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The Representation Of The Body In Contemporary Irish Women's Fiction

Doctoral Thesis

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Introduction

Throughout ancient Celtic culture in Ireland, the human body held a paramount significance. The body was considered a vessel for spiritual and physical nourishment, and its intricate relationship with nature was deeply ingrained in Irish antiquity. As noted by Irish poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, the Celtic tradition places great importance on the profound connection with the body (Ni Dhomhnaill 45-48). This can be seen in the art, literature, and rituals of the Celts, and it highlights the crucial role that the body played in their culture. Through the lens of the Celtic tradition, the human body is more than a mere physical vessel, but a conduit for connection with the natural world and a source of spiritual sustenance. Notably, the female experience of the body has been likened to the land in the earliest etiological myths. In his study *Nudes from Nowhere: Utopian sexual landscapes* Darby Lewes posits that the physicality of the feminine body has long been a trope for the land, terming this phenomenon *somatopias*: "the Ur metaphor, rooted in earliest etiological myths that present the land as a womb from which life sprang" (Lewes 3). In Ireland, the "corporeal figurations and body politic have been fraught ones historically and, issues related to landscape became imbricated with constructions of the 'national body'" as observed by Susan Cahill in *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years* (2). To consider the body as a source of metaphor, as a part of identity and self-construction, means looking at how bodies matter, focusing on how they are portrayed, used and constructed in writing. There was a paradoxical relationship between the Catholic Church and the body in Ireland. Catholicism is a religion that places great emphasis on the body, particularly in relation to its teachings on sexuality, reproduction, and bodily resurrection. However, the Church's influence in Ireland during the twentieth century resulted in an attitude of fear, rejection, and ignorance towards the physical body.

This paradox is partly due to the Church's conservative stance on sexuality and its efforts to regulate sexual behavior, particularly outside of marriage. The Church's influence was particularly pronounced in Ireland during the 20th century, with the establishment of the Free Irish State in 1922. As observed by Daly (72), the Church gained significant influence in Ireland during this period, and its teachings were reflected in many aspects of Irish life, including education, politics, and social norms. This dominance resulted in a cultural attitude that viewed the physical body as shameful and something to be hidden or denied. These attitudes have partially subsided due to

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various socio-political changes in Irish society over the past three decades. Nonetheless, the issue of the body and especially the female body in Irish society, with its reproductive rights, has not been supplanted, and it remains a source of contestation.

The body is often at the root of conflicts as it is an essential but obscured means of understanding ourselves. The metaphors and representations of the corporeal formed on personal and national levels construct vital means of perception and form the basis of our understanding of what it means to be human in the world. The body is not merely a physical entity but also shapes our ordering of the world through how it is perceived and used.

Irish novels written across a wide range of genres in the present era imbue social, cultural and narrative concerns about how bodies should be addressed and portrayed. This dissertation examines how the body is portrayed and addressed in contemporary Irish novels written during the Post Celtic Tiger era of Ireland.[1] The analysis focuses on five selected novels, investigating how they explore the body as a site of expression for identity, nation, memory, desire, and monstrosity in both local and global contexts. My argument centers on the negotiation of a narrative ethics of the body within these works. The physical realm of the body demands careful consideration of the strategies employed to construct, reveal, communicate, and respond to narratives about corporeality, ultimately leading to a heightened sense of responsibility for the stories we tell about the body. By delving into these themes, we gain insight into the complexities of the relationship between the body and storytelling and are forced to confront the ethical implications of our narratives. This approach creates shared concerns for the writers – the relationships between past and present, memory and history, between the national and the global, and between consciousness and corporeality.

All four writers articulate these issues through heightened literary engagement with the body, its contours and limits. As a complex narrative construct, the novel provides a suitable medium for the manifestations of various interrelated perspectives on the body and the ethical concerns related to the aestheticization of the pain and suffering that it endures. To focus on how a writer uses the body in her writing is to consider her attempts to intervene in cultural, political representations and

[1] Post Celtic Tiger refers to novels published after the financial collapse of the Irish economy in 2008. The relevance and the specific features of the term will be elaborated in the following sections of the thesis.

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placements of the body in the context in which she creates the work. It reveals how the body is represented, how it relates to other bodies, and their effect on other embodied individuals, including the reader. These writers often illuminate the nature of the body by placing it in situations that push its capacities to the limits, involving an inviolable level of attention to infinitesimal details.

