

Fecha de recepción: 1 septiembre 2019  
Fecha de aceptación: 20 octubre 2019  
Fecha de publicación: 9 febrero 2020  
URL: <https://oceanide.es/index.php/012020/article/view/44/187>  
Océánide número 13, ISSN 1989-6328  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37668/oceanide.v13i.44>

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# Recent Contributions to the Irish Novel by Sara Baume, Anna Burns and Eleanor O'Reilly: On Language, Words and Wordlessness

## ≈ Resumen

El objetivo de la presente contribución es el estudio de tres jóvenes escritoras irlandesas que han aportado, en los últimos tres años, nuevas muestras de la inagotable capacidad de los autores irlandeses a la hora de experimentar con el género de la novela. *A Line Made by Walking* (2017) de Sara Baume, *Milkman* (2018) de Anna Burns y *m for mammy* (2019) de Eleanor O'Reilly, son tres ejemplos representativos del potencial del género de la novela en manos de autoras irlandesas. Aunque por su complejidad e interés cada una de las novelas merece un estudio individualizado, un análisis conjunto nos permite calibrar el brillante momento que está experimentando la novela en la literatura irlandesa especialmente de autoría femenina.

Las tres novelas objeto de estudio tratan crisis identitarias, representan a sus protagonistas luchando contra la sociedad y sus estructuras, bien sea la familia, la comunidad, el mundo del arte, la naturaleza o la política. Más aún, las tres autoras han sido capaces de proponer diferentes estilos narrativos, técnicas e incluso finales, que les permitiesen reproducir la complejidad de los temas tratados así como representar la inestable condición de sus protagonistas. Además, Baume, Burns y O'Reilly han optado significativamente por protagonistas femeninas con aspiraciones artísticas o intelectuales que les facilitan dotar a sus respectivas narraciones de reflexiones de corte metaliterario sobre las posibilidades así como los límites del lenguaje, las palabras o la ausencia de las mismas.

Palabras clave:

novela irlandesa; escritoras irlandesas; Sara Baume; Anna Burns; Eleanor O'Reilly

## ≈ Abstract

The purpose of this contribution is to study three young writers who have offered, in the past three years, in a distinctively new voice, further instances of the Irish writers' endless ability to experiment with the form of the novel. Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018), and Eleanor O'Reilly's *m for mammy* (2019) are three representative instances of the potential of the form of the novel in the hands of Irish women writers. Each of these novels deserve a study in its own due to their complexity and interest, but analysing them together offers us a unique opportunity to assess the thriving state of novel writing in Ireland, especially in the hands of Irish women writers.

The three novels object of our study deal with identity crises, and they similarly represent their protagonists as struggling against society and its structures, be it the family, local communities, the world of art, nature or politics. Furthermore, the three authors have been able to devise alternative narrative styles, techniques and even endings that enabled them to render the complexities of the topics dealt with as well as to represent the unstable condition of their protagonists. In addition, Baume, Burns and O'Reilly have significantly chosen as protagonists female characters with artistic or intellectual aspirations who allow the authors to endow their respective narratives with metaliterary meditations on the possibilities as well as limits of language, words and wordlessness.

Keywords:

Irish novel; Irish women's writing; Sara Baume; Anna Burns; Eleanor O'Reilly

Irish women writers' undeniable contribution to the brilliant history of Irish literature is nowadays out of question. This was not always the case, as it was evinced with the controversy that took place in the late twentieth century with Seamus Deane's publication of his three-volume *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1991), which unashamedly practically ignored Irish women writers. Irish scholarship had to wait more than ten years for the appearance of two further volumes edited in 2002 by Angela Bourke, acknowledging not only the brilliancy of their works but even the actual existence of Irish women writers. These dates provide the interested scholar with an idea of how long it took the world of the academia to paid due tribute to the literary talent of, among many others, Maria Edgeworth, Somerville and Ross, George Egerton, Julia O'Faolain, Mary Lavin, Kate O'Brien, or Edna O'Brien.

Pioneer specialists on Irish women writers, such as Anne Owens Weeks, Heather Ingman, Caitriona Moloney, or Anne Fogarty, added to their early analyses of women's contribution to Irish literature the work of a next generation of Irish women writers in which we can include names such as Eavan Boland, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, Medbh McGuckian, Anne Enright, Anne Haverty, Evelyn Conlon, Deirdre Madden, Christine Dwyer Hickey or Mary O'Donnell, proving thus that Irish women definitively deserved a honorary place in the history of Irish literature.<sup>1</sup>

And nowadays, Irish scholarship should even distinguish and follow the literary careers of a third generation of young Irish women writers who, despite their youth, have already offered fresh topics and a renewed rendering of the Irish novel. Consequently, despite their more or less established literary careers, names such as Emma Donoghue, Eimear McBride, Claire Kilroy, Caitriona Lally, Sara Baume, Lisa McInerney, Anna Burns, or Eleanor O'Reilly should be already taken into account.

The purpose of this contribution is precisely to study three young writers who have in the past three years offered, in a distinctively new voice, further instances of the Irish writers' endless ability to experiment with the form of the novel. Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018), and Eleanor O'Reilly's *m for mammy* (2019) are three representative instances of the potential of the form of the novel in the hands of Irish women writers. Each of these novels deserve a study in its own, but analysing them together offers us a unique opportunity to assess the thriving state of novel writing in Ireland, especially in the hands of Irish women writers.

