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Northern Ireland's Interregnum.¹ Anna Burns's Depiction of a (Post)-Troubles State of (In)security

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present the main contours of Burns's literary output which, interestingly enough, grows into a personal understanding of the collective mindset of (post)-Troubles Northern Ireland. It is legitimate, I argue, to construe her fiction (*No Bones*, 2001; *Little Constructions*, 2007; *Milkman*, 2018) as a body of work shedding light on certain underlying mechanisms of (post-)sectarian violence. Notwithstanding the lapse of time between 1998 and 2020, the 'Troubles' toxic legacy has indeed woven an unbroken thread in the social fabric of the region. My reading of the novelist's selected works intends to show how the local public have been fed by (or have fed themselves upon) an unjustified—maybe even false—sense of security. Burns, in that regard, has positioned herself amongst the aggregate of writers who feel anxious rather than placated, hence their persistence in returning to the roots of Northern Irish societal divisions. Burns's writing, in the above context, though immersed in the world of the 'Troubles, paradoxically communicates "an idiosyncratic spatiotemporality" (Maureen Ruprecht Fadem's phrase), namely an experience beyond the self-imposing, historical time limits. As such, it gains the ability to provide insightful commentaries on conflict-prone relations, the patterns of which can be repeatedly observed in Northern Ireland's socio-political milieu. Overall, the main idea here is to discuss and present the narrative realm proposed by Burns as (in)determinate, liminal in terms of time and space, positioning readers between "then" and "now" of the region.

Keywords: divided society, Anna Burns, (post-)Troubles Northern Ireland, society-politics-fiction, a sense of (in)stability/(in)security in contemporary Northern Ireland.

¹ Birte Heidemann's *New Direction in Irish and Irish American Literature* served as the main inspiration to use the above term. Further references to her monograph are to be found in the latter parts of this paper.

In 2018, Anna Burns was awarded the Man Booker Prize for fiction. Her success marks the twenty-year anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. This might serve as a good pretext for presenting the main contours of Burns's literary output which grows into a personal understanding of the collective mindset of (post)-Troubles Northern Ireland. It is legitimate to construe her texts of fiction as shedding light on certain underlying mechanisms of (post-)sectarian violence. Notwithstanding the lapse of time between 1998 and 2020, that toxic legacy has indeed woven an unbroken thread into the social fabric of the region. My reading of the novelist's selected works, set against a backdrop of other critical texts by fellow scholars, intends to show how the local public have been fed by (or have fed themselves upon) an unjustified—maybe even false—sense of security, conveyed most often by the so-called “bipartisan” officials. Burns, in that regard, has positioned herself amongst the aggregate of writers² who feel anxious rather than placated, hence their persistence in returning to the roots of Northern Irish societal divisions. Their narratives, imbued with latent antagonisms or painful rifts, point out a simple fact, namely that the troubled past has been camouflaged, and a single traumatogenic³ incident—like Brexit—sufficed to prove that another resurrection of animosities of the “bygone” conflict is imminent.

Frederick Studemann writes that “leaving Northern Ireland gave [Burns] the necessary distance to write about her homeland,” and that it is rather unlikely that she ever intends to rush back to the country. Moreover, as he implies, the author is reluctant to comment upon the current political climate. Still, extrapolating from what she knows about the past, Burns does acknowledge that a regression to the “violence” is easily imaginable. According to her, even if contemporary Northern Ireland is not being torn apart by paramilitary actions, the peace dividend has not fully compensated for “[t]he barricades of her youth”; in fact, they “have been replaced by ‘lots of [other] walls’” (Studemann). Their presence is ubiquitous, as proven for instance by Aleksandra Łojek who, in 2015, published a text about life in post-Troubles Belfast. The very title of her book *Belfast. 99 Walls of Peace*⁴ carries an implication that the “bygone”

² To name just a few, quite representative of contemporary Northern Irish prose writing, whose literary narratives I analyzed in a 2017 monograph: Lucy Caldwell, Nick Laird, Deirdre Madden, David Park, Glenn Patterson (see Bartnik, *Inscribed*).

³ Piotr Sztompka translates it as a cumulative effect, in other words “a threshold of saturation beyond which . . . a shock of realization about something that was ignored before” occurs (158).

⁴ The book is written in Polish, and its original title is *Belfast. 99 ścian pokoju*. The above translation is mine. Aleksandra Łojek lives and works in Belfast as a journalist and independent researcher. Her main areas of interest are interracial communication and restorative justice.

dynamic, albeit in a different format, still resonates, and the expected dividend for the Good Friday Agreement has been at odds with the updated echoes of former antagonisms⁵ (Łojek 12–15). Reading the quotes from Studemann’s interview with Burns, I argue that the latter’s arguments are founded on and resonate with a genuine concern about Northern Ireland’s (un)resolved conflicts, which may easily turn into another eruption of high-intensity, intercommunal violence. Therefore, it seems legitimate to claim that Burns’s works of fiction, though immersed in the world of the Troubles, communicate an experience beyond the self-imposing, historical time limits. As such, they gain capacity in providing insightful commentaries on conflict-prone relations, the patterns of which can be repeatedly observed in Northern Ireland’s fragile social fabric. Burns’s writing, due to its specific, non-linear dimensionality, frames universal narratives around a series of Northern Irish impasses that extend beyond the convenient frame of the three-decade period of armed confrontation. In the same vein, Beata Piątek underlines that the universality of Burns’s language aptly elucidates the dilemmas of Northern Irishness because its horizon of possibility reaches beyond historical tribalism (112). More relevant yet is Maureen Ruprecht Fadem’s argumentation regarding how the novelist inscribes individual “residents” of the North into “an idiosyncratic spatiotemporality that is materially proliferate” (45). In other words, the narrative realm proposed by Burns is (in)determinate, liminal in terms of time and space, positioning readers between “then” and “now.”⁶