The concept of the body has been subject to diverse interpretations throughout human history, ranging from being seen as the seat of the soul to a biological or psychosexual entity, or even a material object. In line with the perspective of contemporary French philosopher Jean Luc-Nancy, who posits that the body is shattered and fragmented, this thesis seeks to examine the manifold interpretations and expressions of human embodiment, within the constraints of prescribed norms: "body is certitude shattered and blown to bits. Nothing's more proper, nothing is more foreign to our old world" (Nancy 5). The thesis adopts a holistic approach to exploring the body, while being mindful of the historical and cultural context of Ireland, which serves as the backdrop for the texts under investigation.

I. Celtic Tiger Ireland

Ireland entered an economically prosperous era in the late 1990s that lasted until the late 2000s. This period witnessed a transformation of the country's economy and its social and cultural landscape. Throughout the 1990s the country experienced impressive economic growth that "became the envy of every other western state" (Coulter and Coleman 3). In 1996 the economy of the Republic of Ireland overtook that of the United Kingdom for the first time ever (Coulter and Coleman 3). While there were a lot of terms created to describe this historical period of Ireland, one in particular has managed to gain a "dramatic impact on popular discourse" (Coulter and Coleman 3). In 1994 Kevin Gardner, economist of the Morgan Stanley bank in London, was trying to draw a comparison between the Republic of Ireland and that of the "tiger" economies of south-east Asia; due to the close economic-performance resemblance, the term "Celtic Tiger" was invented (Coulter and Coleman 3). This name has been since widely used to capture the Republic's prosperous state that lasted from the late 1990s up to the late 2000s. The country underwent radical changes during the 1990s in a relatively short space of time. In 1999 it entered the Eurozone; bringing a large number of high-tech companies; immigration flipped its direction with more

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people coming into rather than out of the country in search of employment opportunities. The economic success was felt on every level of society. It also had a discernible impact on the perception of the interplay between religion, Irish identity, and culture. Before the Celtic Tiger boom in 1993, through the introduction of a new parliamentary bill, homosexuality was decriminalized in Ireland (McDonagh 119). This marked the end of a long and traumatizing battle that had pushed many members of Irish society to the outskirts. The body, which bodies matter and to what degree have become key issues in the Irish social and political consciousness. Evidently bodies that were not fulfilling the confined context of white, male, heterosexuality were subject to social taboos and legal coercion. These practices of discrimination further emphasize the importance of understanding how the body is constructed and valued in different social contexts. According to one homosexual man writing back in 1986: "Growing up gay is very hard but more so if you happen to be in rural Ireland. You have a very negative attitude all around you and many people would prefer to lose a gay family member rather than have to face the neighbours" (McDonagh 119). Such concerns resonate throughout the work of Anne Enright's novel *The Green Road*, partially set during the Celtic Tiger era. She portrays a country still battling the abandonment of a national subject based on ethnic, sexual and racial exclusions. Nonetheless, the novel also shows how these coercively prescriptive notions slowly crumbled under the pressure of new, fresh, globalised influences. In the novel, Constance Madigan makes peace with her brother Dan's gayness, although we can sense some uncertainty when she hints at the social stigma attached to such identity: "Dan was a year younger than Constance, fifteen months. His growing up struck her as daft, in a way. So she was not bothered by her brother's gayness - except perhaps in a social sense -" (*The Green Road* 198).

The path to legalizing gay marriage in Ireland was a long and complex journey, marked by significant milestones, including the critical steps taken during the Celtic Tiger era. Finally, in 2015, Ireland achieved a historic moment by legalizing gay marriage through a popular vote (McDonagh 117). This landmark achievement represented a seismic shift in societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, reflecting a growing recognition of the fundamental rights and freedoms of all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The roots of this change, allowing same-sex couples to be recognised as equal members of Irish society, were laid down at the beginning of the 1990s. After a referendum in 1995 and a change in the Constitution, divorce was also legalised in 1996 (Christopher 79). This law meant more than a

transitional change in the Constitution: "it was a measure of not only a change in Irish attitudes but also the persistence of deep-seated traditional values regarding the place of the family in society and the strictures of the Catholic Church" (Christopher 79). It was a sign of a change; however, it is important to note that it was also a sign of just how strongly traditional attitudes in Ireland remained - almost 50% who voted in the referendum voted for the ban on divorce to stay in place - (Egan, "On This Day"). The right to a civil divorce was amongst the many indices that the new Celtic Tiger country was becoming more modern, adopting closer secular bonds with the inclusive European community. At the same time the Ireland of the 1990s was a very different place from the Ireland of the 2000s, and this points to the rapid pace of the changes that the country has been through.