Contemporary Irish artists have been particularly attentive to the social, cultural, political and environmental changes of their society. Therefore, thematically speaking, they have recorded and scrutinised demographic variations and responses to the social landscape of Ireland provoked by migrations and racism.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, they went as far as to denounce the irresponsibility of excessive consumerism, commodification and the building bubble during the years of economic welfare and to anticipate political scandals and the financial collapse of the Republic of Ireland. And many if not most of the Irish women writers have opted for addressing the collective and individual crises suffered by the Irish in recent years, having resorted to the genre of the novel whose potential for renewal they have endlessly exploited. Mary Rose Callaghan, Elizabeth Wassell, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Anne Haverty, Anne Enright, Deirdre Madden or Claire Kilroy have written novels in which they minutely described the socioeconomic

changes that Ireland and the Irish were undergoing since the last decades of the 1990s, denouncing racist attitudes, warning against excessive consumerism, exposing the commodification of Irish history by the tourist industry, and foreseeing the economic collapse that finally took place in 2008.<sup>3</sup>

Formally speaking, many of them followed the experimental path inaugurated by predecessors such as Lawrence Sterne, Jonathan Swift, Maria Edgeworth, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett or Flann O'Brien, who had already offered us instances of the Irish unease with the novel conceived in classic terms, that is, as a straightforward narrative, chronologically ordered, and with an easily distinguishable structure conformed by a beginning, a development and a denouement. In this respect, Terry Eagleton stated in his influential *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Essays in Irish Culture* that "That the novel in Ireland never flourished as vigorously as its English counterpart is surely no mystery" (1995, 145). Eagleton alludes more specifically to the case of the realist novel and explains it as follows: "literary realism requires certain cultural preconditions, few of which were available in Ireland. The realist novel is the form *par excellence* of settlement and stability, gathering individual lives into an integrated whole; and social conditions in Ireland hardly lent themselves to any such sanguine reconciliation" (147).

Later on, Derek Hand, in his comprehensive *A History of the Irish Novel*, has also referred to "the major misconception that there is no such thing as an Irish novel. Or if there is, it is but a pale imitation of what a real novel ought to be" (2011, 2). Hand argues judiciously that perhaps "much of this type of critique is a dangerously simple misreading of the novel form" (3) that looked narrowly "to the realisms of the nineteenth century novel as the ideal to be copied, forgetting that the form's original power emanated from the vulgar chaos of the picaresque and the whimsy of romance" (4). Hand's broadest conception of the novel is worth taking into account since, as he maintains, the novel is a literary genre "awash with contradictions and, perhaps, beyond any final definition as it wilfully plunders various forms and genres for its own ends" (2). What is more, according to Hand, "it could be argued that it is these contradictions which energise the novel –its rage for order straining against a shapeless form endlessly and necessarily redefining itself, its desire to map the emerging middle-class individual contrasting dynamically with novel's ability to focus on society" (2).

It is our contention that Irish writers in general and the three authors object of our study in particular, have precisely benefited from a broader and freer conception of the novel as the one considered by Hand. Similarly, if we think about traditional subgenres such as the *Bildungsroman* that offered the years of formation and evolution of a single protagonist till his or her final successful integration in society, we also discover its constant reformulation in the case of Irish letters, since it seems that the complex, fragmented, course of Irish history does not favour straightforward coherent narratives oriented to the fulfilment of the expectations of a protagonist. Furthermore, the weight of institutions such as family or the Church has prevented Irish writers from focusing on individuals and has led them to their representation as forming part of communities in relation to which or against which they earnestly try to define themselves.

A clear and early reflection was offered by James Joyce's peculiar rendering of a *Bildungsroman* in *A Portrait of the Artist as a*

~ Young Man where the reader discovers a young protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, trying earnestly to forge an identity of his own free from the nets of family, religion and politics; when the readers reencounter the young man in *Ulysses*, we discover him trapped in a narrative which, through its myriad styles, voices and allusions, conveys the complexity, multidimensionality and fragmentation of Irish history and of the Irish society.

The three novels object of our study also deal with the identity crises of individuals, and they similarly represent their protagonists as struggling against society and its structures, be it the family, local communities, the world of art, nature or politics. Furthermore, the three authors have been able to devise alternative narrative styles, techniques and even endings that enabled them to render the complexities of the topics dealt with as well as to represent the unstable condition of their protagonists. In addition, Baume, Burns and O'Reilly have meaningfully chosen as protagonists female characters with artistic or intellectual aspirations who allow the authors to endow their respective narratives with a self-reflective even metaliterary meditation on the possibilities as well as limits of language, words and wordlessness.