As noted by Ruprecht Fadem, Burns offers a specific perspective, in fact characteristic of all her works, which evolves as “a perplexing reading space . . . that makes possible history’s reenactment” (158). Nevertheless, “the past” that “conquers” the present is counterbalanced by “a time-space oriented towards the future” (Ruprecht Fadem 48). In a way, as indicated by Leszek Drong, Burns’s narrative is marked by an interesting use of memory and “performativity.” According to him, these two, when combined in realist fiction, validate the aim of creating and solidifying “the illusion of reality,” which eventually becomes a “determinant factor” in outlining past events (*Tropy* 98). However, in the case of Burns’s writing, the goal of mimetic accuracy in representing the real cannot be regarded as ultimate. As stated earlier, the ‘Troubles’ legacy, rather than merely being scanned, has been carefully drawn⁷

⁵ For more extensive elaboration on the issue see Bartnik (*Inscribed* 306).

⁶ As indicated by Piątek (109), Burns’s literary narratives have “a universalizing effect” due to the “neutral” (oblique) designation of geographical locations and temporal dimensions.

⁷ In the above context, it is legitimate to invoke the aforementioned concept of “spatiotemporality.” As Ruprecht Fadem underlines, Burns reaches for such a narrative construct to recapture “the tendencies and processes of political violence” (167).

by the author so as to eventually constitute an important reference point for further divagations into the mechanisms of (in)stability insidiously concealed in (post-) conflict Northern Ireland.

Many would like to believe that the post-conflict reality is devoid of belligerence, yet behind the façade of the 1998 settlement is a present-day Northern Ireland that only appears to indicate a new, utterly changed socio-political realm. Elisabetta Viggiani is one of those scholars who concede that the Agreement opened a diametrically new chapter in the history of Northern Ireland. As she underlined, it “marked a shift from violence to politics as the dominant mechanism of engagement,” of which the natural consequence has been “conflict-related memorialization[s]” (18). By and large, this perspective is not in the least unjustifiable; nevertheless, its underlying implication sounds too sanguine. The consociational structure of governance, as part and parcel of the post-Troubles appeasement policy, implicitly endorsed the “beyond-borders coexistence.” Paddy Hoey,⁸ however, rightly notices that the issue of Brexit demystified the fragility of the “post-nationalist” geography, which enhanced people’s belief in “magical . . . evolution” (178). Has life in post-conflict Northern Ireland changed then? Definitely so, yet making such an affirmation is not tantamount to depicting it in terms of utterly peaceful coexistence,⁹ though some are eager to draw up a new landscape demonstrating the extent to which the region “[has] undergone a process of radical rebuilding and rebranding” (Long 16). The skeptics amongst academics and writers, however, speak of a mirage conjured up to avoid addressing the unrelenting legacy of the Troubles unrest.

In order to gain insight into the actual state of affairs it might be relevant to consider the picture provided by John Barry.¹⁰ His portrayal of contemporary Northern Ireland is far grimmer and more disconcerting as he applies the lens of a “frozen or negative peace.”¹¹ In an analysis of the allocation of votes in successive Northern Irish elections, he notes that people over the last two decades have been inclined to opt for candidates selected through the prism of sectarian affiliations. Accordingly, within

⁸ Dr. Hoey works as a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Edge Hill University. His main areas of research are Northern Ireland’s peace process, Republicanism and the city of Belfast.

⁹ Ruprecht Fadem, in her book *The Literature of Northern Ireland*, describes “the landscape” of Northern Ireland as marked by “the [unending] social and political polarization” (15).

¹⁰ Professor Barry represents Queen’s University Belfast, and his field of expertise includes, *inter alia*, anthropology, philosophy and politics.

¹¹ The idea of “negative peace” implies that what one observes in contemporary Northern Ireland is not a fundamental change but a preservation of the status quo of still-potent socio-political “sympathies.”

such a disposition of political assets, of importance is the negative efficiency that aims at exclusion rather than cooptation. Bluntly put, while casting a ballot, people willingly decide to “keep someone out rather than vote someone in” (Barry 49, 53). Is it legitimate to regard the political choices as in any way informative of the Northern Irish domain¹² and its mental background? Undoubtedly. The post-Troubles period does not differ that much from certain templates of the past, when the warring communities were driven by antipathies, always directed against “the other” group. What has changed comes down to practicing a policy of hushed-up antagonisms. Landon E. Hancock¹³ defines this inclination as a “spectacle” in which communication across barriers is insincere. Thus, regardless of the official declarations, “recognition of the other’s motifs” is questionable.¹⁴

