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The “Unspeakableness” of Life in Northern Ireland

Anna Burns’s *Milkman*

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/LC.2020.039>

Abstract: The paper discusses Anna Burns’s *Milkman*, which was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 2018, in the context of new Irish fiction which breaks the silence about women’s lives in the Troubles. Like many other Irish women writing fiction or remembering the past, Burns denounces the culture of violence in both communities and portrays the devastating effects it had on the individual lives. The analysis draws on Hayden White’s notion of the scandalous in language in order to demonstrate that in writing about life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, the author develops an extraordinary style which combines seemingly contradictory elements such as logorrhea and silence and to argue that Burns develops a form of traumatic realism effectively portraying the mechanisms of insidious trauma (Brown 1995). The paper points to Burns’s affinities with such experimental Irish writers as Laurence Sterne and Eimear McBride and proposes to read her novel as a foreshadowing of the Irish #MeToo campaign.

Keywords: Irish fiction, women, insidious trauma, silence, logorrhea

„Niewypowiedzialność” życia w Irlandii Północnej

Milkman Anny Burns

Streszczenie: Artykuł omawia powieść *Milkman* Anny Burns, wyróżnioną nagrodą Man Booker Prize w 2018 roku, w kontekście nowej prozy irlandzkiej, która przelamuje tabu dotyczące doświad-

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czenia kobiet w czasie Konfliktu w Irlandii Północnej. Podobnie jak wiele innych współczesnych pisarek i autorek wspomnień, Burns przeciwstawia się kulturze przemocy w obydwu społecznościach i pokazuje jej zgubny wpływ na życie jednostek. Analiza opiera się na pojęciu skandalu w języku w ujęciu Haydena White'a w celu pokazania, że pisząc o życiu w czasie Konfliktu autorka wypracowuje niezwykle styl łączący tak wydawałoby się sprzeczne elementy jak logorea i milczenie oraz, że można go interpretować jako formę realizmu traumatycznego, który niezwykle przejmująco przedstawia mechanizmy podstępnej traumy zdefiniowanej przez Laurę Brown w 1995 roku. Ponadto artykuł osadza Annę Burns w kontekście innych irlandzkich pisarzy eksperymentalnych takich jak Laurence Sterne, czy Eimear McBride oraz postuluje odczytanie jej powieści jako zapowiedź irlandzkiej odsłony protestu przeciwko przemocy wobec kobiet – #MeToo.

Słowa kluczowe: proza irlandzka, kobiety, ukryta trauma, przemilczenie, logorea

When in 2015 Anne Enright was asked to make a comment about the recent Irish literary boom, the distinguished writer¹ observed that: “Traditionally Irish writing has been about breaking silences. The biggest silence has continued to be about the lives of women” (qtd. in Jordan 2015). Leszek Drong points out in his excellent study of post-Troubles Northern Irish fiction that women on both sides of the border have lived within the constraints of very strictly designated social roles. In a chapter devoted to the analysis of Deirdre Madden’s novel *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), Drong registers a correspondence between the style adopted by the author, characterised by reticence, silence, fragmentariness, and the silence of women in the culture and social life of Northern Ireland during the Troubles (2019a: 183–214). As the critic observes, women were expected to be self-effacing and self-sacrificing; while men were engaged in political action, their mothers, wives and sisters were to be loyal and supportive. Even if they took part in the fighting, or later in the negotiations of the peace process, they were treated as invisible, for “the discrimination of women was the only issue about which the Protestants and Catholics were in agreement” (ibid.: 185).

Susan McKay, a feminist activist, who grew up in Derry in 1970s, and then in 1980s set up and ran the first Rape Crisis Centre in Belfast, speaks openly about the bigotry she experienced in Northern Ireland. In a personal essay about women’s lives during the Troubles, McKay exposes the brutality and oppression suffered by women, not only because of the political conflict, but more importantly and less obviously, because of the power and impunity that the conflict gave men in both communities. She calls Northern Ireland an “armed patriarchy” (2017: 305), “a society in which some of the men who presented themselves in public as heroes, privately beat up their wives and children, or had sex with teenagers” (ibid.: 306). McKay quotes tales of horrific violence against women “sometimes involving men who had guns, or claimed to have guns, which were meant to be for the protection of their communities” (ibid.: 305).

¹ Apart from numerous literary prizes (Booker Prize in 2007 for *The Gathering*), Anne Enright has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature since 2010, and the first appointed Laureate for Irish Fiction.