Sara Baume, born in 1984 when her parents were travelling in a caravan on the road to Wigan Pier, and raised in County Cork, has already published two novels and a handful of short stories which have appeared in prestigious literary magazines such as *Granta*, *The Stinging Fly*, or collections such as David Byrnes. Both *spill, simmer, falter, wither* (2015), and *A Line Made by Walking* (2017) have been unanimously acclaimed by reviewers both due to the interest of the topics dealt with in the novels as well as because of the brilliant technique exhibited by the writer. Baume has become a reputed writer who focuses on diagnosing the condition of the outcasts, of the misfits of our contemporary society, and on representing thus the functioning of their troublesome inner minds as well as the alternative and distanced way in which they interpret the outer world that surrounds them. With this purpose in mind the Irish writer has written highly experimental novels endowed with peculiar structures characterised by fragmentation and by the combination of different narrative voices and discourses. In short, Sara Baume is, as she has deemed it, a writer of "literary fiction" that, in her opinion "doesn't sell well" (2015).

*A Line Made by Walking* narrates the story of twenty-five-year-old Frankie, a young woman who suffers from depression and decides to isolate herself in the bungalow of her recently dead grandmother in a small Irish village. This way the young protagonist abandons her family and Dublin, where she used to work at an art gallery, and spends her time apart from society in a rural environment that she closely scrutinises:

When my grandmother first moved here, fifteen years ago, there wasn't any turbine on turbine hill. For miles around, nothing but pasture, pine forest and the occasional unobtrusive cottage. But since then, vast plots have been levelled and poured with cement. Bizarre dormer bungalows have appeared, with White plaster wings and wide-as-a-wall windows, with turrets. (Baume 2017, 103)

Frankie not only records the most obvious changes provoked by modernisation in the views and landscapes that surround her, but decides to pay close attention to the tiniest details of the natural world that she covers everyday on her bicycle:

When I cycle in the mornings, I make an effort to appreciate even the most ubiquitous bits of nature. Not just the exquisite infestations of White blossom, but the elegance of each black thorn. Not just the petal-packed dandelion buds, but the hollow stalks from which their yellow bursts. Not just the swallows and song thrushes, but every different kind of crow as well. (102)

The novel deploys, in a first-person narrative, the inner world of a protagonist ill at ease with herself and with the rest of the world. Frankie is a further instance of Sara Baume's preference for the representation of outcasts and her brilliant ability to concentrate on their troublesome minds.<sup>4</sup> Frankie is from the beginning perfectly aware of her unstable condition. Early in the novel she acknowledges, "I am twenty-five, still young, I know. And yet, I am already so improper, so disordered" (11), and she recurrently alludes to her condition: "And I felt like such a failure. I thought: I can't even do mental illness properly" (82).

Encouraged by her family, the young protagonist has visited a specialist who has diagnosed her depression as "deficit of happiness", and having discarded the medical treatment prescribed, she has opted for secluding herself from society. The unsympathetic and detached way in which the doctor treats and diagnoses Frankie's problem could be certainly interpreted as an ironic commentary on contemporary medicine and on the frivolous and impersonal treatment of mental illnesses such as depression:

Dr Clancy got up from her desk, gagged me with a man-sized tissue [...] Then she waited as I tried to explain that I had no explanation, that I just spent rather a lot of time trying not to cry; that trying-not-to-cry had become my normal state.

'Well, well. You're depressed,' she said, flatly. 'It's nothing to be ashamed of; a medical matter of imbalanced chemicals, depleted stores of serotonin, plain and simple. It requires a prescription, that's all.' [...] 'It's a deficiency just same as iron or thyroxin or whatever. It's basically a happiness deficiency.' (108-9)

Having studied Arts at University, and spent some time working in a contemporary art gallery in Dublin (3), and being obsessed with death due to her present mental state, Frankie decides to photograph dead animals, and the novel is in fact structured into ten chapters titled with the name of the dead animal that she discovers and whose photograph is included in the novel ("Robin", "Rabbit", "Rat", "Mouse", "Rook", "Fox", "Frog", "Hare", "Hedgehog" and "Badger").

Toppling from the sky to land at my feet. And because my small world is coming apart in increments, it seems fitting that the creatures should be dying too. They are being killed with me; they are being killed for me.

I decide I will take a photograph of this robin. The first in a series, perhaps.

A series about how everything is being slowly killed. (2)

This project in which Frankie has embarked herself has some difficulties: “I have not had a dead creature in some time now. I don’t want anything to die, of course; I only want to make good pictures, a good project. With only a robin, rabbit and rat it hardly seems like a series yet; I could hardly call it art” (123). Frankie’s progression with her photograph series is slow, especially because she has set some rules to follow in relation to the target of her camera: “I have decided to lay down some ground rules for my project. I’m not allowed to photograph a creature I kill myself; this would only encourage unnecessary barbarism. Or a creature which is wounded but is still alive; this would be unnecessary irreverent. Such creatures, I decide, will not count.” (123)

At the same time that she takes her photographs, and in order to keep her mind active and test her knowledge of the world of art, the protagonist relates her ideas and the concepts, notions and ideas that come to her mind with the most diverse artistic manifestations which have previously dealt with that same topic and that she is able to remember. Therefore, she thinks about sculptures, paintings, performances or even films related to abstractions such as “Being”, “Progress”, “Fakery”, “Happiness” “Intelligibility”, “Deprivation”, “Lostness”, “Ineffectuality”, “Validation”, “Wrongness”, “Misguided Resilience”, or “Weightlessness”; actions (“Falling”, “Getting Up”, “Lying”, “Killing Animals”, “Drowning”, or “Digging”); as well as more concrete ideas or objects (“the Sea”, “Wind”, “Body”, “Sky”, “Carpet”, “Bed”, “Flowers”, “Hair”, “Sheds”, “Cats”, “Goldfish”, “Bicycles”, “Birds”, “Stars”, “Walls”, “Zoos”, “Television”, “Ghosts”, “Rooms”, etc.).