An only slightly different perspective on the legacy of the 1998 Agreement was presented by John Brewer.¹⁵ On the one hand, he underlines the fact that Northern Ireland’s peace time, in spite of its “negative” character, works “relatively” well. On the other hand, however, it is becoming evident that “[s]ocietal healing . . . has witnessed very little progress” (Brewer 278). Even if one cannot speak of actual regression, then a persistent inertia that stalls reconciliation is rather apparent. Whether people want it or not, especially on the more private level of individual consciousness, they have been stuck in a liminal area that resonates with noticeable residues of the Troubles’ culture of violence. In order to grasp the nature of this realm of “(un)reformed politics,” I would invoke Birte Heidemann’s argument that addresses the post-Troubles time as “the state of suspension” or unarticulated “interregnum.” Essentially, that condition

¹² To clarify the above term I would like to refer to two eminent sociologists, i.e. Zygmunt Bauman and Piotr Sztompka. The former underlines how crucial it is to study social changes when seeking “the communication between the public and the private [realms]” (86). In other words, when it comes to studying the Northern Irish domain, a combination of individual and collective perspectives is required. The latter scholar, discussing societal transitions, points out that any serious changes within “the population” have a comprehensive character and relate to various “domains,” for instance: “political, legal, moral, cultural, artistic” (Sztompka 159). These are all matters of public resonance, and as such might have an impact on the local population and institutions.

¹³ Dr. Hancock is a lecturer at the School of Peace and Conflict Studies and the Department of Political Science, Kent State University. His main areas of research relate to the notion of ethnicity/identity in conflict generation/conflict resolution.

¹⁴ As Hancock predicts, the only thing that “the people of Northern Ireland can hope for . . . is a grudging willingness to keep talking rather than return to shooting and bombing over differences” (262).

¹⁵ Professor Brewer works at the School of Social Sciences, Queen’s University Belfast, and his research interests include Northern Ireland, peace processes, the legacy of religious and political conflicts.

should enable the locals to bid farewell to “the bygone” and welcome “the new” (Heidemann 46); nevertheless, though the former was officially proclaimed, the latter appears to have failed to completely materialize.¹⁶ After twenty years of negotiated coexistence many a participant of the local communities admits the presence—under the best scenario—of a seething undercurrent of distrust which retains a strongly divisive potential. As Máire Braniff and Sophie Whiting claim (252),¹⁷ these two decades of transition have not been too effective in rooting out sectarian mentality.¹⁸ There are still “conflict-related issues” which have not been dialogically decommissioned, and the society is rather persistent in performing along the “tribal” lines of reasoning.

From a certain angle, post-Agreement Northern Ireland is characterized by a lack of change. Contrary to common beliefs, the results of the 1998 settlement are not that impressive. The present time is indeed marked by those same patterns of a divided world¹⁹ which were characteristic of socio-political life prior to the Good Friday Agreement. And for this reason, I would argue, Burns throughout her literary output delves into mechanisms of denial, divisive rhetoric and acts of reprisal. In her works one observes a regional “habit” of resorting to violence to settle intergroup differences. Its irreducible character, to use Charles Tilly’s phrase (4), depends on strong “social ties, structures and process” that for decades have had a petrifying effect by breeding animosity against “the other side,” against “not-Us.” Thus, on the one hand, she persistently reiterates her commitment to disclose that detrimental logic of belligerence. On the other hand, by recreating the ghastly past, redrawing the frameworks of the conflicted society, and reformulating the Trouble discourse, Burns in fact cries out for an alternative story/a new narrative. Much in the same vein as the novelist, albeit more from a socio-cultural angle, Long points out the significance of the multi-layered texture of experience required to analyze the Northern Irish public domain. Accordingly, these kinds of

¹⁶ Metaphorically speaking, “instead of dying a slow and silent death, the violent past seems to have hit a cul-de-sac in post-Agreement Northern Ireland” (Heidemann 46).

¹⁷ Dr. Braniff is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Applied Social and Policy Studies, Ulster University. Her research interests relate to peace processes, justice and truth recovery. Dr. Whiting is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Bath. Her main research interests relate to Northern Ireland’s politics, as well as the role of women within post-conflict milieux.

¹⁸ It is Long, among others, who underlined how deep-seated such divisions are. According to his study, there is no doubt that in the Northern Ireland of today one observes “the most disturbing indications of the stubbornly unyielding . . . divisions” (38).

¹⁹ To understand the phenomenon of “divided societies,” not only in the context of Northern Ireland but worldwide, see works of the following authors: Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin (2007), Marie Breen Smyth (2007), Brandon Hamber (2009).