The effects of the religious regulations in Ireland were especially evident and forceful after the 1920s leading up to the end of the 1960s, during a period when the country enjoyed a substantial independence from England for the first time since the 1500s (Daly 74). The religious denomination of the Free State as Catholic was an essential aspect of Irish Independence as it clearly pointed to a major difference from Great Britain: "Ireland was the only English-speaking Catholic country in the West" (Nolan 14). At the same time, as Michael Nolan observes, "the influence of Catholicism was not felt in many areas of administration under the new régime, but in specific areas, such as education and public morality (i.e. divorce, censorship, public dancing and sexual matters), the influence was marked" (128). Catholicism did play a vital role in "restricting women's rights and in establishing coercive arrangements of gender roles and relations" (Coughlan 175).

The institute of the family in Irish society has also undergone significant changes from the strict definitions of the 1937 Constitution that granted legal sanction to the traditional Catholic religious ideal of the family unit, viewing women as subordinate to husbands and fathers; and considering their primary roles as those of mothers and housewives. During the Celtic Tiger era, Ireland started to redefine notions viewed previously as cordially unchangeable, such as gender, nationalism, sexuality and social freedom. This process was initiated by a change in the social strata itself due to the large-scale immigration of other nationalities into the country from the late 1990s. As women became more active both in the social as well as political domain (indicated by the election of Mary Robinson as President of Ireland in 1990), a new type of society emerged. Some critics view this

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period as an active, energising era, as Böss argues: "the resourcefulness, adaptability and energy, which had always characterised the Irish in exile have finally found their place at home" (123). There was a general optimism that fueled the Irish *mentalité* during this period.

Concurrently as economic and political changes were in effect, social transformations were taking place too that have seriously affected Irish public consciousness. With the emerging social and economic changes, a new wave of re-evaluations has also started. Investigations have begun into the Catholic Church's hidden cruelties throughout much of the twentieth century in Ireland that were perpetrated agains against women, children and anyone who did not conform to a coercive and authoritarian Catholic religious definition of what was considered to be proper Irish behaviour. This critical exploration of past injustices has manifested itself in literature as well. It is not surprising that in 2006, in an outstanding contribution to the debate about contemporary Irish fiction in Europe, Eve Patten, professor of Irish Literature at Trinity College Dublin, contended that Irish literature had been characterised since the mid-1980s by a heightened political and historical engagement (Patten 259-273). She argued that the constant re-evaluation of past histories is the solution through which "the Irish begin to position themselves as modern Europeans" (Patten 259). According to Robert Welch "all literature is saturated with history, but in Ireland's case there were and there are particular circumstances which rendered the historical, political dimensions of the literature all the more urgent and pressing" (295). The Celtic Tiger era initiated a new, international mode of dealing with issues such as nationalism, religion, Irishness and past histories. This was a confusing but welcomed change. It also carried the danger of a total loss of well definable categories, explained by Derek Hand as "simplifying the nature of Ireland on display, clearing it from the local complexities a local reader might appreciate" (290).

The Celtic Tiger boom years led to a growth in population as well, which in turn manifested itself in urban growth (O'Donoghue 49). According to statistics, by 1996, there were 110 towns and cities with over 2000 inhabitants in Ireland, which rose to 159 by 2011 (O'Donoghue 52). The majority of employment opportunities and emerging businesses have concentrated in and around urban areas, contributing to the acceleration of the process of urbanization. This trend reflects the growing appeal of urban centers as hubs of economic activity and innovation, drawing in a diverse range of industries and professionals. To a country that has defined itself for many years as rural, traditional and Catholic, this transformation also meant a reconfiguration of identity. For writers,

it was hard to cope with this speeded pace of urbanisation. Irishness that had been easily defined by set values became more flexible, a “sellable” rather than a graspable reality.