The title of the novel itself, “A Line Made by Walking”, refers to one of the works of arts summoned by Frankie, that she significantly recalls when thinking about “Works about Lower, Slower Views”:

Works about Lower, Slower Views, I test myself:  
Richard Long, *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967. A short, straight track worn by footsteps back and forth through an expanse of grass. Long doesn’t like to interfere with the landscapes through which he walks, but sometimes he builds sculptures from materials supplied by chance. Then he leaves them behind to fall apart. He specialises in barely-there art. Pieces which take up as little space in the world as possible. And which do as little damage. (261–2)

The kind of information that Frankie provides about each of the artistic manifestations mentioned varies considerably, so that

sometimes she offers abundant information and enables the reader to figure out what the work is about, the technique employed by the artist, or her own interpretation of the piece; meanwhile on other occasions she limits herself to citing the work of art so that the most interested and careful reader is almost forced to look it up, as the author herself recommends in an “Author’s Note” included at the end of the novel:

In these pages, many works of visual art from many different artists and eras have been named and outlined. I want to make clear that these are described as the narrator remembers and perceives them; they are interpreted according to Frankie. I urge readers to seek out, perceive and interpret these artworks for themselves. (303)

Besides deploying Frankie’s vast knowledge of art, and being a mental exercise for this would-be-artist, these allusions to so many and diverse artistic manifestations dealing with such different issues (abstractions, actions, universal concepts, prosaic objects, etc.) convey a further metaliterary reflection in the novel on the diverse interests of artists and on the possibilities of art. Therefore, the works of art mentioned add up to other musings on creativity by the protagonist who, for instance, considers that the best of creations “uncover an unrecoverable view of the world” (75), who finds words as “prosaic” and “insufficient” (255), and who concludes that “art is everywhere. I think: art is every inexplicable thing” (292).

Frankie is, in fact, and above all, an aspiring artist, singled out by her own family “because I am the artistic one, with my artistic temperament” (175) since she was a little girl:

Because I am the complicated, creative, cantankerous youngest child my family have always afforded me dispensations from the petty responsibilities of life, from the conventional social graces. [...]

But nowadays I feel guilty that I am granted the immunity of the artistically gifted, having never actually achieved anything to prove myself worthy. (168)

As the novel progresses, Frankie begins to question her creative gift, so that despite her photographic artistic project, and her proved knowledge of art, she adopts a more realistic view of herself as a would-be-creator: “Now I look like a perfectly regular person, definitively not a genius” (182); “It’s time to accept that I am average, and to stop making this acceptance of my averageness into a bereavement” (219). Furthermore, her progressive acceptance of her own ordinariness, leads her to question her own self-centred and self-indulgent stance, to acknowledge that her own self is not the only possible measure of the world, to detect that she has not been kind (288) and that, nevertheless, she is still able to deploy compassion for others: “I can consequently believe it is possible for me to be driven mad by concern for some

creature other than myself” (295); “A final showdown of concern for a creature other than myself” (297).

Although the narrative does not make it clear if, by the end of the novel, Frankie has overcome her depression or not, the reader gets the impression that she has made her own line by walking, and that the path she has traced has led her from a state of self-absorption and radical introspection towards a compassionate view of the other creatures with whom she shares materiality, finitude and the world.

Sara Baume’s multi-layered novel favours the most diverse critical approaches, and it can be studied as an appropriate representation of disability in fiction, as a sound reflection on, even a deconstruction of the figure of the artist, as a treatise on the relationship between art and reality, and even as a brilliant instance of nature writing. Notwithstanding, *A Line Made by Walking*, is above all a further example of a plotless fragmented narrative, another instance of how Irish writers endlessly play with the form of the novel so as to make it an appropriate cauldron with space for both the ordinary and the extraordinary of the human condition and of our human perception of the reality that surrounds us.

Northern Irish writer Anna Burns’s *Milkman* (2018)<sup>5</sup> has also offered a brilliant representation of the extraordinary powers of perception of a young female character in a novel in which the reader discovers, as in the case of Baume’s novel, a most particular voice and, once again, a distinctively original narrative style. This equally highly experimental novel features the experience of an eighteen-years-old female protagonist who is harassed by an older married man, a very much feared paramilitary. Retrospectively told, and structured in seven chapters of different length conformed by endless paragraphs that convey the digressive flow of thoughts of its main character, the narrative is vaguely set in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, that is, during the upheaval of the Troubles:

At this time, in this place, when it came to the political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming, ordinary people said ‘their side did it’ or ‘our side did it’, or ‘their religion did it’ or ‘our religion did it’ or ‘they did it’ or ‘we did it’, when what was really meant was ‘defenders-of-the state did it’ or ‘renouncers – of-the state did it’ or ‘the state did it’. (Burns 2018, 21–2)

Therefore, suspiciousness, sectarianism, bigotry and violence characterise the small world of the protagonist of a novel without proper names, and significantly referred to as middle sister (as well as middle daughter, and the “Reading-while-walking” person), and who refers to the ones who surround her as first sister, second sister, third brother, first brother-in-law, third brother-in-law, maybe-boyfriend, wee sisters, Somebody McSomebody, tablets girl, ma, da, longest friend, etc.