“stories”²⁰ are to be channeled into a “sought-after difference [and] alert us to the irreducible dimension of antagonism which is so often erased within the consensual propagandizing of the ‘peace’ era” (Long 153). Above all, what comes to the fore in both Burns’s fiction and Long’s argumentation is the general need for reconfiguring Northern Ireland’s private and public discourse.²¹

Although they have been diagnosed, the maladies of the local realm appear not to have been completely dealt with. An interesting comment, in this respect, comes from Gladys Ganiel,²² who, speaking of the Northern Irish legacy of violence, brings to the table a pertinent term, namely “culture of militarism.” Even though the purpose of my paper is not to highlight the paramilitarization of the region, it is worth considering how Ganiel elucidates the unrelenting pressures of the (post-)Troubles reality. As in the past, it is the confrontational mindset that continues to operate, and its veiled character causes a sort of vicarious traumatization amongst the local population. As Ganiel points out, the local culture of violence repeatedly releases its dynamic forces, for the past legacy “continues to be reproduced through discourses, images, rituals, and symbols, as well as through institutions and structures” (134). It is necessary to be mindful of Tilly’s opinion, invoked earlier, which indicates that the syndromes of militancy in a conflicted society are derivative of what is lurking inside its structures and ongoing processes. Accordingly, anyone (including writer) whose competence and expertise enables him/her to speak up and shape public opinion, must take it as their objective not to rest on the laurels of the past but rather to look back at it in order to change the present or project a new future.

There is no denying that in the wake of the Agreement, Northern Ireland’s socio-political discourse has been dominated by an official non-sectarian agenda. Even if this is a *bona fide* policy that accentuates how the peaceful plan has paid off for both communities, it seems to have had some

²⁰ These are stories/literary narratives which prove that Burns “holds a mirror to communal policing,” thereby delving into the meaning of Northern Irish “oppressiveness . . . , tribalism, conformism [or] fear” (Kilroy qtd. in Piątek 108). In a similar vein, Ruprecht Fadern highlights Burns’s capacity to “locate readers in a carefully constructed precarious landscape through which history . . . is resurrected and ‘plays’ across the text until a final . . . substantiation of the truth claim” (144).

²¹ In contrast to general expectations, the prefix “post” that demarcates the end of the Troubles might be construed as far-fetched. Suffice to quote Long, who speaking of current “changes,” comes to the conclusion that it is only a semantic formula behind which we find “an estranging extension and intensification of the familiar” (38).

²² Gladys Ganiel is a Research Fellow in the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen’s University Belfast. Her main areas of research are conflicts in Northern Ireland and Christian tradition in Ireland.

(un)intended side effects.²³ Certain pressing matters related to the past that should be more thoroughly discussed have been relegated to the margins. This in turn, contrary to the intent, fossilizes miscellaneous scripts of the former conflicts. With the recognition of this view as legitimate, it becomes evident that the role that the literary field has to play cannot be underestimated. As rightly noticed by Drong, the post-Troubles period typifies “a mode of social and political evasion of the past,” which parallels a well-known saying that no good comes from “washing dirty linen in public”; any inconvenient reminiscences are apparently unwelcome, thus “recent history [has been] consigned to cultural discourses, to be explored mostly by (literary and filmic) fiction” (“Doing Justice” 410). Dating back to the end of the Troubles, Northern Irish literature has faced an uphill struggle to expose, and further dismantle, suppressed resentments. So has Burns, who continuously presents herself as a novelist whose writing is dense with the clashing narratives of antipathy, which are evident in the province even twenty years after Northern Ireland—allegedly—brought the strife to its end.²⁴

In this paper, it is Burns's latest novel *Milkman* that serves as the main point of reference. Nevertheless, in order to discuss a certain continuity in her thinking about Northern Ireland's entanglement, some of her earlier works need to be brought to the fore. In an article from 2012,²⁵ I made the claim that it has become absolutely imperative in post-Troubles literature to draw attention to the question of personal wounds and collective healing. A number of writers, including Burns, understood that the violence of the past did constitute a heavy burden that could not be reduced by simply cherishing some future scenarios while editing out the pain and suffering. Contrary to much of the early optimism, the celebrated peace agreement does not eliminate the necessity of confronting earlier conflicts. From the perspective offered by Burns in her first novel *No Bones*, the need to rectify a deficiency in examining the ills of the Troubles was already pressing in the early days of the new political dispensation. The story of Amelia Lovett is fairly characteristic of the post-Agreement referential

²³ The post-conflict space can hardly be depicted in terms of normalcy as former divisions have been “petrified” (Ruprecht Fadern 45), and do “persist” as mental fortifications (Patterson, *Here's Me* 23). Patterson, in fact, questions the foundations of a stable society indicating that “the open-endedness coded into the word [Peace Process] has long since ceased to be enabling and became destabilizing” (*Here's Me* 8).

²⁴ The concluding line of the above paragraph is a paraphrasis of Hancock's claim, namely that “the Northern Irish Troubles that ended two decades ago have not stopped . . . conflicting narratives of fear and enmity [which] continue to characterize relations between both communities” (245).

²⁵ A full-fledged analysis of the novel focuses on interesting parallels between post-Troubles Northern Ireland and post-apartheid South Africa (Bartnik, “No Bones” 159–75).

literature²⁶ as it touches upon the problem of mental escapism practiced by characters trying to erase from memory certain violent scenarios played out prior to the political transition. As suggested by the author, the imprints of conflict cannot be fought off by a form of psychological self-detachment. Nor can any disconcerting truths regarding the Troubles' legacy be coped with through mechanisms of denial. In other words, a cover up of the wrongs and resentments works to no avail. Irrespective of one's pain or guilt, the past must be tackled, both on the individual and collective level, to safeguard everyone against the afore-mentioned culture of violence. Towards the end of the novel, Burns's characters embark upon a trip to an island in order to internalize a simple truth about militancy that leads people astray in the long run. Their psychological peregrination ends there, and they become aware that "[h]atred and revenge thoughts were within their upbringing. . . . So they got down to the boat and . . . they left sad. . . . But what if they hadn't? This was the question all of them now asked. . . . What if they hadn't wanted to leave? What if Rathlin Island had also been their homeland?" (*No Bones* 321). The author's debut novel invited a sober, yet alarming, reflection on the perils of Northern Ireland's position, where former animosities and violence showed every potential to spring up (again) across the communities.