In 2001, Irish journalist Fintan O’Toole claimed that the classical instruments of Irish realist prose were destroyed. Without a clear sense of place, it was not only hard to connect to reality, but it was also challenging to be conscious of one’s own identity. Throughout the 20th century, it was possible for Irish writers “to tell stories which seemed in one way or another to relate to a bigger story of revival, repression and collapse” (O’Toole, “Writing the Boom”). However, the boom-time brought a new type of openness and at the same time left writers bereft of any graspable setting. Literature was evaluated in relation to a strong international marketing agenda. There seems to be a consensus among critics regarding the literary tendencies during this era; they are seen as realist and going against the modernist heritage. George O’Brien’s *The Irish Novel 1960-2010* notes of this time: “formal developments show little interest in replicating, much less in adding to, the innovations that earned the modernism of Joyce and Beckett its international eminence” (xxii). Novelist Anne Enright described this time in an interview as a struggle: “during the Tiger times, there was a sense of ‘get with the programme, you’re off message” (Jordan, “A New Irish Literary Boom”). Mainly due to profit-based demands, writers who were experimenting with new forms were often struggling to get their works published. As critic Aran Ward Sell observes: “Irish modernism was largely submerged during the Tiger years, and when it *was* written, it was often unpublished” (“Half-formed Modernism”). One of the writers that the thesis is focusing on is a valid example of this consumerist struggle. Eimear McBride wrote her novel *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* in 2007; however, she could not publish it until 2013 because “it did not fit into any niche” (Kellaway, “Eimear McBride”). Irish writers have found it hard to make their voices heard under the pressure of materialist consumerist policies of publishing houses. Thus, the liberation of this Celtic Tiger era had a paradoxical aspect to it, as to a certain degree, it replaced the oppression of traditional, conservative values with the oppression of hyper-capitalist consumerist values.

One of the effects of this fluctuating state of affairs has been the strengthening of a line of realist novels, set mainly in historical times, dealing with traumas of the national past. In reaction to this tendency, Julian Gough (an Irish-born novelist living in Germany) in 2010 accused Irish writers of being too focused on the past, thus calling the contemporary Irish novelist generation a “priestly caste, scribbling by candlelight, cut off from the electric current of the culture.” He argued that the

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Irish have started to enclose their internal gaze upon themselves, creating a "stubborn fixation […] novel after novel set in the nineteen seventies, sixties, fifties" (Gough, "The State of Irish Literature 2010"). What he failed to notice, as Liam Harte observes, is that Irish history is by no means settled and that "to speak of the recent past as it were unproblematically knowable and definitely 'over' is surely misguided" (Harte 10). Moreover, the term 'past' not only refers to some mythical era of history; it is a past that leads and effects on the living present. Even the most experimental language exercise has its roots in and is affected by the historical context. And Irish history is by no means settled. It is very telling that even during the economic boom years, the wealth and cosmopolitan openness wasn't felt on every level of society. As Liam Harte wryly notes, for poorer people, "it wasn't hard to discern the undertow of 19th-century currents beneath globalised surfaces" (Harte 7).

The French feminist literary critic Hélène Cixous argues that the more turbulent the historical context, the stronger the relationship is between history and works of literary fiction (Quéré 16-17). This conjunction seems to be particularly apposite in the case of Ireland, where history and literature have been such close companions. History and literature have been deeply intertwined in Ireland because, as a country with a traumatic colonial past, Ireland has undergone a process of what Cixous terms "history-in-the-making" (Quéré 20). It is crucial to note that from the beginning of the twentieth century, Irish literary fiction adopted the task of conveying realities that often remained hidden in official, censored, Catholic Church-dominated narratives within the Irish Free State, later to become the Republic of Ireland. Fintan O'Toole ("Writing the Boom") has written of how "Irish writers acquired a paradoxical power from their roles as truth-tellers", paradoxical in the sense that they were creators of fiction. Rather than a "stubborn fixation with the past" (Gough, "The State of Irish Literature 2010"), O'Toole identified a forward-looking tendency in modern Irish literature. Margarita Estévez Saá points out that the assumption of the Irish as backward-looking fails to take into account the many contributions "by men and especially women to Irish literature since the beginning of the twenty-first century" (1) who were committed to addressing the present and current issues of contemporary Ireland.

During the Celtic Tiger boom years, a shift in attitudes towards ethnic identity was also noticeable. The 2006 census revealed a significant increase in non-Irish ethnic groups who identified themselves as Irish on a transnational level. As a result, the traditional categories used to define

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notions of nation and identity were no longer seen as fixed and immutable. Instead, a new, more inclusive form of Irishness began to emerge, one that was heterogeneous and descriptive rather than prescriptive. The onus now lies on future generations to navigate and engage with these shifting identities and categories (O'Connor 2011). Salman Rushdie touches upon this new sense of existence perfectly when noticing that mass migrations create a new type of human being and embodied identity as well:

> People root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things, people who have been obliged to define themselves – because they are so defined by others - by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves, strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves (Rushdie 124-125).