The reader is immediately plunged into the suffocating atmosphere of the protagonist’s community as interpreted by the girl, very much aware of the dangers awaiting its members:

There were beatings, brandings, tar and featherings, disappearances, black-eyed, multi-bruised people walking about with missing digits who most certainly had those digits only the day before. There were too, the impromptu courts held in the district’s hutments, also in other disused buildings and houses specially friendly to the renouncers. There were the myriad methods our renouncers had for levying funds for their cause. Above all, there was the organisation’s paranoia, their examination, interrogation and almost always dispatch of informants and of suspected informants. (Burns 2018, 119)

In a world where everyone has a view (112) and where participating in a conversation is not exempt from putting oneself in danger (27), the young protagonist opts for passing as inadvertently as possible as well as for merging herself in her readings about previous centuries, as she calls them “my usual nineteenth-century, safe-and-sound literary thoughts” (115). Notwithstanding, her habit of reading-while-walking is regarded as weird by the community and thus she is included in the group of those “beyond-the-pale”: “In those days, to keep the lowest of low profiles, rather than admit your personal distinguishing habits had fallen below the benchmark for social regularity. If you didn’t, you’d find yourself branded a psychological misfit and stored out there with those other misfits on the rim.” (60)

The young female narrator is thus subject to the violence surrounding her, as well as to the close scrutiny of community and family. The narrator belongs to a Catholic family –referred to as “our religion”–; her father is already dead after a long depression, one of her brothers was murdered and another has disappeared. Being a woman, she suffers the consequences of patriarchal oppression in a highly conservative society that expects her to marry and to become a “traditional woman”. As the girl laments, her widowed mother had already begun to press her into marriage:

Since my sixteenth birthday two years earlier ma had tormented herself and me because I was not married. My two older sisters were married. Three of my brothers, including the one who had died and the one on the run, had got married. Probably too, my oldest brother gone errant, dropped off the face of the earth, and even though she’d no proof, was married. My other older sister –the unmentionable second sister– also married. So why wasn’t I married? (45)

Immersed in a community of informers, spies, and above all professional gossipers, the resourceful and resilient protagonist tries to escape or at least find solace in reading, doing exercise and, mostly, by means of irony and a shrewd sense of humour. Every change or movement outside the accepted routine of confrontation between “our side” and “their side” is regarded as suspicious, as it is the case of the “issue women”, a group of eight feminists who are very soon rejected by the community and denied a place for their meetings since “They could be plotting subversive acts in it. They could be having homosexual intercourse ~

in it. They could be performing and undergoing abortions in it” (157).

The narrator’s main objective in these circumstances is “to stay as sane in my mind as I thought then I was” (115) and concentrates on her readings, while the narrative displays her endless digressions about names (23–4), flags (25), cats and dogs (93–4), types of depressions (85), etc. Despite the girl’s efforts at keeping her distance from the community, her physical and mental security becomes threatened by two men infatuated with her, Somebody McSomebody and, more ostensibly, Milkman. Thus, what initially were more or less casual encounters with the Milkman, progressively began to be more frequent and menacing, and the young protagonist describes the fear caused by the older man’s approaches:

First thing that happened was again I got those spine shivers, those scrabblings, the scuttlings, all that shiddery-shudderiness inside me, from the bottom of my backbone right into my legs. Instinctively everything in me stopped. Just stopped. All my mechanism. I did not move and he did not move. Standing there, neither of us moved, nor spoke, then he spoke, saying ‘At your Greek and Roman class, were you?’ and this was the only thing, ever, in his profiling of me that the milkman got wrong. (102–3)

Milkman accosts the girl, and menaces her with putting a bomb in maybe-boyfriend’s car. At the end of the novel and after the murdering of four innocents mistaken for Milkman, he is finally killed for being a leading terrorist-renouncer, and the relief experienced by the narrator is, as it would be expected, evident:

My body was proclaiming, ‘Halleluiah! He’s dead. Thank fuck halleluiah!’ even if those were not the actual words at the Forefront of my mind. What was at the Forefront was that maybe thi’ll be the end of all that ‘don’t let it be Milkman, oh please don’t let it be Milkman’, no more having to watch my back, expecting to turn a corner to have him fall into step with me, no more being followed, being spied upon, photographed, misperceived, encircled, anticipated. No more being commanded. No more capitulation such as the night before when I got beat down enough, had become indifferent to my fate enough as to have stepped inside his van. Most of all there would be no more worry about exmaybe-boyfriend being killed by a carbomb. (302–3)

