of the novel’s unconditional secrets, there are four possible explanations that are particularly productive to explore. If we were to follow Lacan’s interpretation of “The Purloined Letter”,

perhaps what we witness in the story is the possessive hold that letters have on anyone in their possession – first on tablets girl’s sister, and then, as the letters are transmitted, on middle sister. However, I suggest that Burns’s account of the letters more closely aligns with Derrida’s reading of Poe’s story, whereby the letter is revealed as divisible, with the story in turn diverging into something of a labyrinth of doubles. As the detective Dupin in Poe’s story makes references to the twin brothers of Atreus and Thyestes in his substitute letter, so too Derrida suggests that the detective (Dupin) and the letter’s thief (D—) are to be considered something close to twins. With this in mind, to return to the novel, what we have a mirroring of twins – one evil, one good – together with the near death of third, a *middle* sister (an echo perhaps of the murder of the half-brother in the myth of Atreus and Thyestes). We may conclude with Derrida, then, that both the letter and the subject are necessarily fractured (in contrast to the Lacanian indivisible signifier) (Derrida 1987, 469); which is to say that the sender cannot be easily differentiated from the receiver (and again contrary to Lacan’s analysis, will never truly arrive at its destination) (Derrida 1987, 489). Indeed, there is always already writing “before a letter” (Derrida 1967, 54).

This observation connects to the element of a haunting trauma within the crypt which surpasses one’s facticity, that which Royle terms transgenerational haunting (2014, 49), and leads us on to the second possible interpretation. We know that middle sister is documenting the events after they have taken place, so it is possible that once tablets girl’s crypt has been dug up and partially revealed, middle sister finds herself haunted by the spectre of the living dead buried within. Indeed, as Derrida writes: “although it’s also connected to the crypt, the ghost is more precisely the effect of another’s crypt in my unconscious” (1985, 59).

This interpretation is to a great extent inspired by Rodríguez-Salas’s analysis Witi Ihimaera’s novel *The Uncle’s Story*. In this story, we witness the haunting effects that the discovery of the character Sam’s diary has on the generations to come. Rodríguez-Salas

describes the diary as a “psychic and linguistic enclave” through which Sam’s trauma becomes intertwined with the trauma of future generations (2020, 129). Similarly, tablets girl’s letters, too, although largely encrypted, are to be understood as containing a written yet undecipherable account of her own (possibly inherited) traumas, themselves passed on to those who discover the letters. Another similarity with Sam’s diary is that due to the internal conflict between tablets girl’s split sense of self, the single loose letter composed by “Lightness and Niceness” remains both incomplete and heavily interrupted. As is required of the protagonist Michael in *The Uncle’s Story*, middle sister, too, finds herself having to decipher the trauma from silences, gaps and ellipses. Both Michael and middle sister thence find themselves haunted by the spectres that reside these crypts.

This interpretation may indeed account for the salient similarities between the language of the narrative voice and that of the letters in *Milkman*. Additionally, it is reinforced by middle sister’s repeated description of tablets girl as a kind of haunting presence throughout the novel: “like some kind of phantom, some kind of horrific nightmare” (*M*, 217) and as “invisible, blending into everything, dissolving away to nothing” (234). Her speech, too, similar to that of Milkman, is dream-like and cryptic, and is spoken in “mesmerising fragmentations” (215). Maybe-boyfriend’s description of how middle sister’s numbed state was “starting to invade and *possess* [her]” certainly comes to mind here, during which he actually likens her to “one of those jointed wooden *dollies* that artists use” (193; emphasis added). We may recall, too, middle sister’s own description, unaware that she had been poisoned by tablets girl, of something ghost-like finding its way inside her (221). What this textual evidence points towards is the idea that middle sister is haunted by the unfronted ghost of tablets girl buried in the crypt. If this were to be the case, middle sister’s mourning would nonetheless have elements of both incorporation and introjection – in the form of an ontological cannibalism or fusion – for the identity of tablets girl has been, at least partially, engulfed and appropriated.

The third possible explanation – more far-fetched but plausible nonetheless – relates to Derrida’s discussion of counterfeit signatures (1977, 172-97). We may have doubts surrounding the authorship of these letters, and in turn consider the possibility that the signature serves as a deliberate misdirection, that is, part of the novel’s cryptaesthetic resistance to interpretation. The question thus arises as to whether middle sister may be the letters’ true pen. It does seem somewhat unbelievable that tablets girl’s sister is able to recite these letters word for word, even more so given the weak physical state in which she finds herself due to her having been poisoned. Very much connected, then, is the question as to who ‘Susannah Eleanor Lizabetta Effie’ really is, and this leads us on to a fourth possible interpretation.

Interestingly, moments after this name is spoken, middle sister expresses, “[s]he said my name then, my first name, and that felt warm” (*M*, 267). It is plausible to conclude, therefore, that ‘Susannah’ is the protagonist’s first name. In the drinking club, too, when tablets girl accuses middle sister of killing her in another life (for which she takes revenge through poisoning her), tablets girl says, “[w]e all died, *sister* ... because of you” (214; emphasis added). It has already been emphasised to the reader earlier in the book that tablets girl has never spoken of feminist issues, nor any other kind of female solidarity. It seems strange – and therefore significant – that she opts to call her ‘sister’. Furthermore, middle sister’s own expectation of what tablets girl’s sister might say to her when she approached (for it was rumoured that she was an accessory to her sister’s murder) was not, “you killed *my* sister”, but rather “you killed *our* sister” (267; emphasis added). Perhaps her use of ‘our’ suggests that tablets girl was also middle sister’s own sister. Then there is Somebody McSomebody’s description of middle sister as a “sub cat” (a buried cat?) but also a “double cat” (a divided cat?) (307).<sup>78</sup> Additionally, middle sister’s argument with herself in the ‘ten-minute area’

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<sup>78</sup> Drong also suggests that naming her a cat may symbolise something of the transgressive nature of her character, that, like a cat, she “does not recognize any boundaries and will not be subordinated and controlled by anybody” (2019, 8). Equally, we may recall how the soldiers killed dogs, whilst the community killed cats.



(between the ‘nice’ feeling she was left with after the French class, and the common voice of ‘what’s the point?’ (101)) bears uncanny similarities with the two voices in tablets girl’s letters. Finally, when describing her intentionally closed disposition when confronted by the community’s questions, middle sister says she gave the community, “no symbolic content, no full-bodiedness, no bloodedness, no passion of the moment, no turn of plot, *no sad shade, no angry shade, no panicked shade* ... Just me, devoid. Just me, *uncommingled*” (174-5; emphasis added). Based on these textual clues, it may be plausible to interpret the characters of tablets girl, tablets girl’s sister (shiny girl) and middle sister as pertaining to the same person. Interestingly, there are certain parallels to be made between this conclusion, and Abraham and Torok’s analysis of the ‘Wolf Man’ when they write, “[w]e suspected the existence of a cohabitation, at the core of the same person, involving his elder sister’s (as well as his father’s) image and his own. Two people in a third one” (1986, 3). To return to the novel, this final explanation, more far-fetched but plausible nonetheless, is the suggestion that the entire story is itself an encoding. That where we are presented with three separate characters, what we really have is one self divided into three ‘sisters’: tablets girl or ‘Faithful Terror Of Other People’, shiny girl or ‘Lightness and Niceness’, and middle sister, the *middle* sister, stuck, like the ‘ten-minute area’, somewhere or nowhere in-between. Two evil, two good, three shades.

#### 5.4. Conclusions

In a similar vein to both *No Bones* and *Little Constructions*, after so much destruction, so many deaths and near deaths, and so many nightmarish episodes, the novel’s ending is (almost) a happy one. In the words of Claire Kilroy, “[w]hat starts out as a study of how things go wrong becomes a study in how things go right, and the green shoots are not the work of the paramilitaries” (2018, n.p.). Milkman is dead, and Somebody McSomebody, after threatening middle sister with a gun in ‘the community’s most popular drinking club’, has been beaten up (several times, it seems, “by hundreds of thousands of people” (*M*, 347)). Middle sister, almost

physically recovered from the stalking, societal pressure and poisoning, returns to go running in the ‘parks & reservoirs’ with third brother-in-law. It is during their conversation whilst stretching that it is revealed that middle sister has finally come to recognise the possibility of other types of bonds. Third brother-in-law, who is upset and angry at the news that Somebody McSomebody had given her a black eye, insists, “I don’t care how many times his family got murdered, he’s a bastard and would’ve been a bastard even if they hadn’t got murdered” (346). For all his crudeness, it is these words that appear to shatter middle sister’s self-defensive (self-destructive) barriers. We read, “[b]rother-in-law was now seriously cross and I was touched by his crossness. Somebody McSomebody was wrong then. People in this place did give a fuck” (346). When third brother-in-law insists on taking action against Somebody McSomebody, middle sister responds that “no further action was needed” because “I was tired of the eye, tired of McSomebody, tired of rules and the district’s regulations. As for principles, sometimes you have to say ‘stuff principles’, such as now when the energy for me was over on all that” (347). We begin to see how, together with this recognition, middle sister’s relationship, or community, with third brother-in-law has changed into something more open, and even *almost* expressible:

“‘[s]till’, he said. ‘Ach’ I said. ‘Ach nothing’, he said. ‘Ach sure’, I said. ‘Ach sure what?’ he said. ‘Ach sure, if that’s how you feel.’ ‘Ach sure, of course that’s how I feel’. ‘Ach, all right then’. ‘Ach’, he said. ‘Ach’, I said. ‘Ach,’ he said. ‘Ach’, I said. ‘Ach’. (M, 347)

As means of a conclusion, I hope to point towards how reading and rereading the text not only allows for novel literary interpretations, but equally underscores the potential role that works of fiction can play in the deconstruction of both the experience of transgenerational trauma, and of the physical and symbolic borders that dictate our understandings.

First, to return to the scene in the ‘ten-minute area’, with Milkman’s apparition occurring in the moment that middle sister unearths the crypt, I propose that his constant

stalking presence may represent the spectre of Northern Ireland's convoluted, often violent, and hugely traumatic history which continues to silently haunt and shape social and political tensions within communities today. The complexity of both the narrative and the narrative style does well to reflect the complexity and the scope of such trauma, which includes, but is not limited to, the trauma of political, domestic, and gender violence; all of which the novel either directly or indirectly engages with.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, the haunting element of this trauma, embodied in Milkman, trespasses boundaries and infiltrates every landscape of the protagonist's life: the social and the political, the communal and the individual, public and private spaces, and even her "private thoughts safe and sound in those recesses underneath" (*M*, 91). Read as such, middle sister's poisoning may be interpreted as a metaphor for the possession that has taken hold of her, the extent of which is made apparent by her younger sisters' observation that she had become white, "[l]ike white milk that's been painted extra white ... so that it glows in the dark" (221). Whilst emphasising the fact that Milkman had indeed got in, the image conjured is equally ghost like. If we take Milkman to stand for the spectre of past traumas, his possession of middle sister may in turn stand for the possessive hold that such spectres maintain on the Northern Irish narrative today. This is brought ever more to the foreground given how Burns blurs temporal boundaries. As Bartnk notes, the novel's "collusion of the present and the past suggests that the Troubles' mentality, though officially bid farewell to, nonetheless remains deterministic" (2021, 75). This being said, whilst rightly weary of the almost forced optimism of the official post-agreement narrative, Burns's writing is equally not entirely pessimistic. Indeed, Danaci underscores how, as "middle sister survives the nightmare she was subjected to, her story and eventual recovery offer a similar confrontation and a process of healing for

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<sup>79</sup> Interestingly, a similar observation is made by McCann in reference to *No Bones* and *Little Constructions*: she suggests that "Burns plays with narrative conventions in both novels with a view to mirroring on a narrative level the chaos of the socio-political setting of each" (2014a, 42).

the country itself” (2020, 304). I suggest that the key to this healing lies in a reimagining of community.

A further conclusion that can be drawn from reading the novel from the perspective of the crypt relates to the construction of identity, for, in the words of Castricano, “[t]wo people in a third one” is “an uneasy model of subjectivity” (2021, 24). Firstly, at an individual level, middle sister appears trapped somewhere in between the shades of tablets girl and shiny girl. We witness how she constantly tries to reassure herself that the way she thinks and plans functions as a secret mask to protect her true inner self. Nonetheless, the novel suggests that this self-reassurance is itself the mask which hides how this “not being anything” (*M*, 91) on the surface penetrates further within than is accounted for. Perhaps there is not actually anything concrete below this surface level at all, and the sought after ‘thing’ that needs to be protected is actually itself a *no-thing*. We may recall how middle sister herself expresses that whilst initially, the “under-the-surface turbulence” she felt confirmed to her that she was alive, eventually, the “numbance from nowhere had come so far on in its development that along with others in the area finding me inaccessible, I, too, came to find me inaccessible. My inner world, it seemed, had gone away” (177). As well as deconstructing the lie of the Heideggerian authentic individual, read against the history of Irish identity politics which has largely been dominated both by ideals of a desired homogeneity based on an ‘us’ and ‘them’ binary, the spectres in middle sister’s story reveal how identity is, on the contrary, necessarily heterogeneous, ruptured, liminal and undefined.

Additionally, the conflicting pressures of the two shades of the same spectre may also lead us to conclude that the protagonist at the same time stands for the identity of the nation of Northern Ireland itself, understood as the ‘middle sister’, trapped somewhere between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain. The three characters, by the end of the novel, are all presented as shades (one dead, two alive), which in turn alludes to the interconnected ghosts

that haunt these three nations (and perhaps, the spectre of a united Ireland). In a similar way to the message received in *No Bones*, the novel underscores how it is only by means not of communion, but of confrontation and communication with these spectres that individuals, communities and nations will be able to move beyond their self-protective/self-destructive identity politics.

This conclusion also allows the novel – as we also saw with *Little Constructions* – to act as a critique of the way the collective trauma of the Troubles has been officially dealt with. After the Good Friday Agreement, there was a certain push towards forgetting as a way of overcoming the traumas of the Troubles, with similar aims to the ‘Pact of Forgetting’ (Pacto del Olvido) employed in post-Franco Spain. Just as middle sister’s own “self-induced amnesia” (*M*, 66) does not prevent the effects of trauma from resurfacing, so too the collective trauma of the Troubles will continue to be felt in Northern Ireland, not only in spite of, but propelled by, official attempts to forget and move on. Writing two years prior to the publication of *Milkman*, Heidemann observes how, “[a] walk through the streets of post-Agreement Belfast reveals not only the changing terrain of the cityscape, but also the unchanging remains of its sectarian past” (2016, 1). Walking back in time with middle sister into her fragmented recollections of, in Burns’s own words, a “skewed form of Belfast” has a similar effect (Schwartz, 2019). Indeed, as Santos Brígida and Pinho propose, “Burns’s narrative strategies ... produce a form of storytelling that resists the Agreement’s tenets for how Northern Irish communities should heal” (2021, 437). These scholars challenge the explicit position of the Good Friday agreement that the best way to honour the victims of the war is through embracing a “fresh start”, suggesting that this position represents a systematic failure to recognise the “belatedness of a haunting event” (438). Just as Milkman’s apparitions in the novel blur the boundaries of time and place, and the narrator’s telling of the events are both fragmented and retrospective, so too, the haunting of collective trauma is revealed to take place not in any fixed understanding of the

past, but rather in physical and temporal liminality. Again, we are reminded how, in order to build a sustainable future, we must move away from the officially endorsed drive to forget towards an engagement with the spectres of our past. In middle sister's own words: "old dark things as well as new dark things had to be remembered, had to be acknowledged because otherwise everything that had gone before would have been in vain" (*M*, 264).<sup>80</sup>

Finally, throughout the course of this chapter, I also hope to have revealed how *Milkman* – like *No Bones* – works towards the deconstruction of barriers. Firstly, by means of an application of a communitarian lens, the fluidity of border between the internal and the external self is exposed by the operative community's penetration not only into private space but mental cognition. As the novel reveals the falsity of Heideggerian authenticity, the protagonist is presented not as internalised individual, but as set apart in her inclining *outside* of herself. We may be reminded here of Nancy when he writes that "Being itself comes to be defined as relational, as non-absoluteness...as community" (1991, 6). This observation in turn leads to the breaking down of the barrier between the individual and the community, first in uncovering the hegemonic unspoken hold of the operative community – the open secret of the novel – and later, in the recognition of the possibility of different, more open, inorganic kinds of bonds. Interestingly, Drong identifies certain transgressive elements to be found *within* the community itself, claiming that the "'imagined community' has porous borders and a fluid and fuzzy identity" and further that it "boasts a rich, multidimensional culture of its own, characterised by a variety of intertextual references that transcend local boundaries" (2019, 6). This is particularly embodied in those characters deemed by the community to be 'shiny', but equally in the transgressive behaviours and mindset of middle sister.

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<sup>80</sup> In an interview for the *Belfast Telegraph*, Burns describes how she did not feel the emotional effects of the trauma she experienced during the Troubles until years later. As the author claims, "I started to get my feelings. I would read about something I remembered but which hadn't engaged my feelings at the time. And then I would start to get my feelings. Fifteen or 20 years later I would be sitting in my room in London having a reaction emotionally to something that happened 15 or 20 years ago" (O'Doherty 2018).

Very much connected to this observation is the novel's questioning of the official narratives that constitute our understanding of history. This is achieved in part thanks to the success of Burns's experimental writing style, and in part to the way in which the reader interacts with the protagonist's retrospective telling of events. Her voice stands in for both unofficial records, and narratives told from the margins.<sup>81</sup> We may conclude with Santos Brigida and Pihno that, "[i]f 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" (2020, 448). Also relevant in this respect is the blurring of the boundaries between events and non-events, fact and fiction and reality and ideology. And finally, a reading of the novel from the perspective of the crypt leads to a dissolution of barriers between dreams and reality, the living and the dead, people, spectres and reflections. This is, after all, a novel that is underscored by issues of both physical and symbolic historic borders: 'our side of the road' and 'over the road'; 'our side of the border' and 'over the border'; 'our side of the water' and 'over the water', and many very real barricades. This interpretation of the novel is supported by a comment made by Burns in an interview for *The Guardian*, where she says, "I think it is absolutely fascinating to explore that whole theme of borders and barriers and the dreaded other" (Allardice 2018, n.p.).

As a concluding remark, it is interesting to briefly explore the final border that is trespassed at the end of the novel. Third brother-in-law's tiny garden is surrounded by an equally tiny, ornamental hedge, which is small enough to step over. Third sister, nonetheless, insists that everyone use the tiny gate. No matter how small and seemingly insignificant, this hedge is a social boundary which both creates and maintains a boundary line. What we have is

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<sup>81</sup> This observation also holds relevance for feminist approaches to the novel. For instance, McGuire highlights how this "retrospective mood" allows the novel to revisit the trauma of past sexual harassment whilst simultaneously questioning gender power dynamics of the present. She cites *Milkman* as an example of Emilie Pine's depiction of 'anti-nostalgia' in recent Irish fiction (2023, n.p.). As the general approach to revisiting the conflicts in Northern Ireland leaves the female experience largely on the sidelines, the importance of giving voice to marginalised stories in literature should not be understated. See: Emilie Pine 2011 and 2017.

a visual representation of the inside/outside divide at the heart of the novel. As the story draws towards its conclusion, third sister returns home drunk with her friends whilst middle sister and third brother-in-law are preparing for their run. They all accidentally trip over the hedge. The following conversation, revealing in its irony, ensues:

“Well, we told you, friend. We warned you. It’s rambunctious, out of control. The hedge is sinister. Get rid of it”. “Can’t”, said sister. “I’m curious to see how it’ll transpire and individualise”. “You can see how it’s transpired and individualised. It’s transpired into day of the triffids. It’s individualising into trying to kill us”. (*M*, 344)

*The Day of the Triffids* is a reference to John Wyndham’s 1951 post-apocalyptic novel, in which a species of alien plant takes over the world. The plants in this book are successful in their conquest by first creating an epic lightshow in the form of a meteor shower which blinds the entire world’s population. Similarly, in the unnamed community in which *Milkman* is set, borders have not only blinded the entire community from seeing what is really in front of them (with several of the characters literally blinded along the way), but also the fixation with borders functions as part of the community’s own self-destruction. Borders, then, are dangerous: they can blind, they can take over, and they can kill. This being said, hope is found in the novel’s dissolution of these same borders. In McGuire’s words, “[i]t is about seeing things and seeing them differently. It is about noticing what has always been there, hidden in plain sight. It is about reimagining the past and realigning the co-ordinates of the future” (2023, n.p.). The novel ends with middle sister and third brother-in-law not bothering with the tiny gate, but instead jumping the tiny hedge, themselves symbolically surmounting boundary lines. As middle sister reflects,

I inhaled the early evening light and realised this was softening, what others might term a little softening. Then, landing on the pavement in the direction of the parks &



reservoirs, I exhaled this light and for a moment, just a moment, I almost nearly laughed.

(*M*, 348)

Middle sister's exhalation offers a sort of cathartic release. Indeed, as Magennis concludes, "[w]hile we know, from our vantage point, that the violence of the Troubles will continue for decades after the novel's close, something in her exhalation offers the reader a chance to breathe out. Everything is possible again, and anything can be rewritten" (2021, 167). At the same time, the novel's ending also acts as an abandonment of the internal struggles amounting from the tensions between identity and identity politics, and trying to find one's place within the community. Middle sister, who has moved through questions of 'who am I?' and 'what is my relationship with other people?' finally finds relief when the boundaries that dominated present themselves as diminished in size. The closing line of the novel expresses the sentiment that "it's just a tiny hedge, and I think I could even laugh at it".

## Chapter Six: Deconstructing Inherited Narratives: Humour and Irony in *Mostly Hero*

### 6.1. Introduction

The role of both humour and irony is fundamental to Anna Burns's writing, yet it is a feature that, whilst often acknowledged, is rarely explored at any length. Of the numerous academic studies that have been conducted on Burns's most successful novel *Milkman* (2018), for instance, only one directly addresses humour, although from a linguistic approach (Rigane, 2022). This may well be in part due to the fact that, despite being undeniably funny, all four of her literary works are equally undeniably serious, and in part due to the commonplace misunderstanding that humour is something of a secondary, unnecessary stylistic add-on to works of literature, and one that concerns aesthetics over ethics. This being said, in the context of Irish culture more generally, it is not uncommon for humour to be described as part of the core or essence of what it means to be Irish. Whilst certain aspects of this preconception may be linked to unfounded historical stereotypes connected to negative portrayals of Irish immigrants in British and American popular culture and press, there is definitely something to be said for what seems to be the Irish way with words. Indeed, collections such as the University of Malaga's *Humour and Tragedy in Ireland* have done well to demonstrate how humour may be the link that connects a multitude of interdisciplinary research into Irish language, literature, theatre, poetry, film and social studies (Trainor de la Cruz and Heredia 2005). In the editors' forward to this collection, we are also reminded of the influence that Irish literature had on introducing humour into culture on a broader scale, with the work of Irish satirist Jonathan Swift and the novelist and playwright Oliver Goldsmith being central in this respect (2005, 9-16). Likewise, in more recent times, the influence of Oscar Wilde, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett on our comprehension of humour and irony is undeniable. Nonetheless,

even when these canonical works are taken seriously, they are often done so on the premise that they are serious *despite* the fact that they are also humorous.

In this chapter, I explore the role of humour and irony both in theory and in literature, arguing in favour of a position we might describe as taking humour more seriously, or being less serious with the serious. Humour is presented neither as a stylistic add-on, nor as something essentially Irish, but rather as the *form* of an argument – a form that has, in some respects, been inherited from the Irish canon. Equally, it is not an attempt to define the *essence* of humour, but rather an argument against the very idea (upheld from Plato to Kant) that concepts, words or ideas have an essence, be this knowable or unknowable. In particular, I examine the relationship between humour and irony and a deconstructive approach to literature. Very much connected to this relationship is a correspondence that may be found between the role of humour and irony in fiction and the rupture depicted in both the ethical encounter and communitarian bonds. With this in mind, I also explore how this particular rupture may open up a space for non-homogenising communities to be brought into being. I engage with a number of prominent approaches to humour and irony, but with a particular focus on those of Freud ([1927] 1990), Derrida (1988), Bakhtin (1984) and Rorty (1989). Whilst conducted specifically in reference to Burns’s novella, *Mostly Hero* (2019)<sup>82</sup> – perhaps the most overtly humorous and ironic of Burns’s prose – I suggest that the conclusions reached could equally apply to any one of novels. With this in mind, at times, I shall draw on a number of interrelated examples from her entire oeuvre.

Originally self-published online in 2014, *Mostly Hero* was first published in print by Faber & Faber in 2019. It has received no academic nor scholarly literary attention, to the extent that I have been unable to find a single published review: it would seem that the novella itself

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<sup>82</sup> Referenced hereafter in this chapter as *MH*.

has not been taken seriously. This could be for a number of reasons. Perhaps it is due to its overtly comical style, or the fact that Burns is playing with the superhero genre – a genre itself not deemed worthy of serious attention. Another influencing factor may also be its length – at only 127 particularly short pages, it only just fits into the category of novella rather than short-story; not serious, perhaps, in form. Equally, significant is the fact that it was not originally published in a ‘serious’ way, that is, not through a publisher, and not in print: it is, in a way, a ‘non-serious’ publication. Indeed, it was only published in print after the success of what is considered Burns’s more *serious* work, *Milkman*, having won awards and achieved international recognition. Thus, the novella was considered something of a non-serious commercial cash-in by the publishing house themselves – a souvenir, or something like a tea towel. It is considered non-serious, then, in both content *and* form.

*Mostly Hero* is something of an unconventional, post-modern subversion of the superhero genre and Greek mythology. It is described by the publisher as “the hilarious, hell-raising descendant of Quentin Tarantino and the Brothers Grimm” (*MH*, Blurb). It is, nonetheless, undoubtedly aimed at both the specificity of the violence of the Troubles, and more generally, tribal warfare of any kind. Additionally, just as we have seen with all of Burns’s novels, the political is presented in the novella as mirrored in the psychological. The plot of the novella is clever, witty, violent and hilariously funny. The male protagonist, named superhero (or hero for short), is said to come from a long line of superheroes who intermittently save the world from the grips of the supervillains. His lover, femme fatale (femme for short), has unwittingly been put under a spell to kill hero by the notorious downtown eastside gang, who seek to take their turn at world domination. Also unbeknownst to femme is that her great aunt (Great Aunt) is in fact hero’s arch enemy. She too, “not further for this world” (*MH*, 7), wants to have one last chance at world domination herself, and so plans to kill hero with the help of her hench men (so long as it does not break her beloved niece’s heart). Freddie

Ditchlingtonne’ly, feme’s cousin, also seeks to kill Great Aunt. He, however, has been coerced by his own supervillain lover, Monique Frostique, who says she will only marry Freddie once the deed is done. All expectations are simultaneously both embraced and subverted, and just as we have seen with Burns’s novels, in the end, a glimpse of hope and restoration can be pieced together from amongst chaos. I suggest that this is possible thanks to humour.

## **6.2. A Philosophy of Humour and Irony**

### **6.2.1. The Super-Humorous Attitude**

When asked about the role of humour in her novels, Anna Burns answers in explicitly Freudian terms: humour, she says, may be “a way of coping” (Allardice 2018, n.p.). Given the country’s hugely traumatic and violent past, it is unsurprising that such an understanding of humour is commonplace in the Northern Irish context. Humour may provide both a release and escape from our darkest of realities. Freud’s theory of humour is elaborated in two of his less referenced texts: a book titled *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* ([1905] 1976), and an essay simply called “Humour” ([1927] 1990). With regards to the first text, the concept of humour (distinguished from that of jokes and the comic) is actually only discussed in the final chapter, and even then only in the last nine pages. His second work is in the form of a six-page article. Freud does not directly discuss humour further in any of his more canonical texts. It is from these fifteen pages alone, then, that we may decipher the Freudian account. This being said, I am more interested in the position elaborated in his later work, which moves away from a focus on the economy of release in humour (whereby jokes express otherwise suppressed desires and drives of the subconscious) towards a theory that aligns closely with Burns’s own words: that a humours attitude is a way of coping.

In his 1927 paper, Freud depicts humour as the process by which “[t]he ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it

cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure” ([1927] 1990, 162). Accordingly, it would seem that, in humour, the superego, or the “severe master” ([1927] 1990, 166) – normally associated with suppression and control (see Freud’s *The Ego and the Id* ([1923] 2019) – takes on a distinctly different role, for it acts to protect or perhaps even comfort the ego in the face of external adversity. Freud describes this new role in reference to the parent (and more specifically, the father). As we read,

[g]enetically the super-ego is the heir to the parental agency. It often keeps the ego in strict dependence and still really treats it as the parents, or the father, once treated the child, in its early years. We obtain a dynamic explanation of the humorous attitude, therefore, if we assume that it consists in the humorist’s having withdrawn the psychical accent from his ego and having transposed it on to his super-ego. To the super-ego, thus inflated, the ego can appear tiny and all its interests trivial; and, with this new distribution of energy, it may become an easy matter for the super-ego to suppress the ego’s possibilities of reacting. ([1927] 1990, 164)

In his compelling (and incredibly humorous) 2002 publication *On Humour*, British philosopher Simon Critchley depicts this reconstruction of the super-ego in terms of maturation, which he describes as “a maturity that comes from learning to laugh at oneself, from finding oneself ridiculous ... in humour the childlike super-ego that experiences parental prohibition and Oedipal guilt is replaced with a more grown up super-ego” (103). Critchley emphasises how the super-ego’s ability to laugh at its own adversities provides a certain liberation or “child-like elevation” (95) for the ego, something he describes as working as a kind of anti-depressant (101).

Particularly relevant for our current purposes is a possible connection that arises between the role of the superego and the popular depiction of the superhero. This is especially

telling when Freud describes the ego of a person who adopts a humorous attitude in terms of “invulnerability” and “invincibility” ([1927] 1990, 162; 163). He questions,

[i]n what, then, does the humorous attitude consist, an attitude by means of which a person refuses to suffer, emphasizes the invincibility of his ego by the real world, victoriously maintains the pleasure principle – and all this, in contrast to other methods having the same purposes, without overstepping the bounds of mental health? ([1927] 1990, 163)

Critchley suggests, however, that the new, mature construction of the superego – that which he refers to, very much in the style of the superhero sequel, as “super-ego II” (2002, 103) – may also take the place of the otherwise narcissistic “ego ideal”,

thus saving the human, by means of humour, from all the fantasies of narcissism: perversion, ecstasy, *superman affirmation*, fusion with God or your essential self, and a legion of other chimeras ... from the Promethean fantasy of believing oneself omnipotent. (2002, 105; emphasis added)

Importantly, if it is to be liberating, the humorous attitude must encourage us to find ourselves ridiculous and laugh: “[o]ur wretchedness is our greatness” (Critchley 2002, 111). According to this account, our ability to laugh at ourselves is what saves us from being consumed in our own ecstasy. It is interesting to note here how the traditional depiction of a superhero seems somewhat incapable of laughing at himself, which in turn becomes a reason why they tend to be the ones that are laughed *at* – the superhero is invincible and invulnerable, but perhaps to a great extent at the expense of maintaining “the bounds of mental health”. This is certainly the case for our protagonist hero in Burns’s novella.

The apparent correspondence between the role of superego in humour and the archetype of the superhero is something also noted by American philosopher and psychoanalyst Elizabeth Rottenberg (2020). Rottenberg elaborates how,

[i]n this scenario ('Superego and Ego vs. Cruel World'), the superego swoops down and rescues the ego; it becomes a kind of *superhero superego*, a *supersuperego*. ... Superego and Ego are a veritable Dynamic Duo (like Batman and Robin). On the one hand, we have a bulging, pumped up, hypercathected or hyperinvested (*überbesetzt*) superego. On the other, we have an itty, bitsy (*winzig klein*) ego, a 'boy wonder' with superpowers—namely, 'invulnerability' and 'invincibility' ... But *together*, let us remember, for this is what makes the Dynamic Duo so *superheroish*, Superego and Ego are able to take on the world. (2020, 44; emphasis in the original)

Accordingly, then, it is not merely a reconstruction of the narcissistic ego ideal, but something of a collaboration between the superego and the ego through humour that both deflates the superego's elevated narcissism and elevates the ego from the hold of melancholy. Interestingly, the humorous attitude thus defined does not necessarily stand totally at odds with the role of the superego as suppressor and censor. Rather, Rottenberg suggests that "it is only when the superego succeeds in mining its own compulsion, becoming a kind of implosive, self-explosive force at the centre of its own correctional agency, that humour seems to have the last and best laugh" (2020, 48). Also of note, and as Critchley observes (2002, 101), in terms of structure, humour and depression are very closely aligned, but in laughing, the humorous attitude provides us with something of a cure to the otherwise self-destructive autoimmune response to both adversities and absurdities.

Interestingly, Rottenberg also underscores how, just as the *superhero* only jumps in to save us when we are dying, so too the *superego* only opts to protect us when facing cruel realities: "[w]ith friends like this" she asks, "who needs enemies?" (2020, 47). It is here that



she draws a parallel between Freud's account of humour and his depiction of the game of *fort/da* (a concept that has proved paramount to my literary analyses thus far). Placing a significant emphasis on the role of play, Rottenberg reminds us of how Ernst in Freud's story not only plays with the reel, but also plays at making himself gone. Play in the face of death, then, may well be the ultimate expression of the *fort/da* game. Furthermore, when considering the role that play has in works of literature, it is worth bearing in mind how the concept of play also indicates a space of movement given within a mechanical structure. In *Mostly Hero* (and indeed in all of Anna Burns's fiction), we witness the author playing with our understanding of death, for the boundaries are blurred between the determinations of dead, alive, not dead, and undead. Thus, following both Critchley and Rottenberg's readings, we may conclude that the humorous attitude is less about the release of energy from the subconscious (as depicted in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*) and is more akin to a kind of play that allows equally for laughing at death and laughing at oneself (especially when on death row).

It is interesting, then, that for Henri Bergson, humour is considered in terms of a "mechanical inelasticity" (Bergson [1900] 2005, 5), that is, according to Bergson, what we find funny is when humans behave like machines. In his words, "attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine" ([1900] 2005, 15). In other words, we laugh when there is a complete lack of play within a machine – when humans are absent minded and mechanical. This too seems somewhat exemplified in the novella in question, for we laugh most when femme and hero act according to their archetypes. Moreover, once under the spell to kill hero, femme is literally absent minded – she does not know what is happening in the moment nor is she able to remember the episodes later on. It would seem, then, that both the *presence* and the *absence* of play makes us laugh.