For some, Burns's narrative might sound as if it has been created by an angst-ridden fatalist, who denies the possibility of genuine reconciliation. In contrast to such opinions, I would argue that she merely finds little reason for excessive optimism. Instead, her conviction is that the post-Troubles sense of safety and stability has been resting on shaky ground. In a subsequent book, titled *Little Constructions*,²⁷ we are confronted with Burns's portrayal of an unspecified land dominated by a history of conflict. As I highlighted before, she persistently feels compelled to comment (albeit implicitly) on the "unresolvable" deadlock of post-Agreement Northern Ireland. Interestingly enough, the novel provides no exact coordinates that point to a concrete geographical location. Burns's anonymous characters nevertheless seem—beyond any doubt—to be part and parcel of the district's familiar dialectic of violence. As in the realm of the Troubles, the story presents a community whose representatives participate in, as well as fall victim to, "the old aberration" (*Little* 295). Some of them, overwhelmed by this legacy, prefer to push the boundaries

²⁶ In a nutshell, the referentiality of literary texts comes down to "find[ing] ways of portraying the events there not as existing in a vacuum, but in their historical, political, geographical. . . context"; hence Patterson's acknowledgement of this mode of writing, and his claim that it is rather prevalent within the Northern Irish literary field (*Lapsed* 182).

²⁷ A more comprehensive analysis of the novel can be found in my monograph (*Inscribed* 307–16).

of (un)awareness in the hope of reducing cognitive dissonance. Yet, as one of the characters is informed, a form of denial works to no avail, for one “is having a hard time because something not very nice once happened to [him/her]. It was a big thing, and although it’s supposed to be over, in [their] body and in [their] head and from the way [he/she] now look out on the world, it’s not bloody over, it’s still bloody going on” (20). In general, this is a land where malice runs in the family, where unsympathetic instincts keep coming to light, regardless of the officially declared efforts to build resilience against harbored grievances. Nurtured on feuds, “they get into their fights . . . , when they come later . . . 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” (172).

Seemingly, in this 2007 work, the author underlines that finding a route out of the labyrinth of sectarian violence entails adopting a deliberate strategy to reduce the impact of individual and collective amnesia. Otherwise, as concluded in the novel, people “hide bomb material [or] other . . . buried fantasy [with] warlike things stuffed in every nook and cranny” (288). And although “a new social order” is mentioned in that narrative, with the call to all the “war factions [to be] dispersed and disbanded” (295), in the end no final solution is announced. Arguably, almost a decade after the end of the Troubles, certain negative processes of the “bygone” strife did not cease to have a discernible impact on public safety. This comes as no surprise given the explanation formulated by Daphna Canetti and others.²⁸ Their claim postulates difficult-to-reverse mechanisms of psychological imprinting that characterize such divided societies as that of Northern Ireland. As their study proves, laying down the law to frame an agenda of reconciliation is insufficient since people, after “greater conflict exposure,” have little chance to ease mental anguish and are “less likely to adopt conciliatory attitudes” (Canetti et al. 669). From this perspective, in the middle of Burns’s literary career, another

²⁸ Professor Canetti works at the School of Political Science, University of Haifa. Her main area of research is political psychology. Professor Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler works at the Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy & Strategy, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. Her main areas of expertise include political violence, conflict resolution, security studies. Dr. Carmit Rapaport works at the Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Haifa. The main research interest is disaster management. Dr. Robert D. Lowe works at the Department of Psychology, Manchester Metropolitan University. His field of expertise relates to the impact of social group memberships in everyday life. Professor Orla T. Muldoon works at the Health Research Institute, University of Limerick. Her main areas of research include social, developmental and health psychology.

semi-referential²⁹ text of fiction, namely *Little Constructions*, reiterates her commitment to pondering the complex “ups and downs” of the post-Troubles psychological background. As in the previous novel, almost ten years after the 1998 political declaration to deescalate the conflict, it would be fair to speak of a sense of individual and public safety only in relative terms.