The novel’s circularity is illustrated when the narrator, as she did at the beginning of her narrative, goes out running with third-brother-in-law while third sister enjoys her usual meeting with friends. The peculiar narrative style of *Milkman* has favoured reviews emphasizing its original surrealist, dystopian

and digressive style. The novel’s digressions have been compared to *Tristram Shandy*, and the author’s treatment of the absurd to Samuel Beckett, as well as to the grim humour of Flann O’Brien (Toal 2018). Therefore, some reviewers have focused their interpretations on Anna Burns’s novel, updated and necessary treatment of the Northern Irish Troubles and have even identified the Catholic district of Ardoyne in which the author grew up as the setting of the novel (Toal 2018; Sherratt-Bado 2019). Furthermore, *Milkman* can be certainly considered as an addition to the corpus of works that Birte Heidemann studies in *Post-Agreement Northern Irish Literature* and that includes the work of writers who in the last two decades have “begun to fill the ‘blank page’ of the post-Agreement discourse and its (dis)engagement with the country’s conflictual past” (2016, 3). In the particular case of the novel, Heidemann accurately distinguishes an evolution in the formal features of the novel particularly useful for understanding novels such as *Milkman*:

Unlike the consensual notion of pre-Troubles novelists or the populist polemics of many writers during the Troubles, post-Agreement novelists 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 moment and closure. (5)

While Burns’s novel can be certainly studied as an interesting addition to Post-Agreement Northern Irish literature, other reviewers consider that the author has brilliantly managed to depart from a specific situation and context, that the Northern Irish author has been able to go from the particular to the universal, and to deal successfully with contemporary concerns of our society such as sexual abuse and sexual scandal and even “social media and digital surveillance”, and have even related the novel with the MeToo movement (Morales-Ladrón 2019).

Furthermore, *Milkman* is another instance of a sound reflection on the power and dangers of language and words, and if Sara Baume’s creative Frankie considered words insufficient, the well-read narrator of Anna Burns’s novel has opted for emphasising caution, indirectness and even silence as protective stances against the potential perils of language and communication. To a certain extent, the protagonist renounces language and words as a safeguard for her own integrity and survival in her troublesome community.

Eleanor O’Reilly’s *m for mammy* (2019) is equally concerned with language and words, but the author has shrewdly deployed the consequences of their forced absence, illustrating the suffering of the wordless. Reilly’s debut novel<sup>6</sup> is a further brilliant instance of the possibilities of the genre in the hands of Irish writers. Once again, the reader discovers a young female protagonist with extremely acute powers for perceiving the reality that surrounds her. This debut narrative deploys the hardships of a family, the Augustts, whose members have to cope with adversity. Jenny, an eight-year-old Irish girl witnesses how her mother’s mental breakdown leads her to suffering a stroke which leaves her speechless and physically disabled. ~

As a consequence, the young girl is left at home in the company of her six-year-old autistic brother Jacob, her jobless father and her imposing grandmother who titanically emerges as the most powerful figure in the family: “just as she sits down at the kitchen table, Granny arrives in behind her again. Jenny’s starting to wonder if there’s more than just one of her Granny. Granny divided by two. Or four. Or twelve” (O’Reilly 2019, 71); “The house so full of Granny’s stuff sometimes it’s like they’ve moved in with Granny, not the other way round. And because Granny’s the only one who cleans the floors now, she thinks they are hers.” (81)

Despite the focus on the adverse, almost tragic, circumstances that the Augustts are going through, the narrative is not exempt from humour and even irony. The humorous touch is mainly provided by means of the love-hate relationship between Granny and other members of the family such as her other daughter, Eleanor, and mostly, through Granny Mae-Anne and her son-in-law, that is, Jenny’s jobless and desolate father. Kevin finds it really difficult to cope with all the adversity that is befalling his family, and despite his acknowledging Granny’s efforts at maintaining order and a sense of normalcy in the household, their different temperaments collide constantly.

The novel is segmented into different chapters which render in third person Jenny’s, Jacob’s, Granny’s, as well as the infirm mother Annette’s thoughts and way of coping with family circumstances. Therefore, sections devoted to Granny are coloured by her powerful use of language, her recourse to sayings and popular expressions. Besides her thoughts and shrewd though innocent interpretation of family circumstances, Jenny’s sections also cover her readings, her letter writing, her dreams, and even her creative enterprises. The chapters devoted to Jenny and Granny illustrate their resourceful and even powerful use of language and words, and contrast ostensibly with the efforts in the novel to render the speechlessness and wordlessness of Jacob’s autistic condition as well as of Annette’s sudden loss of language and progressive though partial recovery of it in their respective chapters.

Therefore, the narrative offers a most interesting effort at rendering the functioning of Jacob’s autistic mind in those chapters which focalise his thoughts, feelings, and reactions:

Mammy’s gone. Not here. Granny’s here. Granny smells like Mammy. But only sometimes. But only sometimes. Sometimes means not all the time. Not like the time on the clock. Just the time in between. In between times Granny smells older than Mammy like she’s been inside the press longer. The circus is here too.