### 6.2.2. Speech Acts vs Serious Play

In her analysis, Rottenberg also argues for the humorous last word to be taken seriously, and it is from here that I wish to move away from Freud's account towards an understanding of the role of humour less in terms of protection, and more in terms of a form of philosophical discourse – a form which in turn allows the subject to deconstruct their experiences of the world into which they have been thrown. Nonetheless, the result of such a discourse could in many respects still be understood as a means on coping, and I believe that it is more specifically this sense of coping that Burns engages with. I propose that the necessary leap is precisely that of the trace, or space, of *différance* in a Derridean sense.

Indeed, my understanding of the role of humour and irony in both theory and literature is to a great extent the result of rereading Derrida's 1988 publication *Limited Inc* – a collection of essays that overtly address the question of what counts for 'seriousness' in writing.<sup>83</sup> Whilst itself not in any way proposed as a thesis on humour (in fact, the word 'humour' never appears in the book, and the word 'irony' is used only once, and in an editor's footnote), the entire collection – but especially the essay titled "Limited Inc a b c . . ." – is both incredibly funny and recurrently ironic. Moreover, I believe that the work of this collection successfully demonstrates how the presence of humour may reflect not merely a stylistic choice on behalf of the writer but, on the contrary, is itself an integral part of the ("very serious") arguments that are made.

*Limited Inc* comprises two papers written by Derrida that form a critique of the Anglo-American theory of language known as speech act theory, as well as an afterword which directly addresses comments and criticisms that the papers provoked. The first, "Signature Event Context", is a response to British philosopher J. L. Austin's seminal work *How to Do*

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<sup>83</sup> I would like here to acknowledge my brother and academic Edward Smith's recommendation of revisiting this text.

*Things with Words* (1962). “Signature Event Context” was originally published in the proceedings of the Montreal conference devoted to the topic of communication in 1971, then in French in Derrida’s 1972 publication *Marges de la Philosophie*, with the first English translation, by Samuel Weber and Jeffry Mehlman, printed in the first volume of the 1977 edition of the journal *Glyph*. The second essay in the collection, titled “Limited Inc a b c . . .” is a response to American philosopher John Searle’s own reply to “Signature Event Context”, titled “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida”, which was printed in Volume 2 of the 1977 *Glyph*. As Searle rejected the request to have his article included in the collection, Derrida quotes his paper in its entirety in “Limited Inc a b c . . .”.

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a detailed analysis of all the arguments presented in the collection, or the theories with which they engage, there are certain elements that I do wish to highlight as I believe them to be key both for my current purposes, as well as for the broader deconstructive approach to the novel that I have undertaken thus far. In “Signature Event Context”, Derrida first takes issue with the concept of ‘communication’ understood solely as referring to the transmission of meaning. He argues,

we have no prior authorization for neglecting communication as a word, or for impoverishing its polysemic aspects; indeed, this word opens up a semantic domain that precisely does not limit itself to semantics, semiotics, and even less to linguistics. For one characteristic of the semantic field of the word communication is that it designates nonsemantic movements as well. (1988, 1)

Just as communication should thus be understood to be polysemic, so too the concept of ‘context’, said to delineate the parameters within which meaning is ascertained, can never be determined in any absolute way. Derrida questions, “[i]s there a rigorous and scientific concept of context? Or does the notion of context not conceal, behind a certain confusion, philosophical presuppositions of a very determinate nature?” (1988, 3). From here, Derrida explores what is

understood by the notion of ‘writing’. Whilst speech act theory presupposes the presence of an addressee, Derrida suggests that, in many respects, what defines writing is precisely the necessary possibility of the addressee’s *absence*. This focus on absence rather than presence extends beyond a theory of language to that of philosophical discourse, that is, that which seeks to understand our experience of the world in a broader sense. In contrast to a pursuit for external meaning, Derrida turns to deconstruct those hidden structures that underpin the very systems through which we determine meaning in language. In so doing, he argues against Austin’s determination of fictional discourse as both non-serious and parasitic on non-fictional discourse.

Searle’s “Reply” to Derrida’s paper effectively accuses him first of having not read Austin’s work, and later of not being able to read at all. It is in response to this “Reply” that Derrida writes the second essay in the collection, “Limited Inc a b c . . .”. I suggest that in this essay, the form of the joke – that is, quoting Searle in his entirety – is not merely an embellishment of Derrida’s argument, but rather, it constitutes the *form* of the argument. In other words, the argument could not be made in any other way. The humour in the text is integral to understanding his approach to language. On reading Burns, there is a sense in which she is doing something similar to Derrida here. Frequently we, as the reader, are encouraged to look at our own understanding of the world and laugh – she makes us see, through laughter, how far we may have got it wrong, and the extent to which our understandings have been shaped by our own inherited narratives. As I have said in my introduction, it is at the same time about being less serious with the serious, and taking the less serious more seriously.

In the afterword to the collection, Derrida questions Searle’s dismissal of the transgressive possibilities of theory, and in turn questions the distinction made between what he calls “nonfiction standard discourse” (that is, work to be taken seriously) and fictional “parasites”. Derrida writes,

what is “nonfiction standard discourse”, what must it be and what does this name evoke, once its fictionality or its fictionalization, its transgressive “parasitism”, is always possible (and moreover by virtue of the very same words, the same phrases, the same grammar, etc.)?

This question is all the more indispensable since the rules, and even the statements of the rules governing the relations of “nonfiction standard discourse” and its fictional “parasites”, are not things found in nature, but laws, symbolic inventions, or conventions, institutions that, in their very normality as well as in their normativity, entail something of the fictional. (1988, 133)

Very much connected to this is Derrida’s use of, in the words of a group of Cambridge academics wishing to protest his honorary degree, “elaborate jokes and puns ‘logical phallusies’ and the like ... tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists or of the concrete poets” (quoted in Naas 2010, 43). Michael Naas argues that Derrida’s “more serious philosophical claims and arguments his work makes” are “inseparable from the language in which they are made” – that is, from the supposed jokes, puns, tricks and gimmicks that he has been criticised for (2010, 43). Likewise, I suggest that humour is inseparable from Burns’s oeuvre.

### 6.2.3. Parody and Deconstruction

As Burns’s novella *Mostly Hero* is in many respects a parody of the superhero story, also relevant for our current purposes is a certain correlation that can be found between deconstruction and parody. Equally of note is the likely literary influence of James Joyce – considered by many to be the “master of parody” (Redondo-Olmedill 2005, 78). Whilst Gregory L. Ulmer famously contended that “part of the difficulty of Derrida’s oeuvre is that it may be the first fully developed theory ever couched in the parodic mode”, in his 1997 paper,

Robert Phiddian suggests that “Derridean deconstruction is not just a (serious) theory couched in a parodic mode (that it is a parodic theory of language), but also that it treats language and questions of truth and reference as if they were already in a play of parody (that it is a theory of parodic language)” (673). Whilst I broadly disagree with Phiddian’s narrow and ultimately dismissive reading of Derrida, there is something interesting to be found in treating deconstruction as parody.

According to Phiddian, parodic texts and deconstruction alike focus on the “echo, allusion, appropriation, and misprision” in writing (1997, 680). And so, parodic “crooked” texts invite a deconstructive reading in a way where more “straight” texts may resist (1887, 680). He cites Derrida’s “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion” in *Limited Inc* as similarly referring to two such modes of writing. Derrida writes that his essay,

makes uncomfortable reading because it is written in at least two registers at once, for it answers to at least two imperatives. On the one hand, I try to submit myself to the most demanding norms of classical philosophical discussion .... On the other hand, in so doing I multiply statements, discursive gestures, forms of writing, the structure of which reinforces my demonstration in something like a practical manner. .... This dual writing seemed to me to be consistent with the propositions I wanted simultaneously to demonstrate on the theoretical level and to exemplify in the practice of speech acts. (Derrida 1988, 114; quoted in Phiddian 1997, 680)

Nonetheless, we may question what exactly Phiddian means by “crooked texts”. Some of Derrida’s most canonical works deconstruct the writing of Plato, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger and, as is the case in *Limited Inc*, Austin and Searle – all authors that Phiddian would, I imagine, consider to be writers of “straight” texts. Phiddian would do well to remember here that if one approaches Derrida in search of external, clear meanings, they will undoubtedly fail at their own game.

From here, Phiddian proposes that “parody *is* a form of deconstruction” that is, that parody and deconstruction “are secretly the same thing” (1997, 681). The basis for this argument lies partially in how easily Derrida’s definition of the term ‘deconstruction’ may apply to our understanding of ‘parody’. This is particularly apparent in the following passage from *Of Grammatology*, wherein Derrida explains,

[t]he movements of deconstruction do not destroy [sollicitent] structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a *certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (Derrida 1967, 24; quoted in Phiddian 1977, 681).

Just as deconstructive texts inhabit the texts they seek to deconstruct, parody, too, borrows and inhabits the “host genre” to the extent that it both is, and is not, an example of the genre it seeks to subvert (Phiddian 1977, 681). Burns’s *Mostly Hero*, for example, whilst parodic and subversive, *is* still a superhero story. Indeed, as Redondo-Olmedill rightly observes in reference to Joyce, “one’s appreciation of the joke depends entirely on how well one knows the parodic object” (2005, 78).

Phiddian also highlights how Derrida’s most famous line “there is nothing outside the text” holds most power when read as a description of parody: “[p]arody occurs within textuality. It resonates within language (or sign systems if it’s painting, drama, or music), without attempting to break out on its own into the zones of pure representation or original” (1977, 684). Further, he claims that “parody is *différance*” (1977, 684) in that “the parodic text differs from its model, but it also displaces and *defers* it” (1977, 685). The connection lies

primarily in the possibility of doubling and repetition of parodic language, with “parodic repetition both adding to and hollowing out its model”, and whereby the parodic text and its model repeatedly displace and defer each other (1977, 686). This idea is key to understanding the relationship between Burns’s novels and Troubles and trauma narratives. Burns both repeats, displaces and defers the stories and histories she engages with. Importantly, however, I wish to underscore in this chapter how, through humour, trauma is not simply repeated, but equally *transformed*.

#### 6.2.4. Parody and the Carnavalesque

When discussing humour and parodies, it is impossible not to do so without evoking the work of Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Indeed, in accordance with Derrida, Bakhtin cites the novel (although specifically Renaissance literature) as the space to explore the relationship between seriousness and humour: he claims that “[i]n world literature there are certain works in which the two aspects, seriousness and laughter, coexist and reflect each other” (1984, 122). Also, and again in a similar vein to Derrida, Bakhtin’s literary theory is founded upon his theory of language, which is often referred to as translinguistics. Meaning, according to Bakhtin, is created through discourse, which may be understood as something of a game. In this game, words are exchanged back and forth with the end game being “the sum of the words’ usage” (Wilson 1986, 77). As this dialogue requires more than one voice, there are numerous voices expressed in each utterance. Thus, Bakhtin saw the novel as the upmost sight of polyphony. In reference to Dostoevsky’s novels, he describes how,

[w]hat unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (Bakhtin 1984, 6; quoted in Wilson 1986, 77).



Bakhtin's insistence on both the dialogical and hybrid nature of language, especially present in the language of literature, also draws our attention to the ethics of laughter: "by denying identity, it embraces alterity" (Lachmann, Eshelman and Davis 1989, 145). From here, we begin to see a certain correlation between Bakhtinian laughter, the communitarian depiction of singularities and the Derridean project of deconstruction: a correlation that lies both in the blurring of boundaries and in ecstatic projection. Scholars Lachmann, Eshelman and Davis elaborate that,

Bakhtin's somatic semiotics describes not only the exchange relationship between body and world, but also the border traffic between inside and out, between I and we, between identity and alterity. It is the description of a process that culminates in ecstasy – an ecstasy, however, that does not refer to the soul leaving the body (which would mean the end of all exchange) but rather the egression of the body's inside into the outside world, that spilling out into the world which is captured in the phrase "to laugh your guts out". (1989, 151)

Of note is how Bakhtin particularly values novels that engage in parody, wherein the voices are borrowed and repurposed: all that is serious "had to have and indeed did have, its comic double" (Bakhtin 1981, 5; quoted in Wilson 1977, 78). The humour we see in parody is described by Bakhtin as 'carnival humour'. Carnivalization is depicted as the process whereby carnival humour is incorporated into literature. In one his most famous quotes, Bakhtin describes carnival laughter as,

[f]irst of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. (1965, 11)

We may recall here the disturbing, psychologically constructed carnival scene in Burns's *No Bones*, during which the character Vincent is forced to identify the corpse of his deceased father (2001, 134-67). This nightmarish carnival both disrupts the given order, and blurs the boundaries between dead and alive, inside and outside. It simultaneously buries and revives the spectres that haunt the text. In quite the Bakhtinian fashion, the trope of the grotesque body is pushed to the extreme that the body of the father is essentially deconstructed (a case of "spaghetti-fication" (165), whilst Mary Dolan's baby is not simply brought outside the body, but forced in and out (139-41). Thus, Burns evokes clear echoes of both Freud and Derrida in a scene that is at the same time undoubtedly carnivalesque.

Importantly, Bakhtin, too, puts emphasis on the fact that for the counter or unofficial voice of parody to exist, there is the necessity of the pre-existence of the official voice. As Robert Wilson writes of Cervantes' *Don Quijote*:

the popular comedy that pervades *Don Quijote* (the dialectical variations, the homespun games, the folk sayings, the many vulgarities, both within and without the inns) and that fills Sancho Panza's voice, requires for its effect the prior existence of the labyrinthinely elegant discourse of chivalric romance that, both in stylistic echoes and in essential structure, fills Don Quijote's own voice. (Wilson 1986, 79).

With this in mind, although carnivalesque acts are transgressive, Wilson emphasises that carnivalization is nonetheless distinct from transgression, and it is here that he contrasts Bakhtin's carnival with the project of deconstruction. Whilst both carnivalization and deconstruction invoke an element of transgressive play, with the two closely aligning when considering Derrida's frequent use of wordplay, Wilson insists that the carnival is at odds with Derridean free-play. He describes free-play as "a mode of bondage"; "a necessary condition and an inevitable effect, not a willed, free or purposeful act" (Wilson 1986, 84). Interestingly, Wilson proposes the kaleidoscope as an appropriate metaphor for free-play, "an endless linear series of permutations, each spectacular in itself, each different, with no potential for

correction, enhancement or culmination” (84). Such a metaphor would be inappropriate for the Bakhtinian carnival. In contrast to the irreducibility of Derridean free-play, in the carnival, there is not “endless (nor even an open) play of difference but a wholeness composed of differences within a single utterance” (Wilson 1986, 85). The carnival is about completion rather than deferral, organisation rather than openness. In Bakhtin’s words, “[t]he material components of the universe disclose in the human body their true nature and highest potentialities; they become creative, constructive, are called to conquer the cosmos, to organize all cosmic matter. They acquire a historic character” (Bakhtin 1965, 366). The “historic character” of the carnival is directed towards a futural end, as Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis elaborate,

in the carnivalesque game of inverting official values he sees the anticipation of another, utopian world in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway, a world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted. (1989, 118)

Of course, in many respects, this utopian world embodies a number of principles we may consider fundamental to the communitarian perspective – above all, openness and difference – and in this sense it is possible to align it with the Derridean notion of the ‘democracy to come’. Indeed, further parallels may be found in Bakhtin’s emphasis on the importance of heteroglossia, which indicates how once dogma is deconstructed, hidden and forbidden meanings and ancient ambivalences may be revealed. However, the key distinguishing feature is Bakhtin’s focus on completion and totality; in contrast, the ‘democracy to come’ is both without definition and eternally deferred. In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida explains how,

[a]t stake here is the very concept of democracy as a concept of a promise that can only arise in such a *diastema* (failure, inadequation, disjunction, disadjustment, being “out of joint”). That is why we always propose to speak of a democracy *to come*, not of a

*future* democracy in the future present, not even of a regulating idea, in the Kantian sense, or of a utopia – at least to the extent that their inaccessibility would still retain the temporal form of a *future present*, of a future modality of the *living present*. (Derrida 2006, 81; emphasis in the original)

Whilst structured like a memory, it is not the memory of a past democracy nor the promise of a future democracy, but rather the exposure to an injunction that is only possible in its impossibility (Derrida 2006, 144).

This being said, both Bakhtin and Derrida employ laughter as a means of drawing together the opposing poles of presence and absence, life and death, familiar and unfamiliar, and I believe it is this uncanniness of laughter that holds something of a therapeutic effect. As Bakhtin writes in *Rebelais*,

[l]aughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. ... As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment-both scientific and artistic-and into the hands of free experimental fantasy. (1981, 23)

Thus, Bakhtinian laughter allows the unfamiliar to become familiar. However, Bakhtin also describes it as a form of alienation or estrangement from memory: “one laughs in order to forget” (Bakhtin 1981, 23; quoted in Lachmann, Eshelman, and Davis 1989, 975). Whilst this largely stands at odds with Derrida’s focus on the politics of memory and inheritance, Bakhtin does well to underscore how laughter allows a critical space to erupt between a memory and the present moment.

### 6.2.5. Irony

Very much connected to Freudian humour, deconstructive parody and the carnivalesque alike is the role of irony. As Donna Haraway writes in *A Manifesto for Cyborgs*:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method. (1990, 190)

Again, we are met with the coexisting dialectic of the serious and the non-serious, for irony is about humour and play, but as Haraway highlights, it is *serious* play.

The logic of irony may be aligned with the Freudian logic of dreams, whereby contradictions are represented as united, and interpretations look mostly to opposites or double meanings. Claire Colebrook depicts how a similar logic of irony may equally be observed in our historical context: “today nothing really means what it says. We live in a world of quotation, pastiche, simulation and cynicism: a general and all-encompassing irony. Irony, then, by the very simplicity of its definition becomes curiously indefinable” (2004, 1). In his 1996 paper “The Concept of Irony”, Paul de Mann, for his part, concludes that irony is not in fact a concept, and thus cannot be contained or controlled. This is itself, as Mladen Dolar observes, a deconstructive position, and one that aligns irony with *différance* (2023).<sup>84</sup> Irony, like parody, relies on repetition. As we observed in parody, in the repetition of irony a space is created between one happening and the next which means the two repetitions are never the same. Indeed, Derrida often draws our attention to the way in which the differential properties of a text often contradict what the text intended to say. As Renegar and Goehring propose, “irony

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<sup>84</sup> This observation was made in a lecture and workshop given at Dundee University, titled “On Ontology”, held on 19<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> May 2023.

allows for a both/and perspective to flourish in a world where either/or choices are often dissatisfying and overly limiting” (2013, 319).

Interestingly, Colebrook also connects the indefinable aspect of irony with the destabilisation of textual contexts, and thus with Derrida’s response to Searle’s paper. Whilst Derrida acknowledges that no text can be read independently of context, he insists that,

a context is never absolutely closed, constraining, determined, completely filled. A structural opening allows it to transform itself or to give way to another context. This is why every mark has a force of detachment, which not only can free it from such and such a determined context, but ensures even its principle of intelligibility and its mark structure – that is, its iterability (repetition and alteration). A mark that could not in any way detach itself from its singular context – however slightly and, if only through repetition, reducing, dividing and multiplying it by identifying it – would no longer be a mark. (Derrida 1988, 216; quoted in Colebrook 2004, 97)

According to Derrida, then, in order for language to work, it is necessary to assume the impossible distinction between ironic and non-ironic language (1988, 114). Colebrook elaborates that,

[t]here could be no such thing as a language without a notion of proper meaning. At the same time, any such proper meaning is necessarily absent, anticipated and deferred. Writing and language, therefore, are always structured by the problem of irony: we must have both a secure contextual sense and understand any specific use of a word or concept as having a force beyond the present context. A word can only have meaning, or work in a context, if I recognise its continued sense beyond what is said here and now. Language is not something that we make up as we go along; it must have a pre-existing order, but each conversation also alters and defers that order. (2004, 96)

Moreover, it is precisely this subversive power of ironic language that allows irony to encourage non-hegemonic communities to be imaginatively created.

#### 6.2.6. Irony and Community

By allowing two contradictory terms to exist simultaneously, irony opens up the space for discourse, and it is in literature that irony speaks the loudest. Indeed, in his seminal book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), American pragmatist Richard Rorty argues that the discourse of theory is itself not capable of unifying philosophies of self-creation or private perfection with those of public social justice. In recognising the truth in both, as well as the impossibility of unification in a single language, the novel is said to provide a space where solidarity is not discovered through abstract contemplation, but is imaginatively *created* – a space that cannot be found in theory (Rorty 1989, xvi). Solidarity (which is not the same as commonality or any essentialist faith in humanity as such) can be created from an increased sensitivity to the suffering endured by others, and the recognition of the cruelty we ourselves, in seeking self-creation, are capable of. Importantly, Rorty is not reducing literature to its moral effects, making any claims as to the essence of literature, nor prescriptions as to what literature *should* be like. His claim is rather that, due to a combination of the contingency of human solidarity and literature's stronger appeal to emotion over and above contemplation or reflection, literature can be a more productive discourse than theory in this respect.

According to Rorty, irony may be understood as the identification of the contingent nature of observations and descriptions. He claims that ironists are “never quite able to take themselves seriously” as they are “always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change” (1989, 73-4). Indeed, the humour of irony is, in Critchley's words, about “finding oneself ridiculous” (2002, 103). Rorty describes “liberal ironists” as those who have “hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease” (Rorty 1989, xv). He suggests that the opposite of irony is

common sense: “[t]o be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies” (74). In contrast to commonsense, irony appears intertwined with an ethics of care and alterity, for “what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right” (166). A similar observation is made by Renegar and Goehring, who argue that the discursive space opened by ironic language encourages both optimism and the possibility for social change, for “irony allows for the cultivation of an attitude of care and charitability” (2013, 316). The destabilising and disruptive power of ironic language provokes a multiplicity of meanings, and a rupture in identities. As Renegar and Goehring explain, “[v]ocabularies of oppression can be dismantled and tossed aside when ironists have an understanding of the contingency of language, thus allowing new vocabularies of agency and liberation to emerge” (2013, 321). This rupture is not far removed from the rupture encountered both in the Levinasian ethical encounter, and in occurrences of the communitarian inoperative community – it is a rupture that demands both response and responsibility.

Rorty’s focus on the contingency of language to some extent echoes Derrida’s own arguments made against the platonic metaphysics of presence, speech act theory and logocentrism. There is a certain contingency at play in Derridean free-play that may be described as an ambiguity or undecidability. Derridean free-play, too, demands a response and responsibility: “[i]t calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility” (Derrida 1988, 116). Moreover, reading from the margins of a text involves approaching questions of ethics from a perspective of marginality or alterity. The undecidability and marginality of the deconstructive reading is the space where the ethical erupts. In other words, ethics is brought into question when logocentricity (which suppresses alterity) is interrupted or disrupted; when the totality of the self-same is ruptured, and non-identity is revealed.



Interestingly, Derrida's insistence on the undecidability of free-play in humour to some extent aligns with Bataille's depiction of laughter as unknowable: "*the unknown makes us laugh*" (1986, 90; emphasis in the original). In his analysis of Bataille's philosophy of humour, Joseph Libertson interprets the unknowable aspect of laughter in reference to a philosophy of alterity, and a form of radical passivity (1982, 1; quoted in Trahair 2001, 158). There is a certain sense, then, in which the ethics of humour is closely tied to the structure of the secret. Indeed, non-homogenising communitarian bonds can be manifested in the secret as an ironic interrupted language. As I hope to have underscored in previous chapters, the ethics of deconstruction is to be understood in terms of Derrida's discussion of unconditional hospitality. However, this unconditionality cannot be fully determined, as Derrida insists that no context has limits: deconstruction is, he claims, "the effort to take this limitless context into account" (Derrida 1988, 136). Thus, whether from the standpoint of the liberal ironist, or the deconstructionist, it seems that the free-play of irony, through a focus on contingency or undecidability, exposes the dominance of a metaphysics of presence, and allows for an ethical discourse to emerge from the margins. In irony and humour, communities are created.<sup>85</sup>

### 6.3: Literary analysis

#### 6.3.1. Names

In like manner to both *Little Constructions* and *Milkman*, the characters in *Mostly Hero* are to some extent deprived of proper names. The protagonists are superhero (the community's superhero), femme fatale (both hero's lover and something of a pinnacle of the 'femme fatale'), Great Aunt (a "frail" and "dodderly" old lady in public (*MH*, 26) but also – something of an open communal secret – the community's most powerful super-villain), Monique Frostique

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<sup>85</sup> Where Rorty diverges from (his reading of) Derrida is in his push for a pragmatic response through the adoption of what he calls the "liberal ironist" position (1989, xv). Rorty fears the postmodern philosopher is prone to concentrate on private projects of perfection, and on determining responsibility and otherness in strictly theoretical terms.

(another supervillain, and as the name suggests, also a particularly cold-hearted lover), and finally Freddy Ditchlintonne'ly (femme's cousin, who is both the one who is easily ditched, and is given a pseudo-aristocratic name for a character who above all seeks self-gratification).

No doubt, the names themselves have been chosen for comic effect. However, what immediately comes to mind here is how in "Limited Inc a b c . . ." Derrida too opts to call Searl not by his proper name, but rather by the acronym "Sarl" throughout the course of his paper. In so doing, he questions both Searl's decision to copyright his own name in the "Reply", as well as the very concept of copyright and authorship that this move insists. Thus, Derrida's motives for doing so are both humorous and integral to the argument he is making. For this reason, I believe it necessary to quote Derrida at length here:

The expression "three + n authors" seems to me to be more rigorous for the reasons I have already stated, involving the difficulty I encounter in naming the definite origin, the true person responsible for the Reply: not only because of the debts acknowledged by John R. Searle before even beginning to reply, but because of the entire, more or less anonymous tradition of a code, a heritage, a reservoir of arguments to which both he and I are indebted. How is this more or less anonymous company to be named? In order to avoid the ponderousness of the scientific expression "three + n authors", I decide here and from this moment on to give the presumed and collective author of the Reply the French name "Societe a responsabilite limitee" – literally, "Society with Limited Responsibility" (or Limited Liability) – which is normally abbreviated to *Sarl*. ... I hope that the bearers of proper names will not be wounded by this technical or scientific device. For it will have the supplementary advantage of enabling me to avoid offending individuals or proper names in the course of an argument that they might now and then consider, wrongly, to be polemical. And should they, perchance, see this transformation as an injurious or ironic alteration, they can at least join me in acknowledging the

importance of the desires and fantasms that are at stake in a proper name, a copyright, or a signature. And, after all, isn't this the very question which, posed by Signature Event Context, will have involved us in this improbable confrontation? It is as a reminder of this, and not to draw the body of his name into my language by subtracting one r and two e's, that I thus break Searle's seal (itself already fragmented or divided). (1988, 32)

The limited liability of 'Sarl's refers to a clause that states that investors cannot be held liable for more than they have contributed. By ironically making use of this acronym to name Searl (three + n), Derrida humorously reveals the extent to which Searl has got it wrong. Indeed, as Spivak explains, "the recuperating of a plural, divided, hetero-geneous, different-deferring intentionality under the rubric of a single self-present sovereign and generative intention has something in common with these (in Derrida's case ironic) procedures" (1980, 33). In her reading of the text, Spivak identifies how Derrida's choice to dislocate Searl's seal in the dislocation of the proper name is an echo of the post-structuralist account of the "irreducibly pluralized and heterogeneous subject" (1980, 33). What Derrida is arguing against is the homogenous present and self-present subject of the speech act that the self-seal of the autograph (which itself may well correspond with the self-assured self-present narcissistic ego ideal). This observation draws light on how Derrida's arguments against speech act theory correspond both with the communitarian account of singularities as previously outlined (that is, as dislocated and undefined), and the Derridean identification of the unconscious with absolute alterity.

To return to the novella, I suggest that Burns's choice of names (or the denial of proper names) achieves something not far removed from Derrida's dislocation of the seal of Searl's name in "Limited Inc a b c . . .". In naming the characters by their archetypes, yet presenting in the characters both comical subversions of these same archetypes and a multiplicity of

possible interpretations, Burns disrupts the seal of the modern mythology through which we construct our understanding of the world. This modern mythology is precisely the trope of the superhero – and more so still given the context of the Troubles. Moreover, just as Derrida points to the impossibility of naming “the entire, more or less anonymous tradition of a code, a heritage, a reservoir of arguments” to which he claims both himself and Searl are indebted, so too Burns directly addresses themes of inheritance, and she does so principally through humour.

It is also worth briefly commenting here on the apostrophes in Freddie Ditchlingtonne’ly’s name. Grammatically speaking, the apostrophe is an indicator of absence – it shows that something is missing, that something has been removed. Interestingly, the etymology of the affix ‘ly’ which functions to transform a noun into an adverb, making the noun *like* something else, goes back to the old English word ‘lich’ meaning ‘corpse’. And so already, Freddie is named from the outset the ditched pseudo-aristocratic corpse he is to become. Equally of note is that the two protagonists – hero and femme – are the only two characters whose names are consistently written in lower-case letter.

As is also the case with both *Little Constructions* and *Milkman*, a further effect of denying the characters proper names is that readers, if they are to follow the story, are forced to focus instead upon the relationships the characters have with one another. The constant oscillating conflict between love and consumption<sup>86</sup> when it comes to the characters of hero and femme in many ways reflects the struggle to grasp what it means to be intimate. In all its humour and irony, the novella reminds us of the communitarian focus on alterity, difference and otherness. It is a story about vulnerability and intimacy, whereby in the end, Burns reveals how to love an other is not to subsume what makes them different, to drag them into one’s own

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<sup>86</sup> I use the term ‘consumption’ here to reflect their attempts to devour each other’s alterity in like manner to the operative community’s drive for fusion, and echoing John Doe’s literal consumption of his victims in *Little Constructions* (Burns 2007, 95).

world of understanding, but to meet them on the borderline. Indeed, as Critchley rightly observes, “ethical subjectivity is comic rather than tragic” (2002, 26). Equally, we may observe here how, just as humour has a way of embracing alterity, so too an openness to alterity – an unconditional hospitality – may indeed be a prerequisite for the humorous attitude. This takes us on to my second point of interest: the inheritance of trauma and violence, and the interconnected theme of narrative inheritance, both of which are revealed in the novel when hero and femme meet on the borderline.

### 6.3.2. Inheritance and the Trauma Narrative

I would argue that in all four of her books, Burns is pushing the trauma narrative to such an extreme that it breaks both its form and hold. Across the board we are met with characters whose understanding of the world is very much shaped by the grip that the inherited trauma narrative has on their lives. Yet Burns’s use of humour and irony in her writing to a great extent loosens the grip of the trauma narrative in making the very serious effects of both the lived experience of trauma and inherited trauma (whilst still very serious) also almost laughable. A perfect example of this is to be found in the way in which the reader is encouraged to laugh at their own “trauma clothes” or “Noises” in *Little Constructions* (Burns 2007, 249; 91). Burns allows a certain space or gap to erupt between one’s own lived experience and something of a view from elsewhere, a distance that allows the reader both to laugh at their own melancholy and recognise the absurdity of the way in which these narratives are able to take hold. We take a look at the clothes we opt for when feeling particularly insecure, for instance, and we find ourselves ridiculous. It is a deferred response – a response of *différance* – and one in which irony plays an important role. This is something we see most overtly in *Mostly Hero*.

Another great example occurs in the novella amidst a conversation that takes place during hero and femme’s so called “post-cliff revelations” (*MH*, 50). The scene is described as “post-cliff” as it takes place after an incredibly long, quite literal cliff-hanger scene that extends

across some twenty pages of the narrative. Hero arranges to meet femme for lunch at the edge of a cliff for, just as was the case for the day trippers in *No Bones*, hero, too, is drawn to the dramatic boundary line. Once there, Great Aunt's heavies turn up and push hero off the cliff. Femme then tries to save him with equipment she had inadvertently purchased to kill him, whilst the heavies, under new orders, work to save him too. Once pulled to safety, however, femme – now back under the spell placed on her to kill him – pushes him back off the cliff. In something of a pinnacle of Freudian *fort/da* play, hero is thus repeatedly pushed over the edge and rescued by different people intermittently trying to kill and save him, with the entire cliff literally crumbling away in the process, together with the borders and binaries at play. Described as a “semi-collapse and subsequent rearrangement” (*MH*, 42), it is not simply *destruction*, but rather *deconstruction*.

Once rescued by instruments femme initially (though unwittingly) intended as murder weapons, hero believes it to be time to reveal to femme the spell that has been placed upon her. Cautious not to upset her (superhero/ superego he is), we are told that he opts not to get into

undercurrents of passive, angry women, of hidden motivation, of latent hostility, innate hysteria, multi-generational consequences of long-term gender conflict, appetite suppression, sexual repression, good old fashioned penis envy, probably a few problems as regards their fathers, and all that other outer space stuff as well. (*MH*, 50-1)

With these details supposedly omitted, femme's response is especially ironic. We read,

[a]ll the angry mothers. You men and your angry mothers. You can't see an angry woman today but you sense it's mamma, de-sublimated, come to cut off your manhoods and boil up your teddy bears when maybe it isn't. Maybe it's just an angry woman – maybe one too, who isn't angry at you. (*MH*, 51)

Though hero omits his true analysis of the situation from the words he expresses, the argument is nonetheless present in its absence, and it is to these absences – these gaps – that femme responds, ironically, with the very same Freudian analysis. Part of what makes us laugh on reading this interaction is the extent to which we, as readers, may well have already been thinking the same thing. It is almost impossible not to read a story of gender conflict without analysing it from a Freudian perspective, looking for the hidden clues of the unconscious. Equally, the humorous exaggeration of Ernst's game of *fort/da* in front of the mirror allows us to laugh at the internal conflict between the superego and the ego, or the externally sublated hero and the internally suppressed villain within. By bringing these arguments to the surface, Burns allows us to laugh at the very structures that determine our interpretations. What is revealed in this moment of laughter may indeed be understood as indeterminacy or undecidability.