Another decade had elapsed when Burns published *Milkman*. Given what has been said so far, this novel from 2018, unsurprisingly, sends us back to the Troubles. Nevertheless, by invoking the recognizable mechanisms of radicalism, violence and antipathy, the author does not circumvent some current issues affecting the present-day Northern Irish mindset. It is useful to invoke the aforementioned interview with Burns, in which she advanced a working hypothesis regarding Northern Ireland’s recent processes of re-erecting the old walls of partition. She sounds alarm bells as those “tribal” rifts can regain momentum and start (re)producing mutual distrust, if not hostility. While examining different aspects of the *Milkman* narrative, I see a firm dichotomy³⁰ that might be regarded as pivotal in outlining Burns’s understanding of why the local, yet modern and progressive society, happens to be stalled by regressive [sectarian] sentiments. As the protagonist observes,

“Us” and “them” was second nature: convenient, familiar . . . , and these words were off-the-cuff. . . . It was unanimously understood that when everybody here used the tribal identifiers of “us” and “them,” of “their religion” or “our religion,” not *all* of us and not *all* of them was, it goes without saying, to be taken as read. (*Milkman* 22)

This passage is of utmost importance because, as stated earlier, it provides a lesson on the Northern Ireland of today, a region/district/place still infused with strong echoes of the past. In this context, one must mention Glenn Patterson, who in 2015 openly admitted that, notwithstanding their attempted deconstruction, the well-known “walls” do “persist.” And sadly, at odds with the peace coaching, “‘we’ or ‘they’ (depending on your political sympathies), it seems to say, are not finished yet” (*Here’s Me* 8, 23). Irrespective of the peace dividend, Burns decided to be faithful to her commitment and write another narrative, in which the underlying mechanisms of violence

²⁹ I call the novel semi-referential as it aims not at mimetic copying of the real; nevertheless, it gives an indirect confirmation that the author burdened herself with producing a literary narrative that touched upon the socio-political realm of Northern Ireland.

³⁰ Jonathan Sacks, studying the societies which for decades have been involved in “the process of creating an ‘Us,’” indicates that the only thing they have achieved is a dichotomous outcome, which entails “creating a ‘Them’—the people not like us” (114).

are presented as playing the pivotal role in the region. This collusion of the present and the past suggests that the Troubles' mentality, though officially bid farewell to, nonetheless remains deterministic.

In truth, the literary field in post-Troubles Northern Ireland to a degree orients itself towards non-politicized pathways. Yet this is not tantamount to defining it as devoid of a political dimension. Not only do novelists wade into matters of public resonance, but in fact endorse a form of engaged "storytelling" that aims at "mitigating [an antagonistic] sense of commitment" (Drong, "Doing Justice" 414). Even if there is no armed violence, a sort of enduring legacy of the Troubles persistently happens to be reflected in Northern Irish literary narratives. Burns seems to be one of those authors who, with determination, delves into the individual and collective mindsets of the Troubles to discuss the reasons why the past has its relentless bearing on the present. *Milkman* in this regard diagnoses, *inter alia*, two issues of fundamental importance, namely memory and language. In a similar vein, Heidemann speaks of the post-Agreement socio-political realm in terms of "a pathological syndrome of *memory loss*" (44), whereas Ganiel underlines the fact that "the discourse" revealing politicized affiliations, when read and reused "uncritically . . . , can justify or legitimate present violence" (139). As regards Burns's line of argumentation, it is Northern Ireland's language which endorses ideological agendas and intentional amnesia that comes to the fore as a predominant side-effect of a wrongly-construed politics of memory.

Milkman's storyline revolves around a young female who resorts to a defensive tactic to separate herself from sectarian mayhem. Depicted as a "reading-while-walking" individual, she tends to avert her eyes from "this psycho-political atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed, [with] 'their names' and 'our names,' . . . 'our community' and 'their community'" (Burns, *Milkman* 24). Her decision to opt out of the suffocating reality, though understandable, turns out to be hardly effective in the long run. As phrased by Burns, in a world of "aberrations" leading a sane life can be a challenge. Many a person under such circumstances consider mental escapism as an acceptable solution: "the convention was to rub along with, to turn a blind eye, because life was being attempted where you had to cut corners" (59). No matter how much one's life has suffered from actual or symbolic violence, in the end it is essential to confront and internalize³¹

³¹ An apt description of what a process of internalization might denote comes from Geraldine Smyth. In her discussion on the post-Troubles era, she underlines how crucial it is, both on the individual and collective level, to "refus[e] to consign . . . lived lives [or the troubling memories] to 'holes of oblivion' as if they had never existed and were of no consequence" (131).

the harsh lesson from Northern Ireland's antagonistic milieu. Accordingly, as underlined by Brandon Hamber,³² there is no guaranteed compensation for the damage done to the welfare of Northern Irish collectivities or individuals unless the essential condition of building a complete mental (public/personal) integrity is validated. First and foremost, there must be at least a considerable majority ready to embrace the precept of "awareness" because it foregrounds "a successful transition to sustained peace" (Hamber, "Problematizing" 25). To respond adequately to the legacy of sectarianism, and not to place oneself in an alternative (delusional) reality, individuals must remain cognizant of all the textures of local militancy. Hence the character's slow progression towards a deliberate deconstruction of the 'Troubles' idiom, as well as an in-depth study of individually and collectively perceived memory deficits.