Granny says *bringing* tomorrow. Tomorrow is not today. Today can never be tomorrow. *Ing* things happen today or tomorrow. This is a rule. *Will* things only happen tomorrow or later today. But not *Now*. *Now* things are different. *Now* things are heavy and strong. *Walk* is a now thing. *K* is strong. *K* looks strong like it can’t fall over. *Sit* is a *Now* thing too. *T* is very strong, carrying a big bar on its head or through its neck if it’s only small. *Watch* is *Now*. So is *Talk*. (48)

Thus, the chapters centred on Jacob, deploy the young boy’s fear of and nervous reactions at unexpected noises; his association of colours with experiences (for instance, pink with sweets, and yellow with mammy and happiness); his obsession with TV series like *Thomas & Friends* that allow him to link numbers and the cartoon trains; or his endless repetition of ideas and images:

Choo-choo. Up the hill. Over the tunnel. Past the tres. Over the bridge. Over the water. Away from the waving-goodby man. Past the shop. Past Jacob. Past Daddy. Yellow. Red. Blue. Green. Orange. Choo-choo. Up the hill. Over the tunnel. Past the tres. Over the brige. Over the water. Away from the waving-goodby man. Past the shop. Past Jacob. Past Daddy. Yellow. Red. Blue. Green. Orange. Choo-choo. Up the hill. Over the tunnell. Past the tres. Over the brige. Over the water. [...] This is the train. Daddy made the train for Jacob. (255–6)

Readers are, therefore, allowed or rather compelled to inhabit Jacob’s alternative way of experiencing the world that surrounds him. Notwithstanding, *m* for *mammy* offers also the possibility of learning how to deal compassionately and tenderly with the disabled and, for instance, by means of his sister Jenny, the reader witnesses how the little girl pays close attention to the boy’s recurrent efforts at learning to speak:

And sometimes when Jenny gets fed up trying to get him to swing by himself she tries to teach Jacob a song or a new word, like Ma used to do, and sometimes his mouth moves but there’s no letter shapes or word sounds coming out. He just opens and closes his mouth a lot. But Jenny knows he is listening and trying real hard and she knows he really, really wants to say something because he pushes his tongue upside down and makes little noises and snaps with his teeth. (116)

Moreover, despite Jacob’s wordlessness, his sister is perfectly able to understand him and even to figure out his opinions and answers which the text renders in italics:

After a while they get a bit bored throwing stones. *It’s nice here.* Jenny hears Jacob’s words stolen away by the wind. *It’s quiet.* ‘Yes, it is quiet here, Jacob, isn’t it? Will we go back and check on Da?’ *Okay, Jenny.* (127)

~ The brilliant effort at deploying the functioning of Jacob's autistic condition illustrates the possibilities as well as the potential of disability narratives described by Stuart Murray:

The dominant arc of most disability narratives is a movement from the representation of an impairment to the overcoming of the difficulties that are seen to come from it. Such a trajectory provides all manner of resolutions: individuals prove their integrity in the process of the struggle; communities learn from the dignity of the afflicted; humanity as whole triumphs and we are all rewarded. (2008, xvi)

Furthermore, as Murray concedes, due to the lack of precise scientific knowledge about autism and about the autists' way of being in the world, the afflicted are regarded as representatives of "otherness in the extreme and, as a consequence, the source of endless fascination" (xvii), which endows writers with multiple possibilities since "in the free world of narrative interpretation, autism can, and does, become an open topic for representation, in part because of the lack of scientific consensus on the condition." (6)

Notwithstanding, Jacob's is not the only instance of a novel which earnestly tries to make the reader understand the functioning of the mentally disabled. As we have mentioned, Annette's stroke is also linguistically reproduced: "Crash down crushing Pain Pushing in beating skull Throbbing inside Eye. Dark. One side black heavy unfeeling" (O'Reilly 2019, 51). After Annette recovers consciousness, her partial understanding of her circumstances is reflected by means of the scattered words that the infirm is able to distinguish:

|             |           |           |                |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|----------------|
| 'You are.   | Hospital. | You-      | haemorrhagic   |
|             | Stroke.   |           |                |
| Metal Clip. |           | Aneurysm- | Cerebral       |
|             |           |           | Craniotomy     |
|             |           |           | Bulging        |
|             |           |           | Risk           |
|             |           |           | Rupture (52-3) |

Annette's progressive though incomplete recuperation of language and memory is minutely rendered in the sections of the novel devoted to her: "Old and new words slip and slide around in her mouth. Some were lost. Others found again for now. Mouth shapes forming words she knows and yet doesn't" (176); "Some days she does know. Some days she doesn't. Some days she doesn't know if she does or she doesn't." (286)

As it happened with Baume's and Burns's novels, Eleanor O'Reilly offers us an ambiguous ending that avoids closure or any sort of naïve resolution of the conflicts and traumas exposed. In the case of *m for mammy*, and similarly to the case of *Milkman*, the narrative refers the reader to the beginning, and to Jenny's imaginary story "A Good Day. by Jennifer Augustt", the same

that opened the novel, with the difference that in the last pages the young protagonist imagines that she is able to perfectly distinguish Jacob uttering a word, "Ma-me. Ma-me." (413)

Eleanor O'Reilly's novel certainly deserves being interpreted from the perspective of disability studies, although this has not been the purpose of this contribution. The brilliant characterisation of Granny Mae-Anne also makes the narrative a most interesting case for those interested in ageing studies. The old woman becomes an impressive presence for the family and in the narrative. Despite her incipient arthritis she manages to take care of her infirm daughter, her autistic grandson, her ten-year old ill-adapted granddaughter, and her desolate son-in-law.