Additionally, as was also the case in *Little Constructions*, we see Burns playing once again with the notion of the inheritance of past violence and trauma through the interconnected concepts of repression and the repressor protein, or the recessive gene. With regards to the character femme fatale, this is discussed early on in the novel in reference to her apparent lack of “femme fatality” (*MH*, 9). We are told that femme,

considered herself the antithesis of the femme fatale – the good girl, the non-threatening girl, the cute-kid-next-door girl – thinking she'd escaped any soulless generational legacy of false glamour, dirty money and of men of power but dubious morality mattering more to her than anything else mattering to her; believing too, that the unhappy, fretful fatale gene had been recessed in her. (*MH*, 9)

The irony of this passage is of course two-fold – first, given the spell that had inadvertently been placed upon her, she displayed all the characteristics of a stereotypical femme fatale, and second, the very passage itself reveals the extent of her fretfulness. In her efforts to ensure that

any femme fatality skips her generation, femme engages in something of an intentional repression of the transgenerational violence of her foremothers. But the spell that determines her fate is put on her from elsewhere – the notorious downside eastside villains. It is a magic spell – not of this world – yet one whose only antidote is “incredibly natural, ordinary, nonmagical” (*MH*, 99). It is at the same time foreign and familiar, internal and external, natural and supernatural, inherited and acquired.

With regards to the character of hero, we are repeatedly told of the internal turmoil he suffers given the rumour that he does not descend from purely hero blood. It is said that he “existed on three levels”:

top level – often considered by mental health professionals the world over to be the delusional level for most people – was, in hero’s version, “good guy defeating villains for the benefit of the world”. That was him, he told himself, he was that guy. Below this level was the “I’ll get you back, you bastard’ level.” ... Third level was the deepest level, the level currently playing havoc with hero’s nervous and digestive systems. This was his fear that, despite all his sense of duty, all his correctness, all his antecedents, his high-minded nobility of purpose – even underneath that grudge bit – what if, in truth, he was nothing but a big repressed villain himself? (*MH*, 33)

Undoubtedly, Burns is making fun of the Freudian account of the three interacting agents of the psyche here (superego, ego, ID), and so again we are met with the parallel of the superego and the superhero. In provoking these concepts through irony and humour, however, Burns both draws attention to ways in which the Freudian analysis still holds sway in our understanding, but also, and perhaps more importantly still, the way in which humour can reveal these hidden structures. It is not only the case that the superhero/superego allows us to laugh to protect ourselves from the otherwise traumatic realisation of traumatic inheritance,



nor further that the superego II is also able to laugh at his own supposedly invulnerability, but rather, it is through laughter that such bonds are disrupted.

### 6.3.3. Death and finitude: “Corpses don’t live long”

As to be expected, given that the novella is a play on the superhero genre, and given the context of the Troubles that is both hidden and visible in the text, themes of violence and death are constants throughout. Both themes are dealt with in an intentionally exaggerated and humorous manner. In a similar vein to her disruption of Freudian analysis, by means of parodying the glorification of violence, Burns challenges the hold that superhero narratives have on our lives. Indeed, it is through the lens of the modern mythology of the superhero that we find Burns’s work both funny and shocking.

The deaths in the narrative occur in a sequential fashion in what appears to be the novella’s climax, about midway through the story. Firstly, coerced by his supervillain lover – Monique Frostique – to kill his supervillain great aunt – Great Aunt – Freddie enters the skyscraper where Great Aunt resides with a gun, finds her in her Contemplation Room “crying her heart out over *The Third Man*”, and shoots her in the back: “[t]wo times bang. Then a pause. Then another bang” (*MH*, 59-60). The scene in which she dies is also hilarious, and an intentional laugh at comic-book style deaths. We are told how,

she staggered about the room in quite the required fashion, knocking things off shelves, everything off tables, flinging arms, splattering blood. This proceeded for two full minutes, with Aunt clutching everyday items as if realising these were treasures dearer to her than anything, before dropping them and staggering with equal intensity to another piece of bric-a-brac somewhere else. Yes, a good two minutes, which shows that just because the last death must occur, doesn’t mean it can’t be a long, drawn-out Shakespearean one. (*MH*, 61)

Once in the foyer, and in a state of almost-dead, Great Aunt returns fire on Freddie. Then, once “definitely dead”, her corpse also shoots Monique Frostique in her “freezing cold heart” in the very same moment that Monique shoots a bullet at hero (83-4). By the time the police arrive at the skyscraper, they find a chaotic scene of several dead and almost dead, wounded and sobbing heroes and villains in a mist of red and green blood. Interestingly, this scene is not far removed from that in which the police arrive to the Doe family residence towards the end of *Little Constructions* (Burns 2007, 261-4).

The exaggerated and humorously glorified deaths in the novella to a certain extent allow the reader to reflect on the contingency of death in a communitarian sense. Death is returned to, in Nancy’s words, “the senseless meaning that it ought to have – and that it has, obstinately” (1991, 14). This, too, is achieved in the novella through laughter. Importantly, similar moments can be found in Burns’s novels. We may recall how in *Milkman*, when the character wee tot falls to his death from his bedroom window, the community said he must have thought himself a super-hero, and jumped (Burns 2018, 145-6); also in *Milkman*, when tablets girl is killed, the community was disturbed not by her murder itself, but the fact that it was not a political murder (237); whilst in *Little Constructions*, murders are so common place that characters are unable to see dead bodies when they are right in front of them, or the blood on their own hands (Burns 2007, 172); and in *No Bones*, Amelia insists that a violent outbreak at a cross-community youth training programme must have been about the border, despite witnessing otherwise (Burns 2001, 116). In all of these cases, the absurdity of the mystification of death is brought to the forefront through humour: in the space thus erupted in the differed response, what the reader necessarily confronts is death “without glory, without consolation, without recourse” (Blanchot 1988, 46).

#### 6.3.4. More Famous Last Words

From the demystification of death, I wish to return once more to the topic of conversing with the dead. Whilst, as previously outlined, in Burns's novels, communications with the dead take place mostly during psychotic episodes, or in the form of dream sequences (*No Bones* 2001, 246-82), or via Ouija boards (*Little Constructions* 2007, 80), in *Mostly Hero* we see fairly extensive sections of the otherwise short narrative dedicated to hearing the last words of the corpses themselves. Unquestionably, there is a sense in which Burns is mocking the idea of taking wisdom from the dead – yet, I would argue that both here and in her novels, her use of humour allows the reader to distinguish between listening to spectres, and constructing cultural monuments to the dead. As Kristeva's puts it, "[t]o worry or to smile, such is the choice when we are assailed by the strange; our decision depends on how familiar we are with our own ghosts" (1991, 191).

In *Mostly Hero*, the scenes in which the dead speak their last words are both insightful and funny. After dying in an exaggerated comic book manner – that is, "in quite the required fashion" (*MH*, 61) – each corpse, in a state of dead, or almost dead, is nonetheless still able to speak. It is precisely the humour of these scenes that allows us to deconstruct our understanding of our relationship with our ancestors, and in turn loosen the hold of inherited trauma. The expression 'famous last words', both in its ironic everyday usage and its quite literal sense, is especially apt for describing what is going on here. For instance, some fourteen pages after she is shot, Great Aunt is still talking, and at great length (despite apparently not going into too much detail). The reader is met with an exaggerated stream of last words, ending where she begins with the expression "[t]iny little button, I think I'm dead" (*MH*, 74). This in itself may be considered an example of what Freud determined the "crudest" form of humour – gallows humour – and one that so closely aligns with Freud's own reference to the joke "a criminal who was being led out to the gallows on a Monday remarked: 'Well, the week's beginning nicely'"

(1927, 161). Importantly, however, and as Rottenberg notes, Freud's inclusion of this joke is itself a repetition of his own 'famous last words' on the matter given in 1905. Perhaps the echo of Freud here allows his last words to continue to reverberate.

In search for the antidote to the spell put upon femme, the Wizards, too, consult the dead. They do so on the assumption that the words of a corpse would be in some way "more authentic" than those expressed through "some living, breathing, fallible human being medium" (MH, 95) (a belief also held by the Doe's in *Little Constructions*). The Wizards turn to the "dead, or semi-dead, or temporarily dead or undead" corpse of Monique Frostique (95). Before unpacking Monique's own famous last words, I wish briefly to explore a connection that arises here with Homer's *Odyssey*, (and in turn, given the Irish context, with Joyce's *Ulysses* ([1922] 2008)). In book eleven of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus travels to the underworld in search of information from the deceased. His primary concern is to speak with the shade of Tiresias, a blind clairvoyant or oracle (yet another character from mythology who is blinded for seeing, and acknowledging, that which he was not supposed to see).<sup>87</sup> After speaking with Tiresias, Odysseus then proceeds to speak to the shades of a dozen women, most of whom are mothers of heroes or lovers of gods (Fagles 1997, 249-71). Odysseus, too, seeks authentic answers that seemingly cannot be found in the world of the living.

Interestingly, a connection also arises here between *Little Constructions* character John Doe and hero's shared obsession with mothers. In *Little Constructions*, John Doe both describes his mother as "mother of God" and repeatedly buries her in pseudo funerals, to which the narrator suggests the reader might be thinking "[f]or God's sake! Enough of the mother! We've

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<sup>87</sup> Interestingly – and this very much connects with my previous discussion of secrecy – the story goes that Tiresias was blinded by the Gods for revealing their secrets. In this meeting in the underworld, Tiresias also warns Odysseus of Poseidon's anger stemming from Odysseus's blinding of the Cyclops Polyphemus, Poseidon's son. Polyphemus, we may recall, was blinded for not respecting the rights of hospitality to his guests (Fagles 1997, 211-30). Thus, this trace that can be identified between John Doe, hero and Odysseus in turn connects to the one-eyed cat's head in *Milkman*, found by the character middle sister after exclaiming that nobody was hurt (Burns 2018, 83).

all had mothers!” (Burns 2007, 115). In the previous chapter I suggested that John Doe’s mother obsession allows his character to be analysed in terms of the borderline patient. His discription bears uncanny similarities with the aforementioned conversation in *Mostly Hero* during the so called “post-cliff revelations” (*MH*, 50). With the character of Odysseus – considered one of the greatest heroes from antiquity – embodied in both John Doe and hero, the result is both a comic demystification and reinterpretation of Odysseus’s visit to the underworld. This is made even more apparent given femme’s rejoinder: “[a]ll the angry mothers. You men and your angry mothers” (51).<sup>88</sup>

Additionally, both hero and femme’s own conclusions add comic effect to the ultimate ending of the exaggerated *fort/da* play of hero being pushed back and forth over the cliff. Once finally rescued by his lover, the conversation falls back on the presence/absence of his mother. Burns’s fiction thus functions at the same time as a parody of superhero genres, Greek mythology, Freudian psychoanalysis and Troubles narratives. This parody, however, is one that aligns more closely with the kaleidoscopic work of Derridean free-play than with Bakhtinian carnivalization – it is “an endless linear series of permutations, each spectacular in itself, each different, with no potential for correction, enhancement or culmination” (Wilson 1986, 84).

#### 6.3.5. The Antidote that’s not an Antidote

To return to Monique Frostique’s last words, she is said to pronounce that, “[t]he great sign of love and friendship between us ... is that I don’t point my gun at you and you don’t point your gun at me and the designated site of the non-pointing of guns will be the cemetery, marked by a famous unfilled-in grave” (*MH*, 95-6). Interestingly, this is not so far removed from the warning Tiresias gives to Odysseus in the underworld: that if Odysseus and his men refrain

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<sup>88</sup> Equally, the theme of angry mothers ties John Doe and hero to Agamenon, who is referred to in antiquity as ‘the greatest of men’, and is considered the exemplar of pure masculinity. We may recall how, according to Aeschylus’s play, Agamenon is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra (a particularly angry mother) in a bathtub, for sacrificing their daughter in order to ensure good winds (*Oresteia* translated by Goldhill 2004).

from harming the cattle of Helios – with the designated site of this non-harming being the island of Thrinacia – they may make it home safely; if not, there awaits the open grave (Fagles 1997, 34). In *Mostly Hero*, the narrator interprets Monique’s last words as the equation of love and friendship with “distrust”, “treachery” and “hyper-defence” (96). The open grave in both cases, then, may be said to equate with the open grave of the operative community.

Unhappy with this antidote, however, the wizards decide to come up with their own. It is, I suggest, the wizards’ final conclusion that proposes something of an antidote to hold of the trauma narrative. They suggest, “[m]ayhap the answer to the spell ... is simply to decide you’re not under it after all” (*MH*, 99). This pronouncement may indeed be interpreted as something of a reiteration of the Foucauldian notion that by revealing the power structures that shape and dictate one’s understanding of the world, one thereby diminishes their scope. Moreover, it is also worth bearing in mind how the wizards’ conclusion greatly reflects Derrida’s arguments made against speech act theory in *Limited Inc*. It both is, and is not, an antidote. As the narrator explains,

the antidote to the spell seemed not to be one; or not to be one that wasn’t a natural, ordinary, non-magic one. Just people making an effort to work out how to be with each other, especially when one of them was being a person in a way the other person has decided was wrong. (*MH*, 99)

Undoubtedly, certain parallels are to be found here with the Northern Irish conflicts, adding weight to part of what is difficult about reading Burns’s entire oeuvre. This lies in the difficulty we have with writing humour into trauma – as Fiona McCann acknowledges, “[t]he comic strain is ... what differentiates [Burns’s] novels from other trauma narratives and there is no doubt that they make for highly uncomfortable reading for this reason” (2014, 20) – which is itself connected to the difficulty felt in upsetting our common sense. It is the simple realisation that the solution is something seemingly so un-difficult. Indeed, it is no more difficult than

doing democracy rather than shooting one another. The difficult part, then, is arriving at this realisation in the first place.

#### 6.3.6. Hero's Way of Coping

Once the antidote to the spell has been pronounced, hero's own way of coping is revealed to the reader when femme, looking for a First Aid Kit with which to stitch up hero's open wounds, stumbles across a hidden secret box labelled "survival kit" (*MH*, 103). This survival kit is discovered "buried in the back room, sticking up slightly from under a loose floorboard" (103). Inside the box, femme reveals a series of graphs. Hero's love of graphs was familiar to femme, but what troubled her about these particular graphs was the fact that "they had been hidden" (104). The contents of these graphs refer to the overriding storyline of the novella. We are told how,

[o]ne loosely pertained to Great Aunt and the other, less loosely, pertained to herself. The graph on Great Aunt covered the length of time in relation to the intensity of wooing hero would have to put in in order to get Great Aunt's favoured great niece – his Trojan Horse – to fall in love with him, thus enabling him to get Great Aunt to destroy her for having killed his clan. The graph on femme covered the quantity of his dismay at finding himself in love with her against the quantity of his wonder, even occasional joy, at finding himself in love with her. (*MH*, 104-5)

Hero's secret box, hidden yet visible, partially buried in his back room, his private space, acts as something of a parody of the psychoanalytic notion of the crypt. It both is, and is not, hero's crypt. The contents – the graphs – may at first glance appear far from cryptic: the first documents something of a pragmatic approach to his secret plot of retribution, in which the apparent correlation with Odysseus is made ever more explicit in reference to the Trojan horse. The second is a documentation of his ostensibly conflicting emotions. Perhaps the graphs act

as an external documentation of both the inner death drive and the pleasure principle. Yet hidden in these graphs lies hero's true intention behind his plot to kill Great Aunt – that is, to discover his ancestry. And so, buried in hero's crypt are the spectres of his ancestors – the living dead – together with the transgenerational trauma and conflict that hero has inherited, and which has taken a hold on his own narrative. In contrast to the presence and totality of the graphs, what lies hidden in the crypt – the unresolvable or absolute secrets – are gaps and absences in his story. It is, in a way, an external physical representation of hero's unconscious – a side of him that is, in hero's eyes, both abnormal or abominable, yet to the reader, ridiculously and laughably human. In Critchley's words: "our wretchedness is our greatness" (2002, 111).

Interestingly, there is an undeniable correspondence between hero's survival kit and the spell that has been placed upon femme. For it seems that the result of the spell is that femme is given a lack of presence with her own mind: when under the spell's influence, she no longer knows what she is thinking, nor is she able to identify the motivations for her actions, or even remember them after the event. Her inner sense of self is to a great extent mixed with and influenced by outer forces. We might say, then, that femme has been cursed with a subconscious – that is to say, she has been cursed with being human. Of course, this only looks like a curse from the viewpoint of logocentrism.

#### **6.4. Conclusion: Feme's Pharmacy**

As a means of conclusion, I wish, as I have done in previous chapters, to turn to the novella's own conclusion. Following from a chaotic scene that ends in the foyer to Great Aunt's skyscraper filled with dead and half-dead heroes and villains, and red and green blood, we see femme putting her haberdashery shopping to new use and patching up hero's open wounds, with hero lying heavily drugged (as a result of all of the hospital staff wanting to be the ones to administer his medicine) on his kitchen floor.



Significantly, this is not the first time femme has employed apparently inappropriate tools, intended for other resolves, for healing purposes. In the cliff-hanger scene, femme uses a rope she inadvertently bought to murder hero in order to rescue him, after herself having pushed him over the edge of the cliff (*MH*, 28). We are told how “[t]he idea was to hang him after drugging him with chloroform, but femme has no recollection of this. She stared at the rope therefore, also at other improvised murder weapons ... all the items she could not recognise nor ever imagine she would own” (28-9). In the very same scene in which we witness femme both desperate to save her lover, and crying tears of relief over his chest when he is safe, we also witness her attempt to kill him, with the sheer extent of the murder weapons revealing her extensive, subconscious plotting. She is presented as highly stereotypically feminine in her passion for shopping and her stream of tears, yet at the same time, unknowingly masculine, with her murder weapons purchased in the hardware store. Despite being named so overtly; she is only *inadvertently* the femme fatale.

The irony and humour at play in the text, especially in the depiction of femme, in many respects echoes the multiplicity of the meanings of words, and the destabilisation of meanings in deconstruction. This is most prominently seen in Derrida’s exploration of the ‘pharmakon’ in Plato’s texts: an ancient Greek term that can mean both remedy and poison (Derrida [1972] 2004, 67-154). In the form ‘pharmakeus’, it means the sorcerer or poisoner, whilst in the forms ‘pharmakos’ and ‘pharmakoi’ a sacrificial ritual or a human scapegoat (Derrida [1972] 2004, 133). Derrida’s deconstruction of the pharmakon is a deconstruction of the platonic ideal of the unity and singularity of a text’s meaning and interpretation, as well as the platonic metaphysics of presence (and in turn, the dominating hold of logocentrism). According to Derrida, Plato establishes a logic of binaries, whereby the first in each pair is always dominant, with the second understood as outside, negative, and absent: for example, essence or appearance, good or evil, true or false. Plato’s definition of writing as pharmakon – a drug that draws attention

away from the natural cause of illness, and to largely negative effects – relies heavily on these binaries by insisting that writing, as repetition and representation, is second to and parasitic on the self-presence of speech (Derrida [1972] 2004, 112). However, Derrida argues that what the pharmakon represents is “the play of possibilities”, or a back and forth, inside and outside movement: it is both *différance* and difference ([1972] 2004, 76). If, as Plato claims, writing is dead language and is to be contrasted with the living being of speech, it can only be described as ironic that Plato (or Socrates, or both) rely so heavily on myth and metaphor to prove their case. Moreover, the ambiguity of the use of the term pharmakon is not a matter of discerning the intentions of the speaker, but rather demonstrates how all possible senses of a word are necessarily evoked in its utterance, together with an infinite possibility of new meanings.

Whilst Plato for his part does not actually use the term pharmakoi in his writing, it is key to understanding Derrida’s deconstruction of Plato’s argument, and in particular how Derrida’s arguments are especially applicable to a reading of the final scene in *Mostly Hero*. In Ancient Greece, as a means of purifying the city, or protecting the inside of the city from the outside, the pharmakoi was taken outside the city to be killed, often by being thrown off the edge of a cliff (Thoibisana 2022, 78). The fear of exteriority that dominates the narrative in all of Burns’s novels is thus brought to the forefront in *Mostly Hero*. As hero – hero-villain-scapegoat-sorcerer – is pushed back and forth over the edge of the cliff, the boundaries of inside/outside, good/evil become blurred, and the borderline quite literally deconstructs in the process. The cliff-hanger scene, in addition to being a comical exaggeration of a Freudian *fort/da* play, equally becomes both a literal and figurative Derridean ‘play of possibilities’.

It should thus be clear how femme’s murder weapons and haberdashery may be interpreted as the pinnacle of Plato’s pharmakon – they are both, and at the same time, the cure and the poison, a ritual and a scapegoat, and neither one nor the other. Just as femme herself moves back and forth between playing the part of caring lover and murderous assassin, femme

and femme fatale, pharmakeus and pharmakon, hero, too, fluctuates between the roles of hero and villain, conniving and caring, defined and undefined. Similarly, the spell itself is both a scapegoat and a healing ritual, present and absent, a spell and not a spell; whilst the remedy to the spell is both a poison and a cure, supernatural and ordinary, a remedy and not a remedy. We may also observe an embodiment of the expression “to laugh one’s guts out”, for in the moment that femme discovers his secret box of graphs – his survival kit – hero’s insides are quite literally spilled out on the kitchen floor. Equally, the scene in which femme begins to sew hero back together could indeed represent a moment between I and we; between identity and alterity. It is both humours and healing, but not in any completed sense, or understood totality, but rather from the perspective of marginality, and multiplicity. Finally, there is also a sense in which femme’s concern for hero in this moment has to some extent shifted towards something less operative. As Blanchot says, “to take upon myself another’s death as the only death that concerns me, this is what puts me beside myself, this is the only separation that can open me, in its very impossibility, to the openness of a community (1988, 9).

As femme sets to work, we read how she “took a deep breath, then she plunged in. ‘People do this’, she reminded herself. ‘People always do this. Why, this is done every day by everybody’” (*MH*, 114). We thus begin to see how femme putting her haberdashery to healing purposes may well symbolise the role that humour plays in providing a way out of the self-destructive repetition of inherited violence in traumatised societies. Rather than making a pact based on mutual suspicion and hyper-defence, it is about breaking down those very same self-protective/self-destructive barriers that dominate our narratives. We may also recall here the Wizard’s conclusion regarding the antidote to the spell, that it is “[j]ust people making effort to work out how to be with each other, especially when one of them was being a person in a way the other person has decided was wrong” (*MH*, 99).

In a similar vein to all of Burns's novels, *Mostly Hero* ends with a *cautious* atmosphere of hope and restoration. In line with Bakhtin, by means of depicting the violence and destruction within the community through humour and irony, Burns deconstructs the dominating vocabularies of oppression, and opens a space for new understandings to emerge, together with the possibility of an imaginative restructuring of our notions of love, friendship and community. The ending paragraph reads as follows:

From their quiet position on the floor, they could just about make out the top of Great Aunt's skyscraper in the distance. There was a coffin-shaped cloud hanging over it and by now the day had turned to dusk. Not really dusk. It was the blue hour, the era of endarkenment. In the air, however, was the delicious smell of life. Possibly real, possibly delusional, came the fragrance of newly cut grass, of freshly turned damp earth, of honeysuckle at the end of summertime – things that might make a person happy, especially unexpectedly happy, and which cost little, bar the willingness, and the gratefulness, to open up and breath. (*MH*, 127)

Interestingly, this “blue hour” holds a certain resemblance to the “softening” early evening light in which *Milkman* ends (Burns 2018, 348). Indeed, just as femme draws a deep breath before she sets to work, *Milkman* ends with middle sister breathing in this light – opening herself up – and exclaiming “for a moment, just a moment, I almost nearly laughed” (2018, 348). Also of note is Burns's choice of the expression “the era of endarkenment” in contrast to the era of enlightenment. I suggest that the kind of scholars that say Derrida is parody, are the kind that say that he is obscurantist, or simply showing off; that what is to be considered good writing is clear writing, and common sense (Searle 1977; Ellis 1989; Phiddian 1997). However, what we are met with here is the idea that it is not when concepts, contexts and texts are clearly defined and self-present that the ground is fertile for change, but rather when boundaries and borders become blurred and less defined: that is, in the evening light. As Mitchell writes in response to

the question of immunity: “[p]reestablished certainties are exactly the wrong medicine” (2007, 283).

This takes us back to the notion of ‘common sense’, which also brings to mind a certain current movement within far-right politics in the UK. There is a particular group of conservative politicians who refer to themselves as the “common-sense group”; with GB news presenter and Cheshire MP Esther McVey being donned the unofficial title of “minister of common sense”.<sup>89</sup> This group purports the view that not only is truth both present *and* transparent, but moreover, the very fact that it is, is itself equally present and transparent. The conclusion is, therefore, that one no longer needs to question one’s given beliefs, nor to question their transparency; it is thus a doubly anti-intellectual position.<sup>90</sup> Given their persistent anti-trans stance, it is not difficult to see how this group of politicians rely on preconceived binaries and borders. It is a position that stands so overtly against an ethics of alterity. Their argument against the so-called ‘woke’ movement is particularly revealing, for they see this community as merely virtue signaling. They are not even saying their arguments are intellectually flawed, rather that this group’s arguments are to be considered mere performance that means nothing, because genuine truth is something obvious. Common sense – understood as uninterrogated and uninvestigated received wisdom – is specifically what both Derrida and Burns are concerned with. Both writers question where our thinking, our concepts and our ethics come from. Rorty, too, highlights how ‘common sense’ is only common to a very specific time and place and culture, whilst even Nietzsche underscores how concepts have a history ([1886] 2002). What we see in Burns (and in Derrida) is indeed the revelation of this process of inheriting beliefs and narratives, but importantly, a further step is taken to address our response. One response, to some extent seen in Rorty, is to simply accept that this is the case.

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<sup>89</sup> For an insightful report on the meaning of ‘common sense’ to the group, see Addley (2023).

<sup>90</sup> For an account of how ideals of political transparency might serve untransparent political agendas, see Birchall (2021).

Another would be to either deny it, or to deny our inherited language all together. Something we see in Heidegger, for instance, is the insistence that, based on the recognition that our language is unreliable, we need a new language. However, what Derrida is doing, which is an act that can equally be traced throughout Burns's entire oeuvre, is underscoring both the point that you cannot escape your inheritance, and the position that you have to treat it. That is to say, the only way to achieve democracy is to never stop doing democracy.

Burns's fiction reveals how there remains a space for change *within* the trauma narrative; that trauma is to some extent mutable. The reason many find reading her work uncomfortable, or difficult, may be linked to the fact that allowing for humour in trauma, or laughing at trauma, to some extent desacralises it. Trauma to the 'woke' is similar to common sense to the 'antiwoke'; we are repeatedly told that it is not something to be messed with. Indeed, for Rorty, the worst thing you could possibly do is desacralise someone else's trauma. However, whilst *fort/da* as a model of trauma is the repetition of doing the same thing over and over again, in humour and irony, trauma is repeated, but in such a way that it allows for it to be transformed.

These observations also allow us to reflect on the final role of humour in both theory and literature. As Critchley rightly observes, it is laughter that makes us human (2002, 111), and importantly, it is also what brings us together. There is a sense that in recognising the contingency, or absurdity of our *shared* suffering, irony and humour in fiction may allow us, as Rorty suggests, to imaginatively *create* solidarity (1989, xvi). This being said, in line with Derrida, and as I have underscored in previous chapters, Burns does not make any predictions or prescriptions as to what this future may look like. She is not promoting utopian ideals, but rather allowing a space to open up, both internally and externally, from which a community otherwise – one that embraces multiplicity and alterity over the self-sameness of logocentricity – may emerge from the ashes. Humour is indeed a way of coping, but it is also a way of

transforming our realities. Thus, Hero's survival kit *is* at the same time a First Aid Kit afterall. Just as *Milkman* ends with middle sister (almost) laughing at the boundaries that once dominated her life, so too *Mostly Hero* ends when hero awakes up from his drug induced sleep, opens his eyes, and laughs.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusions

Throughout the course of this PhD Thesis, I hope to have demonstrated how Anna Burns's fiction welcomes both a communitarian reading and a deconstructive approach. The results of such a reading not only allow for a multiplicity of possible interpretations, but equally help to draw insight into both the theoretical underpinnings of her work and the complex psychological and political realities that her fiction has transcribed into writing. With this in mind, although the dissemination of deconstruction reveals context to be limitless – indeed, as Buse and Scott explain, “no signification can be unproblematically sutured to the originary context of its production, as the sign is haunted by a chain of overdetermined readings, mis-readings, slips and accretions that will always go beyond the event itself” (199, 12) – in my conclusions I shall, nonetheless, return briefly to the (specific but not isolated) context of current Irish and Northern Irish political, institutional and social issues. I do so, on the one hand, in order to establish the ways in which Burns's fiction may speak more specifically to our current times (for the four years since I began writing this PhD Thesis have indeed been turbulent ones), whilst on the other, to point towards the ways in which a deconstructive reading of her work allows the messages to reach “beyond the event itself”. I explore the ways in which Burns's fiction enters into a conversation with social and political tensions in Northern Ireland that have been worsened by the UK's withdrawal from the European Union; the revelation of the extent and extremity of the violence that was taking place behind closed doors in Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries both in the Republic and the North; and the way in which the trauma of the Troubles has been officially dealt with. Furthermore, whilst my conclusions are divided under six subheadings – on fiction and reality, identity, memory, sight and inheritance, borders, community, and humour – something I hope to underscore are the ways in which these insights, in their “slips and accretions”, necessarily overlap and overspill.



### 7.1. Fiction and Reality

The blurring of the borders between fiction and reality *inside* the novels is reflected in a similar blurring between the fiction of the stories themselves and the historical reality *outside* that they – to some extent – have transcribed. In *No Bones*, for instance, the borders between inside and outside are felt to tremble throughout the novel in its entirety, with the title of each chapter pointing towards real historical events, which are thence presented as either mirrored within domestic disputes, or distorted to such an extent that they can be felt only as echoes that reverberate from between the gaps and silences within the stories we are told. I suggest that this is something felt most noticeably when considering the correspondence that can be found between the interconnected stories of Amelia Lovett and Mary Dolan, and the real case of Ann Lovett. Whilst a Derridean approach to literature does not seek unchanging, static truths, if the very concept of truth is reconstituted as neither singular nor unitary, then we may begin to understand Burns's own reflection that "[n]on-fiction didn't much attract me. It felt like it might not be true" (McWade 2020, n.p.).

To return to observations made in chapter one regarding the tension felt between the "limitless possibilities of context" and the desire to reveal a context as fully self-contained, clear and identified, we may recall how the context of a text can be neither suspended nor defined. Thus, whilst it is true that there is nothing outside the text, the history, world, reality and alterity of the context are bot texts in their own rights, and form part of the text at hand. Also of note in this respect is that the significance of a text goes beyond the intention of the author – something Derrida refers to as 'dissemination' (1981, 21) – and so, whilst it is certainly intriguing to question whether Burns was aware of Ann Lovett's suitcase of trinkets, for example, regardless of whether she was or not, the existence of the suitcase is intertwined with our reading of the text in the same way that we cannot but hear Freud when we read Shakespeare today.

In addition to the intertextuality apparent between fiction and reality, Burns's novels would also appear to converse with the literary theories they embody. This is especially apparent in *Little Constructions* given the role of the character of Judas, who spies from inside a suit of armour. As I suggested in chapter four, Judas's role in the novel may be interpreted as similar to the *judases* of Derrida's *Glas* (1986b) – he is there to provide betraying peepholes between the novel and literary theory, as well as between the fictional story and the outside reality it represents. Similarly, that middle sister in *Milkman* is said to be reading *Ivanhoe* is, I suggest, not incidental. For while we are told that her choice of novel to read was based on her own claim that “I did not like twentieth-century books because I did not like the twentieth century” (Burns 2018, 5), *Ivanhoe* in many respects is a reflection of her outside reality – it is a story of sectarian division and witch hunts. Perhaps middle sister's choice of escape is simply ironic, or perhaps what Burns is emphasising here is the inescapability of the hegemonic community – that even one's attempts to break its hold through acts of dissidence reveal how ingrained the dominant way of thinking is in one's psyche. Equally, though, the intertextuality in a way provides another peephole, for the spectres of *Ivanhoe*, whilst still hidden within the pages of middle sister's book, silently haunt the pages of *Milkman*. Moreover, very much connected to these observations is middle sister's determination as ‘the one who reads’. Just as Miller said of deconstruction that it is “nothing more or less than good reading” (Miller 1987, 10), so too, I suggest that middle sister – like the narrator of *Little Constructions* – does not simply read, she interprets. Indeed, this observation adds strength to my conclusion that the novel in many respects draws official narratives into question.

## 7.2. Identity

The question of individual and collective identity lies at the heart of Burns's oeuvre, in which we see individuals and communities alike, in an attempt to protect themselves from the outside, construct barriers that inadvertently contribute to their own self-destruction. In both *No Bones*

and *Milkman*, the rupture experienced when reading into literary constructions of the crypt, for example, results in the blurring of boundaries between characters in the stories, just as characters are found to substitute one another in *Little Constructions*. One of the results of this analysis is that the Heideggerian account of authenticity is revealed in its falsity. Moreover still, I suggest that something Burns's fiction points towards is a communitarian understanding of individuals not as atoms but as *singularities* – not self-enclosed and inward turning, but rather exposed and “shattered through and through” (Blanchot 1988, 6). In my reading of *No Bones*, I have suggested that the characters of Amelia and Mary Dolan may in fact stand in for one girl's loss and traumatic projection, whilst in *Milkman*, my analysis of tablets girl's letters opens the possibility that readers are being intentionally misled with regards to the characters of tablets girl, tablets girl's sister and middle sister. Something that both of these interpretations support is the thesis that identity is neither homogenous nor structured around binaries, but rather heterogeneous, fluid, ruptured and undefined. This stands greatly in contrast to the dominating rhetoric of identity politics in Northern Ireland, under which people are assumed to fit neatly into the categories of British or Irish, Protestant or Catholic, Unionist or Nationalist. Furthermore, with middle sister interpreted as standing in for the identity of Northern Ireland – that is, as a *middle* sister – we are met with the image of the Northern Irish national identity as existing, too, in a liminal space. We may also recall how, as highlighted in chapter two, the liminality of the topography of the crypt is described by Derrida in terms that resonate with the Northern Irish identity. It is said to be “a place *comprehended* within another but rigorously separated from it, isolated from general space by partitions, an enclosure, an enclave. So as to purloin *the thing* from the rest” (Derrida 1986a, xiv; emphasis in the original).