It would be naïve to declare the destruction of nationalist identities in Ireland, but attention has increased in recent times towards a new type of cultural understanding that involves harmonious acceptance of diverse ethnicities and lifestyles, and one that finds its source in one's identity with oneself. Transnational sensitivity is not a new attitude, but it has gained force during the Tiger era, and then it strengthened in Post Celtic Tiger Ireland. In her book published in 2002, Jennifer Jeffers notices some changes related to a transnational Irish identity in the novels that were published in the 1990s:

> Judging from the novels written in the last decade of the twentieth century, Irish identity is in large part a matter of economics (replacing the traditionally political) as the Republic of Ireland's postmodern place in the Euro community becomes more important than its postcoloniality. Perhaps one distinguishing characteristic of these novelists is their departure from the themes long considered 'Irish' (Jeffers 1).

Estévez Saá traces transnational attitudes to the fast pace of immigration into the country, that has "altered the social landscape of the country" (1). Moreover, she argues that immigration itself needs to be viewed from a broader perspective as many of these newcomers "did not come to Ireland for economic reasons" (Estévez Saá 1). Celtic Tiger Ireland was in the process of reinventing itself, Declan Kiberd claiming that the cultural history of the Celtic Tiger should be traced back to as early as 1890s Gaelic Revival when "Irish leaders began to realise that freedom wasn't something

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you sought from others but from an attitude of mind, something you assumed for yourself" (270-271).

Despite these multicultural social impulses, warning signs suggested that the country was not fully ready to jettison exclusivist notions of Irishness. In 2004 the Citizenship referendum was voted through, meaning that people born in Ireland were not given the right of citizenship unless one of their parents was already an Irish citizen at the time of the birth. This was mainly triggered by growing xenophobia surrounding increased immigration into the country, which as Cahill describes, "pivoted on the perceived threat of an influx of pregnant African women who would achieve citizenship once their children were born in Ireland" (*Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years* 17). The body of the immigrant pregnant woman was seen under suspicion in a still exclusionary society that was fighting to defend the purity and integrity of the national body. *The Green Road* by Enright explores this controversial state of a society that still struggles with the idea of the Irish body and national identity defined along ethnic and racial lines. She portrays a Dublin that is fluctuating with different cultures and ethnicities, yet when Emmet Madigan is getting ready to travel to the rural family home for Christmas, he needs to realise that inviting his Kenyan flatmate is still out of bounds. Emmet knows that "it is not a question of colour (though it was also a question of colour)" and utters the grotesque conclusion that "the only route to the Madigans' Christmas table was through some previously accredited womb" (*The Green Road* 212).

Irish consciousness has been constantly faced with its hidden fears and traumas of the past. It seems that one of the major challenges of the Irish novel still remains that of relating and uttering truths that otherwise might remain hidden. As regarding national identity and writing, in 2013, Eimear McBride − when asked how her Irishness features in her novels − stated that she doesn't feel the need to define that aspect as something necessarily distinct and yet it is an undeniable presence: "I'd like to set up my stall as a European writer, but I don't know if it is up to me" (Collard, "Interview with Eimear McBride").

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II. Post Celtic Tiger Ireland

From 2008, the Celtic Tiger era started to disintegrate through "the collapse of the property industry and the destabilisation of the banking industry" (Bracken, Harney-Majahan, "A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I" 1). The stock market in 2008 closed at its lowest level in three years, and the banking system was near a catastrophic collapse (McConell, "Banking bailout"). The government tried to alleviate the situation, but the solutions were not viable enough, and news about the crisis started to emerge in the media in September 2008 (McConell, "Banking Bailout"). The collapse of the Tiger era brought consequences on every level, including effects on Irish identity itself. Michael Böss argues that the collapse was a result of "bad governance, political inertia, lack of economic acumen among political leaders, the increasing impact of neoliberal principles, the political populism of the coalition government, and the failure of the social partnership model" (119). The sum of all these and probably many other factors led to a serious period of economic struggle, which came as a shock to the country and its residents. By 2008, Ireland was considered a strong, globalised country. However, economic corruption and poverty re-emerged. The process of revealing past hypocrisies and abuses that had started during the Celtic Tiger was still ongoing.