*m for mammy* is, to sum up, an accomplished attempt at registering in fiction different voices, most inventively including the voice of the voiceless, it is a hymn to communication in its most varied forms, verbal, gestural, and affective, among others. The novel is a sound and talented reflection on the powers of language and of words as well as on some of the circumstances that turn human beings wordless.

Despite the obvious differences between the three novels, they share significant similarities. The first one is, as we have seen, their technical brilliance and their condition, in Sara Baume's words, as "literary fiction", that is, as technical artifacts that are self-consciously aware of, on the one hand, the potential of the material with which they work (i.e. the malleable and polyvalent genre of novel writing) as well as, on the other, the possibilities and the limits of language and words to, as Frankie puts it in *A Line Made by Walking*, turn "every inexplicable thing" (Baume 2017, 292) into art.

It is also worth noticing that the three narratives deploy protagonists who, without being strictly speaking artists, are related to the world of art. Frankie has studied Arts in Dublin and has alleged artistic aspirations; the nameless protagonist of *Milkman* is an avid reader whose knowledge of literature allows her to take refuge in the literary tradition of previous centuries; and Jenny's creative powers are recurrently illustrated in O'Reilly's novel not only through the young girl's allusions to children's fiction but also by means of her letters to Anna Frank and to her own mother, as well as through the brilliant stories that she makes up and writes, and which are reproduced by the narrative.

Another feature shared by the three female characters is their isolation from the world, their unease with society and their condition as outcasts. Both their artistic biases and their loneliness favours the development of an introspective as well as detached view of the world that surrounds them and enhance their close scrutiny of their inner selves as well as of external reality.

Finally, the three novels are representative instances of Irish women writers' ability to create and project new and enduring characters, and to deal with topics of undeniable interest for our contemporary society such as individual or collective traumas and crises, as well as temporary or permanent disabilities.



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## Notes

1 See, for instance, Anne Owens Weekes, *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* (1990); Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women* (2007); Caitriona Molloney and Helen Thompson, *Irish Women Writers Speak Out, Voices from the Field* (2003); or Anne Fogarty's "Irish Women Novelists 1800-1940" (2000, 81-187) and "Deliberately Personal? The Politics of Identity in Contemporary Irish Women's Writing" (2002, 1-17).

2 *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland. The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature*, edited by Pilar Villar-Argáiz, was a pioneer study on the topics of migrations and racism (2014). The volume included chapters focused on the Irish novel such as "Immigration in Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger Novels" (Estévez-Saá, 2014, 79-92)

3 Representative novels in this sense are Mary Rose Callaghan's *The Visitors' Book* (2001), Elizabeth Wassell's *The Thing He Loves* (2001) and *Sustenance* (2011), Anne Haverty's *The Free and Easy* (2006), Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow* (2007), Claire Kilroy's *The Devil I Know* (2012), Deirdre Madden's *Time Present and Time Past* (2013) and Anne Enright's *The Green Road* (2015). Most of these novels have been studied as representative renderings of Celtic Tiger Ireland by Margarita Estévez-Saá in critical pieces such as "Antidotes to Celtic Tiger Ireland in Contemporary Irish Fiction: Anne Haverty's *The Free and the Easy* and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's *Fox, Swallow, Scarecrow*" (2010, 199–210), "Transnationalism and Transculturality in Twenty-First-Century Irish Novels" (2015, 1–17), and "A Map of Things Known and Lost in Anne Enright's *The Green Road*" (2016, 45–55).

4 Already in her first novel *spill simmer falter wither*, Baume concentrated on the figure of another loner, fifty-seven years old Ray, and his close relationship with his one-eyed dog.

5 Anna Burns (Belfast 1962) was raised in the working-class Catholic district of Ardoyne in Belfast, and is currently living in East Sussex. Her first novel, *No Bones* (2001), was centred on the experience of a girl growing up in Belfast during the Troubles. Afterwards, she has published the novel *Little Constructions* (2001) and a novella, *Mostly Hero* (2014).

6 Eleanor O'Reilly lives in Arklow, Co. Wicklow, she is a teacher of English and Classical Studies at The Community School in Gorey, Co. Wexford, and she has completed an MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. *m for mammy*, developed out of the short story "Stoppin' the Silence" which won the 2015 Francis McManus Award.

This article was supported by the following funded projects and institutions, which are hereby gratefully acknowledged: Research network "Rede de Língua e Literatura inglesa e Identidade III" (<http://Rede-Ing-III.eu>) (ED431D2017/17), Xunta de Galicia / ERDF-UE; Research project "Eco-Fictions" (FEM2015-66937-P), Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness / ERDF-UE; Research project "El tropo animal" (PGC-2018-093545-B100), Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities-State Agency for Research-AEI / ERDF-UE; and by the Research Group of Discourse and Identity (D&I, GI-1934; ED431C 2019/01), Universidade de Santiago de Compostela.

Título:

Contribuciones recientes a la novela irlandesa de Sara Baume, Anna Burns y Eleanor O'Reilly: Sobre el lenguaje, las palabras y su ausencia

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