Importantly, the recognition of the fluidity and multiplicity of identity was said to be an integral part of the Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement, which states that “the two governments recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify

themselves and be accepted as Irish or British or both, as they may so chose” (Northern Ireland Office 1998, 3). Although post-agreement EU, UK and locally funded peace programmes in Northern Ireland have worked hard to try to break down the physical and symbolic barriers that divide the population, much work is still needed in this respect. Around 93% of children still attend single-faith schools (Roulston and Cook 2021, 1), and interactions between communities remain for the most part both uneasy and limited. On a positive note, despite the UK’s withdrawal from the block, the EU has pledged to continue providing funding through the follow-up to the Peace programme known as Peace Plus. However, the UK’s exit of the European Union has nonetheless brought these social, religious and political divisions back into the public consciousness with an intensity not seen in the last twenty-five years. As a result of Brexit, the agreement’s formal recognition of the fluidity of identity is something that has been to some extent jeopardised, for it has forced citizens of Northern Ireland to requestion their identity on different and conflictual terms. Identifying as British no longer means identifying as European, and so there are certain rights that are now determined by one’s own self-identification. Moreover, the implementation of border checks in the Irish sea leaves many who do identify as British finding themselves somewhat excluded from import and export rights granted to those living on the mainland.

This being said, something that has been highlighted by the results of the 2021 census in Northern Ireland is a shifting demographic in the population, with a significant drop in the number of people that identify as British, and an increase in those who identify as Irish or Northern Irish (NISRA 2001, 2). Further evidence of the shifting demographic and national identity lies in the fact that, for the first time since partition – that is, for the first time in the country’s 103-year history – a nationalist party won the elections in 2020. Importantly, however, whilst this certainly marks a moment in history, as Northern Ireland’s identity as a country is entirely based on its division from the Republic, it also marks something of a

precarious moment of vulnerability. Moreover still, there has been a further significant increase in people identifying as “British and Northern Irish” or “British, Irish and Northern Irish” over “British only” (NISRA 2001, 3), suggesting a general turn towards identity being understood not as homogenous but as heterogeneous. Also of note is the fact that the fastest growing demographic is people with “Other National Identities” (3). What I believe all of these findings indicate is both the importance of understanding the potential violence of embracing only a domestic or conditional hospitality in a Derridean sense, and a recognition that any attempted relation with another based on equivalence or identification equates to an ontological violence. Burns’s fiction brings both concerns to the forefront. Indeed, the violence of the operative community’s “tendency towards a communion, even a fusion” (Blanchot 1988, 6-7) can be identified both in *Little Constructions*, where John Doe is said to consume his murder victims, and in *No Bones* when Amelia relives the trauma of being raped in terms of being eaten. We may also do well to remember, as Marias puts it, that “the other is not just community’s outsider, but its insider, one’s neighbour. Put differently, the neighbour is a stranger, just as the stranger is a neighbour” (2021, 186).

With this in mind, equally relevant is the communitarian recognition of how the finite nature of the inoperative community is closely tied to the community’s resistance to violence. In Nancy’s words, “[c]ommunity is ... resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence ... (resistance to the communion of everyone or to the exclusive passion of one or several: to all the forms and all the violences of subjectivity)” (1991, 35). Just as identity is something transitory for the individuals that make up a community, so too, Burns’s fiction helps us to recognise that the identity of the community and the nation as such is to be understood as something that is neither fixed nor transcendent, but rather open, interrupted and differed. More revealing still, however, is that, not only in this particular census but in censuses in general, there is never the option to identify as simply *not* belonging to any national identity. In

Agamben's words, "[w]hat the State cannot tolerate in any way ... is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging" (2003, 85). Something I hope to have demonstrated throughout the course of this PhD Thesis, however, is the potential role that innovative literature – and more specifically, a deconstructive approach to such literature – may play both in the deconstruction of binary thinking and the reimagining or reconstruction of notions of identity and community not based on belonging but on alterity; a potential I suggest that is especially exemplified in Burns's oeuvre.

### **7.3. Memory, Sight and Inheritance**

In *No Bones*, memory is described as "slippery" (Burns 2001, 76), for "[e]verything got eclipsed, always got eclipsed, by the next, most recent, violent death (104-5). Yet we also witness how, no matter how far memories might slip away superficially, the power of these same memories to tremble under the surface remains formidable. Very much connected to the role of memory are conclusions reached in reference to *Little Constructions* regarding the process of personal and political repression. Indeed, as Derrida writes of repression, "in both its psychoanalytical sense and its political sense ... [repression] ends up producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm" (2004, 99).

Importantly, whilst the contents of the multiple literary crypts identified in Burns's work are never fully revealed, we are reminded how that which is hidden in the crypt – whilst encrypted – belongs to memories. Such memories have been projected onto physical and psychological objects and spaces. In *No Bones*, for instance, encrypted within Amelia's Treasure Trove are a string of interconnected experienced and inherited, personal and political traumas. Encrypted in Vincent's psychologically constructed murder gang, carnival scene and "Identify the Body Display", is the distorted memory of his dead father. Equally, I have suggested that Vincent's constructions could also stand in for the projection of the trauma of

his mother's dead baby and his own subsequent abandonment and isolation. Mary Dolan's toy pram, on the other hand, conceals not only the very dead baby itself, but a string of traumas related to sexual abuse and loss, potentially together with the collective trauma of Northern Ireland's violent legacy of strict abortion laws. Moreover, my analysis of Mary Dolan's toy pram from the perspective of the crypt, together with the parallel accounts of the character of Amelia Lovett and the real case of Ann Lovett, hinted at the possibility that Amelia, too, is projecting the trauma of her own loss not only onto the toy pram, but equally onto a psychological construction she names Mary. Likewise, the so-called 'Noises' that all the Doe siblings suffer from in *Little Constructions* embodies a similar projection of the inherited fear of other people, something which is passed down across generations, subsequently projected onto earplugs, and encrypted within the locked empty kitchen cupboard. Indeed, I have suggested that analysing the cupboard from the perspective of the crypt reveals how hidden within this empty sealed space is the fear of the absolute Other – the unconditional secret – or alterity as such.

Regarding the role of sight, in both *No Bones* and in *Little Constructions* we witness how most of the community appear incapable of seeing violence even when it is both shockingly brutal and happening right in front of one's eyes. In *Milkman*, too, we see a number of characters quite literally blinded, like Oedipus, for seeing what they were not supposed to see. To return to the context of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, I propose that Burns's interaction with notions of memory and sight have reverberations for the general denial of knowledge – on the part of the church, the state and the general public – as to the scope of the physical and psychological violence happening in the Mother and Baby institutions and Magdalene Laundries, which were operational for more than seventy-six years. Of particular significance in this respect is the fact that the 3,000-page final report that came as a result of a five-year judicial commission of investigation established in 2015 (Irish Government 2020)

concluded that, despite survivors' testimonies to the contrary (1,000 pages of which were printed in the very same report), there was "no evidence", "no indication" or "very little evidence" of physical mistreatment (8), forced adoption (9-10), of women being forced into the institutions (3), or being held against their will (8). Equally disturbing, however, is the somewhat more accurate conclusion that "[t]here is no evidence of public concern being expressed about conditions in mother and baby homes or about the appalling mortality among the children born in these homes even though many of the facts were in the public domain" (22), and that "[i]t was not until the tragic death of Ann Lovett in 1984 that there is evidence of extensive public commentary on unmarried motherhood, and serious questioning of Irish attitudes" (23). Just as the narrator explains in *Little Constructions*: "witnesses to violence suddenly go blind and deaf and completely insensate and never notice anything" (Burns 2007, 116).

Indeed, across her entire oeuvre, Burns depicts communities that suffer both from an inability to see and from individual and communal amnesia. Individuals and communities refuse to process the violence that surrounds them, perhaps in an attempt to prevent the transcription of the events into memories, or perhaps in order to conceal (from themselves and others) the part they may have played in the shameful truth. What concealment and denial obstruct is any potential for healthy mourning, on both personal and collective levels. The message that we receive, however, is that, whether conscious or subconscious, individual or collective, amnesia and denial only functions at surface level, for the supposedly forgotten trauma continues to haunt beneath the surface. Indeed, in each one of Burns's novels we witness how the haunting presence of unconfrosted secrets, the refusal to acknowledge open secrets and the fact rumours were taken for truth, all contribute to the communities' autoimmune responses. Additionally, something we see perhaps most prominently in *No Bones* is the way in which the novel engages in the very act of mourning itself by inscribing the individual and



collective traumas of those past, present and yet to come into writing. We may conclude with Derrida that “everything that we inscribe in the living present of our relation to others already carries, always, the signature of memoirs-from-beyond-the-grave” (1989, 29).

This being said, in chapter four I also aimed to shed light on a warning that can be identified in *Little Constructions* of constructing cultural artefacts or memorials that keep the spectres of trauma and conflict encased in the past. This is, I suggested, something that Burns evokes through the suggestion that a number of the members of the community sought to transform the Doe family residence into a “Miss Havisham Museum” (Burns 2007, 263). This warning holds further relevance if we take into account recommendations for memorialisation written in the final report on Mother and Baby institutions (Irish Government 2020, 10). Whilst memorials may be an important aspect of remembering, the danger lies in assuming that those that have been lost belong only to the past. On a similar note, I have also suggested that there is a sense in which Burns is mocking the idea of taking wisdom from the dead. In *No Bones* communications with the dead take place during psychotic episodes or dreams (2001, 246-82), in *Little Constructions* such conversations are had via Ouija boards (2007, 80), whilst in *Mostly Hero* they are had with the semi-dead corpses themselves. What I have argued, however, is that Burns’s use of dark humour and irony allows the reader to distinguish between genuinely *listening* to spectres, and simply constructing cultural monuments or memorials to the dead.

Very much connected to the role of memory and memorials therefore is the haunting presence of spectres – understood to be both and at the same time the absolute secret and the absolute Other. In *No Bones*, for instance, we are reminded of the lasting impact that spectres may have on present and future generations – whilst individual, communal, and national trauma may go unspoken and repressed, the spectres of these secrets nonetheless continue to haunt. The message we receive is that without a confrontation of such spectres, individuals and communities will inevitably remain in a cyclical return of trauma. Indeed, in chapter five I read

the character of Milkman's constant stalking presence in *Milkman* to represent the spectre that haunts the Northern Irish narrative. I have suggested that the complexity of the style and narrative in *Milkman* reflects the complexity and the scope of such trauma, and I believe this could equally be said of any one of Burns's novels. Similarly, just as Amelia's spectres trespass the sea border between Belfast and London in *No Bones*, so too in *Milkman* we are met with the image of how such haunting presences infiltrate every landscape of the protagonist's life. I have suggested that the possessive and debilitating hold that this haunting presence takes on middle sister may in turn stand for the possessive hold that the spectres of individual and collective trauma maintain in the Northern Irish narrative today. Also relevant in terms of the role of sight is my analysis of Judas and his suit of armour from inside of which he spies in *Little Constructions* from the perspective of what Derrida terms the 'visor effect' (1994, 6). We are reminded how the gaze of the spectre – the absolute Other – is both irreducible and asymmetrical.

Taking all of the above into consideration, something we may take from an analysis of Burns's entire oeuvre, although most noticeably from *Little Constructions*, is how it is not so much the *repression* of trauma and the surrounding shameful secrets that keep the community locked into the autoimmune cyclical return of inherited violence, but rather a process closer akin to the repressor protein, or a hereditary recessive gene. With this recognition, we may begin to see how while *fort/da* as a model of trauma depicts the relentless repetition of that which has been inherited, understanding inheritance as a recessive gene points towards the idea that the cycle may be interrupted. Moreover, as Derrida reminds us, where there is inheritance, there is also a call to responsibility: "whether we like it or not, whatever consciousness we have of it, we cannot not be its heirs" (1994, 114). This point is accentuated in *Mostly Hero*, where we see in the novella's conclusion the character of femme facing up to the fact that whilst she can never escape her inheritance, her call to responsibility means that it needs to be treated.

#### 7.4. Borders

All of Burns's fiction is heavily concerned with symbolic borders and boundary lines, sometimes advertently, sometimes inadvertently, just as Ardoyne – Burns's town of birth – remains largely delineated by physical walls and sectarian divisions. We may recall how in chapter three of *No Bones*, young Amelia and her classmates, when tasked by their teacher to write poems about peace, were said to have “spent more emotional time on their borders than they'd done on their poems” (Burns 2001, 37). Later on in the narrative, this very same draw to borderlines is expressed by the group in their general gravitation towards cliffs (a trait equally seen in the character of hero in *Mostly Hero*). I suggest that in part what this draw represents is the notion that both mourning and spectres are experienced on the borderline, or at the interface. Importantly, however, this is also where both alterity and community may be encountered. Moreover, just as Vincent's chapter in *No Bones*, whilst appearing as something of an aside to the main story, in many respects disrupts the entire reading of the novel, so too the abject holds disruptive potential. Whilst this is something most evident in the character of Vincent whose very diagnosis is said to be “borderline” (Burns 2001, 143), it can equally be identified in the intersex patient that Amelia meets in the psychiatric hospital named Jewels, as well as in tablets girl's fractured subjectivity in *Milkman*. In *Little Constructions*, too, Jotty is described as “not fitting into society” but rather “remaining forever stubborn and stony-faced, on its rim” (Burns 2007, 195).

Peace in Northern Ireland is, indeed, intimately concerned with borders. Not only are there walls constructed to divide communities, and protect them from each other, given the name “peace-walls”, but the success of the Good Friday Agreement relies heavily on land and sea borders remaining invisible. Both the fragility of this peace accord and the extent of its relationship with borders have been emphasised in the years since the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. The UK government's insistence on leaving the EU single market meant

that either sea or land border checks became an inevitability, with the risk being that the borders would cease to remain invisible – something that stands at odds with the general terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Riots across Protestant areas of Northern Ireland in April of 2021, which marked some of the worst unrest the country had seen in decades, were said to be a direct result of the Northern Irish Protocol, and links were identified between the rioters and paramilitary Unionist groups such as the UDA and UDF (Hirst 2021, n.p.). When rioters broke through a gate in a Peace Wall, the violence spilled over into the Catholic communities. What comes to mind here is Schultz’s analysis of the situation back in 2014, referenced in chapter two, that “sectarian violence will inevitably return because political and cultural differences still haunt Northern Ireland” (2014, 137).

This unrest has equally been felt at a political level. In objection to the so called Northern Irish protocol, the DUP (the leading Unionist political party) boycotted the Northern Irish Assembly, resulting in three years of stagnant politics. This had a huge economic and social strain on the country, with one of the biggest ever public worker strikes held in Belfast in January of this year. An estimated 80% of public sector employers were said to have participated (Carroll 2024, n.p.). As a means of restoring Stormont, then British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s solution (as well as 3-billion-pound deal) was not to get rid of the border checks – as this would stand against the UK’s agreement with the EU – but rather to promise to make them once again invisible. The newly erected sea border – something former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson famously said would be implemented “over [his] dead body” (Toynbee 2020, n.p.) – has thus been transformed into an “invisible” presence (hidden in plain sight). Relevant here, as I have said in chapter four, is how Burns’s *Little Constructions* also underscores the dangers of a desire to return to “normality” – this is especially the case in the context of Northern Ireland given the fact that normality has, since the nation came into being, always been underscored by division and conflict. We may question, as the narrator of *Little*

*Constructions* does, “if you’ve been abused, ‘What’s normal?’ And if you haven’t been abused, ‘What’s normal?’ And are both ‘normals’ meant to be the same thing?” (Burns 2007, 219).

What all of this evidence points towards are the ways in which the Good Friday Agreement’s focus on forgetting rather than remembering, and of moving forwards in order to leave the past behind, has largely left the spectres of the legacy of Northern Ireland’s hugely violent and traumatic past unfronted. Moreover, the erection of borders – be they towering physical walls, symbolic divides or “invisible” sea borders – will only heighten the communities’ autoimmune defences. However, it is when alterity is experienced on these very borderlines that we may witness the potential for rupture – a rupture that may in turn allow for a revised notion of community, a deconstruction of the barriers that divide us, and a decentring of the dominant power structures. What I hope to have demonstrated throughout the course of this PhD Thesis is how literature, as a space that welcomes both secrecy and alterity, allows for the experience of such of rupture.

Indeed, I hope to have revealed the ways in which a reading of Burns’s fiction from the perspective of hauntology allows us to see how a communication with the ancestral voices of the past – with the “ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence ... or any of the forms of totalitarianism” (Derrida 1994, xviii) – may allow individuals and communities alike to be able to break the self-destructive hold of the trauma narrative. As *Milkman*’s protagonist middle sister expresses: “old dark things as well as new dark things had to be remembered, had to be acknowledged because otherwise everything that had gone before would have been in vain” (Burns 2018, 264). Moreover, what results from such a confrontation is the deconstruction of those binaries and boundaries that once dominated communities, and still maintain their grip (albeit somewhat loosened) on our narratives today. In Derrida’s words, “no border is guaranteed, inside or out” (Derrida 1979, 78).

It is worth noting here the fact that there is very little space for non-binary thinking in Northern Ireland's power-sharing model of government, which, to a great extent, institutionalised sectarianism and division. Moreover, this model of government effectively does not allow for disagreements, for the moment that one party objects and chooses to boycott the assembly, the government is dissolved. Notably, the DUP's most recent boycott (in response to the Northern Irish protocol) was the second in the past seven years that the assembly has been suspended, and the fourth time since 1998. In fact, in the twenty-six years since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, almost twelve have passed without a government in Stormont. That is, almost half. Due to its autoimmune structure, it is, in a way, a democracy that prevents Northern Ireland from being democratic. It cannot, and I suspect, will not continue on the same terms; in Derrida's words, "a mutation *will have* to take place" (Borradori 2003, 106; emphasis in the original).

### **7.5. Reimagining Community**

Whilst something common to all of Burns's fiction is her portrayal of the extent of the operative community's devouring of singularities, something I suggest is to some extent unique to *Milkman* are fleeting moments of what may be described as inorganic or inoperative kinds of relationships. I have proposed, for example, that real milkman's encounter with middle sister on the border of the ten-minute area may be interpreted in terms of the ethical encounter, whilst the secret relationship between maybe boyfriend and chef holds a certain correspondence with Blanchot's depiction of the community of lovers. Furthermore, where the operative community would appear to be defined by its blindness in the face of both violence and difference, I concluded in chapter five that a communitarian openness, exposure and rupture is expressed in *Milkman* in terms of the sight, both in the sense of being able to see that which you are not supposed to see, and in the sense of seeing difference, colour, or light. Indeed, we saw how

after middle sister is exposed to different ways of seeing her surroundings, her understanding of community, too, begins to change.

With this in mind, a connection may also be made here with the character of Vincent in *No Bones*. For Vincent repeatedly and vividly *sees* spectres he is told are merely his own creation, and insists that the characters in his visions are “life apart from [him] every time!” (2001, 145). I suggest that both Vincent and Amelia’s confrontation with such spectres – which is a confrontation with alterity itself – equally marks a fundamental shift in their relationships with other people, and the start of the process of healing under the surface. In all of Burns’s novels, we are met with the message that, just as deconstruction is about seeing things that have been hidden, like the purloined letter, in plain sight, so too, reimagining community involves opening one’s eyes to the multiplicity of differences that have always surrounded us. In Derrida’s words,

[t]he point is right away to go beyond, in one fell swoop, the first glance and thus to see there where this glance is blind, to open one’s eyes wide there where one does not see what one sees. One must see, at first sight, what does not let itself be seen. And this in invisibility itself. For what first sight misses is the invisible. (1994, 187)

Importantly, what becomes visible is how, in many respects, the only thing that unites any of the characters in Burns’s novels is a shared confrontation with death and finitude. Importantly, however, and as Nancy writes, “it is through death that community reveals itself” (1991, 14-5). It is perhaps for this reason that it is in death and near-death (and especially those deaths and near-deaths that cannot be explained from within the community’s rhetoric) that fleeting moments of what may be described as the inoperative communities are to be found. As middle sister expresses, “[d]eath is truthful, and ‘ambushed and shot and nearly dead’ is also truthful” (Burns 2018, 213).

## 7.6. Mourning

An underlying theme that reverberates across all of the conclusions thus far – those relating to identity, memory and community alike – is the role of individual and collective mourning. Indeed, I would agree with Santos Brigida and Pinho’s analysis of *Milkman* that “one finds that mourning might be a form of non-violent and yet radically transformative political resource” (2021, 439). Something I explored at length in chapter four in reference to *Little Constructions* is the prominent theme of the endeavour to identify the corpse and localise the dead. A connection may also be made here with Amelia’s efforts in *No Bones* to bury the memories of the dead somewhere secret and unfronted – encrypted in objects – in an attempt to escape the brutal reality of their deaths. It is particularly telling, however, how both Amelia’s draw to boundary lines, together with the persistent haunting of her friends and ancestors, eventually forces her to listen to, and remember, the spectres of her past. This is, I suggest, equally an act of both identification and localisation. In *Milkman*, too, middle sister’s desire to bury the decapitated, one-eyed cat’s head she finds in ten-minute area may be interpreted in similar terms. Although here the corpse has been to some extent identified – at least in the sense that the cat’s head acts as a signifier – what middle sister seeks is that the dead receive appropriate burial rites.

To return to the context of the Northern Ireland, the identification and localisation of the dead certainly resonates on a number of levels. To begin with, I wish to return to the spectre of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland’s institutionalised violence in the form of Mother and Baby Homes. Research into the history of one particular institution in Tuam carried out by Catherine Corless (2012) is what led to the aforementioned commission of an extensive investigation into the treatment of mothers and babies within such institutions in the Republic of Ireland. Corless’s campaign also allowed for the discovery of a mass unmarked grave that concealed the remains of 796 babies, infants and toddlers within the chambers of a large sewage



tank at the site of the Tuam institution (with the topography of these physical underground chambers reflecting the psychological repression of circumstances surrounding the babies' deaths). Shockingly, there were no official records of any of these deaths. The full excavation of the site, which intends to identify the remains and give the victims a respectful burial, is yet to commence. Meanwhile, the whereabouts of the majority of the 900 babies and children who died in a similar institution in Bessborough remains unknown.

Whilst it is believed that as many as 9,000 babies and children died between 1922 to 1988 in the eighteen institutions that were investigated in the report, as most county homes were not included, this figure is expected to be significantly higher. Moreover, institutions in Northern Ireland were also not taken into account. Research carried out in collaboration with Queens University in Belfast and Ulster University in 2021, however, suggests that at least 10,500 women spent time in eight institutions in the North, run by Catholic or Protestant religious organisation, with more than 3,000 having spent time in Magdalene Laundries (McCormick, O'Connell, Dee and Privilege 2021, 2). Following the publication of the Queens report, together with the Northern Ireland Executive report that both details its findings and makes recommendations in terms of further research and redress (Mahon, O'Rourke and Scraton 2021), the Stormont executive agreed to carry out a public enquiry in November 2021. However, due to the DUP's aforementioned three-year boycott of the Northern Irish Assembly, the promised research has been stalled, with the focus shifted instead onto the redress scheme and financial support for (a limited number) of survivors, which was announced in February of this year (2024). Although any support is of course welcome, this kind of limited response based on strict terms of eligibility remains very much within the realm of merely surface level solutions critiqued by Burns. In fact, it is estimated that some 40% of survivors (about 44,000 people) will not be eligible to apply (Flanagan 2024, n.p.).

In many respects, the incredibly traumatic and violent practices at these institutions may be understood as something of an ‘open secret’. The institutions themselves were both visible and known by the communities, no matter that what went on within the walls was never spoken about. This is evidenced by the fact that, although much of the necessary data was missing with regards to entry pathways and referrals, both reports suggest that a combination of family members, religious clergy and medical professionals were responsible for the women and girls’ referrals, with some women reported to have referred themselves (Irish Government 2020, 12-3; McCormick, O’Connell, Dee and Privilege 2021, 4). The secrecy surrounding the institutions was equally reflected in the internal running of them, as women were prevented from speaking to one another regarding their circumstances, and in many cases, a regime of silenced was implemented. This is not, however, the only instance where the dead have neither been identified nor localised. Further relevance may be found in the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains (ICLVR), which works to locate the remains of the so-called “disappeared” of the Troubles – victims of paramilitary violence whose bodies were never found, and whose deaths remained unaccounted for. In fact, it is generally understood that at some 1,186 of the 3,200 killings of the Troubles in Northern Ireland remain unsolved (O’Toole 2024).

Something I believe that can be interpreted from an analysis of Burns’s fiction is that, for traumatised communities to begin a process of mourning and under the surface healing, both physical and psychological crypts must be disturbed. Indeed, as I have detailed in chapter two, whilst hauntology is about mourning and memory, it is also about responsibility and justice. The kind of justice that Derrida describes, however, is distinct from that of both the justice system and economic redress:

Not for calculable and distributive justice. Not for law, the calculation of restitution, the economy of vengeance or punishment ... not for calculable equality therefore, not

for the symmetrising and synchronic accountability or imputability of subjects or objects, not for a rendering of justice that would be limited to sanctioning or restituting, and to doing right, but for justice as incalculability of the gift and singularity of the an-economic ex-position to others. (1994, 26)

Interestingly, Derrida proposes that this understanding of justice allows for something of a “step beyond repression”: he insists that “there is a beyond the economy of repression whose law impels it to *exceed itself, of itself* in the course of a history, be it the history of theater or of politics between *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*” (1994, 26; emphasis in the original). This is, I suggest, equally something that may be read from within the margins of Burns’s work.

Reflecting both on this revision of our understanding of justice, together with the warning we receive from *Little Constructions* of memorialising the past, I believe it is also noteworthy to reflect upon last year’s celebrations held to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, which went ahead whilst Stormont remained suspended. Particularly significant was the “Agreement 25” event held at Queens University that invited world leaders to participate. The overriding theme of the event was economic growth and prosperity in Northern Ireland. However, we may question what seems to be something of a capitalist peace drive; that is, one that focuses more on international investments than on political instability or disquietude in local communities. The irony of this international celebration of Northern Ireland’s prosperity was especially apparent given the backdrop of stagnant politics, increasingly long hospital waiting lists, public sector pay disputes, and civil unrest.

Also significant in this respect is my interpretation of the role of memory in Burns’s *Milkman* as presenting a critique of the way in which the collective trauma of the Troubles has been officially dealt with. In its insistence of a fresh start, and as a means of moving forward, the agreement pushed for what may be understood as an ethics of forgetting rather than remembering. More recently still, as noted in chapter two, this sentiment has seen further

reverberations in the UK's implementation of the controversial "Legacy and Reconciliation" Act, which was passed in Parliament despite significant opposition in September 2023, and came into force on 1 May this year (2024). The act closed all historical inquests from 1 May and prevents new civil cases from being taken to court (O'Toole 2024, n.p.). It represents yet a further barrier for many victims and bereaved families in their quest for answers and justice. As it is understood that security forces were responsible for 29% of the Troubles era deaths (and potentially involved with paramilitary operations), one cannot but question the government's motives. Whilst the UK government has set up an independent commission to take on the cases, as *The Guardian* journalist O'Toole points out, "the lifeblood of such institutional efforts is public trust, a confidence that is extremely difficult to establish in a context where the British state has such a lamentable record of obfuscation" (2024, n.p.). Their desire to write an "official" (British) history of the Troubles is equally concerning, and takes us back to a critique identified in Burns's writing with regards to official narratives. The most controversial aspect of the act, however, which sought to grant conditional immunity for Troubles-era crimes, was disapplied following the High Court in Belfast's ruling that it was in breach of international human rights (O'Niell 2024, n.p.). Nonetheless, the fact that the UK government included such a clause in the first place only reveals the extremes they are willing to go to in order to preserve the image (or "memory") of their special forces, and to forget, or turn a blind eye to, the atrocities that were committed in the North.

To return, then, to the theme of mourning in Burns's oeuvre, I would like to recall a connection I identified in chapter six between middle sister and the figure of Antigone, which brings to mind Derrida's deconstruction of Hegel's reading of Antigone in *Glas* (1986b). For not only does this observation connect *Milkman* with *Little Constructions* through Derrida's use of *judases*, but the character of middle sister (who seeks an appropriate burial for the dead) is subsequently aligned with that of Jotty (who seeks to locate the dead), and thus the myth of

Antigone may be read against the myth of Demeter. Importantly, something both Burns's fiction and observations regarding Northern Ireland's violent past support is the idea that both the identification of the corpse and the act of burial are intimately tied with the work of mourning and of justice. As Derrida underscores, mourning "consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by *identifying* the bodily remains and by *localizing* the dead" (1994, 9; emphasis in the original). One somewhat unexpected insight we may receive from reading these two figures (middle sister and Jotty, Antigone and Demeter) alongside one another, and in reference to Derrida's *Glas* is, however, of the (powerless) power of humour and irony that these women wield (like a sword):

masculine power has a limit – an essential and eternal limit: the weapon, no doubt powerless, the all-powerful weapon of powerlessness, the inalienable blow struck by the woman is irony. The woman "internal enemy of the polity" can always burst out laughing at the last moment: she knows, in tears and in death, how to pervert the power that suppresses her. (1986b, 210)

A further connection that presents itself here is with a claim made by Cixous in her notable essay "The Laugh of Medusa", when she writes of feminine writing that it "cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic ... If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the 'truth' with laughter" (1976, 888). Whilst I would refrain from agreeing with Cixous's depiction of feminine writing as something noticeably distinct – or rather, that the style of writing that she refers to is something necessarily *feminine* – I would nonetheless suggest that where Cixous's argument holds most weight is with regards to the subversive power of both speaking from and with alterity and abjection. Such is the power of the Other, of the spectre, of the absolute secret to disrupt our social order, and it is a power expressed most prominently through laughter.

### 7.7. Humour, Irony and the Trauma Narrative

This leads me on to my final conclusions, drawn from an analysis of Burns's novella *Mostly Hero* in chapter six, with regards to the role of humour and irony in theory and literature. First of all, an analysis of humour in the novella allows us to interpret the part that the character of femme plays in putting her murder weapons and haberdashery to healing purposes as representing the role that humour may play in breaking the hold of transgenerational trauma. I have said that humour and irony, in evoking contradictions and blurring binaries, may interrupt the cyclical return of repression. I have also suggested that the fact that *Mostly Hero*'s ending is described as "the blue hour, the era of endarkenment" (Burns 2019, 127), just as in *Milkman* the novel ends in the "softening" early evening light (Burns 2018, 348), equally acts as an argument against logocentrism, speech-act theory and 'common sense' politics. Burns reminds us how the potential for change does not lie in self-certainty, presence, truth or 'common sense', but rather in the experience of uncertainty and multiplicity. From here, Derrida's arguments made against Searle's dismissal of the transgressive potential of theory and fiction may align with Burns's questioning of official narratives. Moreover, I maintain that the undecidability of a deconstructive reading is the space where the ethical erupts; that ethics is brought into question when logocentricity (which suppresses alterity) is interrupted. Something that Burns's use of humour and irony points towards, then, is the idea that, just as humour has a way of embracing alterity, so too an openness to alterity may be a prerequisite for the humorous attitude. To return to the role of the spectre, we may recall how, in the words of Lorek-Jezińska and Wieckowska, "[a]n encounter with the spectral results in and perhaps from the condition and acceptance of the state of unknowing" (2017, 9). While Medusa is said to be the pinnacle of the one whose gaze can never be met – and indeed, she is evoked in *Little Constructions* in reference to the role of ghosts in the community (Burns 2007, 31) – according to Cixous: "[y]ou

only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (1976, 885).

Equally, I hope to have highlighted how the ungraspability and indeterminacy of humour and irony may provide a way out of the *fort/da* model of trauma, where violence and trauma is repeated indefinitely. As the narrator questions in *Little Constructions*, "concealing and revealing again ... is that trauma? Is that normal? Is it important for a person to recreate bad times over and over for themselves like that?" (Burns 2007, 196). Although Burns repeats, displaces and defers the traumatic stories and histories she engages with, her embrace of humour is in part what causes the narrative to be both disrupted and transformed in the process. Through humour, Burns encourages a certain distantiality to erupt between one's lived experience of trauma and something of a view from elsewhere that allows the reader both to laugh at their own melancholy and recognise the absurdity of the way in which these narratives are able to take hold. As the wizards conclude in *Mostly Hero*, "[m]ayhap the answer to the spell ... is to simply decide you're not under it after all" (Burns 2019, 99).

Indeed, I have suggested that part of what makes Burns's writing so innovative is also what makes her fiction such an uncomfortable or 'difficult' read – this lies in the difficulty we have with writing humour into trauma, which is very much connected to the difficulty we feel when our 'common sense' is disrupted or upset. The humour and irony at play across Burns's entire oeuvre allows the reader to recognise both the contingency and the absurdity of their shared suffering, thereby diminishing the hold that such suffering has on one's lived experiences. I have proposed that perhaps, in a way, the difficulty of this recognition lies in the difficulty of acknowledging the simplicity of the solution. As the narrator of *Mostly Hero* explains, it is the realisation that,

the antidote to the spell seemed not to be one; or not to be one that wasn't a natural, ordinary, non-magic one. Just people making an effort to work out how to be with each

other, especially when one of them was being a person in a way the other person has decided was wrong. (Burns 2019, 99)

In her description of both the spell placed upon femme and hero's so-called survival kit, Burns is, I suggest, mocking the idea – received from the logic of logocentrism – that to have a subconscious is anything other than human.

### **7.8. Future Avenues of Research**

Whilst the singularity and complexity of the conflicts in Northern Ireland should not be understated, it is important to remember that both civil and international conflicts are unfortunately commonplace across the globe today. According to the ACLED Conflict Index, one in six people are estimated to have been exposed to conflict so far this year, with fifty countries ranked as within extreme, high or turbulent levels of conflict (January 2024, n.p.). Indeed, we need only to think of the atrocities being committed in Palestine, Myanmar and Syria, for example, to see how the relevance of these conclusions may exceed the given context. Of note in this respect is how the success of the Good Friday Agreement in maintaining peace in Northern Ireland is being used as a model for peace processes in conflicts across the world (this was a prominent theme in the aforementioned 'Agreement 25' event in Queens last year). However, Burns's critique of the way in which the trauma has been dealt with in Northern Ireland should equally be heard as a warning for conflicts further afield.