In 2013 Taoiseach of Ireland Enda Kenny made an official apology for all those women who had to experience containment and abuse in Magdalene Laundries at the beginning of the 20th century. These laundries were created to hide those female bodies that were a burden for the nationalist Catholic policy. The first Irish Magdalene Institution opened its gates in 1767 in Dublin to provide refuge for "fallen women" (Smith 25). According to sociologist James Smith, they were initially meant to function as a place of shelter for female sex-workers, managed at the beginning mainly by layman and offering services for short periods (24-26). By the 19th century a total number of 22 were operating; they worked as "philantrophic enterprises" (Smith 25), offering services for those women who were rejected by society. The women generally stayed for short periods, entered by their own will and were offered rehabilitative services (Smith 25). After 1830 many of these institutions began to be controlled by Catholic religious female congregations and became more punitive and coercive. By the 1920s, they were all "incorporated into the state's architecture of containment" (Smith 42). Ireland was viewed as a stronghold of Catholic values that were posed against modern promiscuity, as Nolan describes: "women − above all fallen women − were the

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particular focus of its [Ireland's] sexual ideology and victims of its strict policy" (14-15). There was no new Magdalene Laundry opened after the foundation of the Irish Free State in 1922. This is confirmed by the Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee issued in 2013, which states that ten existed before and continued to work after Ireland became a politically independent state (McAleese Report 2). The Magdalene Laundries didn't expand after the political changes, but they were transformed and gained new functions. The last Magdalene laundry closed its doors in 1996 (Smith 42). The first full report on these institutions between 1922 and 1996 was completed and published in 2013. In his official apology for the atrocities and unfair treatment committed against women in the Magdalene Laundries, Enda Kenny, Taoiseach of Ireland admitted that "it was a cruel, pitiless Ireland distinctly lacking in a quality of mercy" (Enda Kenny's State Apology). The journey to this historical moment was very long, confirming Smith's observation of Irish attitudes, willing to commemorate heroes of Irish history but hesitant in admitting the failures. (42-43) The issue is by no means settled; some still feel that the Report doesn't show the whole truth and that the religious orders should admit their culpability as well (McDonald, "Ireland finally admits"). Not long after, in June 2014, a series of 'new' painful atrocities were discovered. Historians claimed to have found the remains of 800 children buried at an Irish home for unmarried mothers in county Galway (Grierson, "Mass grave of babies"). Irish consciousness has been faced suddenly and constantly in recent years with its 'hidden bodies' of the past.

During the Post Celtic Tiger period, literature in Ireland has acquired a new force. Experimentation and innovation have become dominant approaches taken by Post Celtic Tiger novelists. They challenge but also reinvent old modes of writing, stretching genre conventions (Anne Enright, John Banville, Claire Kilroy, Sara Baume), re-adapting postmodernist experimentation (Eimear McBride, Mike McCormack), comically representing absurd aspects of present-day Irish life (Kevin Barry, Lisa McInerney, Keith Ridgway), reinventing the historical novel (Lia Mills, Sebastian Barry), meticulously exploring everyday lives of individual characters through unusual narrative phases and rhythms (Sara Baume, Colm Toibin, Donal Ryan). The diversity of narrative voices and structures reflects Irish life's changing and dynamic state and forms of Irishness that fixed characteristics cannot pin down. This diversity of narrative voices and structures reflects the dynamic state of Irish life and Irishness. Critic Claire Bracken observes that "what we see in the post-boom period is a paradox of explosive literary activity" ("A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I" 2); therefore, the term which can be used to capture the essence of the contemporary

Post Celtic Tiger Irish fiction is that of innovation. Contemporary Irish fiction is at “the age of literary prosperity, and women’s fiction, particularly, is in a phase of vitality” (Bracken, Harney-Majahan, “A Continuum of Irish Women’s Writing I” 2). In the past few years, there has been a noticeable presence of women novelists in Irish fiction. Irish writers, including Edna O’Brien, Anne Enright, Eimear McBride, and Sara Baume, have undertaken critical examinations of the neoliberal aspects of Post Celtic Tiger Ireland, as well as broader human rights and the female experience. This growing body of fiction reflects a more global perspective rather than a strictly local one. These writers challenge official historical narratives and offer innovative approaches to ethical and philosophical issues, as reflected in their styles and language.