Anna Burns was born in 1962 and grew up in Ardoyne, one of the most entrenched nationalist districts of West Belfast, before moving to Britain in 1987. Having dropped out of a Russian Literature degree, she completed a creative writing course and embarked on writing a trilogy about the experience of living with the Troubles. Her work is a perfect illustration of Irish women entering “into hitherto forbidden public sites” such as “publication and representation”, where Burns has successfully inserted her voice into the “extravagantly militarized masculine discourses” (St. Peter 2000: 3). The three novels she has published so far: *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007) and the Man Booker Prize winning *Milkman* (2018)², break the silence and expose the horror of women’s lives under the “armed patriarchy” of Mc Kay’s essay.

The present paper will focus on *Milkman*, the most daringly experimental of the three novels, to demonstrate how it 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. I hope to show how in *Milkman*, rather than exploit the violence of the Troubles³, Anna Burns leads her readers to what Dominic LaCapra terms “empathic unsettlement” i.e. the aesthetic experience of simultaneously feeling for another and becoming aware of a distinction between one’s own perceptions and those of the other (2001: 41). In my attempt to demonstrate how Burns uses silence, absence and noncommunication in constructing her own style of writing about trauma, and how her novel taps into very current debates about the gendered nature of trauma, I am going to refer to the work of a feminist therapist Laura Brown, and the concept of “insidious trauma” (1995: 107).

Since the Vietnam war, the symptoms of trauma have been recognised as a medical condition and listed under the heading Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* regularly published by the American Psychiatric Association. For a person to be recognised as a trauma victim is one thing, but to be diagnosed as suffering from PTSD may have serious legal and financial consequences. It is in this context that Laura Brown in 1995 took it upon herself to revise the definition of trauma as it appeared in the 1987 edition of the *Manual*: “an event outside the range of human experience” (qtd. in Brown 1995: 100). As Brown argues, for women most traumas occur “well within the range of human experience” (ibid.: 101), for they are victims of rape, incest, abuse which statistically are not unusual, yet lead to the same psychological symptoms as war, genocide and natural disasters, which Brown calls “agreed-upon traumas” (ibid.: 101). In order to redress the gender bias which privileges the male experience, she proposes to recognise “insidious trauma”, a concept introduced by Maria Root to refer to “traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit” (ibid.: 107). Anna Burns’s text is a piece of literary fiction which places insidious trauma at its centre.

² In 2018 Burns became the first writer from Northern Ireland to be awarded the Man Booker Prize.

³ The first two books of the trilogy are explicitly set in Belfast during the Troubles, they deal with growing up amidst violence and contain accounts of “many many murders and attempted murders” narrated “in the same deadpan ever-so-slightly-ironic tone” (Wills 2019: 6). Some reviewers have found the combination of dark humour and relentless violence exploitative and hard to stomach (cf. Darnell 2001).

The reviewers, as well as the Booker Prize judges, highlight the challenge that Burns's style poses to the readers, they are impressed by Burns's ability to "hold a mirror to the 'communal policing'", to depict "the oppressiveness of tribalism, of conformism, of patriarchy, of living with widespread distrust and permanent fear" (Kilroy 2018). They also point out that the novel is "particular but brilliantly universal as well" and foreshadows the #MeToo campaign (Appiah qtd. in Flood [&] Armitstead 2018). The author confirms her ambition to endow her text with a universal appeal in an interview:

It's not really Belfast in 1970s. I would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions. [...] I see it as a fiction about an entire society living under extreme pressure with long-term violence seen as the norm (Burns qtd. in Allardice 2018).

In one sentence, the novel deals with the experience of an 18-year-old girl pursued by a senior IRA man, it is a story of sexual harassment, of the young woman gradually worn down by Milkman's unwanted attention and pressure from her community. As Harriet Baker wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*: "Anna Burns is masterly in her creation of a reading experience that so closely simulates the plight of its protagonist [...] Burns does not write about fear so much as create the experience of it" (2018). This effect is achieved through an intriguing balancing act on the part of the author, the text relies in equal measure on silence, reticence, omission, refusal to register or mention, isolation, rejection, repression, denial and on lexical and syntactic excess: digression, overwhelming verbosity, constructing neologisms, repetition and multiplication of synonyms which produce a sense of rhythm, of breathlessness⁴.

The language in this novel is scandalous in the sense once used by Hayden White⁵, who recalled the etymology of "scandal", its origin in Greek *scandalon* meaning: a stumbling block (*Etymology Dictionary Online*). Thus scandalous language is the opposite of transparent language. We stumble upon *Milkman's* style and language, which attracts attention and cannot be taken for granted or passively consumed; it requires hard work on the part of the reader. Even the first contact with the material book may be repellent: the 350 pages of the paperback edition are packed with words, unbroken by paragraphs or dialogue, the sentences frequently run to half a page, the pages seem overcrowded and uninviting to the eye. The visual effect creates the first *scandalon*, which alerts the reader to an undercurrent of pain and liminality of the experience which it communicates. A similar correspondence between the traumatic experience of growing up in Ireland and the language of the text may be observed in another award winning Irish novel – Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (2013). Although McBride's linguistic experiment is more radical⁶, both authors have chosen to speak about abuse and pain in scandalous language.