Additionally, as I suggested in chapter five, the Good Friday Agreement's push towards a 'fresh start' holds a certain resonance with the 'Pact of Forgetting' (Pacto del Olvido) employed in post-Franco Spain. Similarly, just as commissions have been put together to work towards the identification and localisation of victims of institutional, paramilitary and state violence in the Republic and the North, so too, the passing of the Law on Historical Memory in Spain in 2007 has provided autonomous regions with new funding aimed at the localisation



and exhumation of victims of both the civil war and Franco's regime. Both Northern Ireland and Spain, however, have faced significant barriers when it comes to seeking justice largely due to the fact that amnesty is effectively written into both countries' democratic foundations. The clear message we receive from reading Burns's fiction from the perspective of hauntology – a message that is equally applicable in the context of Spain as it is Northern Ireland – is that, when left both physically and psychologically buried in unmarked graves, the spectres of violence will continue to haunt our democracies.

Furthermore, as politics across the globe is being expressed in increasingly divisive modes, a deconstruction of the dominating ideals of identity, truth, common sense and belonging may at least in part disrupt the ontological hold that such rhetoric holds on our communities today. New and innovative fiction such as that created by Burns, whilst by no means promising clear solutions, does encourage a confrontation with spectres, secrecy and alterity – a confrontation that is both and at the same time internal and external – from which different forms of community may emerge. We may conclude with Nancy and Blanchot that such communities are not founded on notions of belonging, commonality, or self-certainty, but rather on an embrace of non-belong, uncertainty, multiplicity, and difference.

This being said, having traced the various threads of the theoretical framework through the course of Anna Burns's oeuvre, the main limitation I have encountered is the limited potential for an application of both Nancy's depiction of the inoperative community and Blanchot's community of lovers to instances in the novels. This is largely because moments of genuine intimacy are few and far between. While there are numerous depictions of how relationships and communities may be autoimmune and self-destructive, there are far fewer accounts of how things could be different. I would go so far as to say that it is only really in *Milkman* where fleeting moments of the inoperative community can be identified. We do, nonetheless, receive the message that friendship and intimacy may act as a mediating term

between the dialectic of revealing and concealing, and in turn account for part of the way out of the repetitive reliving of inherited and experienced trauma, both at an individual and a communal level. In *No Bones*, for instance, the groups' daytrip to Rathlin island in the final chapter allows them to recognise, together, the borders and barriers that have dictated their lives – the first step in the deconstruction of these same barriers, and the decentring of the dominant rhetoric. In *Milkman*, too, the novel ends with middle sister recognising the possibility of different, *almost* expressible kinds of friendships. One productive further avenue of research may be, therefore, a comparative study of Burns's novels alongside those that welcome a clearer application of Blanchot's community of lovers. I am thinking specifically here of Lucy Caldwell's *Where They Were Missed* (2006) or Mary O'Donnell's *Where They Lie* (2014). Both of these novels are equally haunted, but something they provide more of an insight into is a hint of what the hither side might look like – that is, an imagining of the community otherwise. On the other hand, whilst the role of humour was by no means my primary focus of this particular research, I believe that, building on conclusions reached in chapter six in reference to Burns's novella *Mostly Hero*, a deconstructive approach to humour and irony could provide a new lens through which Burns's entire oeuvre could be revisited – for I believe there is much still to be said in this regard.

As a means of a concluding remark, I wish to reflect on something I have learnt perhaps most profoundly throughout the course of writing this PhD Thesis: namely, the importance of being open to unexpected and open-ended conclusions. Often, when one approaches a text from the perspective of a clearly defined theoretical lens, or in search of particular political underpinnings, one is able to uncover the answers they are looking for irrespective of the selected work. What deconstruction has taught me, however, is how literature itself may encourage us, as critics, to question the very underpinnings that we consciously or unconsciously bring to a text. If we are to agree with Miller that deconstruction is “nothing

more or less than good reading” (Miller 1987, 10), being open to the multiplicity of meanings that can resonate from the margins of a text, and paying attention to the play of possibilities that each word choice or omission (be it deliberate or inadvertent) brings, may promote both ‘good’ reading, and better critics. With this in mind, Anna Burns’s fiction not only encourages the reader to question those concepts that determine one’s understanding of the world (including what has past and what is to come) as well as one’s relationships with, and responsibility to, other people (again, those past and yet to come), but equally encourages us to laugh at ourselves and to find ourselves ridiculous (Critchley 2002, 103). This is, I believe, a first step towards embracing an ethics of alterity, together with an understanding of community and democracy not founded on commonality, but on difference and *différance*. Whilst I hope that my analyses may contribute to current literary debates both within and beyond the field of Irish studies, I recognise that the work is neither complete nor finished in any real sense of the word. Deconstruction is, to borrow Amelia’s words in *No Bones*, an “attitude of mind and maybe it can be got from somewhere, somehow, further down the line” (Burns 2001, 321). We may conclude with Derrida, then, that “we never finish with this secret, we are never finished, there is no end” (2001, 58).

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## Introducción y Conclusiones en Español

### Introducción: Una Tarea Imposible: Anna Burns en [Con]texto

#### 1.1. Introducción

Nacida en Ardoyne, Belfast, en 1962, la novelista norirlandesa Anna Burns creció durante los peores años de los conflictos etnonacionalistas conocidos en inglés como los *Troubles*. En una entrevista con el diario *The Independent*, Burns explica cómo «había muchísima violencia, una violencia espeluznante, aparte de los conflictos [*the Troubles*] ... adultos peleándose en la calle por cualquier cosa, niños peleándose y perros mordiendo a cualquiera. Y luego, por supuesto, había manchas de sangre por todas partes» (Marshall 2018, n.p.). Como Ardoyne es una zona predominantemente católica y republicana de Belfast rodeada de distritos protestantes lealistas, su crianza en muchos aspectos estuvo dictada por fronteras y líneas divisorias, tanto físicas como simbólicas. El oeste de Ardoyne está delimitado por la conocida *Crumlin Road*, que actúa como interfaz entre los barrios católicos y protestantes, en la cual tuvo lugar varios atentados y bombardeos durante el conflicto. Aunque el número de atentados y ataques disminuyó tras el alto el fuego, los conflictos entre ambas comunidades no cesaron en absoluto. En los años que siguieron al alto el fuego, durante los desfiles de la Orden de Orange para celebrar el 12 de julio<sup>91</sup> (que fueron muchos), la policía y el ejército encerraron a los residentes de Ardoyne en sus calles (en teoría para protegerlos, pero en gran parte en contra de su voluntad). En 2001, el año en que Burns publicó su primera novela *No Bones*, *Crumlin Road* volvió a estar en las noticias por el conflicto de Holy Cross, centrado en la escuela primaria católica femenina donde asistía la propia Burns. Durante tres meses, las alumnas de la escuela, acompañadas de sus padres, fueron objeto de abusos diarios por parte de manifestantes protestantes lealistas cuando

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<sup>91</sup> Aunque se dice que estas celebraciones conmemoran la victoria de William de Orange sobre el rey James II en la batalla del Boyne en 1690, las comunidades católicas suelen considerarlas una expresión de sectarismo y triunfalismo. Las banderas de la Unión adornan las calles y no es poco frecuente que se quemen banderas irlandesas.

se dirigían a la escuela. Los manifestantes se burlaban, escupían y arrojaban piedras y globos llenos de orina a las jóvenes y a sus padres (DeYoung 2023, 62). Mientras tanto, en el año 2013 se produjo una serie de disturbios violentos a raíz de una prohibición que impedía que un polémico desfile Orangista volviera a *Crumlin Road* por la noche (McDonald y Quinn 2013, n.p.). Aunque no se han producido conflictos graves desde 2016, gracias al acuerdo satisfactorio alcanzado entre los residentes católicos nacionalistas y las organizaciones locales del Orden de Orange para restringir el paso de los desfiles por Ardoyne por la noche, la estabilidad de esta paz es, no obstante, precaria. En una fecha tan reciente como 2021, se lanzaron cócteles molotov por encima del muro que separa el *Shankill* y *the Falls* durante seis noches de violencia provocada por el protocolo post-Brexit de Irlanda del Norte (O’Carroll 2021, n.p.), mientras que apenas el pasado año (2023) se presentaron varias solicitudes a la *Parades Commission* (la comisión de desfiles) para volver a marchar por la noche por *Crumlin Road* (McParland 2023, n.p.). Por otra parte, a pesar de la promesa de Stormont en 2013 de eliminar todos los muros y líneas de la paz para ese mismo año, el distrito de Ardoyne sigue rodeado de barreras, con el muro que separa el *Shankill* y *the Falls* a casi catorce metros de altura (tres veces la altura del Muro de Berlín). Teniendo todo esto en cuenta, aunque Burns insiste en que sus novelas no son autobiográficas, no es de extrañar que en todas sus obras de ficción aborde, con un ojo astuto para las complejidades, los temas de la violencia, el trauma y las fronteras.

Aunque Burns se marchó de Ardoyne a Londres en 1987, la destructividad de los conflictos no quedó atrás ni en su pensamiento ni en su entorno. En una entrevista para el *Seamus Heaney Centre*, Burns describe el barrio en el que vivía en Londres como violento e intimidatorio, en el que ella y los demás residentes, «eran abandonados por las autoridades para que sufrieran las consecuencias del comportamiento destructivo de otros» (McWade, 2020). Sin embargo, la distancia física le permitió a Burns el espacio emocional necesario para

enfrentarse por fin a esos recuerdos de su infancia que, de otro modo, no habría afrontado. En una entrevista para el *Belfast Telegraph*, Burns relata que, en Londres,

empecé a tener sentimientos. Leía sobre algo que recordaba pero que no había despertado mis sentimientos en ese momento. Y entonces empecé a tener sentimientos. 15 o 20 años después, estaba sentada en mi habitación de Londres y reaccionaba emocionalmente a algo que había sucedido 15 o 20 años atrás. Así es como empecé a reconectar. Alcancé un reconocimiento sentido sobre esa experiencia. (O'Doherty 2018, n.p.)

Su escritura surgió, en gran medida, de esta reacción emocional diferida al trauma que había sufrido anteriormente en su vida. En la entrevista con el *Seamus Heaney Centre*, Burns describe tres momentos específicos, ocurridos en pocos días consecutivos, que marcaron el inicio de su carrera como escritora. El primero fue cuando compró un cuaderno de dibujo en la tienda de arte de una amiga, no para dibujar, sino para escribir; un momento que Burns describió como una «experiencia fundamental» (McWade 2020, n.p.). Pocos días después, otra amiga le recomendó el libro de Julia Camdon *The Artist's Way* (1992) y, según explica, antes de que tuviera tiempo de abrir el libro, otra amiga más la invitó a una clase nocturna sobre «Camino Hacia la Escritura Creativa» [*Ways into Creative Writing*]. Burns describe cómo,

estas tres experiencias me parecieron los primeros indicios claros de hacia dónde se dirigía mi atención en aquel momento. La situación era también propicia, como si hubiera llegado el momento de hacer algo más. Después, la escritura surgió de la nada. Irrumpió en mí y llegó sin ninguna intención profesional. En un arrebató de energía y de revelación, y a través de un proceso que me produjo mucha alegría y satisfacción, había comenzado esta nueva vida como escritora. (McWade 2020, n.p.)

De ese torrente de energía nacieron tres novelas: *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007) y *Milkman* (2018), así como una novela corta, *Mostly Hero* (2019). *No Bones* le hizo ganar el Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize en 2001, mientras que *Milkman* recibió el National Books Critics Circle Award for Fiction y el prestigioso Man Booker Prize en 2018, el Orwell Prize por escritora política en 2019, el Christopher Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize y el International Dublin Literary Award en 2020. Aunque cada una de estas obras de Burns es sin duda distinta, las cuatro son sumamente complejas, inquietantes, conmovedoras y – lo que es fundamental – humorísticas. Su novela debut, *No Bones*, relata la brutal historia de la vida de Amelia Lovett desde su infancia hasta que se convierte en mujer. Comienza con la llegada de las tropas británicas a Belfast en 1969, cuando Amelia tiene siete años, y termina durante el Proceso de Paz [*the Peace Procoess*] de 1994. Rodeada de violencia política y doméstica, Amelia sufre bulimia, alcoholismo, paranoia y episodios psicóticos. La segunda novela de Burns, *Little Constructions*, es una historia (radicalmente surrealista) de violencia, miedo, secretos y venganza en una familia de criminales conocida como los *Does*. A diferencia de *No Bones*, *Little Constructions* no está situada en Irlanda del Norte, sino en una ciudad ficticia llamada «Tiptoe», conocida por sus habitantes como «Tiptoe Floorboard». Dicho esto, la familia criminal presenta asombrosos puntos en común con grupos paramilitares – tanto el *Irish Republican Army* (IRA) como el *Ulster Defence Association* (UDA) – y tanto el lenguaje como el entorno muestran indicios evidentes de la idiosincrasia de Belfast. La novela corta de Burns, *Mostly Hero*, es una especie de subversión posmoderna que combina mitología griega y héroes de cómic. No obstante, no cabe duda de que está dirigida tanto a la especificidad de la violencia de los conflictos de Irlanda del Norte como, en términos más generales, a una guerra tribal de cualquier tipo. Por último, la tercera y más conocida novela de Burns, *Milkman*, cuenta la historia de madurez de una joven que crece en una ciudad norirlandesa sin nombre durante los años setenta. Sin embargo, a diferencia de *No Bones* en la que la violencia y la devastación

tanto de los conflictos como de las disputas domésticas son (al menos al principio) implacables, en *Milkman* se explicitan muy poco. Aunque *Milkman* ha recibido mucha atención académica, no se ha escrito mucho sobre sus obras anteriores. En consecuencia, esta Tesis Doctoral no sólo constituye el primer estudio académico de la obra de Anna Burns en su totalidad, sino también uno de los primeros estudios serios sobre *No Bones* y *Little Constructions*, y el primero sobre *Mostly Hero*.

En este capítulo introductorio, comenzaré con la tarea (imposible) de contextualizar las obras de Burns en el contexto de la narrativa irlandesa contemporánea, para lo cual me fijaré en los puntos en común que pueden encontrarse, en términos de tema y estilo, con otros/as escritores/as contemporáneos y sus novelas. Sin embargo, también intentaré determinar de qué manera la ficción de Burns es, no obstante, distinta, sobre todo en términos de complejidad estilística y temática. A partir de aquí, justificaré y presentaré la perspectiva teórica desde la que realizo mis análisis, junto con una explicación de mi metodología. Por último, expongo la estructura de la tesis, así como un breve resumen de lo desarrollado en cada capítulo.

## 1.2. Burns en [Con]texto.

En *Limited Inc.* Derrida aclara que su afirmación más citada «no hay nada fuera del texto» – tomada como una especie de eslogan de la deconstrucción y, en sus palabras, «tan mal entendida» – significa precisamente que «no hay nada fuera del *contexto*» (1988; énfasis añadido). Esta afirmación encapsula tanto la imposibilidad de abstraer el significado (los textos) de los contextos (con énfasis en el plural aquí) como también, de forma un tanto paradójica, la imposibilidad de delinear o delimitar tales contextos. Derrida lo explica así,

el texto no es el libro, no está confinado en un volumen que a su vez está confinado en la biblioteca. No suspende la referencia – a la historia, al mundo, a la realidad, al ser, y sobre todo no al otro, puesto que decir de la historia, del mundo, de la realidad, que

aparecen siempre en una experiencia, por tanto en un movimiento de interpretación que los contextualiza según una red de diferencias y por tanto de remisión al otro, es sin duda recordar que la alteridad (la diferencia) es irreductible. La *différance* es una referencia y viceversa. (1988, 137; énfasis en el original)

La deconstrucción entendida así es tanto «el esfuerzo por tener en cuenta este contexto ilimitado» (1988, 136), como un argumento contra la violencia de reducir, demarcar o determinar la alteridad y la diferencia (1988, 137). Al igual que el significado nunca puede fijarse, ni el texto ni el contexto pueden definirse en ningún sentido permanente: la referencia es diferencia; la presencia es *différance*. En consecuencia, Derrida explica que el proceso de deconstrucción consiste,

únicamente en la transferencia, y en el pensamiento de la transferencia, en todos los sentidos que esta palabra adquiere en más de una lengua, y en primer lugar en el de la transferencia entre lenguas. Si tuviera que arriesgar una sola definición de la deconstrucción, una tan breve, elíptica y económica como una contraseña, diría simplemente y sin exagerar: *plus d'une langue* – a la vez más que *una* lengua y no más que una lengua. (Derrida 1989, 14-5; énfasis en el original)

Teniendo en cuenta esta paradoja, abordo la tarea de contextualizar la ficción de Anna Burns con cierta cautela. Si bien es cierto que es necesario tener en cuenta el «contexto ilimitado» de su escritura, al mismo tiempo quiero hacer énfasis precisamente en lo ilimitado que sería dicho contexto. Por lo tanto, tengo la precaución de no reducir la importancia de su obra a un marco único, cerrado o restringido, es decir, el contexto de la escritura (de mujeres) (nor)irlandesa.

Dicho esto, tomando como referencia el impulso de Derrida a favor de una lectura que preste atención a los márgenes, huecos y silencios desde los que habla la alteridad (1982, xxviii), merece la pena tener en cuenta cómo, en algunos aspectos, la literatura norirlandesa se



ha enfrentado de forma recurrente a un estatus, si no de marginalidad, sí de liminalidad. Parece existir un sentimiento general de incomodidad a la hora de clasificar la ficción de Irlanda del Norte como británica o irlandesa, o ambas, algo que se refleja en la clasificación particularmente poco útil y limitadora de «ficción angloirlandesa» – que está muy relacionada con la complejidad y los matices de la identidad norirlandesa.<sup>92</sup> De hecho, estoy de acuerdo con la observación de Edna Longley sobre que la literatura norirlandesa «desborda las fronteras y manifiesta una red de filiación que se extiende más allá de cualquier núcleo [*heartland*]» (1994, 194). Sin embargo, y quizá como resultado de esta ambigüedad, la ficción norirlandesa se considera a menudo aislada de otros corpus de obras, y con frecuencia, sólo se incluye en referencia a las tensiones políticas y sociales específicas del Norte.<sup>93</sup> Aunque este enfoque ha demostrado ser productivo a la hora de aclarar nuestra comprensión de las especificidades del turbulento pasado del Norte, Caroline Magennis subraya que, inadvertidamente, también tiene el potencial de ser excesivamente determinista y reductivo (2021, 4). Además, Magennis advierte de los peligros de reducir la importancia de una obra a «la religión de un autor y la postura percibida sobre la cuestión nacional», señalando que muy pocos/as de los escritores/as

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<sup>92</sup> En su monografía *Contemporary British Fiction* (2008), Nick Bentley aborda la dificultad que conlleva la determinación de lo «británico», que implica identificar «qué escritores han sido o quieren ser etiquetados con una etiqueta nacional que, en cierto sentido, determina la forma en que se lee su obra» (2-3). Reconociendo esta dificultad, explica que su elección de escritores/as para incluir en su colección se basó en su deseo de proporcionar «una gama representativa mediante la elección de textos que son reconocidos como parte de un canon emergente de la ficción británica contemporánea» (3). El hecho de que incluya a una serie de escritores/as con doble herencia – como Salman Rushdie, Courttina Newland y Monica Ali – es sin duda encomiable, ya que da voz a la multiplicidad de identidades en Gran Bretaña. Sin embargo, algo que me parece curioso es la ausencia de escritores/as norirlandeses. Bentley sugiere que, con la excepción de Seamus Deane y Bernard MacLaverty, «en Irlanda del Norte, la principal respuesta literaria a los *Troubles* ha sido el teatro» (7). Los novelistas norirlandeses distintos de Deane y MacLaverty (cuya obra no se incluye, pero cuyos nombres se mencionan de paso) están, por tanto, presentes en la colección sólo en su ausencia.

<sup>93</sup> En este sentido, merece la pena mencionar el volumen de Dermot Bolger *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* (1993). Aunque Bolger sí incorpora en su colección obras de varios escritores norirlandeses – entre ellos Glenn Paterson, David Park, Robert McLiam Wilson y Eoin McNamee – las observaciones que hace en su introducción son especialmente reveladoras. No sólo se queja de que, si bien se aceptan colecciones separadas sobre la escritura norirlandesa, excluir esta categoría de una colección sobre la escritura irlandesa sería recibido con cierta hostilidad; también argumenta que las vidas de los habitantes de la República de Irlanda existen como una «realidad separada» de las del Norte (xii). Ambas aseveraciones, en mi opinión, pueden resonar con las barreras a las que se enfrentan las escritoras, artistas y académicas mujeres. Parece que la inclusión por parte de Bolger de escritores/as del Norte es más un acto para complacer a sus editores, redactores y críticos que una demostración del valor de leer estas obras en conversación con las de la República.

seleccionados para su propio estudio «responden directamente a acontecimientos históricos específicos, sino que se dirigen a pequeños momentos íntimos que tienen una relación más compleja con el contexto político, social y económico de lo que permite este enfoque» (2021, 4). De hecho, algo que resulta claramente visible al leer la ficción norirlandesa es cómo tanto las influencias de los/as escritores/as como el significado de sus obras se extienden mucho más allá de la frontera norirlandesa (incluso en aquellas novelas que *sí* responden directamente a acontecimientos históricos). La insistencia de Derrida en el «contexto ilimitado» – o la *dissemination* – de cualquier texto indica cómo el significado de un texto va necesariamente más allá de la intención del autor o de la autora (1981, 21).

Es importante destacar que dicha lectura limitada y esta marginación son aún más evidentes cuando se considera la ficción escrita por mujeres. De hecho, de la misma forma que la literatura norirlandesa no aparecía hasta hace poco<sup>94</sup> en los estudios sobre la ficción británica o irlandesa o, como parece ser en el caso del volumen de Dermot Bolger (1993) donde sólo está presente para complacer a los editores y críticos, la ficción escrita por mujeres también se ha dejado de lado en su mayor parte. Aunque en las últimas tres décadas se ha realizado una gran labor para hacer frente a esta marginación, a través de más plataformas públicas y oportunidades de publicación, el resultado es que tanto la literatura norirlandesa como la ficción de mujeres siguen siendo a menudo exploradas en secciones separadas dentro de las

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<sup>94</sup> La colección de Harte y Parker *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories* es pionera en este sentido, ya que establece un diálogo entre la literatura irlandesa y la norirlandesa, reconociendo el modo en que la literatura de ambos lados de la línea divisoria trabaja en la subversión de las fronteras físicas y metafóricas, y rechazando la postura (expresada por autores como Bolger) de que los disturbios en el Norte fueran de algún modo una realidad separada de la República (2000, 4). El trabajo de esta colección es muy valioso, ya que aborda esta división como por la proliferación de ficción norirlandesa, examinando así conjuntamente las novelas de Glenn Paterson y Robert McLiam Wilson. No obstante, dado que la colección está organizada por temas, vale la pena observar cómo, incluso en una colección que hace tan bien en contrarrestar esta tendencia, tenemos un capítulo titulado «*Reconfiguring Identities: Recent Northern Irish Fiction*» (232-55).

colecciones, o incluso en estudios aparte.<sup>95</sup> Destaca aquí la antología pionera *The Female Line: Northern Irish Women Writers*, editada por Hooley y publicada en 1985, que dio voz a varias escritoras norirlandesas al publicar por primera vez sus obras, así como la posterior publicación, treinta años después, de *Female Lines: New Writing by Women from Northern Ireland*, editado por Anderson y Sherratt-Bado (2017).<sup>96</sup> Lo que pone de manifiesto estas dos colecciones es la enorme diversidad de las obras escritas por mujeres norirlandesas contemporáneas en términos de estilo, forma y perspectivas con ejemplos de poesía, ficción, memorias y ensayos reflexivos. También ha sido notable el progreso percibido desde la antología de 1985, ya que muchas de las escritoras elegidas para la edición de 2017 eran escritoras bien establecidas en el momento de la publicación de sus obras (incluidas Anne Devlin, Jan Carson, Lucy Caldwell y Colette Bryce). No obstante, aunque de ninguna manera desacredito los logros de tales antologías en términos de una mayor proliferación de la escritura femenina norirlandesa, simplemente expreso mi preocupación por las posibles consecuencias de mantener dicha escritura separada tanto en términos de lectores como de reconocimiento académico. Es cierto que por fin se está leyendo, escuchando y celebrando la escritura de mujeres, pero desgraciadamente, a menudo sólo en referencia a sí misma. En este sentido, ambas categorías – la escritura norirlandesa y la escritura de mujeres – permanecen hasta cierto punto en los márgenes.

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<sup>95</sup> Sin embargo, esto es algo que está cambiando notablemente en ambos aspectos gracias a la ardua labor y a las generosas subvenciones de las asociaciones europeas e internacionales de estudios irlandeses. Por ejemplo, de los nueve autores/as, dramaturgos/as y poetas invitados a intervenir en los cuatro últimos congresos organizados por la Asociación Española de Estudios Irlandeses, AEDEI, siete han sido mujeres, y tres de Irlanda del Norte. Sin embargo, cuando se trata de paneles académicos, sigue existiendo una clara polarización, con sesiones tituladas «Las escritoras hablan» (Vigo 2021) o «Irlanda del Norte 1» e «Irlanda del Norte 2» (Burgos 2022).

<sup>96</sup> Otras antologías de escritoras irlandesas (tanto de la República como de Irlanda del Norte) de gran éxito son *Wee Girls: Women Writing from an Irish Perspective* (Lizz Murphy 1996) y *The Long Gaze Back: An Anthology of Irish Women Writers* (Sinéad Gleeson 2015). Para un análisis exhaustivo de la contribución de escritoras irlandesas en el género del relato corto, véase *Irish Women Writers and the Modern Short Story* (2017) de Elke D'hoker.

De hecho, Anne Fogarty hizo una observación parecida sobre el estatus de la escritura irlandesa contemporánea de autoría femenina en su investigación sobre la política de la identidad. Según Fogarty, «[m]ientras que los estudios anteriores simplemente ignoraban o descartaban las obras producidas por mujeres, muchos relatos actuales de la cultura irlandesa utilizan definiciones estratégicamente delimitadas de la escritura de las mujeres como un contrapunto crucial» (2002, 1). De este modo, la escritura femenina o bien sólo está presente en su ausencia, o bien su importancia, aunque elogiada, se reduce a «un subproducto de cuestiones estrechamente feministas» (2002, 2). Fogarty argumenta que, en cualquier caso, «tal posicionamiento de la escritura femenina tiene el efecto de reforzar su marginalidad y hacerla en el peor de los casos invisible o, en el mejor, cuasi-visible» (2002, 2).<sup>97</sup> En un sentido parecido, en la introducción a su análisis de tres escritoras norirlandesas, Maureen Fadem se muestra igualmente cauta a la hora de subrayar sus razones para no considerar el género como una preocupación principal. Fadem explica cómo,

las obras escritas por mujeres irlandesas – no sólo en el Norte, sino en toda la isla – se convierten en obras «de género» inmediatamente después de su publicación y, a menudo, todo lo que pueda hacer referencia a cuestiones políticas o históricas, cualesquiera que sean los medios por los que la autora «habla» de la nación, queda ocluido dentro de un análisis por lo demás feminista. Esto persiste a pesar de la existencia de alusiones a temas políticos e históricos claros y constantes. (2015, 2)

La necesidad académica de aclarar que el análisis la literatura escrita por mujeres no significa intrínsecamente centrarse en cuestiones de género es, en sí misma, reveladora. Ni siquiera se espera un comentario semejante en relación con el análisis de obras producidas por hombres;

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<sup>97</sup> Curiosamente, retomando mi comentario anterior sobre la ausencia de referencias a escritoras norirlandesas en la monografía de Bentley, Fogarty hace una observación muy similar sobre la afirmación de Conor McCarthy en su propia colección de que todavía no existe un canon de la escritura femenina irlandesa contemporánea (2002, 1).

de hecho, imagino que se lo tomarían como algo absurdo. La novelista irlandesa Kathleen MacMahon también expresa este sentimiento al hablar de su malestar cuando le ofrecieron un contrato que describía su obra no como «ficción», sino como «ficción comercial femenina» [*women's comercial fiction*]. Como ella misma explica, «[l]a etiqueta ‘escritura femenina’, con su implicación de que no interesa a los lectores que no sean mujeres, es un insulto que no ha desaparecido» (2020, n.p.).

Teniendo en cuenta todo lo anterior, podemos concluir que la ficción norirlandesa escrita por mujeres está doblemente marginada en este sentido. Dicho esto, tanto el excelente estudio comparativo de Fogarty sobre la obra de Paula Meehan, Deirdre Madden, Mary Morrissy y Marina Carr, como los análisis críticos de Fadem sobre el teatro, la poesía y la ficción de Anne Devlin, Medbh McGuckian y Anna Burns, revelan tanto la inexactitud y limitación de tal enfoque de la escritura femenina, como el modo en que estas escritoras en particular contribuyen al debate político y público actual en general. De hecho, Fogarty señala que «se podría encontrar una forma de conceptualizar la obra de determinadas escritoras que demuestre que es una parte central de la historia literaria irlandesa contemporánea y no un mero apéndice o eslabón perdido de la misma» (2002, 2). Estoy convencida de que se puede decir lo mismo no sólo de Anna Burns, sino de todas las escritoras contemporáneas a las que me referiré en este capítulo introductorio. Del mismo modo, las escritoras del Norte contribuyen no sólo a las conversaciones sobre la situación actual de Irlanda del Norte, sino también a los acontecimientos que tienen lugar a escala mundial. En este sentido, es igualmente relevante el trabajo crítico de académicos en los estudiosos irlandeses sobre la literatura irlandesa contemporánea. Tal y como afirma Caroline Magennis, «en los últimos años, la erudición académica que revisa el pasado y considera el futuro de forma innovadora y desafiante está transformando el panorama crítico» (2021, 5). En este sentido cabe destacar *A Poetics of Dissensus: Confronting Violence in Contemporary Prose Writing from the North of Ireland*

(2014) de Fiona McCann; *The Literature of Northern Ireland: Spectral Borderlines* (2015) de Maureen Fadem, y la monografía de Caroline Magennis *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles: Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures* (2021).

Creo que es importante hablar sobre el poder de escribir desde una posición de marginalidad o liminalidad; de acuerdo con Derrida (1982, xxviii), opino que precisamente son los márgenes los que tienen el potencial de perturbar nuestro sentido de certeza y, a su vez, transformar nuestra comprensión y nuestras experiencias vividas. Esto se consigue en gran medida cuestionando y traspasando los límites. De hecho, como señala Stefanie Lehner, «la propia categoría crítica de la literatura norirlandesa – dependiendo de dónde se enseñe o se venda – está a caballo entre las categorías de literatura inglesa, irlandesa y británica y, por tanto, las *cuestiona*» (2020, 1; énfasis añadido). Esta observación es especialmente relevante para mis propósitos actuales, ya que en los capítulos siguientes exploro cómo la ficción de Burns interactúa con las nociones de fronteras, herencia y alteridad. Como señala Rosemary Jenkinson en su (algo controvertido) artículo sobre los/as escritores/as en el Norte, «la unión es la clave de cualquier comunidad, pero es precisamente en los valores compartidos donde empiezan los problemas», y además «el inconveniente de las comunidades es que esperan conformidad. La política de grupo no perdona a los que se desvían» (2022, 24-5). Sugiero que éste es precisamente el mensaje que subyace en la obra de Burns.

En una observación al margen, sin embargo, vale la pena considerar el hecho de que, tras haber ganado numerosos premios literarios por su ficción, entre ellos, como se mencionó anteriormente, el premio Man Booker en 2018 (lo que la convierte en la primera escritora norirlandesa en ganar el premio), Burns se encuentra en la actualidad firmemente posicionada dentro del canon de la ficción contemporánea; algo evidenciado además por los abundantes estudios realizados sobre *Milkman* (2018) tanto dentro como fuera del campo de los estudios irlandeses. Sin embargo, es también importante recordar la respuesta dividida a su éxito con el

Man Booker Prize, porque las críticas que se hicieron contra Burns no se habrían hecho, me imagino, contra un escritor varón. *Milkman* fue descrita, por un lado, como una obra «inaccesible», «impenetrable», «amasadora de cerebros», «implacablemente interiorizada» y «desconcertante» (citado en Stefanou 2019), a la par que un desafío *moderado* para aquellos que leen el *Journal of Philosophy* (citado en Flood y Armistead 2018). Este último comentario fue hecho por uno de los propios jueces del Man Booker, irónicamente en un intento de defender la novela contra tales críticas. Por el contrario, Paul Beatty, ganador del mismo premio en 2016 por su excepcional novela *The Sellout*, fue justamente elogiado por su escritura «atrevida y abrasiva» (Colter Walls 2015, n.p.). De modo similar, el ganador de 2017, George Saunders, recibió elogios similares por su obra maestra *Lincoln in the Bardo*, la cual fue descrita como «una interpretación de gran audacia formal ... que está muy por encima de la mayoría de la ficción contemporánea» (Kunzru 2017, n.p.). Como elaboro en términos más claros en el capítulo cinco, soy de la opinión de que las características de *Milkman* que recibieron más críticas son las mismas que le deben su éxito: como se dijo de *The Sellout*, *Milkman* destaca por ser estilística y formalmente atrevida y abrasiva. En su exploración de los temas de la marginalidad, la ficción de Burns tiene sin duda un potencial disruptivo.