The history of Irish women novelists is controversial and complex. In a strenuous analysis of Irish women writing, critics Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahajan argue that due to the troubled history and religious traditions of the country, the history of the female writers presents a “non-linear, non-homogenous space” (“A Continuum of Irish Women’s Writing II” 97). There is an existing “dynamic continuum”, but Bracken and Harney Mahajan argue that the categories used to delineate it need revision (“A Continuum of Irish Women’s Writing II” 97). It is problematic to view women novelists just *as* women. Such a view can led to prescriptive notions. At the same time, it would also be restrictive to deny the relevance that relies on their specific accounts of feminine experiences. Writing on a group of four exceptional female figures of the late twentieth century, Emer Nolan points out that there is great power “in what the uncommon life of these women tells us, not just about themselves but about our common life – in general, but specifically in Ireland” (3). The contemporary literary landscape is characterised by “increased visibility” (Bracken and Harney-Majahan, “A Continuum of Irish Women’s Writing I” 2) of women writers who challenge past hypocrisies. In 2016 the *Waking the Feminist* movement tried to raise awareness on the exclusionary and sexist politics of the Abbey Theatre when it failed to include important women playwrights in its 1916 Easter Rising centenary programme (Meany, “Irish theater abounds”). Performance artists tried to expose the lived reality of womanhood; women poets like Sarah Clancy, Elaine Feeney and Sarah Maria Griffin related to issues like the vote on the Repeal of the 8th campaign.[2] In 2015 as well as 2016, two collections of Irish women short

[2] In 1983 voters included the 8th Amendment into Ireland’s Constitution, equating the life of a fetus with that of a pregnant woman. This made abortion rights stricter, it only being legally permitted if the life of the pregnant women was at risk. The 8th Amendment produced a strong reaction from many, finally leading to a vote in May 2018 to

story writers won the Best Irish Book at the Irish Book Awards. There are various new small presses that offer new publication possibilities. This can be interpreted as a reaction to the technologically advanced world context. The bio-digital era that we live in calls into question our basic human existence and human future so that the exploration of womanhood must be stringently connected to the exploration of the human body itself and the damage that human activities are doing to the natural world, especially over the past twenty years.

III. Bodies in Literature

A paradox can be observed in contemporary societies where individuals are encouraged to prioritize their physical appearance and well-being through practices such as body modifications, fitness regimens, and health pursuits. However, the prevalence of technology, AI, cyborgs, and virtual reality distracts attention from the physical realm and relegates it to a secondary concern, an afterthought. Digital technology shifts focus from the materiality of the body to absorb users into an entirely digitized simulacrum of images and messages separated off from the physical presence of the human body or reducing it simply to a means through which users can inhabit digitally generated spaces without the physical presence of the body. Irish essayist Sinead Gleeson expands this latter idea when she explains that in everyday life, people tend to assume the material coordinates of the body, - its weight, the working of the organs - as a given:

> Unless it’s involved in pleasure or pain, we pay this moving mass of vessel, blood and bone no mind. The lungs inflate, muscles contract, and there is no reason to assume they won’t keep on doing so. […] The body – its presence, its weight – is both an unignorable entity and routinely taken for granted (Gleeson 1).

There is one consistent occurrence, though, that has been a moment of body awareness since the existence of humanity: the experience of illnesses. One usually becomes more body-conscious and aware of one’s own biological ephemerality in case of sickness, old age, or experiences at the limit when the finite capacities of matter suddenly become obvious. Psychologist Bessel Van Der Kolk

repeal the Amendment. This resulted in a victory for the Repeal Campaign, repealing the Amendment via the 36th Amendment of the Constitution of Ireland. (Carnegie, Roth, 2019)

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states that even when experience, especially a traumatic one, is treated as forgotten, the body works as a precise mnemonic device “the physical effect on the organs go unabated until they demand notice when they are expressed as illness […] the body continues to keep the score” (46). So that every emotion, every life event is carved into the body, and even when the thinking subject tends to or wants to forget experiences, our bodies are constant reminders. Kolk proposes that cells store the memory of emotional pain, and the only way to rewire these memories is through reprogramming the body itself and the automatic reaction patterns that it created (1-25).

Exploring one’s own and others’ lived experiences or coping mechanisms can potentially serve as a form of therapy that facilitates neural rewiring. Through engaging with narrative representations of human experiences navigating temporal and spatial domains, one’s conception of self and physical embodiment may be confronted and reevaluated. The relationship between literature and corporeal existence has long been characterized by a complex interplay of indeterminate factors. An intriguing study of this link between literature and the body is described in Paul Kalanithi’s memoir *When Breath Becomes Air*, which highlights the interplay between literature and neuroscience. Kalanithi, a former neurosurgeon, reflects on the significance of human relationality explored and narrated through literature and how it relates to the functioning of the brain and body. According to Kalanithi, the language of life as experienced through literature, such as passion, hunger, and love, is intricately linked to the language of neurons, digestive tracts, and heartbeats (Kalanithi 38). This memoir is relevant in the context of exploring the relationship between literature and science, particularly in the field of neuroscience. It underscores the idea that literary texts can provide insight into the workings of the human brain and body as embodied existence. Moreover, it highlights the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to understanding complex phenomena, such as the relationship between literature and neuroscience.