⁴ The rhythmic breathlessness of "middle sister's" monologue is splendidly rendered in the audiobook version of the novel, narrated by Brid Brennan.

⁵ Personal communication during an international seminar with Hayden White organised in the Institute of English Studies of the Jagiellonian University with the support of Visegrad Fund in 2011.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of McBride's novel and her stylistic legacy to James Joyce see Drag, Wojciech (2016). "Dziedzictwo tradycji irlandzkiego eksperymentu literackiego. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* Eimear McBride". In: Ewa Kowal [&] Robert Kusek (eds.). *Powieść irlandzka w XXI wieku. Szkice*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.

For the sake of clarity, I will distinguish in my discussion between ellipsis functioning as narrative strategy of the author and silence and omission employed as defence mechanisms by the narrator-protagonist, even though there is a considerable amount of overlap between the two. The already mentioned universalising effect is achieved by the author through careful erasing of all the proper names of countries, towns, districts, communities, religious denominations and replacing them with “universal” “neutral” phrases such as: “country over the water” for Britain, “country over the border” for Ireland, “renouncers of the state” and “defenders of the state” for the two sides in the conflict; “our community” and “their community”; “our end of the road” and “their end of the road”. The names of characters have also been erased, instead, they are identified through their relationship with the protagonist as in “first sister”, “third brother in law”, “eldest wee sister”, “maybe-boyfriend”, “best friend”. Other characters go by the nicknames which they have been given by the community: “Somebody MacSomebody”, “tablets girl”, “nuclear boy”, “the real milkman”, “women with issues”, “chef”. Various parts of the city are unmentionable and referred to as “dot dot dot places”, one particularly dangerous area is referred to by the amount of time it takes to cross it as “ten-minutes-area”. The political conflict in Northern Ireland which we refer to as the Troubles appears in the novel as “the sorrows”, “the losses”, “the sadnesses”. This particular instance of using a series of synonyms in place of one commonly accepted term draws the reader’s attention to the euphemistic nature of the term which has been used about this bloody conflict in which over 3,500 people lost their lives (CAIN on-line). At the same time, the universal, nonspecific, euphemistic phrases may be interpreted as a rejection of the tribal language i.e. the fact that for years the two ethnic groups involved in the conflict in Northern Ireland have used different terminology to talk about their country. Therefore the place names people use (e.g. Derry vs Londonderry, Six Counties vs Ulster) may function as indicators of their ethnopolitical identity (Drong 2019a: 116). Anna Burns makes her narrator go to great lengths not to use such specific language, in consequence she draws the reader’s attention to what is ostensibly absent from her text, which in this case is the divisive power of language. Yet another possible association with this artificially sanitized language is that of the reports of journalists or researchers doing field work in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, who would scrupulously erase all the names of people or places that might lead to the identification of their informants (Dowler 2001: 420). In this case giving away any details might lead to arrests of the informants or death threats from paramilitary organisations. Thus the reality of the Troubles is lurking on the margins of the novel, it must be reconstructed from hints, scraps of information, but it is not allowed to take up space in the centre.

Another linguistic anomaly in *Milkman* is syntactic excess, or surtaxis (Korwin-Piotrowska 2015: 131). The narrator’s monologues are constructed with complex sentences which are so long that they frequently fill entire paragraphs, the archaic style brings to mind the fiction of the 18th and 19th century, which the middle sister declares to be her favourite:

No matter the reservations held then – as to methods and morals and about the various groupings that came into operation or which from the outset already had been in operation; no matter too, that for us, in our community, on “our side of the road”, the government here was the enemy, and the police here was the enemy, and the government “over there” was the enemy, and the soldiers from “over there” were the enemy, and the defender-paramilitaries from “over the

road” were the enemy and, 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 or garments easily to be mistaken for a uniform, also were the enemy, and where we were viewed in our turn by our enemies as the enemy – in those dark days, which were the extreme of days, if we hadn’t had the renouncers as our underground buffer between us and this overwhelming and combined enemy, who else, in all the world, would we have had? (Burns 2018: 114)⁷