Para volver a la (imposible) tarea que me ocupa, es decir, contextualizar la ficción de Burns, empezaré por ofrecer un breve (y en nada exhaustivo) panorama de algunas de las obras de ficción irlandesas y norirlandesas contemporáneas más destacables (con la excepción de la inclusión de un escritor escocés) que abordan temas similares a los de Burns. Los escritores de cuya obra hablaré brevemente son (por este orden): Lucy Caldwell, Paul McVeigh, Louise Kennedy, Jan Carson, Francesca McDonnell, Elaine Canning, David Keenan, Anne Enright, Glenn Patterson y Mary O'Donnell. Los temas que conectan sus novelas incluyen, entre otros, la herencia del trauma; la inquietante presencia del pasado; la memoria; el secreto; el duelo; la identidad individual y comunitaria; y las fronteras, barreras y líneas binarias. Las observaciones

y conexiones relativas a las novelas que comento se basan en mis propios análisis de las novelas. El hecho de que la mayoría de estos/as escritores/as sean mujeres y de Belfast es una muestra que apoya mi afirmación sobre el poder de escribir desde una posición de liminalidad. Es importante destacar que, al establecer estas conexiones, ecos o rastros entre las novelas en cuestión, no estoy de ninguna manera insinuando que las escritoras pertenezcan a una comunidad o movimiento de escritoras claramente diferenciadas; simplemente pretendo resaltar el interés de poner estos textos en conversación. De hecho, estoy en gran parte de acuerdo con Claire Kilroy cuando, en una entrevista con Lozano García, dice de la escritura irlandesa contemporánea: «No puedo decir que haya un movimiento. Sólo hay colegueo, pero cada uno hacemos lo nuestro y me parece interesante el trabajo de mi generación. Me parece interesante el trabajo de los mayores. La escritura irlandesa sí me parece interesante, pero es difícil señalar un único tren imaginativo [*imaginative train*] dentro de ella» (Lozano García 2018, 159). Sin embargo, aunque tal vez no tan claras como las vías de un «tren imaginativo», sugiero que hay ciertas huellas e hilos a seguir (al menos entre los/as escritores/as elegidos/as que he optado por incluir). No obstante, y con este propósito en mente, también identificaré la manera en la que la obra de Burns se sitúa en cierta medida a contracorriente, es decir, el modo en que su escritura es innovadora tanto en su temática como en su forma de albergar la singularidad, la alteridad y la diferencia (o el modo en el que no pertenece de ninguna forma esencialista a la escritura de «su generación»).

Quizá el hilo temático más destacable que puede encontrarse en la escritura irlandesa contemporánea sea la confrontación con el pasado. Según Andrzej Gąbiński, éste ha sido un enfoque común durante bastante tiempo: «La mejor escritura irlandesa de los últimos 200 años» – sugiere – intenta «establecer conexiones entre el pasado y el presente para poder imaginar un futuro más fructífero. Y yo diría que lo mismo ocurre con la mejor ficción irlandesa actual» (2007, 45). A menudo, esto implica volver al pasado para reevaluar y reimaginar el presente.



Esto me recuerda a la descripción que hace Neal Alexander de las novelas posteriores al Acuerdo del Viernes Santo como “retrospectivas”; tal y como afirma Alexander, estas novelas reflejan una «tendencia a recrear un momento concreto del pasado en un esfuerzo por iluminar la difícil situación contemporánea del Norte» (2009, 274). En *Where They Were Missed* (2006) de Lucy Caldwell,<sup>98</sup> y *The Good Son* (2015) de Paul McVeigh, por ejemplo, nos adentramos en la vida de un niño pequeño que crece en Belfast durante el conflicto de Irlanda del Norte: uno en la zona católica de Ardoyne, el otro en la zona este protestante de Belfast, pero ambos igualmente marcados por la guerra tribal y la paranoia. Estas novelas guardan ciertas características en común con los primeros capítulos de *No Bones* de Burns, tanto en el marco geográfico e histórico de las novelas como en el hecho de que ambos Caldwell y McVeigh utilizan a un narrador infantil. En *No Bones*, vemos la realidad a través de Amelia Lovett, una niña de siete años, que se desenvuelve en una Ardoyne devastada por la guerra. Se pueden encontrar más analogías entre la ironía y la idiosincrasia local de Burns y McVeigh: como escribe Patricia Craig sobre *The Good Son*, esta novela «encarna la ironía y el ingenio de Belfast, y su lenguaje local es perfecto» (2018, 193). Del mismo modo, en las tres novelas somos testigos de cómo el conflicto externo se infiltra en el entorno doméstico y personal. También situada en la Belfast de la época del conflicto, nos encontramos con la novela *Trespases* (2022) de Louise Kennedy. Esta novela cuenta la historia (un tanto cliché) de una joven maestra de primaria en un distrito católico que se enamora de un hombre mayor casado, un abogado protestante. Como ocurre en las novelas de Caldwell y McVeigh, aquí también vemos la lucha por determinar la identidad individual en medio de una comunidad profundamente dividida por las normas sociales, junto con la tensión emocional de comprometerse con la propia perspectiva ética. El perspicaz realismo de Kennedy, no muy

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<sup>98</sup> Para una exploración perspicaz del tema del duelo en la novela de Caldwell, véase Dawn Miranda Sherratt-Bado (2018).

lejano del de Caldwell, es tan cautivador como conmovedor, y aborda con acierto y matiz emocional las cuestiones del amor y la muerte.

Otra novela que afronta directamente el tema de la herencia y el legado es *The Fire Starters* (2019) de Jan Carson. Situada en un Belfast ficticio dieciséis años después de la firma del Acuerdo de la Paz, la historia desarrolla los relatos paralelos de dos padres cuya preocupación por los traumas que podrían transmitirse a su descendencia los lleva a sentir vergüenza y responsabilidad por el ciclo de violencia reemergente. Como dice el personaje de Sammy, «la violencia es algo que se transmite, como las enfermedades del corazón o el cáncer» (Carson 2019, 47). Sin embargo, lo que permite que la novela de Carson destaque del resto es su adopción del realismo mágico (se nos cuenta cómo la hija recién nacida de Jonathan nació de una sirena, y la narración se interrumpe regularmente con historias de los llamados «niños desafortunados» de Belfast: una niña con alas, un niño con ruedas por pies, otro que ve el futuro en cada superficie líquida). Además de la preocupación por la herencia, la novela de Carson – como las de Burns – explora las formas en las que una apertura a la alteridad podría interrumpir el retorno cíclico de la violencia, junto con los peligros potenciales que dicha apertura puede acarrear. Como escribe Magennis en su análisis de la novela, lo que Carson presenta al lector es «tanto la dura realidad de que lo que amamos podría destruirnos como los poderes enriquecedores de la vida íntima» (2021, 41).

De manera parecida, *Trouble the Living* (2023), de la escritora irlandesa-estadounidense Francesca McDonnell Capossela, confronta directamente el pasado con el presente. La novela narra las historias interconectadas de Brid y su hermana Ina, que crecen en Belfast durante los últimos años de los denominados *Troubles*, y de la hija de Brid, Bernie, que crece en el sur de California en 2016. Aunque las historias están íntimamente ligadas, están separadas geográfica y temporalmente. La fragilidad de la relación entre madre e hija se ve sacudida por la revelación del secreto de la madre, un secreto que afecta tanto al legado como a la herencia. Con una prosa

enormemente honesta e íntima – similar en muchos aspectos al realismo de Kennedy – Capossela se enfrenta (con una sensibilidad afinada) a la inquietante presencia de los secretos transgeneracionales, el duelo y el trauma. Esto nos lleva a un segundo tema destacado: la inquietante presencia de silencios y secretos.<sup>99</sup> De hecho, como comenta Maureen Fadem, «[l]a ficción del Norte... lleva la marca enmascarada de la espectralidad» (2015, 10).<sup>100</sup> *These Days* (2022) de Lucy Caldwell es particularmente relevante en este sentido. Aunque está situada en Belfast, el contexto de fondo de la historia no es el conflicto de Irlanda del Norte, sino el *Blitz*. Curiosamente, a diferencia de *Trouble the Living* de Capossela – donde el presente se experimenta como perseguido por los secretos y traumas del pasado – lo que atormenta las páginas de *These Days* son los espectros del futuro. Como escribe Joseph O'Connor en su reseña para *The Guardian*, «[a]cechando esos pasajes están las imágenes de la violencia posterior en la misma ciudad, fantasmas del futuro de Belfast. Caldwell no los señala explícitamente, pero revolotean en los márgenes de esta impresionante novela» (2022, n.p.). Por último, otra novela que aborda directamente temas de duelo y embrujo que traspasan fronteras generacionales, geográficas e históricas es *The Sandstone City* (2022), el debut

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<sup>99</sup> Véase *Narratives of the Unspoken in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Silences that Speak* (Caneda-Cabrera y Carregal-Romero, 2023); dicha colección de ensayos críticos ofrece una perspectiva novedosa en el estudio del silencio en la narrativa irlandesa contemporánea.

<sup>100</sup> Hay otras dos novelas que también me recuerdan a los fantasmas y los secretos: *Reading in the Dark* (1996), de Seamus Deane, y *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), de Deirdre Madden. Aunque existe una importante separación de años (y, por tanto, de contexto) entre la publicación de estas novelas y la ficción contemporánea que estoy analizando actualmente – de hecho, éstas son las dos únicas novelas que menciono que fueron escritas antes de la firma del Acuerdo de Belfast – ambas novelas tienen claras correlaciones con la ficción de Burns. Además, la separación temporal se reduce significativamente al considerar la primera novela de Burns, que se publicó en 2001. *Reading in the Dark*, de Deane, trata de la inquietante presencia de secretos transgeneracionales. Su protagonista es un joven que pretende resolver el misterio de su tío desaparecido, un misterio que, como vimos en *Trouble the Living*, gira en torno a un secreto familiar inconfesable. Curiosamente, de forma similar al protagonista de Burns en *Milkman*, el chico no es nombrado. Aunque el entorno no es Belfast, sino Derry, y antes del inicio del conflicto de Irlanda del Norte, los espectros que recorren la ciudad están sin duda relacionados. Por otro lado, *One by One in the Darkness* de Madden cuenta la historia de una familia que intenta comprender las circunstancias del asesinato de su padre. Situada en Belfast durante los *Troubles*, el enfoque doméstico de Madden difumina los bordes entre lo público y lo privado, y la destrucción política y personal, temas igualmente recurrentes en toda la obra de Burns. Además, como ocurre también en la ficción de Burns (y especialmente en *No Bones* y *Little Constructions*), el acontecimiento traumático central de la novela – en este caso, el asesinato del padre – se reprime en gran medida y no se cuenta, por lo que el lector debe reconstruir los hechos a partir de una serie de lagunas y ausencias. Además, el complejo estilo posmoderno de la novela de Madden guarda más similitudes con el estilo narrativo de Burns que con la mayoría de las obras de ficción contemporánea que he analizado hasta ahora.

increíblemente original de Elaine Canning. Lo que hace que esta novela sea destacable es cómo, a diferencia de las obras anteriormente comentadas, los espectros del pasado no se afrontan como una especie de presencia inquietante, sino más bien como fantasmas en el sentido más literal. A un abuelo fallecido se le concede un periodo de gracia de cuarenta días para ayudar a descifrar y curar los traumas de su nieta y enfrentarse a los fantasmas de su propio pasado. La novela se sitúa entre Salamanca durante la guerra civil española, y la Belfast de hoy en día, lo que produce una perturbación inquietante en tiempo y lugar. Curiosamente, Canning cita como influencias tanto a Caldwell como a Carson (Arts Council of Northern Ireland 2022, n.p.).

Sin embargo, los/as seis autores/as se diferencian significativamente de Burns en las convenciones estilísticas y formales. En lo que Caldwell, McVeigh, Kennedy y Capossela coinciden es en su narración astuta y convincente de las experiencias vividas del trauma, algo que evoca una fuerte respuesta empática y emocional por parte del lector. Aunque la novela de Carson destaca ciertamente en términos de estilo y forma, el realismo mágico sigue siendo, hasta cierto punto, una forma de realismo. A pesar del cruce de mitología y magia en su ficticia Belfast, una vez inmersos en el mundo de Carson, la historia parece creíble y real. Del mismo modo, aunque la poco convencional historia de fantasmas de Canning es atrevida e innovadora, su prosa es clara y fácil de seguir, y la novela termina con una fuerte sensación de reconciliación y resolución. En cambio, toda la obra de Burns, aunque trata temas similares como el trauma, la muerte, el secreto y la herencia, se caracteriza por ser sumamente críptica y poco convencional; los enigmas, silencios y ausencias de sus historias nunca se resuelven del todo, ni siquiera en las conclusiones de las novelas. Éste es sobre todo el caso en *Little Constructions*, una novela en la que el lector se queda con muy poco a lo que aferrarse, y sin una base clara de hacia dónde deben dirigirse sus simpatías.

Teniendo todo esto en cuenta, la original *For the Good Times* (2019) del escritor escocés David Keenan guarda un mayor parecido con la obra de Burns en cuanto a forma y estilo. *For the Good Times* está narrada por un soldado de infantería republicano de Belfast, Sammy, desde los confines de una celda en prisión desde donde relata el violento trabajo que hizo para el IRA y un secuestro que salió mal. Mientras que el uso que hace Keenan de las secuencias de sueños recuerda especialmente al de Burns en *No Bones*, los segmentos en los que repite los hechos como una historia de aventuras de superhéroes también acercan la novela a *Mostly Hero* de Burns. Además, la perspectiva que se obtiene del viaje de Sammy a Glasgow en *For the Good Times* guarda cierta similitud con el capítulo final de *No Bones*, en el que vemos a Amelia y sus amigos hacer una excursión de un día a la isla de *Rathlin*. También es interesante mencionar el hecho de que la novela de Keenan gira en torno al tema central del dominio y la deconstrucción de las fronteras, un tema que se encuentra en el centro de toda la obra de Burns. Como señala Leszek Drong en su estudio comparativo de *Milkman* y *For the Good Times*, «la obra de Burns y Keenan ha demostrado ser especialmente útil para cuestionar los supuestos sobre la solidez de las fronteras, los límites y las barreras tanto entre comunidades como dentro de ellas» (2020, 178).

Por otra parte, al igual que el poder del superhéroe Sammy es el del olvido, toda la obra de Burns interactúa con el tema recurrente de la pérdida de memoria a corto plazo, el *jamais vu* y la amnesia comunitaria, un tema que, propongo, actúa a la vez como advertencia alegórica de los peligros de la amnesia política y como medio para poner en duda la supuesta objetividad de la memoria oficial. Como comenta Gerry Smyth en relación con las tendencias de la cultura irlandesa contemporánea, «la categoría de la memoria – oficial, secreta, reprimida – ha sido objeto de un intenso escrutinio» (2001, 134). Del mismo modo, Constanza del Río identifica «pulsos contradictorios en la novela irlandesa contemporánea en velar y desvelar la memoria del pasado» (2010, 11). También es destacable el modo en que *The Gathering* (2007) de Anne

Enright, escrita en modo testimonial, se compromete con esta tensión entre la falibilidad de la memoria individual y colectiva y el deseo de desvelar traumas de abuso ignorados, ocultos y reprimidos. Como escribe Carol Dell’Amico en su análisis de la novela, «los personajes de Enright promulgan un patrón de la nación en su conjunto: una repulsa con respecto a las revelaciones de abuso que es en última instancia pasiva e inadecuada, caracterizada como ‘un siglo de mirar hacia otro lado’» (2010, 73).

En cuanto al papel de la memoria, *That Which Was* (2004) de Glenn Patterson merece también una referencia en este apartado. Aunque su estilo de prosa discrepa del de Burns – como comenta Neal Alexander, «Patterson escribe con una prosa poco llamativa, naturalista y engañosamente sencilla» (2009, 276-7) – los temas centrales de la novela no podrían ser más pertinentes. *That Which Was* gira en torno a las confusas confesiones de asesinato y encubrimiento político hechas a un sacerdote, y aborda cómo los recuerdos reprimidos, en palabras del personaje Larry, «vuelven para perseguirte, incluso cuando alguien ha intentado borrarlos» (Patterson 2004, 49). Esta cita también me recuerda a *Where They Lie* (2014) de Mary O’Donnell. El estilo narrativo de O’Donnell es también similar al de Burns, ya que emplea tropos de fragmentación, repetición, tiempo anacrónico y secuencias de sueños para explorar la estructura formal del secreto, y lo hace a través del prisma de la pérdida traumática. Además, la obsesión de los protagonistas de O’Donnell por recuperar los restos de los fallecidos es el hilo conductor de *Little Constructions* de Burns, lo que a su vez vincula ambas novelas con la obra de Derrida sobre el duelo. Como escribe Derrida, «[n]ada podría ser peor, para el trabajo del duelo, que la confusión o la duda: uno *tiene que saber* quién está enterrado y dónde» (1994, 9; énfasis en el original). De hecho, como escribe José Manuel Estévez-Saá en su análisis crítico de *Where They Lie*, «[n]i el Proceso de Paz ni el Acuerdo de Belfast en Irlanda del Norte han sido capaces de exorcizar con éxito todas las voces atormentadas e inquietantes de los tiempos de los *Troubles*» (2016, 21). Este sentimiento es respaldado por

Colin Graham, quien advierte al hablar del Proceso de Paz en Irlanda del Norte, que «la construcción de un proceso político para olvidar en lugar de recordar, ... que considera la identidad, en su sentido más amplio, como un peligro en lugar de como la sustancia misma de la cuestión» significará inevitablemente que el país permanezca atrapado en «patrones de represión y recurrencia» (2007, 180). Del mismo modo, Fiona McCann, en referencia a los desfiles de Orange, advierte de «los peligros de borrar de la historia las razones subyacentes del conflicto y de negarse a abordar cuestiones polémicas como la vivienda y la educación, ya que están relacionadas con la segregación étnico-religiosa que está tan profundamente anclada en la propia geografía del Norte» (2014a, 2-3). Richard Kirkland, por su parte, aplica la noción de Gramsci del *interregnum* a la situación en el Norte, describiendo una nación atrapada en un período de transición estancada o paralizada (1996, 9). No obstante, creo que lo que todos/as estos/as novelistas demuestran son las formas en que una narrativa (y una narración) más abierta, perturbada o alternativa permite no sólo la posibilidad de reconstruir nuestra perspectiva sobre la identidad y la comunidad, sino también la representación de Belfast como un territorio fértil tanto para la reimaginación como para el cambio.

A pesar de las aparentes correlaciones y similitudes que se pueden encontrar entre la ficción de Burns y la de sus contemporáneos/as, creo que lo que hace que la narrativa de Burns sea aún más provocativa y filosóficamente transformadora es su toque claramente idiosincrático. Aunque Claire Kilroy reconoce con razón que «la ficción literaria irlandesa es siempre caótica y personal» (Lozano García 2018, 159), si bien es cierto que hay un trasfondo Joyceano en su escritura, Burns tiene una voz especialmente única: subvierte las expectativas, interrumpe el flujo narrativo y permite que surjan conexiones cuando menos se espera. Como escribe Daragh Downes en su reseña de *Milkman*, Burns sobrepasa «todas las convenciones estilísticas y narrativas» (2021, 231). A su vez, el estilo complejo, subversivo y crítico de su narrativa se resiste a simples interpretaciones unitarias, y los secretos en el centro de muchos

de sus hilos narrativos nunca se revelan ni se resuelven en las conclusiones de las novelas. Además, al leer y releer sus textos, empezamos a ver cómo en sus numerosas criptas literarias se esconden no sólo los espectros de los muertos vivientes, sino la propia alteridad. Mientras que la mayoría de los/as escritores/as que he mencionado hasta ahora se involucran en el proceso de escribir el trauma en la ficción – de hecho, parte de lo que hace que sus narraciones sean tan conmovedoras y poderosas es el grado en que resuenan con la experiencia vivida del trauma – propongo que Burns lleva la narrativa del trauma a tal extremo que empezamos a ver las grietas que la sostienen.

Además, la complejidad de su escritura hace que las novelas de Burns no encajen fácilmente en categorías de género. Esta es una característica bien demostrada por la gran variedad de categorizaciones de *Milkman* – que incluyen la distópica (Callan 2023; Sweeney 2018), el realismo histórico (White 2021), la picaresca (Malone 2019) y el gótico postcolonial (McMann 2023), por nombrar sólo algunos – junto con la variedad de diferentes enfoques críticos de la novela, entre ellos los estudios literarios feministas. Al igual que vemos en los personajes de Burns, las propias novelas traspasan fronteras. De hecho, estoy de acuerdo con el análisis de Fiona McCann cuando, en referencia a *Little Constructions*, describe cómo «la ficción de Burns, mediante el compromiso con modos innovadores de representación, participa en la apertura de nuevas perspectivas a través de las cuales el pasado, pero también el futuro, pueden ser cuestionado, (re)formado y (re)escrito» (2016, 34). Del mismo modo, deseo explorar cómo éste es particularmente el caso cuando se considera la reimaginación de diferentes formas de comunidades. Por último, pretendo desvelar cómo las novelas de Burns también son increíblemente humorísticas, pero no en el sentido desenfadado del alegre narrador de McVeigh. Su humor es, en mayor parte, oscuro y siniestro. Aunque se puede encontrar, hasta cierto punto, un sentido de humor cínico similar en algunos de los personajes de *Where They Lie* de O'Donnell y *For the Good Times* de Keenan, algo que vemos más claramente en la



escritura de Burns es cómo ésta desarrolla el sentido del humor de tal manera que se puede decir que encarna la forma misma de la posición filosófica que recorre sus textos; de hecho, esto es algo que exploro ampliamente en el capítulo seis. La singularidad de la escritura de Burns se hace eco tanto de la singularidad del acontecimiento en la ficción como de la singularidad del otro en la teoría comunitaria. Teniendo esto en cuenta, pasaré a describir y justificar mi enfoque teórico.

### 1.3. Marco Teórico: Justificación, Metodología y Objetivos

En concordancia con la descripción que hace Derek Attridge de la “lectura hospitalaria” [*hospitable reading*], sostengo la singularidad de la literatura tiene un significado comunitario y ético (Attridge 2017, 280-305). Tal postura implica prestar especial atención a lo que puede estar asomando en los márgenes de un texto y escuchar lo no dicho, lo indecible y lo indecible. De hecho, como concluye Ian Hickey, siguiendo a Derrida, «el presente está hecho de presencias espectrales y ausentes del pasado que sólo son visibles en las huellas y marcas que dejan en los textos y en nuestro interior» (2022, 16). Esta convicción, junto con el interés de Burns por temas profundamente filosóficos y el estilo subversivo de su narrativa, ha determinado mi elección de las teorías a partir de las cuales realizo mis análisis. Curiosamente, también existen claros paralelismos entre el relato de la propia Burns sobre su escritura y la descripción que hace Attridge sobre el tipo de textos ergódicos que exigen una respuesta hospitalaria. En la mencionada entrevista para el *Seamus Heaney Centre*, Burns explica cómo,

el estilo de rompecabezas se convirtió en la mejor descripción de parte de mi escritura. Sin embargo, a diferencia del juego de rompecabezas en una caja – con una imagen en la tapa para que al menos tengas una idea de lo que se supone que quieres conseguir – mi narrativa no iba marcada por ningún plan. Lo que vino, sin prisa y sin pausa, fue un enorme proceso de apuntalamiento. Podía sentir cómo sucedía y me encantaba que sucediera, pero no podía acceder a él ni parecía que tuviera que hacerlo. Al menos no

conscientemente. Cada libro se iba formando más y más bajo la superficie, con menos escritura como prueba, por así decirlo – y a veces durante años –encima. Una gran parte de lo que para mí se convierte el proceso de escritura de un libro tiene que ver con ese apuntalamiento. No se puede compartir el apuntalamiento. Es imposible cogerlo. (McWade 2020, n.p.)

Mientras que Attridge, por su parte, describe cómo,

parte del secreto, un secreto en la superficie, que no se puede desvelar ... es un aspecto esencial y obvio de la singularidad de una obra; desempeña un papel importante en la experiencia del lector; y, sin embargo, sigue siendo irreductible al significado. ... Tiene lugar cada vez que la obra se lee como un acontecimiento sin sentido o, para ser más precisos, como un acontecimiento cuyo significado sigue siendo indecible e inexhaustible. (2021, 30)

La correlación entre Burns y Attridge se encuentra entre la descripción que hace la autora sobre la base invisible e indescifrable de su escritura y el relato de Attridge sobre la inexhaustibilidad del significado. A partir de aquí, podemos concluir que, adoptando las palabras de Derrida, «la legibilidad del texto está estructurada por la ilegibilidad del secreto» (1992, 152). Así pues, la idoneidad de un enfoque deconstructivo a la obra de Burns, centrado en las singularidades, los espectros y el secreto, no podría ser más visible.

La base teórica de mi investigación se basa en primer lugar en la teoría comunitaria postfenomenológica alentada por pensadores tales como Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot y Jacques Derrida, pero con un interés particular en el modo en que estas teorías interactúan y responden a la ontología Heideggeriana y a la ética de la alteridad Levinasiana. La notable correlación entre lo inconfesable de las «comunidades del secreto» (López 2021, 10) y la ecuación de Derrida de la negación del derecho al secreto y el estado totalitario (Derrida y

Ferraris 2001), es en parte lo que conecta este primer aspecto de mi marco teórico con el segundo, el cual explora el papel del secreto tanto en las comunidades como en los textos. La preocupación de Nancy y Blanchot por las singularidades más que por los individuos (Nancy 1991; Blanchot 1988), la relevancia de los conceptos de hospitalidad, lectura hospitalaria (Attridge 2017) y autoinmunidad (Derrida en Borradori 2003), y las teorías de Derrida sobre el secreto ‘absoluto’ (Derrida y Ferraris 2001) también invitan a la incorporación de la hauntología [*hauntology*] Derrideana en este marco, así como la noción psicoanalítica de la ‘cripta’ (Derrida 1994; 1986) – todos estos conceptos se abordan ampliamente en el capítulo dos.

Este marco teórico está en gran parte influenciado por dos colecciones pioneras de ensayos –*Community in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Rodríguez Salas, Martín Salván y Jiménez Heffernan 2013) y, aún más profundamente, *Secrecy and Community in 21st-Century Fiction* (López y Villar-Argáiz 2021) – así como por mi colaboración en el proyecto de investigación financiado por el Ministerio español *Democracy, Secrecy and Dissidence in Contemporary Literature in English*. Lo que creo que demuestra el trabajo, tanto de estas colecciones como del grupo, es el modo en que la literatura – como espacio que permite lo secreto y que se asemeja igualmente a las estructuras formales de lo secreto como tal – proporciona un espacio liminal productivo en el que los conceptos de comunidad, secreto y cripta pueden ser reimaginados. Propongo que la alteración y reescritura – o deconstrucción – de nuestros conceptos básicos a través de los cuales nos relacionamos con el mundo y con los demás puede, a su vez, transformar nuestras experiencias vividas.

Además, mientras que los enfoques contemporáneos de la novela tienden a hacer énfasis en los contextos culturales, políticos e históricos (especialmente en el contexto de los estudios irlandeses, donde la teoría crítica está, en su mayor parte, desatendida), propongo que el estilo de escritura complejo y críptico de Burns invita a una lectura abstraída, en la que el

contexto y las fronteras se difuminan en lugar de definirse, y a partir de la cual nos abrimos a una multiplicidad de interpretaciones potenciales. Como escribe Derrida, «ninguna frontera está garantizada, ni dentro ni fuera» (Derrida 1979, 78). A su vez, este enfoque permite llegar a conclusiones más amplias, que traspasan las propias fronteras con las que se relacionan. Además, dado que las teorías comunitarias postfenomenológicas exploran las tensiones que se producen entre las singularidades y sus comunidades, las conclusiones a las que se llega en un estudio de este tipo pueden aportar nuevas perspectivas sobre cuestiones que, dadas las actuales tensiones sociales y políticas (tanto en Irlanda del Norte como en todo el mundo), no podrían ser más pertinentes.

El carácter innovador de mi investigación consiste principalmente en que se trata de una de las primeras investigaciones comunitarias sobre la literatura irlandesa, la primera (que yo sepa) sobre la literatura de Irlanda del Norte y la primera sobre la obra de Anna Burns. Los estudios anteriores sobre la relación entre el individuo y la comunidad en el ámbito de los estudios irlandeses, aunque muy perspicaces, han permanecido en su mayor parte sutilmente fieles a la idea modernista del individuo aislado, según la cual la comunidad se entiende en términos de lo común y la pertenencia. Por ejemplo, aunque la investigación de Brian Cliff sobre la comunidad en la literatura irlandesa muestra con detalle el modo en que la atención a la nacionalidad determina las identidades normativas y excluye otras, su análisis se basa en la noción de que la comunidad es «una manifestación del deseo de pertenencia» (2006, 114). Cliff hace bien en ilustrar cómo, en sus palabras, «los mapas de comunidades alternativas de la literatura irlandesa contemporánea amplían el vocabulario crítico del campo y abordan cuestiones cada vez más difíciles sobre la naturaleza de la comunidad y la pertenencia» (2006, 125). Lo que Cliff busca, sin embargo, son rastros de otros tipos de pertenencia: los que a menudo son marginados o anulados por la retórica de la nación. Aunque esta preocupación por los marginados está muy relacionada con el discurso comunitario, algo que quiero subrayar en

mi investigación son las formas en que las teorías comunitarias abarcan las comunidades de *no* pertenencia: o comunidades de aquellos que «no tienen nada en común» (Derrida y Ferraris 2001, 58).

El potencial innovador de un enfoque comunitario a la literatura irlandesa ha quedado bien demostrado en una serie de estudios realizados por Pilar Villar-Argáiz. En sus análisis críticos de una selección de novelas, relatos y poemas irlandeses de James Joyce (2013a; 2015), Edna O’Brien (2013b) y Eavan Boland (2020), respectivamente, Villar-Argáiz demuestra cómo este enfoque contribuye tanto a la deconstrucción de las formas dominantes de pertenencia como a la reimaginación de la propia noción de comunidad en términos más abiertos. En referencia al relato corto de Joyce «The Dead» ([1914] 2004), por ejemplo, Villar-Argáiz sostiene que «Joyce muestra que la construcción de cualquier forma de identidad comunitaria sólo puede lograrse a expensas de alguna forma de alteridad que se excluye y se define negativamente en relación con ese sentido imaginario del yo comunitario» (2013a, 63). Sin embargo, algo importante que Villar-Argáiz subraya es cómo este enfoque del análisis literario no implica simplemente identificar las críticas de los/as autores/as a las comunidades orgánicas, sino que también revela la existencia de ejemplos de comunidades inoperativas e inorgánicas – aquellas que no se basan en la pertenencia sino en la exposición y la alteridad. En su capítulo sobre los relatos de O’Brien, por ejemplo, Villar-Argáiz explica cómo dicha autora visualiza comunidades alternativas no solo temáticamente, sino también de manera simbólica y formal (2013b, 192).

Con respecto al secreto, aunque se han realizado varios estudios sobre este aspecto en la ficción de Burns,<sup>101</sup> algo que espero aportar al debate es una de las primeras aproximaciones al papel de lo secreto en su obra desde la perspectiva de la hauntología Derrideana. Aunque no

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<sup>101</sup> Sobre el secreto en *No Bones*, véase McGuinness (2010) y Fadem (2015). Sobre el secreto en *Milkman*, véase Piątek (2020), Morales-Ladrón (2023) y Malone (2021).

se trata en absoluto de un enfoque habitual en el análisis de la literatura irlandesa, los resultados de tres estudios previos son especialmente reveladores. La colección de ensayos de 2009 de Eugene O'Brien *'Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse': Negotiating Texts and Contexts in Contemporary Irish Studies* presenta una de las primeras aproximaciones deconstructivas a los estudios irlandeses desde la perspectiva de la hauntología. Tomando la obra del llamado canon literario de los estudios irlandeses – Yeats, Joyce, Heaney y Ó'Faoláin – junto con el programa de televisión *Father Ted* y una serie de anuncios comerciales de Guinness, los análisis de O'Brien son particularmente reveladores desde la perspectiva de la teoría crítica, demostrando como estas voces canónicas y fenómenos culturales están abiertos al «otro del lenguaje» (2009, 8). Curiosamente, en su introducción a esta colección, O'Brien localiza la influencia de la teoría literaria y crítica francesa en la cultura irlandesa, sugiriendo que, aunque llegó más tarde que en la Europa continental – es decir, aunque era diferida – ha permitido lo que él describe como «una nueva apertura»:

una apertura en la que los viejos centros no han sido demolidos, simplemente descentrados, deconstruidos en el sentido de que ya no están más allá del poder de la crítica. El legado de la teoría literaria y crítica es el de la pregunta: la pregunta que plantea lo incuestionable, que sugiere lo insugestionable. (2009, 28)

O'Brien se refiere aquí no sólo al Estado, sino también a la Iglesia y a la comunidad dividida. También cabe destacar la innovadora monografía de Matthew Schultz *Haunted Historiographies: The Rhetoric of Ideology in Postcolonial Irish Fiction* (2014), que ofrece un ejemplo excelente de cómo la hauntología es especialmente útil en el estudio de la literatura irlandesa y norirlandesa contemporánea. Aunque comienza con Joyce y termina con Beckett, en los capítulos intermedios Schultz explora los espectros de la hambruna y la revolución en ocho novelas irlandesas contemporáneas. En contraste con el análisis de John Brewer en su enfoque sociológico del Proceso de Paz, que sugiere que en Irlanda del Norte el pasado existe

como una forma de «eterno presente» (2010, 145), algo que Schultz subraya en sus análisis es cómo «el embrujo se imagina como un vehículo productivo para sacar a la nación del pasado en lugar de mantenerla allí» (2014, 14). En su capítulo sobre *No Bones* de Burns (uno de los cuatro estudios previos realizados sobre la novela), Schultz explora las formas en que la crítica de Burns a la herencia gótica actúa como un medio para hacer frente a la reemergencia de la violencia transgeneracional (2014, 134), un aspecto sobre el que volveré en mi propio análisis de la novela en el capítulo tres. En *Haunted Heaney: Spectres and the Poetry* (2022), Ian Hickey, por su parte, aplica la perspectiva de la hauntología a un análisis de los fantasmas y espectros en la poesía de Seamus Heaney, desde su primera hasta su última colección. Sus análisis parte de la mitología nórdica hasta el colonialismo británico, ahondando así en el tema recurrente de la multiplicidad de espectros que ronda un texto determinado; y trastocando por tanto nuestro propio sentido del tiempo y del lugar.

Basándome en el trabajo de Villar-Argáiz en cuanto a los enfoques comunitarios de la ficción irlandesa, los estudios realizados en la colección de López y Villar-Argáiz sobre las «comunidades de lo secreto» (López 2021, 10), y las aplicaciones de Schultz y Hickey de la hauntología a la ficción y la poesía norirlandesas, espero que esta Tesis Doctoral demuestre cómo estos tres enfoques interactúan y se complementan entre sí como herramienta para el análisis literario. Esto me lleva al último aspecto de mi enfoque teórico: la noción psicoanalítica de la cripta. Mientras que Hickey reconoce la importancia de la cripta para la hauntología Derrideana, especialmente con respecto a los temas de represión y repetición (2022, 21-3), mi objetivo es ir un paso más allá en la identificación y deconstrucción de posibles construcciones literarias de criptas dentro de los propios textos. Para ello, me inspiro en el estudio de Pascual Garrido sobre *The Lowland* de Lahiri (2021) y en el análisis de Rodríguez-Salas sobre *The Uncle Story* de Ihimaera (2021). Es importante destacar que las conclusiones a las que se llega a partir de un análisis de este tipo son importantes no sólo para comprender el papel de los

espectros en el proceso de duelo, como se podría esperar, sino también para entender los conceptos de hospitalidad, alteridad, democracia y comunidad.