As signaled elsewhere, Northern Ireland witnessed various forms of the political instrumentalization of language, so operational amidst the sectarian fighting. *Milkman* in particular seeks to expose the belligerency in inter-personal/inter-group ways of (non-)communication. Burns, addressing the problem, notices its complex character as it starts from the individual dimension of one-to-one relationships to end up at the level of structural interactions between state institutions and private citizens. As regards the former, it is rather symbolic violence that the vernacular idiom favored. Readers are confronted with a similar situation, indicative of the binary variables, when a "vigilant" neighbor hastes to inform the protagonist that

[A]t least [her] lover was a renouncer-of-the-state and not a defender-of-the-state, something to be grateful for, this, of course, a quiet allusion to my second sister who'd brought disgrace upon the family as well as upon the community by marrying-out to some state-forces person then going to live in some country over the water, maybe even *that* country over *that* water. (*Milkman* 48, emphasis in the original)

Bluntly put, the so-called third parties, namely family members, close friends or neighbors, for that matter, usurped the right to encroach upon the domain of one's intimacy. Hence, the above-quoted denouncement of the lover is followed by a clear suggestion about the choice of a proper friend: "Why not . . . take up with one of them nice wee boys from the area, suited to and more . . . consistent with your religion . . .? Ma's understanding of the nice wee boys was that they were the right religion" (50). Unfortunately, the violence can have a more tangible character, which is

³² Professor Hamber works at the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences, Ulster University. His main area of research is transitional justice.

even more tragic when someone's death results from institutionalized enmity. The circumstances of how the pain and suffering came about should be covered up for the sake of the community's future: "[e]ventually the state responded by admitting that yes, it had precision-targeted a few accidental people in pursuance of intended people, that mistake had been made . . . , but that the past should be put behind, that there was no point in dwelling" (303). This sort of anti-conflict rhetoric *prima facie* resembles a mere declaration of intent, behind which, nonetheless, lies the unresolved conflict.³³

As has been observed, the petrification of the old divisions is by and large couched in language; concurrently, due to Burns's subversive semantics, Northern Ireland's culture/discourse of violence is depicted as caricatural. *Milkman* offers a perfect illustration of how warped the local perspective is through one "dialogue" between "a full-time . . . longest friend from primary school" and the leading character. Theirs is a conversation devoted to the question of why wandering around with Semtex might be less detrimental than the habit of text-browsing:

[I]f I cared to look at it in its proper surroundings, then Semtex taking precedence as something normal over reading-while-walking—"which nobody but *you* thinks is normal"—could certainly be construed as the comprehensible interpretation here. "Semtex isn't unusual," she said. "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." (201, emphasis in the original)

This twisted view of the North seems symptomatic of the unbearable repetitiveness of those mechanisms that rather poorly enabled the opposing identities to bridge the divide. From a certain perspective, it looks as if local inhabitants have been going around in circles and have (in)advertently toed the line drawn by the violent past. Speaking of the present time, Heidemann made an interesting claim that the thirty years of the Troubles "have hit a cul-de-sac in post-Agreement Northern Ireland" (46). The inimical mindset is perceived then as if it has not been adequately reframed but simply forced into the shadows, destined to reveal itself later on—leading to a dead end. Burns outlines this same pattern by juxtaposing the protagonist (shaped by the Northern Irish predicament) and her French teacher (mentally positioned outside the conflict zone). The latter

³³ As Heidemann points out, even in today's Northern Ireland one observes just "the desire for a definite and defined end"; instead, however, there is the region's barely altered status of a place "plagued by a beginning without ending" (47).

insists on personal readiness to turn over a new leaf, whereas the former voices her skepticism about the reversibility of the worn-out ruts of divisive rhetoric:

“*Attempts and repeated attempts*,” teacher had said. “*That’s the way to do it.*” But what if she was wrong about attempts and repeated attempts, about moving on to next chapters? What if the next chapter was the same as this chapter, as had been the last chapter? What if all chapters stayed the same or even, as time went on, got worse? (*Milkman* 101, emphasis in the original)

Certain details in the above exchange lead to another crucial aspect of the narrative: namely, correlations between memory and post-conflict coexistence.

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Contrary to the teacher’s suggestion, a commitment to the future and simultaneous efforts to disregard the past would rather turn Northern Irish transformation into a fiasco. True, as Burns’s writing proves, “that which was” (to use Patterson’s phrase) constitutes a heavy burden that cannot be easily disposed of. It is not uncommon that traumatized individuals and the state itself opt for self-deception by resorting to various forms of denial. Therefore, the patterns of “mental separations” (so named by one of the characters) find their way into a number of dialogic exchanges. And once again, it is the protagonist who is reminded that she happens to be pulled down by a syndrome of selective amnesia:

The things you notice yet don’t notice friend. The disconnect you have going between your brain and what’s out there. This mental misfiring—it’s not normal. It’s abnormal—the recognizing, the not recognizing, the remembering, the not remembering, the refusing to admit to the obvious. . . . you encourage that, these brain-twitches, this memory disordering. (207)

This peril runs parallel to the situation in contemporary Northern Ireland which Long defined as “a post-Troubles moment.” In essence, the idea is that the embers of politicized antagonism have not been entirely put out. Its very nature, as he underlines, has been indeed “contained or marginalized”; most importantly, however, many doubt whether it has been “addressed” at all (Long 17). Taking into account the three novels by Burns, at least two of them delve into the local difficulty with the policy of remembering/forgetting. Initiated in *No Bones*, a similar debate resurfaces in *Milkman*, a book released exactly twenty years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. And it is the latter text in which a commonly-shared mechanism of mental compartmentalization serves as a temporary

antidote to “trauma and the darkness. . . . Impossible then, with all these irreconcilables, to account, not just politically-correctly, but even sensibly for oneself. Hence, the dichotomy, the cauterizing, . . . the blanking-out, the reading-while-walking” (113).