The quote above consists of a single complex sentence, with the repetition of the phrase “was the enemy” creating a rhythmic refrain very much like the phrase: “the emphasis was helped by ... ” repeated four times in the opening page of Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1994: 1). Burns’s narrator, “middle sister” seems to relish in her own articulacy and verbal dexterity in a manner which brings to mind the eponymous narrator of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, like Tristram, she is prone to digressions, repetition and enumeration. The following extract in which Tristram justifies his digressive style may serve as an illustration of “middle sister’s” literary inspiration:

Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule,—straight forward; - - - for instance, from Rome all the way to Loretto, without ever once turning his head aside either to the right hand or to the left,—he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey’s end; - - - - but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible: For, if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid. He will have views and prospects to himself perpetually solliciting his eye, which he can no more help standing still to look at than he can fly; he will moreover have various Accounts to reconcile: Anecdotes to pick up: Inscriptions to make out: Stories to weave in: Traditions to sift: Personages to call upon: Panygericks to paste up at this door: (Sterne 2005: 34-35)

In fact, “middle sister’s” narration not only bears strong resemblance to Sterne’s novel published in 1760 in its complex syntax and the propensity to repeat certain phrases and create a rhythm, but you could venture a claim that the explanation of the digressive nature of the text offered by Tristram Shandy also applies to that of *Milkman*. “Middle sister” also has “various Accounts to reconcile: Anecdotes to pick up: [... and] Stories to weave in”, which make her tale equally digressive as that told by Shandy.

Another “scandalous” syntactic strategy of the narrator is constructing extraordinarily long sentences by piling up modifiers, like in this one following her mother’s complaint about the father “being psychological”, a phrase which “middle sister” decides to explain: “She meant depressions, for da had had them: big, massive, scudding, whopping, black-cloud, infectious, crow, raven, jackdaw, coffin-upon-coffin, catacomb-upon-catacomb, skeletons-upon-skulls-upon bones crawling along the ground to the grave type of depressions” (*Milkman* 85). The 14 modifiers of “da’s” depressions make the reader feel the pressure building in the narrator, there is a turbulence under the surface of eloquence and composure. The sense of turbulence may also result from her propensity to use negative structures, she frequently avoids direct statements:

⁷ The quotation from *Milkman* comes from the 2018 paperback edition published by Faber and Faber, all further references to this novel will be marked in the text as (*Milkman*).

Maybe boyfriend had three brothers, none of whom were dead, none either, living in this house with him ... (*Milkman* 35)
... this non-wedlock was selfish ... and unsettling for the younger girls ... (*Milkman* 45)
... this was a deliberate withholding on my part because never had it been in my remit not to withhold from my mother because never had it been in her remit to get my message. (*Milkman* 51)

Following Dorota Korwin-Piotrowska's reflection on the significance of silence in contemporary fiction (2015), I interpret these excesses of language as a gesture of self-defence on the part of the narrator, who strives to take control of the world she is describing by shifting the focus from the plot to the process of creating the plot. The overabundance of words which she uses in the process alerts the reader to numerous blanks, omissions, things which are left unspoken.

The last of the three quotes above refers to miscommunication and rejection of communication, which are also very prominent in the plot of the novel and lie at the heart of "middle sister's" experience of harassment. The narrator's perspective is post-therapy, i.e. she is able to reflect on her situation with the knowledge and awareness which she did not have at the age of eighteen in 1970s. She realises that her powerlessness in the face of harassment resulted from the fact that the concept did not exist in those days, certainly not in her community. This is how she recalls her sense of entrapment and defencelessness when Milkman joined her during one of her regular runs:

... why was he acting as if he knew me, as if we knew each other, when we did not know each other? Why was he presuming I didn't mind him beside me, when I did mind him beside me? Why could I just not stop this running and tell this man to leave me alone? Apart from "where did he come from?" I didn't have those other thoughts until later. And I don't mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later. At 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 levelled at 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? At eighteen I had no proper understanding of the ways that constituted encroachment. I had a feeling for them, an intuition, a sense of repugnance for some situations and some people, but I did not know intuition and repugnance counted, did not know I had a right not to like, not to have to put up with, anybody and everybody coming near. (*Milkman* 6)

Then, she becomes a victim not only of Milkman's harassment, but of the whole community and even her closest family, who accept the rumour that she is having an affair with this dangerous, married man, and will not let her deny it. She tries to protest, to explain her situation to her mother, her sister and her oldest friend, but they all refuse to believe her. She is molested by the powerful "renouncer of the state", but she becomes traumatised by the bigotry of her community. As for the community, once the rumour has been spread that she is Milkman's lover, she becomes "beyond the pale", an outcast, which paradoxically is communicated to her through exaggerated reverence: she is complemented by strangers in bars, offered free goods in the local shops. Powerless in her attempts to prove that she had not crossed any boundaries, she tries to explain to her mother why she did not tell her that she had been approached by Milkman:

I ended by admitting that I hadn't wanted to tell out any of this, not just to her, but to anyone. I said this was because of the twisting of words that went on in this place. I'd have lost power, such as was my power, if I'd tried to explain and to win over all those gossiping about me. So I'd kept silent, I said. I'd asked no questions, answered no questions, gave no confirmation, no refutation. That way, I said, I'd hoped to maintain a border to keep my mind separate. That way, I said, I'd hoped to ground and protect myself. (*Milkman* 54)

For "middle sister" silence is a defence mechanism, she declares that "not mentioning was [her] way to keep safe" (*Milkman* 44), she believes that her silence could "shield [her] from pawing and from molestation by questions" (*Milkman* 205). She seems correct in her intuition that silence is related to power and control (Glenn 2004), however, her refusal to speak means that she becomes silenced by the community. This experience is confirmed by contemporary scholarship on rape and harassment which exposes the asymmetric notions of credibility which "result in resistance to believing women's experiences of sexual harassment, especially those that stop short of physical violence" (Fitzpatrick 2020 on-line).

In fact, all the coping mechanisms which the narrator has developed may be recognised as symptoms of trauma: "reading while walking" a habit which allows her to avoid noticing the reality around her and interacting with the world is a manifestation of dissociation. She also displays other symptoms: hypervigilance for threat, memory impairment, psychological numbing (McNally 2005: 9). During a conversation with "best friend" it becomes apparent that "middle sister" fails to register and remember unpleasant events such as being stopped and searched, on another occasion she makes an effort to forget the mass slaughter of all the dogs in the district. She is terrified of the prospect of "not being numb, but to be aware, to have facts, to retain facts" (*Milkman* 294). She is not exceptional in displaying the symptoms of trauma, the community is "overladen with heaviness and grief and anger" (*Milkman* 89) and its members resort to memory lapses, blanking-out, what she calls *jamais vu*, as the narrator admits: "we wouldn't remember what we'd remembered" (*Milkman* 43).

Anna Burns paints an extremely evocative picture of 1970s in Northern Ireland, of a community damaged by prolonged exposure to a violent conflict "before psychology, before even the idea of emotional damage or psychological trauma" (Wills 2019: 6). Leszek Drog aptly classifies this novel as "post-tribal fiction" (2019b) i.e. fiction which contests "the homogenising narratives of the Troubles offered by mainstream nationalist discourses" (ibid.) The main focus of the text is not political violence, but its links with sexual violence and corrosive effects of both on individuals and the community; the militarised patriarchy gives a sense of power and impunity to all kinds of loathsome men – "middle sister" and all her older sisters have been groped by "first brother-in-law", Somebody MacSomebody uses his reputation of a "renouncer of the state" to intimidate women he stalks. The author creates characters who have no access to the language of feelings and live in a world which does not count the cost of human violence. Instead, she offers dark humour: women establish their place in social hierarchy by comparing the number of murdered relatives; an ordinary, non-political murder perplexes the community; people expect their spouses to be killed so they do not marry for love; Somebody MacSomebody is beaten up by a group of women not because he was threatening to kill the narrator, but because he entered the ladies toilet in order to kill her.

In 2013 in his comprehensive study of the contemporary Irish novel, Liam Harte wrote about the recurrent theme of the destructive cultural and psychological effects of overt and covert violence. Anna Burns had been dealing with overt violence in her previous novels, in *Milkman* she deliberately pushes political violence to the margins and focusing on its consequences creates an alarming portrayal of the mechanisms of insidious trauma. In a community divided by tribal wars women are expected to be loyal and conform to the strict moral code imposed by the patriarchal society and enforced by means of vigilance. As the narrator discovers in therapy in her mature years, you cannot argue with something that is unspoken, you cannot complain about something that does not have a name. Anna Burns has developed an original style where logorrhea and syntactic excess cover up and simultaneously highlight the sinister power of silence, absence and failed communication. In this way she has produced a unique artistic contribution to the #MeToo movement, which in Northern Ireland coincided with a few other campaigns on the social media: #WakingtheFeminists, which responded to the almost entirely-male Abbey Theatre programme for 2016, celebrating the centenary of the Easter Rising; #InHerShoes and #Repealthe8th both supported the repeal of Ireland's near-total ban on abortion; #IBelieveHer expressed public rage at the conduct of a high-profile rape trial in Belfast (Fitzpatrick 2020).

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