Los objetivos generales de la investigación son examinar las maneras en que la literatura puede ayudar a revelar y desentrañar las tensiones entre las filosofías de la autenticidad y las de la ética y la comunidad. También exploro el papel del secreto dentro de dichas teorías. Teniendo todo esto en cuenta, pretendo a su vez explorar cómo el acercamiento a las teorías comunitarias puede contribuir a una revisión de la relación entre el secreto y la visibilidad, y el secreto y la transparencia; una revisión que, a su vez, invita a una lectura desde la perspectiva de la hauntología. Por último, deseo investigar el potencial productivo que ofrecen estas teorías cuando se aplican al análisis de la literatura. Mis objetivos específicos son ante todo explorar las ideas que pueden extraerse de un enfoque comunitario de la ficción de Anna Burns, centrándome en el papel del secreto tanto en términos de modo como de contenido, así como en las aplicaciones literarias de la cripta. Al hacerlo, espero demostrar cómo el poder subversivo de su narrativa contribuye a la deconstrucción de las fronteras simbólicas que han llegado a dominar nuestros discursos: los que existen entre el individuo y la comunidad; ‘nosotros’ y ‘ellos’; la presencia y la ausencia; lo público y lo privado; la transparencia y el secreto; y el pasado, el presente y el futuro. Aunque considero que las conclusiones de este estudio van mucho más allá de las fronteras terrestres y marítimas de Irlanda del Norte, también deseo explorar las formas en que se refieren más específicamente tanto a la narrativa irlandesa y norirlandesa como a la narrativa del trauma. De hecho, como explica Constanza del Río mediante el uso de una analogía literaria, la historia irlandesa es o bien «un texto experimental abierto que exige continuamente una reinterpretación, ya que siempre acecharía la amenaza del sinsentido» o bien un texto gótico, ya que es «una historia de desposesión, violencia, conflicto, fragmentación y alienación es una historia gótica» (2010, 5). Por último, me centraré en el lugar que ocupa el humor y la ironía dentro de este marco teórico



y exploraré las formas en que la contingencia y la indecidibilidad del humor pueden permitir que surja un discurso ético desde los márgenes en la obra de Burns.

#### 1.4. Estructura

En términos de estructura, mientras que el capítulo dos está dedicado a mi marco teórico, cada uno de los capítulos siguientes aborda, sucesivamente, las tres novelas y una novela corta de Burns. Mientras que los estudios de las novelas siguen un orden cronológico (por fechas de publicación), dejo para el final su novela corta (originalmente autopublicada antes de la publicación de su novela más reciente). La razón de ello es que en esta novela corta centro mi análisis en los conceptos de comunidad y secreto en relación al papel del humor, que, en mi opinión, es algo que une todas sus obras, por lo demás heterogéneas. El último capítulo está dedicado a mis conclusiones.

El capítulo dos ofrece una exposición detallada de la perspectiva teórica y se divide en dos partes principales: la comunidad y el secreto. La primera parte de este capítulo explora las teorías comunitarias postfenomenológicas representadas por Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) y Maurice Blanchot (1988), así como la obra de Jacques Derrida sobre conceptos como la autoinmunidad (2003) y la hospitalidad (2000). Comienza con una breve visión general de la descripción de Heidegger sobre la socialidad y la autenticidad ([1953] 2010); ya que las teorías anteriormente mencionadas la tienen como referencia en su crítica. A continuación, abordo las aparentes tensiones entre las filosofías de la ontología y la ética, la ética y la comunidad, y la comunidad y el amor. La segunda parte de este capítulo explora el papel del secreto tanto en términos de la estructura formal de un texto literario, como dentro de las teorías comunitarias así definidas, y entra en conversación con el trabajo de teóricos tales como Tom McCarthy (2012), Nicholas Royle (2014), J. Hillis Miller (2002) y Clare Birchall (2011). El análisis del concepto de Royle sobre la ‘resistencia criptoestética’ de un texto literario (2014), así como el relato de Derrida sobre el secreto ‘absoluto’ o ‘incondicional’ (Derrida y Ferraris 2001), me lleva a explorar la

hauntología Derrideana (1994) y su deconstrucción de la noción psicoanalítica de la ‘cripta’ (1986).

En el tercer capítulo, aplico dichas teorías a una lectura detallada de la primera novela de Burns, *No Bones* (2001). Aunque la exactitud de la descripción que hace Burns del trauma y la violencia que sufrió la comunidad de Ardoyne durante el conflicto de Irlanda del Norte es incuestionable, considero que parte del éxito de la novela reside en el modo en que la prosa de Burns obliga al lector a cuestionar la fiabilidad de cada una de las perspectivas que se le presentan. Propongo que el lector se encuentra frecuentemente desorientado y engañado, al tiempo que se enfrenta a constantes recordatorios de la falibilidad de la memoria tanto individual como colectiva. En este capítulo se establecen paralelismos con el caso histórico de Ann Lovett y se llega a conclusiones sobre el desplazamiento del trauma, la memoria individual y colectiva, los espectros transgeneracionales y la difuminación de las fronteras. Sugiero que la postura que Burns defiende en *No Bones* es la de escuchar y comunicarse con las voces ancestrales del pasado, ya que esto permite la ruptura con los ciclos violentos autodestructivos del trauma heredado.

En el capítulo cuatro, me centro en el análisis de la segunda novela de Burns, *Little Constructions* (2007). Este capítulo aborda el tema del secreto en la novela, primero brevemente en referencia a la descripción comunitaria de la comunidad operativa, con especial atención al papel de los nombres de los personajes y la importancia de los rumores en la novela, y después a través de la hauntología Derrideana. Analizo las aplicaciones del concepto de autoinmunidad, el llamado ‘efecto visor’ [*visor effect*] del espectro y las construcciones literarias de la cripta. El objetivo de este capítulo es demostrar cómo *Little Constructions* revela que la construcción y la fragmentación de los secretos en el ámbito de lo político se refleja en el ámbito de lo psicológico. Se extraen conclusiones sobre la sutil pero significativa crítica de Burns a la forma en que se abordó inicialmente el trauma de los disturbios – es decir, la

respuesta política – que a su vez se hace eco de las críticas realizadas a lo largo de la novela a cierto estilo de ‘terapia de sillón’ – es decir, la respuesta psicológica.

A continuación, el capítulo cinco se centra en la novela más reciente y conocida de Burns, *Milkman* (2018). La opresión, el patriarcado y el miedo constante retratados en la comunidad se discuten como un claro ejemplo de una comunidad operativa [*operative*]. Sin embargo, propongo que, a pesar de la aparente ineludibilidad de la comunidad hegemónica, se pueden encontrar ejemplos de comunidades inoperantes [*inoperative*], no como relaciones fijas, proyectadas o trascendentales, sino más bien como ocurrencias transitorias, fundadas en una confrontación con la muerte, el trauma, la exposición, la heterogeneidad y la vulnerabilidad. A partir de aquí, procedo a analizar el papel del secreto tanto en términos de tema como de estilo. Por último, una aplicación de la noción de la cripta a dos objetos, relacionados con dos encuentros, pone de relieve los secretos incondicionales o absolutos del texto, aquellos que permanecen sin resolver. Llego a la conclusión de que una lectura y relectura del texto no sólo permite interpretaciones literarias novedosas, sino que también subraya el papel potencial que pueden desempeñar las obras de ficción en la deconstrucción de las fronteras tanto físicas como simbólicas.

El sexto capítulo se centra en el estudio de la novela corta de Burns *Mostly Hero* (2019). En este capítulo, exploro el papel del humor y la ironía tanto en la teoría como en la literatura, haciendo énfasis en la relación entre el humor y la ironía y un enfoque deconstruccionista de la literatura. Como reconoce Fiona McCann, «[l]a tensión cómica es ... lo que diferencia las novelas [de Burns] de otras narrativas de trauma y no hay duda de que son una lectura muy incómoda por esta razón» (2014a, 20). Teniendo esto en cuenta, se hace énfasis en el papel que el humor puede desempeñar en primer lugar en la interrupción de la retórica dominante (y por lo tanto *cómoda*), y de ahí en la apertura de un espacio para la creación de comunidades no homogeneizadoras. Este capítulo aborda una serie de conocidos enfoques del humor y la ironía,

pero centrándose especialmente en Freud ([1927] 1990), Derrida (1988), Bakhtin (1984) y Rorty (1989). La conclusión a la que llego es que, si bien el humor es una forma de hacer frente a los problemas, también es una forma de transformar nuestras realidades.

Por último, en el capítulo siete se ofrece una serie de conclusiones interconectadas. Es importante destacar que este capítulo no es un mero resumen de las observaciones obtenidas como resultado de cada uno de mis análisis literarios, sino que permite extraer conclusiones más amplias sobre toda la obra de Burns. Vuelvo a los conceptos introducidos en la introducción, tales como identidad, autoinmunidad y hospitalidad, para así ofrecer una visión de cómo la ficción de Burns permite una reimaginación creativa de nuestra comprensión de la comunidad. En este último capítulo también se retoman las nociones de la memoria y el secreto para abordar la crítica que hace Burns a las soluciones superficiales y su defensa de establecer un diálogo con los espectros para así proporcionar una salida productiva al pasado. Por último, propongo que lo que une a toda su obra es el papel del humor y la ironía, algo que, en mi opinión, permite a sus novelas romper el dominio de la narrativa del trauma.

## Conclusiones

A lo largo de esta Tesis Doctoral espero haber demostrado cómo la ficción de Anna Burns acoge tanto una lectura comunitaria como un enfoque deconstructivo. Los resultados de tal lectura no sólo permiten una multiplicidad de posibles interpretaciones, sino que también ayudan a comprender mejor tanto los fundamentos teóricos de su obra como las complejas realidades psicológicas y políticas plasmadas en su ficción. Teniendo esto en cuenta, aunque la *dissemination* de la deconstrucción revela que el contexto es ilimitado – como explican Buse y Scott, «ninguna significación puede suturarse sin problemas al contexto originario de su producción, ya que el signo se ve acechado por una cadena de lecturas sobredeterminadas, lecturas erróneas, deslices y acreciones que siempre irán más allá del propio acontecimiento» (199, 12) – en mis conclusiones volveré, no obstante, brevemente al contexto (específico pero no aislado) de las cuestiones políticas, institucionales y sociales actuales de Irlanda y de Irlanda del Norte. Lo hago, por un lado, con el fin de discernir el modo en que la ficción de Burns puede hablarnos sobre nuestros tiempos actuales (ya que los cuatro años transcurridos desde que empecé a escribir esta Tesis Doctoral han sido tiempos realmente turbulentos), y por otro lado, con el objetivo de señalar la forma en la que una lectura deconstructiva de su obra permite que los mensajes lleguen «más allá del propio acontecimiento». Analizo cómo la ficción de Burns entra en conversación con las tensiones sociales y políticas en Irlanda del Norte que se han agravado por la retirada del Reino Unido de la Unión Europea; la revelación del grado y la extremidad de la violencia que tenía lugar a puertas cerradas en las instituciones conocidas como los *Mother and Baby Homes* y las *Magdelene Laundries*; y la forma en la que se ha tratado oficialmente el trauma de los denominados *Troubles*. Además, aunque mis conclusiones se dividen en seis secciones – sobre la ficción y la realidad; la identidad; la visión, la memoria y el legado; las fronteras; la comunidad; y el humor – algo que quiero subrayar son las vías por

las que estas percepciones, en sus «deslices y acreciones», inevitablemente se solapan y desbordan.

### 7.1. La Ficción y la Realidad

La difuminación de las barreras entre ficción y realidad en el *interior* de las novelas de Burns se refleja en una difuminación similar entre la ficción de los propios relatos y la realidad histórica *exterior* que – en cierta medida – han traspasado o transcrito. En *No Bones*, por ejemplo, las fronteras entre el mundo interior y el exterior se resienten a lo largo de toda la novela, con el título de cada capítulo apuntando a acontecimientos históricos reales, que se presentan reflejados en disputas domésticas, o están tan distorsionados que sólo pueden percibirse como ecos y silencios de la historia que se nos cuenta. Propongo que esto es algo que se percibe más notablemente al considerar la correspondencia entre las historias interconectadas de Amelia Lovett y Mary Dolan y el caso real de Ann Lovett. Aunque un enfoque Derrideano de la literatura no busca verdades inmutables y estáticas, si el propio concepto de verdad se reconstituye como algo que no es ni singular y unitario, ni estático e inmutable, entonces podríamos llegar a entender la reflexión de la propia Burns de que «[l]a ficción no me atraía mucho. Tenía la sensación de que podía no ser cierta» (McWade 2020, n.p.).

Para volver a las observaciones realizadas en el capítulo uno sobre la tensión entre las «posibilidades ilimitadas del contexto» y el deseo de revelar un contexto como totalmente claro e identificado, recordemos cómo el contexto de un texto no puede definirse. Por tanto, si bien es cierto que no hay nada fuera del texto, la historia, el mundo, la realidad y la alteridad del contexto son a la vez un texto y parte del texto en cuestión. También es importante destacar a este respecto que el significado de un texto va más allá de la intención del autor – algo a lo que Derrida se refiere como *dissemination* (1981, 21) – y así, aunque es sin duda curioso preguntarse si Burns era consciente de la maleta de bisuterías de Ann Lovett,

independientemente de si lo era o no, la existencia de la maleta está entrelazada con nuestra lectura del texto del mismo modo que no podemos dejar de oír a Freud cuando leemos a Shakespeare hoy en día.

Además de la intertextualidad evidente entre la ficción y la realidad, las novelas de Burns también parecen conversar con las teorías literarias que encarnan. Esto es particularmente aparente en *Little Constructions*, dado el papel del personaje de Judas, que espía desde el interior de una armadura. Como propuse en el capítulo cuatro, el papel de Judas en la novela puede interpretarse como parecido al *judas* de la obra *Glas* de Derrida (1986): está ahí para proporcionar mirillas [*peepholes*] traicioneras entre la novela y la teoría literaria, así como entre la historia ficticia y la realidad exterior que representa. Del mismo modo, creo que el hecho de que se el personaje de *middle sister* de la novela *Milkman* aparezca leyendo *Ivanhoe* no es nada accidental. Aunque se nos dice que su elección de la novela se basó en su propia afirmación de que «no me gustaban los libros del siglo XX porque no me gustaba el siglo XX» (Burns 2018, 5), *Ivanhoe* es en muchos aspectos un reflejo de la realidad exterior de *middle sister*: es una historia de división sectaria y caza de brujas. Tal vez la forma de escapar que tiene dicho personaje es simplemente irónica, o tal vez lo que Burns está destacando aquí es la inevitabilidad de la comunidad hegemónica – que incluso los intentos de romper su control a través de actos de disidencia revelan lo arraigada que está la forma dominante de pensar en la psique de cada uno. De igual modo, la intertextualidad proporciona en cierto sentido otra mirilla, ya que los espectros de *Ivanhoe*, aunque siguen ocultos en las páginas del libro que lee *middle sister*, rondan sigilosamente en las páginas de *Milkman*. Además, muy relacionada con estas observaciones está la determinación de *middle sister* como «la que lee» [*the one who reads*]. De la misma manera en que Miller dijo de la deconstrucción que «no es ni más ni menos que una buena lectura» (Miller 1987, 10), también propongo que *middle sister* – igual que la narradora de *Little Constructions* – no se limita a leer, sino a interpretar. Esta observación añade

fuerza a mi conclusión de que, en muchos respectos, la novela pone en duda las narrativas oficiales.

## 7.2. La Identidad

La cuestión de la identidad individual y colectiva ocupa un lugar central en la obra de Burns; en ella, vemos cómo individuos y comunidades, en un intento de protegerse del exterior, construyen barreras que contribuyen inadvertidamente a su propia autodestrucción. Tanto en *No Bones* como en *Milkman*, la ruptura experimentada al leer las construcciones literarias de la cripta, por ejemplo, da lugar a la difuminación de los límites entre los personajes de los relatos, del mismo modo que en *Little Constructions* los personajes se sustituyen unos a otros. Uno de los resultados de este análisis es que el discurso Heideggeriano de la autenticidad se revela en su falsedad. Más aún, sugiero que Burns apunta en su ficción hacia una interpretación comunitaria de los individuos, no como átomos, sino como singularidades, no encerradas en sí mismas y replegadas sobre sí mismas, sino más bien expuestas y «destrozadas por dentro y por fuera» (Blanchot 1988, 6). En mi lectura de *No Bones*, he propuesto que los personajes de Amelia y Mary Dolan pueden representar la pérdida y la proyección traumática de una sola niña, mientras que en *Milkman*, mi análisis de las cartas de *tablets girl* abre la posibilidad de que los lectores estén siendo engañados intencionadamente con respecto a los personajes de *tablets girl*, *tablets girl's sister* y *middle sister*. Algo que ambas interpretaciones sostienen es la tesis de que la identidad no es homogénea ni está estructurada en torno a binarios, sino que es heterogénea, fluida, fracturada e indefinida. Esta tesis se contrapone en gran medida a la retórica dominante de la política de identidad en Irlanda del Norte, según la cual se supone que las personas encajan perfectamente en las categorías de británico o irlandés, protestante o católico, unionista o nacionalista. Además, al interpretar que *middle sister* representa la identidad de Irlanda del Norte – como *middle sister* – nos encontramos con la imagen de que la identidad nacional norirlandesa también existe en un espacio liminal. Recordemos también



que, tal y como se destacó en el capítulo dos, Derrida describe la liminalidad de la topografía de la cripta en términos que resuenan con la identidad norirlandesa. Se trata de «un lugar *comprendido* dentro de otro, pero rigurosamente separado de él, aislado del espacio general por tabiques, un recinto, un enclave. Con el fin de hurtar [*purloin*] *la cosa* del resto» (Derrida 1986, xiv; énfasis en el original).

El reconocimiento de la fluidez y la multiplicidad de identidades se consideró parte integrante del Proceso de Paz y del Acuerdo de Viernes Santo, que establece que «los dos Gobiernos reconocen el derecho de todos los ciudadanos de Irlanda del Norte a identificarse y ser aceptados como irlandeses o británicos, o como ambas cosas a la vez, según su elección» (Northern Ireland Office 1998, 3). Aunque los programas de paz posteriores al acuerdo que financian la UE, el Reino Unido y las autoridades locales en Irlanda del Norte han trabajado duramente para intentar acabar con las barreras físicas y simbólicas que dividen a la población, aún queda mucho por hacer en este sentido. Alrededor del 93% de los menores siguen asistiendo a escuelas monoconfesionales (Roulston y Cook 2021, 1), y las interacciones entre las comunidades siguen siendo, en su mayor parte, incómodas y limitadas. Como nota positiva, a pesar de la retirada del Reino Unido de la UE, la UE se ha comprometido a seguir proporcionando financiación a través del programa de seguimiento de la paz conocido como *Peace Plus*. Sin embargo, la salida del Reino Unido de la Unión Europea ha hecho que estas divisiones sociales, religiosas y políticas vuelvan a la conciencia pública con una intensidad no vista en los últimos veinticinco años. Como resultado del Brexit, el compromiso formal del acuerdo de reconocer la fluidez de la identidad ha quedado en cierta medida en peligro, ya que ha obligado a los ciudadanos de Irlanda del Norte a replantearse su identidad en términos diferentes y conflictivos. Identificarse como británico ya no significa identificarse como europeo, por lo que hay ciertos derechos que ahora vienen determinados por la propia autoidentificación. Además, la implantación de controles fronterizos en el mar de Irlanda hace

que muchos de los que incluso sí se identifican como británicos se encuentren en cierto modo excluidos de los derechos de importación y exportación que se conceden a los que viven en el territorio continental.

Dicho esto, algo que han destacado los resultados del censo de 2021 en Irlanda del Norte es un cambio demográfico en la población, con un descenso significativo del número de personas que se identifican como británicos y un aumento de los que se identifican como irlandeses o norirlandeses (NISRA 2001, 2). Otra señal del cambio demográfico y de la identidad nacional es que, por primera vez desde la partición – es decir, por primera vez en los 103 años de historia del país – un partido nacionalista ganó las elecciones en 2020. Sin embargo, es importante tener en cuenta que, si bien es cierto que esto marca un momento en la historia, ya que la identidad de Irlanda del Norte como país se basa por completo en su división de la República, también marca un momento de vulnerabilidad bastante precario. Además, se ha producido un aumento significativo de las personas que se identifican como ‘británicas e irlandesas del norte’ o ‘británicas, irlandesas e irlandesas del norte’ por encima de los que se identifican como ‘sólo británicas’ (NISRA 2001, 3), lo que indica un giro general hacia una identidad entendida no como homogénea, sino como heterogénea. También es destacable el hecho de que el grupo demográfico que más crece es el de las personas con ‘otras identidades nacionales’ (3). Lo que en mi opinión indican todas estas cifras es tanto la importancia de comprender la violencia potencial de adoptar tan sólo una hospitalidad doméstica o condicional en un sentido Derrideano, como el reconocimiento de que cualquier intento de relación con el otro, basada en la equivalencia o la identificación, equivale a una violencia ontológica. La ficción de Burns destaca ambas preocupaciones. En efecto, la violencia de la «tendencia a la comunión, incluso a la fusión» (Blanchot 1988, 6-7) de la comunidad operativa [*operative community*] se repite tanto en *Little Constructions*, donde se dice que John Doe consume a sus víctimas de asesinato, como en *No Bones*, cuando Amelia revive el trauma de ser violada en

términos de ser consumida. También conviene recordar, como dice Marías, que «el otro no es sólo el extranjero de la comunidad, sino su interior, su vecino. Dicho de otro modo, el vecino es un extranjero, del mismo modo que el extranjero es un vecino» (2021, 186).

Teniendo todo esto en cuenta, también es relevante el reconocimiento comunitario de cómo la naturaleza finita de la comunidad inoperante está íntimamente relacionada con la resistencia de la comunidad a la violencia. En palabras de Nancy «[l]a comunidad es... la resistencia misma: a saber, la resistencia a la inmanencia... (resistencia a la comunión de todos o a la pasión exclusiva de uno o varios: a todas las formas y todas las violencias de la subjetividad)» (1991, 35). Del mismo modo que la identidad es algo transitorio para los individuos que componen una comunidad, la ficción de Burns nos ayuda a reconocer que la identidad de la comunidad y de la nación como tal debe entenderse como algo que no es fijo ni trascendente, sino abierto, interrumpido y diferenciado. Más revelador aún, sin embargo, es que, no sólo en este censo en particular, sino en los censos en general, nunca existe la opción de identificarse simplemente como no perteneciente a ninguna identidad nacional. En palabras de Agamben «[l]o que el Estado no puede tolerar de ninguna manera... es que las singularidades formen una comunidad sin afirmar una identidad, que los humanos copertenezcan sin ninguna condición representable de pertenencia» (2003, 85). Sin embargo, algo que pretendo haber demostrado a lo largo de esta Tesis Doctoral es el importante papel que la literatura de vanguardia – y más concretamente cuando se aborda desde un enfoque deconstructivo – puede desempeñar tanto en la deconstrucción del pensamiento binario como en la reimaginación de nociones de identidad y comunidad no basadas en la pertenencia sino en la alteridad; la obra de Burns refleja con claridad dicho potencial.

### 7.3. La Memoria, la Visión y el Legado

En *No Bones*, la memoria se considera «resbaladiza» (Burns 2001, 76), ya que «todo queda eclipsado, siempre queda eclipsado, por la siguiente, más reciente y violenta muerte» (104-5).

Sin embargo, también somos testigos de cómo, por mucho que los recuerdos se desvanezcan superficialmente, el poder de esos mismos recuerdos para temblar bajo la superficie sigue siendo formidable. Las conclusiones a las que se llega en *Little Constructions* en relación con el proceso de represión personal y política están muy relacionadas con el papel de la memoria. En efecto, como escribe Derrida sobre la represión, «tanto en su sentido psicoanalítico como en su sentido político ... [la represión] acaba produciendo, reproduciendo y regenerando aquello mismo que pretende desarmar» (2004, 99).

Es importante destacar que, aunque el contenido de las múltiples criptas literarias identificadas en la obra de Burns nunca se revela por completo, se nos recuerda cómo lo que se oculta en la cripta – aunque encriptado – pertenece a la memoria. Dichos recuerdos se han proyectado en objetos y espacios físicos y psicológicos. En *No Bones*, por ejemplo, en el *Treasure Trove* de Amelia hay encriptados una serie de traumas personales y políticos, vividos y heredados. En la banda de asesinos psicológicamente construida de Vincent, en la escena de carnaval y en «*Identify the Body Display*», está encriptado el recuerdo distorsionado de su padre muerto. También he planteado cómo las construcciones de Vincent podrían representar la proyección del trauma de la muerte del bebé de su madre y su posterior abandono y aislamiento. El carrito de juguete de Mary Dolan, por otra parte, oculta no sólo el propio bebé muerto, sino una serie de traumas relacionados con el abuso sexual y la pérdida, potencialmente junto con el trauma colectivo del legado violento de las estrictas leyes sobre el aborto en Irlanda del Norte. Además, mi análisis del carrito de juguete de Mary Dolan desde la perspectiva de la cripta, junto con los relatos paralelos del personaje de Amelia Lovett y el caso real de Ann Lovett, apuntaban a la posibilidad de que Amelia también estuviera proyectando el trauma de su propia pérdida no sólo en el carrito de bebé, sino también en una construcción psicológica de la que llama Mary. Del mismo modo, los llamados ‘ruidos’ [*noises*] que sufren todos los hermanos Doe en *Little Constructions* incorporan una proyección similar del miedo heredado

en otras personas, algo que se transmite de generación en generación; esto se proyecta posteriormente en los tapones para los oídos y se encripta en el armario de la cocina vacío y cerrado. De hecho, he planteado cómo el análisis del armario desde la perspectiva de la cripta nos revela cómo en este espacio vacío y cerrado se oculta el miedo al Otro absoluto – el secreto incondicional – o a la alteridad como tal.

En cuanto al papel de la vista, tanto en *No Bones* como en *Little Constructions* somos testigos de cómo la mayor parte de la comunidad parece incapaz de ver la violencia, incluso cuando ésta es escandalosamente brutal y ocurre justo delante de los ojos. También en *Milkman* vemos a varios personajes literalmente cegados, como Edipo, por ver lo que no debían ver. Volviendo al contexto de la República de Irlanda e Irlanda del Norte, propongo que la interacción de Burns con las nociones de memoria y visión tiene repercusiones en el desconocimiento general – por parte de la Iglesia, el Estado y el público en general – del grado de violencia física y psicológica que tuvo lugar en los *Mother and Baby Homes* y *Magdalene Laundries*, instituciones que estuvieron en funcionamiento durante más de setenta y seis años. A este respecto, es especialmente significativo el hecho de que el informe final de 3.000 páginas elaborado como resultado de una comisión judicial de investigación de cinco años creada en 2015 (Gobierno irlandés 2020) concluyera que, a pesar de los testimonios de supervivientes en sentido contrario (1.000 páginas de los cuales se publicaron en el mismo informe), no había «ninguna prueba», «ningún indicio» o «muy pocas pruebas» de malos tratos (8), adopción forzosa (9-10), o coacción de mujeres obligadas a ingresar en las instituciones (3) o retenidas contra su voluntad (8). Sin embargo, resulta igualmente inquietante la conclusión, algo más acertada, de que «[n]o hay pruebas de que se expresara preocupación pública por las condiciones de los hogares para madres y bebés o por la espantosa mortalidad de los niños nacidos en estos hogares, a pesar de que muchos de los hechos eran de dominio público» (22), y que «[n]o fue hasta la trágica muerte de Ann Lovett en 1984 que hubo pruebas de amplios

comentarios públicos sobre la maternidad fuera del matrimonio y un serio cuestionamiento de las actitudes irlandesas» (23). Como explica el narrador en *Little Constructions*: «los testigos de la violencia se vuelven ciegos y sordos de repente, completamente insensibles y nunca se dan cuenta de nada» (Burns 2007, 116).

A lo largo de toda su obra, Burns presenta comunidades que sufren tanto ceguera como de amnesia individual y comunitaria. Los individuos y las comunidades se niegan a procesar la violencia que les rodea, quizá en un intento de evitar que se grabe en sus recuerdos, o quizá para ocultarse (a sí mismos y a los demás) del papel que pueden haber jugado en esta vergonzosa verdad. Lo que la ocultación y la negación obstruyen es cualquier potencial de duelo saludable, tanto a nivel personal como colectivo. Sin embargo, el mensaje que recibimos es que, ya sea consciente o subconscientemente, individual o colectivamente, la amnesia sólo funciona a nivel superficial, ya que el trauma supuestamente olvidado sigue atormentando bajo la superficie. En efecto, en cada una de las novelas de Burns somos testigos de cómo la presencia inquietante de secretos no afrontados, la resistencia a reconocer los secretos a voces y el hecho de que los rumores se tomaran por verdad contribuyen a las respuestas autoinmunes de las comunidades. Además, algo que vemos quizás de forma más prominente en *No Bones* es el modo en que la novela se implica en el propio acto de duelo al inscribir los traumas individuales y colectivos del pasado, del presente y de lo que está por venir. Podemos concluir con Derrida que «todo lo que inscribimos en el presente vivo de nuestra relación con los demás lleva ya, siempre, la firma de las memorias-más-allá-de-la-tumba» (1989, 29).

Dicho esto, en el capítulo cuatro también me propuse aclarar una advertencia que puede identificarse en *Little Constructions* sobre la construcción de artefactos culturales o monumentos conmemorativos que mantienen los espectros del trauma y del conflicto encerrados en el pasado. Tal y como planteé, varios miembros de la comunidad intentaron transformar la residencia de la familia Doe en una especie de «Museo de Miss Havisham»

(Burns 2007, 263). Este intento tiene aún más relevancia si tenemos en cuenta las recomendaciones para la memorización escritas en el informe final sobre los *Mother and Baby Homes* (Gobierno irlandés 2020, 10). Aunque los monumentos conmemorativos pueden ser un aspecto importante del recuerdo, el peligro reside en asumir que las personas fallecidas pertenecen sólo al pasado. En un sentido similar, también he sugerido que Burns cuestiona la idea de alcanzar sabiduría de los muertos. En *No Bones* las comunicaciones con los muertos tienen lugar durante sueños o episodios psicóticos (2001, 246-82); en *Little Constructions* tales conversaciones se mantienen a través de tablas ouija (2007, 80); y en *Mostly Hero* se mantienen con los propios cadáveres semimuertos. Lo que sostengo, sin embargo, es que el empleo del humor negro y la ironía por parte de Burns permite al lector distinguir entre la idea de escuchar realmente a los espectros y simplemente construir monumentos culturales o memoriales a los fallecidos.

Por tanto, la presencia inquietante de los espectros, entendidos al mismo tiempo como el secreto absoluto y el Otro absoluto, está muy relacionada con el papel de la memoria y los monumentos conmemorativos. En *No Bones*, por ejemplo, se nos recuerda el impacto persistente que los espectros pueden tener en las generaciones presentes y futuras: aunque los traumas individuales, comunitarios y nacionales no se digan y se repriman, los espectros de estos secretos siguen acechando. El mensaje que subyace es que, sin una confrontación con tales espectros, los individuos y las comunidades permanecerán inevitablemente atrapadas en un retorno cíclico del trauma. De hecho, en el capítulo cinco he interpretado al personaje de *Milkman* como el espectro acechante de la narrativa norirlandesa. La complejidad estilística y narrativa de *Milkman* recuerda a la complejidad de dicho trauma, y creo que esto podría decirse igualmente de cualquiera de las novelas de Burns. De la misma manera en que los espectros de Amelia traspasan la frontera marítima entre Belfast y Londres en *No Bones*, también en *Milkman* nos encontramos con la imagen de cómo esas presencias inquietantes se infiltran en

todos los paisajes de la vida del protagonista. El poder que ejerce esta presencia inquietante sobre *middle sister* puede representar a su vez la gran influencia de los espectros del trauma individual y colectivo en la narrativa norirlandesa actual. También es pertinente en cuanto al papel de la vista, mi análisis de Judas en *Little Constructions* y su armadura desde cuyo interior espía desde de lo que Derrida denomina el «efecto visor» [*visor effect*] (1994, 6). La mirada del espectro – el Otro absoluto – es a la vez irreductible y asimétrica.

Así pues, algo que podemos deducir del análisis de toda la obra de Burns, aunque sobre todo de *Little Constructions*, es que no es tanto la represión del trauma y los vergonzosos secretos que lo rodean lo que mantiene a la comunidad encerrada en el retorno cíclico autoinmune de la violencia heredada, sino más bien un proceso más cercano a la proteína represora o a un gen recesivo hereditario. Al reconocer esto, empezamos a ver cómo mientras el *fort/da* como modelo de trauma describe la repetición implacable de lo que se ha heredado, entender el legado como un gen recesivo apunta hacia la idea de que el ciclo puede ser interrumpido. Además, tal y como subraya Derrida, donde hay legado también hay una llamada a la responsabilidad: «nos guste o no, tengamos la conciencia que tengamos de dicho legado, no podemos dejar de ser sus herederos» (1994, 114). Este punto se acentúa en *Mostly Hero*, ya que en la conclusión de la novela vemos al personaje de *femme* enfrentarse al hecho de que, si bien nunca podrá escapar de su legado, su llamada a la responsabilidad significa que ésta debe ser tratada.