The interplay between memory and language resonates most in the above context, and not only with regard to the past but also in relation to the present. Like other authors of Northern Irish descent, Burns, while narrating the past, draws attention to the discursive framework of the Troubles as adapting the language that operated to erase some disconcerting memory traces or at least withhold information which, otherwise, would insulate neither “them” nor “us” from constructive self-criticism. That said, I think it is worth invoking Brewer’s analysis of the needs that people in Northern Ireland should address in terms of keeping alive “the social peace process.” Among the relevant factors he enumerates are “truth and reconciliation procedures, . . . atonement strategies, policies that encourage compromise,” but also “new forms of memory work [as well as] language act that recognize . . . the reassessment and re-evaluation of [antagonistic/violence-prone] identity” (Brewer 275). The article comes from 2019, and its temporal dimension indicates that Northern Ireland, two decades after the peace agreement, seems to still be seeking adequate forms of self-expression and that the surface of “former” resentments has barely been scratched. Likewise, it is Burns’s latest novel, if not her entire literary output, which strongly resonate with the question regarding a means to (re-)articulate the Northern Irish culture of antagonism and belligerency. And though *Milkman* is placed in the past, some of its conclusions relate to the present: “[I]n a district that thrived on suspicion, supposition and imprecision, where everything was so back-to-front it was impossible to tell a story properly, or not tell it but just remain quiet, nothing could be said here or not said but it was turned into gospel” (229). The protagonist’s experiences are conducive to deliberations over the *sine qua non* of community-building, and as such could become general guidelines shared by a majority of the concerned citizens of present-day Northern Ireland.

Therefore, in order to establish the foundations of long-term coexistence and ensure the public sense of safety, a truly dialogic communication must be worked out. Its core idea should revolve around a revised discourse, in which uncompromised memory work finds its reflection. As the protagonist notes, “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” (*Milkman* 264). Central to this paradigmatic code of conduct is people’s understanding of how vital to the collective and individual mindset a proper archiving of the past is. On the basis of the acknowledgment of its complex character,

people can ultimately renounce the corrupting influence of sectarianism. In this regard, they may receive access to a new language that disregards the policy of a façade of peacefulness, and communicates due regard for the “other side,” as well as sufficient trust in the state. Thus, any private or institutional voices sympathetic towards “paramilitarized” mentality should be considered detrimental to the public interests of contemporary Northern Ireland. A relevant exemplification of this comes near the end of the book, when the protagonist reminisces about Milkman (known for being a “renouncer of the state”), whose militant poise becomes a threat to her well-being: “after Milkman and his ‘I’m male and you’re female,’ and his ‘you don’t need that running,’ plus his subsoil ‘I’m going to curtail you and isolate you so that soon you’ll do nothing’; after months . . . of stumbling, of legs strangely no longer working to legs soon to be magnificently working, I did feel *safe* again to run on my own” (343, emphasis mine). In a metaphorical way, by reference to the protagonist’s physical training, Burns not only presents a character as enjoying the act of running, but in fact depicts an individual in an unrestrained pursuit of self-agency, beyond any guerrilla-oriented limitations.

Let me conclude in a rather unorthodox way, by briefly referring to the pressing question of the COVID-19 pandemic. The current worldwide disease, caused by a hitherto unknown pathogen, poses a real threat to mankind. Equipped only with certain estimates of the damage, we view further study and investigation as a must. It seems, nevertheless, that the planet resembles the Yeatsian world, “turning and turning in the widening gyre” (“The Second Coming”). On the other hand, there are such geographical locations as Northern Ireland wherein the virus of inter-communal antipathy was identified a long time ago. With a proper diagnosis, the local patients decided, in 1998, to “vaccinate” themselves by signing the peace agreement. After twenty years of its application, the medicine appears to have been effective only to a degree, and the pathogens of sectarian animosity seem to have hibernated rather than been eradicated. One of the writers who notices and describes some hidden symptoms of the Northern Irish predicament is Anna Burns. As I have tried to demonstrate in this article, there are three basic refrains that occur repeatedly in her fiction. Firstly, Northern Ireland cannot turn away from the fact that it has been constituted on militancy. Secondly, in order to get from point A, namely a domestic conflict, to point B, that is mutual coexistence centered on trust, respect and reconciliation, a new communication is required. In other words, the language of contemporary Northern Ireland should be free of stale (politicized) clichés linked to the “old” ruts of sectarianism. Thirdly, in its basis the projected discourse needs to be built on genuine memory work and cannot have a superficial character. Fictional representations of

such a multidimensional debate on Northern Irishness, albeit with different intensity and contextualization, are to be found in all the novels mentioned in this paper. *Milkman*, in this regard, is of ultimate significance since it brings to the fore (two decades after the Good Friday Agreement) some mechanisms of belligerence that people in the post-Troubles period would prefer to see as buried deep underground. Burns reframes her general narrative to underline the fact that there is no prospect of ending historical divisions unless some solid foundations of inter-group coexistence are guaranteed. Otherwise, to navigate the treacherous waters of (non-)tribal identity, when a cultural, social or political storm is detected, might become extremely difficult, and the whole project of rebranding Northern Ireland might remain merely a mirage.

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