#### 7.4. Fronteras

Toda la ficción de Burns está muy marcada por fronteras y límites simbólicos, a veces de forma explícita y a veces inadvertida, del mismo modo que Ardoyne – la ciudad natal de Burns – sigue estando en gran parte delimitada por muros físicos y divisiones sectarias. Recordemos que en el capítulo tres de *No Bones*, se dice que la joven Amelia y sus compañeros de clase, cuando su profesor les pide que escriban poemas sobre la paz, «han dedicado más tiempo



emocional a sus bordes que a sus poemas» (Burns 2001, 37). Más adelante en la narración, el grupo expresa esta misma atracción por las fronteras en su fascinación por los acantilados (un rasgo que también se observa en el personaje de *hero* de *Mostly Hero*). Creo que, en parte, esta atracción representa la noción de que tanto el duelo como los espectros se experimentan en el límite, o en la interfaz. Sin embargo, es importante recordar que también es ahí donde pueden encontrarse tanto la alteridad como la comunidad. Además, del mismo modo que el capítulo de Vincent en *No Bones*, aunque aparece como una especie de paréntesis en la historia principal, en muchos aspectos interrumpe toda la lectura de la novela, también lo abyecto posee un potencial perturbador. Si bien esto es más evidente en el personaje de Vincent, cuyo diagnóstico es ‘*borderline*’, también puede identificarse en el paciente intersexual que Amelia conoce en el hospital psiquiátrico, llamado *Jewels*, así como en la subjetividad fracturada de *tablets girl* en *Milkman*.

La paz en Irlanda del Norte está íntimamente vinculada a las fronteras. No sólo los muros contruidos para dividir a las comunidades y protegerlas unas de otras reciben el nombre de ‘muros de la paz’ [*peace-walls*], sino que el éxito del Acuerdo de Viernes Santo depende en gran medida la invisibilidad de fronteras terrestres y marítimas. De hecho, tanto la fragilidad de este acuerdo de paz como el alcance de su relación con las fronteras se han acentuado en los años transcurridos desde la retirada del Reino Unido de la Unión Europea. La insistencia del gobierno británico en abandonar el *single market* de la UE supuso que los controles en las fronteras marítimas o terrestres se convirtieran en algo inevitable, con el riesgo de que las fronteras dejaran de ser invisibles, algo que contradice los términos generales del Acuerdo de Viernes Santo. Se dijo que los disturbios en las zonas protestantes de Irlanda del Norte en abril de 2021, los cuales marcaron algunos de los peores altercados que el país había visto en décadas, eran un resultado directo del Protocolo de Irlanda del Norte, y se identificaron vínculos entre los manifestantes y grupos paramilitares unionistas como la UDA y la UDF

(Hirst 2021, n.p.). Cuando los instigadores de los disturbios rompieron una puerta del muro de la paz, la violencia se desbordó hacia las comunidades católicas. Lo que me recuerda aquí es el análisis que Schultz hizo de la situación en 2014, al que se hace referencia en el capítulo dos, según la cual «la violencia sectaria volverá inevitablemente porque las diferencias políticas y culturales siguen persiguiendo a Irlanda del Norte» (2014, 137).

Este descontento se ha dejado sentir igualmente en el plano político. En oposición al llamado Protocolo de Irlanda del Norte, el DUP (principal partido político unionista) boicoteó la Asamblea norirlandesa, lo que dio lugar a tres años de estancamiento político. Esto provocó una enorme tensión económica y social en el país, con una de las mayores huelgas de trabajadores públicos jamás celebradas en Belfast en enero de este año. Se calcula que participaron en ella el 80% de los empresarios del sector público (Carroll 2024, s.p.). Como medio para restaurar Stormont, la solución del primer ministro británico Rishi Sunak (además de un acuerdo de 3.000 millones de libras) no fue deshacerse de los controles fronterizos – ya que esto iría en contra del acuerdo del Reino Unido con la UE – sino prometer que volverían a ser invisibles. La nueva frontera marítima recién erigida – algo que el ex primer ministro británico Boris Johnson dijo célebremente que se levantaría «sobre [su] cadáver» (Toynbee 2020, n.p.) – se ha transformado así en una presencia ‘invisible’ (oculta a plena vista). Como ya he dicho en el capítulo cuatro, aquí es relevante cómo *Little Constructions* de Burns también subraya los peligros de un deseo de volver a la ‘normalidad’, sobre todo en el contexto de Irlanda del Norte, dado el hecho de que la normalidad, desde que la nación nació, siempre ha estado marcada por la división y el conflicto. Podríamos preguntarnos, al igual que lo hace el narrador de *Little Constructions*, «si han abusado de ti, ‘¿qué es normal?’ Y si no han abusado de ti, ‘¿qué es normal?’ ¿Se supone que ambas ‘normalidades’ son lo mismo?» (Burns 2007, 219).

Todas estas pruebas apuntan a la manera en que el Acuerdo de Viernes Santo, centrado en el olvido más que en el recuerdo y en avanzar para dejar atrás el pasado, ha dejado sin afrontar los espectros del pasado violento y traumático de Irlanda del Norte. Además, la erección de fronteras – ya se trate de imponentes muros físicos, divisiones simbólicas o fronteras marítimas ‘invisibles’ – no hará sino aumentar las defensas autoinmunes de las comunidades. Sin embargo, cuando la alteridad se experimenta en estas mismas fronteras, podemos ser testigos de la posibilidad de ruptura, una ruptura que a su vez puede dar lugar a una noción revisada de comunidad, una deconstrucción de las barreras que nos dividen y un descentramiento de las estructuras de poder dominantes. Lo que pretendo demostrar a lo largo de esta Tesis Doctoral es que la literatura, como espacio que acoge tanto el secreto como la alteridad, permite experimentar esa ruptura.

En efecto, espero haber demostrado el modo en que una lectura de la ficción de Burns desde la perspectiva de la hauntología nos permite ver cómo una comunicación con las voces ancestrales del pasado – con los «fantasmas de aquellos que aún no han nacido o que ya están muertos, ya sean víctimas de guerras, de la violencia política o de otro tipo ... o de cualquiera de las formas de totalitarismo» (Derrida 1994, xviii) – puede permitir a individuos y comunidades por igual a ser capaces de romper el dominio autodestructivo de la narrativa del trauma. Como expresa la protagonista *middle sister* en *Milkman*: «tanto las viejas cosas oscuras como las nuevas tenían que ser recordadas, tenían que ser reconocidas porque, de lo contrario, todo lo anterior habría sido en vano» (Burns 2018, 264). Además, lo que resulta de tal confrontación es la deconstrucción de aquellos binarios y fronteras que una vez dominaron a las comunidades, y que aún hoy mantienen su control (aunque de forma más sutil) sobre nuestras narrativas. En palabras de Derrida, «ninguna frontera está garantizada, ni dentro ni fuera» (Derrida 1979, 78).

Conviene destacar aquí el hecho de que hay muy poco espacio para el pensamiento no binario en el modelo de gobierno de poder compartido de Irlanda del Norte, que, en gran medida, institucionalizó el sectarismo y la división. Además, este modelo de gobierno no permite los desacuerdos, ya que en el momento en que una de las partes se opone y opta por boicotear la asamblea, el gobierno queda disuelto. El boicot más reciente del DUP (en objeción al protocolo sobre Irlanda del Norte) ha sido el segundo en los últimos siete años en los que se ha suspendido la asamblea, y la cuarta vez desde 1998. De hecho, en los veintiséis años transcurridos desde el Acuerdo de Viernes Santo de 1998, han pasado casi doce sin gobierno en Stormont. Es decir, casi la mitad. Debido a su estructura autoinmune es, en cierto modo, una democracia que impide que Irlanda del Norte sea democrática. No puede serlo, y sospecho que no continuará en los mismos términos; en palabras de Derrida: «*tendrá* que producirse una mutación» (Borradori 2003, 106; énfasis en el original).

#### 7.5. Reimaginar la Comunidad

Mientras que algo común a toda la ficción de Burns es su retrato del grado de destrucción de singularidades por parte de la comunidad operativa, algo que creo que es hasta cierto punto único de *Milkman* son los momentos fugaces de relaciones inorgánicas o inoperativas. He propuesto, por ejemplo, que el encuentro del *real milkman* con *middle sister* en el borde de la zona de diez minutos puede interpretarse en términos de encuentro ético, mientras que la relación secreta entre *maybe-boyfriend* y *chef* guarda cierta correspondencia con la descripción que hace Blanchot de la comunidad de amantes [*community of lovers*]. Además, mientras que la comunidad operativa parecería definirse por su ceguera ante la violencia y la diferencia, en el capítulo cinco concluí que en *Milkman* se expresa una apertura, exposición y ruptura comunitarias en términos de la vista, tanto en el sentido de poder ver lo que se supone que no se debe ver, como en el sentido de ver la diferencia, el color o la luz. De hecho, analicé cómo

después de que *middle sister* se expone a diferentes formas de ver su entorno, su comprensión de la comunidad también comienza a cambiar.

Teniendo todo esto en cuenta, también puede establecerse una conexión con el personaje de Vincent en *No Bones*. Vincent ve repetida y vívidamente espectros que, según le dicen, no son más que su propia creación, e insiste en que los personajes de sus visiones son «vida aparte de mí cada vez» (2001, 145). De hecho, propongo que tanto la confrontación de Vincent como la de Amelia con tales espectros – que es una confrontación con la alteridad misma – marca igualmente un cambio fundamental en sus relaciones con otras personas, y el comienzo del proceso de recuperación bajo la superficie. En todas las novelas de Burns se nos transmite el mensaje de que, al igual que la deconstrucción consiste en ver las cosas que han estado ocultas, como la carta robada, a plena vista, la reimaginación de la comunidad implica abrir los ojos a la multiplicidad de diferencias que siempre nos han rodeado. En palabras de Derrida,

[se] trata enseguida de ir más allá, de golpe, de la primera mirada y ver así allí donde esta mirada es ciega, de abrir bien los ojos allí donde no se ve lo que se ve. Hay que ver, a primera vista, lo que no se deja ver. Y esto en la invisibilidad misma. Pues lo que la primera mirada no ve es lo invisible. (1994, 187)

Es importante destacar que lo único que une a cualquiera de los personajes de las novelas de Burns es una confrontación compartida con la muerte y la finitud; como escribe Nancy, «es a través de la muerte como la comunidad se revela a sí misma» (1991, 14-5). Es tal vez por esta razón que la muerte y la casi-muerte (y sobre todo en aquellas muertes y casi-muertes que no pueden explicarse desde dentro de la retórica de la comunidad) es donde se encuentran los momentos fugaces de lo que podría describirse como las comunidades inoperantes. Como

expresa *middle sister*, «[l]a muerte es veraz, y lo ‘emboscado y disparado y casi muerto’ también es veraz» (Burns 2018, 213).

## 7.6. El Duelo

Un tema subyacente en todas las conclusiones extraídas hasta ahora – las relacionadas con la identidad, la memoria y la comunidad – es el papel del duelo individual y colectivo. En el capítulo cuatro sobre *Little Constructions*, he analizado en profundidad el importante tema del esfuerzo por identificar el cadáver y localizar a los muertos. También puede establecerse aquí una conexión con los esfuerzos de Amelia en *No Bones* por enterrar los recuerdos de los muertos en algún lugar secreto y sin confrontar – encriptados en objetos – en un intento de escapar de la realidad brutal de sus muertes. Resulta especialmente revelador, sin embargo, cómo la atracción de Amelia por las líneas fronterizas, junto con la persistente persecución de sus amigos y antepasados, la obligan finalmente a escuchar y recordar a los espectros de su pasado. En mi opinión, se trata tanto de un acto de identificación como de localización. También en *Milkman*, el deseo de *middle sister* de enterrar la cabeza decapitada del gato tuerto que encuentra en la zona de diez minutos puede interpretarse como un acto análogo. Aunque aquí el cadáver ha sido hasta cierto punto identificado – al menos en el sentido de que la cabeza de gato actúa como significante [*signifier*] – lo que *middle sister* busca es que el muerto reciba los ritos funerarios apropiados.

Volviendo al contexto de Irlanda del Norte, la identificación y localización de los muertos tiene resonancias a varios niveles. Para empezar, volveré al espectro de la violencia institucionalizada de la República de Irlanda e Irlanda del Norte en forma de los *Mother and Baby Homes*. La investigación llevada a cabo por Catherine Corless (2012) sobre la trayectoria de una institución en Tuam es lo que condujo a la mencionada comisión sobre el tratamiento de las madres y los bebés dentro de tales instituciones en la República de Irlanda. La campaña de Corless también permitió el descubrimiento de una fosa común que ocultaba los restos de

796 bebés y niños dentro de las cámaras de un gran tanque de aguas residuales en el lugar de la institución de Tuam (con la topografía de estas cámaras subterráneas físicas reflejando la represión psicológica de las circunstancias que rodearon la muerte de los bebés). Resulta chocante que no hubiera registros oficiales de ninguna de estas muertes. La excavación completa del lugar, que pretende identificar los restos y dar a las víctimas un entierro respetuoso, aún no ha comenzado. Mientras tanto, sigue sin conocerse el paradero de la mayoría de los 900 bebés y niños que murieron en una institución parecida en Bessborough.

Mientras que se estima que hasta 9.000 bebés y niños murieron entre 1922 y 1988 en las dieciocho instituciones investigadas en el informe, al no incluirse la mayoría de los *county homes*, se cree que esta cifra es bastante mayor aún. Además, tampoco se tuvieron en cuenta las instituciones de Irlanda del Norte. Sin embargo, una investigación realizada en colaboración con la Universidad de Queens en Belfast y la Universidad del Ulster en 2021 sugiere que al menos 10.500 mujeres han pasado algún tiempo en ocho instituciones del Norte, dirigidas por organizaciones religiosas católicas o protestantes, y que más de 3.000 han pasado tiempo en las *Magdalene Laundries* (McCormick, O'Connell, Dee y Privilege 2021, 2). Tras la publicación del informe de Queens, junto con el informe del Ejecutivo de Irlanda del Norte (Mahon, O'Rourke y Scraton 2021), en noviembre de 2021 el Ejecutivo de Stormont acordó llevar a cabo una investigación pública. Sin embargo, debido al ya mencionado boicot de tres años del DUP a la Asamblea de Irlanda del Norte, dicha investigación se ha paralizado, y el foco de atención se ha desplazado hacia el plan de reparación y ayuda económica para (un número limitado) de supervivientes, tal y como se anunció en febrero de este año. Aunque, por supuesto, cualquier ayuda es bienvenida, este tipo de respuesta limitada basada en estrictas condiciones de elegibilidad sigue estando muy dentro del ámbito de las soluciones superficiales criticadas por Burns. De hecho, se calcula que alrededor del 40% de los supervivientes (unas 44.000 personas) no podrán solicitar la ayuda (Flanagan 2024, n.p.).

En muchos aspectos, las prácticas traumáticas y violentas de estas instituciones pueden entenderse como una especie de ‘*open secret*’. Las propias instituciones eran visibles y conocidas por las comunidades, aunque nunca se hablara de lo que ocurría entre sus muros. Así lo demuestra el hecho de que ambos informes sugieren que muchos miembros de la familia, clérigos religiosos y profesionales médicos eran los responsables de las derivaciones de las mujeres y niñas, y que algunas mujeres se habían derivado a sí mismas (Gobierno irlandés 2020, 12-3; McCormick, O’Connell, Dee y Privilege 2021, 4). El secretismo que rodeaba a las instituciones se reflejaba igualmente en el funcionamiento interno de las mismas, ya que se impedía a las mujeres hablar entre ellas sobre sus circunstancias y, en muchos casos, se aplicaba un régimen de silenciamiento. Sin embargo, no es éste el único caso en el que no se ha identificado ni localizado a los muertos. Otro caso relevante es el de la *Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains* (ICLVR), que trabaja para localizar los restos de los llamados ‘desaparecidos’ de los disturbios, víctimas de la violencia paramilitar cuyos cuerpos nunca se encontraron y cuyas muertes siguen sin aparecer. De hecho, en general se considera que unos 1.186 de los 3.200 asesinatos de la época los *Troubles* en Irlanda del Norte siguen sin resolverse (O’Toole 2024).

Algo que creo que puede interpretarse a partir de un análisis de la ficción de Burns es que, para que las comunidades traumatizadas inicien un proceso de duelo y de recuperación bajo la superficie, deben perturbarse tanto las criptas físicas como las psicológicas. De hecho, como he detallado en el capítulo dos, aunque la hauntología trata sobre el duelo y la memoria, también trata sobre la responsabilidad y la justicia. El tipo de justicia que Derrida describe, sin embargo, es distinto tanto del sistema judicial como de la reparación económica:

No para la justicia calculable y distributiva. No para el derecho, el cálculo de la restitución, la economía de la venganza o del castigo ... no para la igualdad calculable, por tanto, no para la rendición de cuentas o imputabilidad simétrica y sincrónica de



sujetos u objetos, no para una impartición de justicia que se limitaría a sancionar o restituir, y a hacer lo correcto, sino para la justicia como incalculabilidad del don y singularidad de la ex-posición no-económica a los demás. (1994, 26)

Curiosamente, Derrida propone esta comprensión de la justicia para permitir algo así como un «paso más allá de la represión»: insiste en que «hay un más allá de la economía de la represión cuya ley la impulsa a *excederse a sí misma, de sí misma* en el curso de una historia, ya sea la historia del teatro o de la política entre *Edipo Rey* y *Hamlet*» (1994, 26; énfasis en el original). Esto es, sugiero, igualmente algo que puede leerse desde los márgenes de la obra de Burns.

Reflexionando tanto sobre esta revisión de nuestra forma de entender la justicia como sobre la advertencia que se nos hace en *Little Constructions* sobre la conmemoración del pasado, creo que también es interesante considerar las celebraciones del año pasado para conmemorar el 25 aniversario del Acuerdo del Viernes Santo, que se llevaron a cabo mientras Stormont permanecía suspendido. Especialmente significativo fue el acto ‘*Agreement 25*’, celebrado en la Universidad de Queens, en el que se invitó a participar a líderes mundiales. El tema principal del congreso fue el crecimiento económico y la prosperidad de Irlanda del Norte. Sin embargo, cabe preguntarse por lo que parece ser una especie de campaña de paz capitalista, centrada más en las inversiones internacionales que en la inestabilidad política o la inquietud de las comunidades locales. La ironía de esta celebración internacional de la prosperidad de Irlanda del Norte se hizo especialmente patente en un contexto de estancamiento político, listas de espera hospitalarias cada vez más largas, conflictos salariales en el sector público y disturbios civiles.

También es reveladora mi interpretación del papel de la memoria en *Milkman* como una crítica a la forma en que se ha tratado oficialmente el trauma colectivo de los *Troubles*. En su insistencia en un nuevo comienzo, y como medio de seguir adelante, el acuerdo impulsó lo que puede entenderse como una ética del olvido más que del recuerdo. Más recientemente aún,

como se señala en el capítulo dos, este sentimiento ha tenido repercusiones en la aplicación en el Reino Unido de la controvertida Ley de ‘*Legacy and Reconciliation*’, la cual fue aprobada en el Parlamento a pesar de una importante oposición en septiembre de 2023, entrando en vigor el 1 de mayo de este año (2024). La ley cerró todas las investigaciones históricas a partir del 1 de mayo, impidiendo que se llevaran a los tribunales nuevos casos civiles (O’Toole 2024, n.p.). Esto representa un obstáculo más para muchas víctimas y familiares en su búsqueda de respuestas y justicia. Como se entiende que los cuerpos de seguridad fueron responsables del 29% de las muertes de la época de los disturbios (y potencialmente implicadas en operaciones paramilitares), no puede dejar de cuestionarse los motivos del gobierno. Aunque el gobierno británico ha creado una comisión independiente para que se ocupe de estos casos, como señala el periodista O’Toole para *The Guardian*, «la savia de tales esfuerzos institucionales es la confianza pública, una confianza que es extremadamente difícil de establecer en un contexto en el que el Estado británico tiene un historial tan lamentable de ofuscación» (2024, n.p.). Su deseo de escribir una historia ‘oficial’ (británica) de los *Troubles* es igualmente preocupante, y nos remite a la crítica que hace Burns con respecto a las narrativas oficiales. Sin embargo, el aspecto más controvertido de la ley, que pretendía conceder inmunidad condicional para los crímenes de la época de los disturbios, no se aplicó después de que el Tribunal Superior de Belfast dictaminara que vulneraba los derechos humanos internacionales (O’Niell 2024, n.p.). No obstante, el hecho de que el gobierno británico incluyera dicha cláusula en primer lugar sólo revela los extremos a los que está dispuesto a llegar para preservar la imagen (o ‘memoria’) de sus tropas militares y olvidar, o hacer la vista gorda, ante las atrocidades que se cometieron en el Norte.

Para volver al tema del duelo en la obra de Burns, me gustaría evocar una conexión que identifiqué en el capítulo seis entre *middle sister* y la figura de Antígona que me recuerda a la deconstrucción que hace Derrida de la lectura que hace Hegel de Antígona en *Glas* (1986). Esta

observación no sólo conecta *Milkman* con *Little Constructions* a través del uso que hace Derrida de *judas*, sino que el personaje de *middle sister* (en su búsqueda de un entierro apropiado para los muertos) se alinea con el de Jotty (que busca localizar a los muertos), y así el mito de Antígona puede leerse en relación con el mito de Deméter. Es importante destacar que tanto la ficción de Burns como sus observaciones sobre el violento pasado de Irlanda del Norte apoyan la idea de que tanto la identificación del cadáver como el acto de enterrarlo están íntimamente ligados a la labor del duelo y de la justicia. Como subraya Derrida, el duelo «consiste siempre en intentar ontologizar [*ontologize*] los restos, hacerlos presentes, en primer lugar, *identificando* los restos corporales y *localizando* a los muertos» (1994, 9; énfasis en el original). Una idea un poco inesperada que podemos concluir en la lectura de estas dos figuras (*middle sister* y Jotty, Antígona y Deméter) y en referencia a *Glas* de Derrida es la del (impotente) poder del humor y la ironía que estas mujeres esgrimen (como una espada):

El poder masculino tiene un límite, un límite esencial y eterno: el arma, sin duda impotente, el arma todopoderosa de la impotencia, el golpe inalienable asestado por la mujer es la ironía. La mujer ‘enemiga interna de la política’ siempre puede estallar de risa en el último momento: sabe, en las lágrimas y en la muerte, pervertir el poder que la reprime. (1986, 210)

Otra conexión que se puede establecer aquí es a través de la afirmación de Cixous en su notable ensayo «La risa de Medusa», cuando escribe que la escritura femenina «no puede dejar de ser más que subversiva. Es volcánica ... Si es ella, es para destrozarlo todo, para hacer añicos el marco de las instituciones, para hacer saltar por los aires la ley, para romper la ‘verdad’ con la risa» (1976, 888). Aunque no estoy de acuerdo con la descripción que hace Cixous sobre la escritura femenina como algo notablemente distinto – o más bien, que el estilo de escritura al que se refiere es algo necesariamente *femenino* – coincido con el argumento de Cixous sobre el poder subversivo que implica el hablar desde la alteridad y la abyección. Tal es el poder del

Otro, del espectro, del secreto absoluto para trastornar nuestro orden social, y es un poder que se expresa de forma más destacada a través de la risa.

### 7.7. El Humor, la Ironía y la Narrativa del Trauma

Esto me lleva a mis conclusiones finales, extraídas del análisis de la novela de Burns *Mostly Hero* en el capítulo seis, con respecto al papel del humor y la ironía en la teoría y la literatura. En primer lugar, el análisis del humor en la novela nos permite interpretar el papel que desempeña el personaje de *femme* al utilizar sus armas homicidas y sus artículos de mercería con fines curativos como una representación del papel que puede desempeñar el humor a la hora de acabar con el trauma transgeneracional. Tal y como sugería, el humor y la ironía, al evocar contradicciones y desdibujar binarios, puede interrumpir el retorno cíclico de la represión. También analicé como las escenas finales de *Mostly Hero* (en el que se describía «*the blue hour; the era of endarkenment*», Burns 2019, 127) y *Milkman* (con la «suavizante» luz del atardecer, Burns 2018, 348), actúan como un argumento contra el logocentrismo, el ‘*speech act theory*’ y la política del ‘sentido común’ [‘*common sense*’]. Burns recuerda cómo el cambio no reside en la autocerteza, la presencia, la verdad o el sentido común, sino más bien en la experiencia de la incertidumbre y la multiplicidad. Desde aquí, los argumentos de Derrida contra el rechazo de Searle del potencial transgresor de la teoría y la ficción pueden alinearse con el cuestionamiento que hace Burns de las narrativas oficiales. Además, sostengo que la indecidibilidad de una lectura deconstructivista es el espacio donde irrumpe lo ético; que la ética se pone en cuestión cuando se interrumpe la logocentrismo (que suprime la alteridad). Algo hacia lo que apunta el uso que Burns hace del humor y la ironía es la idea de que, al igual que el humor tiene una forma de abrazar la alteridad, también la apertura a la alteridad puede ser un prerequisite para la actitud humorística. Para volver al papel del espectro, podemos recordar cómo, en palabras de Lorek-Jezińska y Wieckowska, «[u]n encuentro con lo espectral da lugar a la aceptación del estado de desconocimiento» (2017, 9). Mientras que se dice que

Medusa es el pináculo de aquel cuya mirada nunca puede encontrarse – si recordamos, se la evoca en *Little Constructions* en referencia al papel de los fantasmas en la comunidad (Burns 2007, 31) – según Cixous: «[s]ólo tienes que mirar a la Medusa de frente para verla. Y no es mortal. Es hermosa y se ríe» (1976, 885).

Del mismo modo, pretendo haber puesto de relieve cómo la indeterminación del humor y la ironía pueden proporcionar una salida al modelo de trauma *fort/da*, en el que la violencia y el trauma se repiten indefinidamente. Aunque Burns repite, desplaza y aplaza los relatos y las historias traumáticas con las que se compromete, su adopción del humor es en parte lo que hace que la narración se vea alterada y transformada en el proceso. A través del humor, Burns fomenta un distanciamiento entre la experiencia traumática vivida y una especie de visión desde otro lugar que permite al lector tanto reírse de su propia melancolía como reconocer lo absurdo de la forma en que estas narrativas son capaces de arraigar. Como concluyen los magos en *Mostly Hero*: «Tal vez la respuesta al hechizo ... sea simplemente decidir que no estás bajo él después de todo» (Burns 2019, 99).

Como he sugerido a lo largo de esta Tesis Doctoral, parte de lo que hace que la escritura de Burns sea tan innovadora es también lo que hace que su ficción sea una lectura tan incómoda o ‘difícil’, dada la dificultad que tenemos para escribir con humor sobre el trauma, y la dificultad que sentimos cuando nuestro sentido común se ve alterado. El humor y la ironía presentes en toda la obra de Burns permiten al lector reconocer tanto la contingencia como lo absurdo del sufrimiento compartido, disminuyendo así el control que dicho sufrimiento ejerce sobre las experiencias vividas. Tal vez, en cierto modo, la dificultad de este reconocimiento resida en la dificultad de reconocer la simplicidad de la solución. Como explica el narrador de *Mostly Hero*, es la constatación de que,

el antídoto para el embrujo no es otro que hacer un esfuerzo por averiguar cómo estar el uno con el otro, especialmente cuando uno de ellos/as estaba siendo una persona de una manera que la otra persona ha decidido que estaba mal. (Burns 2019, 99)

En su descripción tanto del embrujo lanzado sobre *femme* como del llamado kit de supervivencia de *hero*, Burns se burla de la idea – heredada de la lógica del logocentrismo – de que tener un subconsciente es cualquier cosa menos humana.

### 7.8. Futuras Líneas de Investigación

Aunque no hay que subestimar la singularidad y complejidad de los conflictos de Irlanda del Norte, es importante recordar que, por desgracia, los conflictos civiles e internacionales son corrientes hoy en día. Según el Índice de Conflictos ACLED, se calcula que una de cada seis personas ha estado expuesta a un conflicto en lo que va de año, y cincuenta países se encuentran en niveles de conflicto extremo, alto o turbulento (enero de 2024, n.p.). De hecho, basta pensar en las atrocidades que se están cometiendo en Palestina, Myanmar y Siria, por ejemplo, para ver cómo la pertinencia de estas conclusiones puede exceder el contexto dado. Cabe destacar a este respecto cómo el éxito del Acuerdo de Viernes Santo en el mantenimiento de la paz en Irlanda del Norte se está utilizando como modelo para los procesos de paz en conflictos de todo el mundo (este fue un tema destacado en el mencionado congreso del ‘*Agreement 25*’ celebrado en Queens el año pasado). Sin embargo, la crítica que hace Burns a la forma en que se ha tratado el trauma en Irlanda del Norte también debería servir de advertencia para conflictos más lejanos.

Además, como sugerí en el capítulo cinco, el impulso del Acuerdo del Viernes Santo hacia un ‘nuevo comienzo’ tiene cierta resonancia con el ‘Pacto del Olvido’ empleado en la España posfranquista. Del mismo modo, al igual que se han creado comisiones para trabajar en la identificación y localización de las víctimas de la violencia institucional, paramilitar y

estatal en la República y en el Norte, la aprobación de la Ley de Memoria Histórica en España en 2007 ha proporcionado a las comunidades autónomas nuevos fondos destinados a la localización y exhumación de las víctimas tanto de la guerra civil como del régimen franquista. Sin embargo, tanto Irlanda del Norte como España se han enfrentado a importantes obstáculos a la hora de buscar justicia, en gran medida debido a que la amnistía está inscrita en los fundamentos democráticos de ambos países. Sin embargo, el mensaje claro que recibimos al leer la ficción de Burns desde la perspectiva de la hauntología – un mensaje que es igualmente aplicable al contexto de España como al de Irlanda del Norte – es que, mientras existan tumbas sin nombre, los espectros de la violencia seguirán acechando a nuestras democracias.

Además, a la vez que la política se expresa en todo el mundo de un modo cada vez más divisivo, una deconstrucción de los ideales dominantes de la identidad, la verdad, el sentido común y la pertenencia puede, al menos en parte, desbaratar el control ontológico que dicha retórica ejerce sobre nuestras comunidades hoy en día. Una ficción vanguardista e innovadora como la escrita por Burns, aunque no promete en absoluto soluciones claras, sí fomenta una confrontación con los espectros, el secretismo y la alteridad – una confrontación que es a la vez interna y externa – de la que pueden surgir diferentes formas de comunidad. Podemos concluir con Nancy y Blanchot que tales comunidades no se basan en nociones de pertenencia, comunalidad o certeza en sí mismas, sino más bien en la aceptación de la no pertenencia, la incertidumbre, la multiplicidad y la diferencia.

Dicho esto, tras haber rastreado los diversos hilos del marco teórico a lo largo de la obra de Anna Burns, la principal limitación que he encontrado es el limitado potencial de aplicación tanto de la descripción de Nancy de la comunidad inoperante [*inoperative community*] como de la comunidad de amantes [*community of lovers*] de Blanchot a los casos de las novelas. Esto se debe en gran parte a que los momentos de intimidad sincera son escasos y distantes entre sí. Aunque hay numerosas descripciones de cómo las relaciones y las comunidades pueden ser

autoinmunes y autodestructivas, hay muchas menos descripciones de cómo las cosas podrían ser diferentes. Me atrevería a decir que sólo en *Milkman* se pueden identificar momentos fugaces de comunidad inoperante. No obstante, recibimos el mensaje de que la amistad y la intimidad pueden actuar como vías mediadoras entre la dialéctica de revelar y ocultar, y a su vez justificar parte de la salida de la repetitiva repetición del trauma heredado, tanto a nivel individual como comunitario. En *No Bones*, por ejemplo, la excursión a la isla de *Rathlin* en el capítulo final permite a los grupos reconocer juntos las fronteras y barreras que han dictado sus vidas, y esto es un primer paso para la deconstrucción de esas mismas barreras y el descentramiento de la retórica dominante. También en *Milkman*, la novela termina con *middle sister* reconociendo la posibilidad de diferentes tipos de amistad, casi expresables. Por lo tanto, un estudio comparativo de las novelas de Burns desde la perspectiva de la comunidad de amantes [*community of lovers*] de Blanchot podría ser una vía de investigación productiva. La obra de Burns puede en este respecto ser analizada comparativamente con *Where They Were Missed* (2006) de Lucy Caldwell, y *Where They Lie* (2014) de Mary O'Donnell. Ambas novelas están igualmente marcadas por el trauma, pero ofrecen claros indicios de otras formas alternativas de crear comunidad. Por otra parte, aunque el papel del humor no era en absoluto mi objetivo principal en esta investigación, creo que, a partir de las conclusiones alcanzadas en el capítulo seis en referencia a la novela *Mostly Hero*, un enfoque deconstructivo del humor y la ironía podría proporcionar una nueva perspectiva para revisar toda la obra de Burns, ya que creo que todavía hay mucho que decir al respecto.

A modo de conclusión, quiero reflexionar sobre algo que quizá haya aprendido más a fondo a lo largo de la redacción de esta Tesis Doctoral: la importancia de estar abierta a conclusiones inesperadas y abiertas. A menudo, cuando uno se acerca a un texto desde la perspectiva de teorías claramente definidas, o en busca de determinados fundamentos políticos, es capaz de descubrir las respuestas que busca independientemente de la obra seleccionada. Sin



embargo, lo que la deconstrucción me ha enseñado es cómo la propia literatura puede animarnos, como críticos, a cuestionar las propias afirmaciones que consciente o inconscientemente proyectamos en un texto. Si estamos de acuerdo con Miller en que la deconstrucción no es «ni más ni menos que una buena lectura» (Miller 1987, 10), estar abiertos a la multiplicidad de significados que pueden resonar desde los márgenes de un texto y prestar atención al juego de posibilidades que aporta cada elección u omisión de palabras (ya sea deliberada o inadvertida), puede fomentar mejores lecturas críticas. Teniendo esto en cuenta, la ficción de Anna Burns no sólo anima al lector a cuestionar los conceptos que determinan nuestra comprensión del mundo (incluyendo lo que ha pasado y lo que está por venir), así como nuestras relaciones con otras personas y nuestra responsabilidad hacia ellas (también, las del pasado y las que están por venir), sino que también nos anima a reírnos de nosotros/as mismos/as y a encontrarnos ridículos/as (Critchley 2002, 103). Creo que éste es un primer paso hacia la adopción de una ética de la alteridad, junto con una mejor comprensión de una comunidad y una democracia no basada en lo común, sino en la diferencia y la *différance*. Aunque espero que mis análisis puedan contribuir al debate literario actual tanto dentro como fuera del campo de los estudios irlandeses, reconozco que el trabajo no está completo ni acabado en ningún sentido de la palabra. La deconstrucción es, tomando prestadas las palabras de Amelia en *No Bones*, una «actitud mental y quizá pueda obtenerse de algún lugar, de alguna manera, más adelante» (Burns 2001, 321). Podemos concluir con Derrida que «nunca terminamos con este secreto, nunca estamos acabados, no hay final» (2001, 58).