Contemporary cognitive research proposes that the mind is inextricably linked to the body, and that cognitive and affective processes are fundamentally embodied phenomena. According to Antonio Damasio, a contemporary cognitive philosopher, “the soul breathes through the body, and suffering, whether it starts in the skin or in a mental image, happens in the flesh” (*Descartes’ Error* xvii). Novels record what it is like to lead a life in a human body. Writing is tied to the body and what the body experiences, and through the process of reading, one is brought into the experience itself. Controlling a narrative through writing also means controlling bodies and minds that exist

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through the dimension of narrative space and time. *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Hillman *et al.*) argues that "the body participates in crucial ways in thinking, feeling and the shaping of our personalities […] being constitutive of what we call the self" (1). However, bodies are hard to define or describe, as David Hillman observes: "for the body, it is notoriously difficult to theorise or pin down, because it is mutable, in perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definition" (1). And whereas there are no actual bodies in the written text, literature can change the way we think of our embodied life. As early as 1949, Gilbert Ryle stated that "novelists have always been satisfied to exhibit people's motives, thoughts, perturbations, and habits, by describing their doings, grimaces, gestures, and tones of voice" (301). His observation indicate that bodies, or more specifically, the mode and experiences of an embodied life, have long been the main focus of narrative writing. Sustaining Merleau-Ponty's assumption that every experience that a human being can have is essentially an embodied one - "rather than a mind *and* a body, man is a mind *with* a body" - (Merleau-Ponty, *The world of perception* 67), the reading experience itself can be termed as a bodily one too. Gilbert Ryle calls for the rethinking of the "Carthezian myth" that mind and body are separate forms of sensation, a "category-mistake" in Ryle's opinion (Ryle 6). The cause of this mistake lies in the view that mind and body are 'things' in a common framework, their differences explained by the same set of attributes. This causes a theoretical difficulty, making it hard to explain how minds can influence and be influenced by bodies, how "a mental process such as willing cause spatial movements like the movements of the tongue?" (Ryle 9). As Ryle suggests minds are not mere "ghosts in the machine" (9) and do not belong to the same category as bodies that are affected and governed by mechanical laws. Both the mental and the bodily are different aspects of human experience but belong commonly and powerfully to a third yet unnamed level of ontology. So that rather than existing separately, they reside on a common level as embodied existence. This also means that the cognitive and somatic are 'symptoms' of something unified that we call human existence.

In the Buddhist tradition mind and body are so interlinked that they have a single name for it: *shinshin ichinyo. Shinshin ichinyo* is a concept in Buddhism that means "body and mind are not two." It emphasizes the interconnectedness and unity of the mind and body, disclosing how they cannot be viewed as separate entities (Jaffe). The idea is that the physicality of the body is intertwined with the functioning of the mind, and vice versa. This concept has implications for a range of fields, including psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and literature. In contemporary

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neuroscience, the view that the mind and body are intimately interconnected is known as embodied cognition. This perspective posits that cognition is not purely a product of the brain, but rather a product of the brain's interactions with the body and the environment (Wilson and Foglia). Embodied cognition highlights the ways in which bodily experiences shape and inform cognitive processes, such as perception, memory, and emotion. The idea of *shinshin ichinyo* has been influential in the field of psychology as well. For example, the practice of mindfulness meditation, which originated in Buddhism, emphasizes the integration of body and mind (Garland et al.). By focusing on bodily sensations and the breath, practitioners learn to cultivate a greater awareness of their physical and mental experiences, and to view them as interconnected.

Cognitive literary theories also view writing and literature as embodied processes. Lisa Zunshine posits that readers use their embodied experiences to create mental simulations of fictional worlds and characters (Zunshine). These simulations involve not only cognitive processes but also sensory, emotional, and bodily responses (Gerrig). In the context of cognitive literary theories, the concept of *shinshin ichinyo* highlights the importance of embodied experiences in the reading process. For example, the interconnection of mind and body suggests that readers' bodily sensations, gestures, and movements, can influence their cognitive responses to literary texts. Furthermore, the unity of body and mind implies that literary texts can have a profound effect on readers' physical and emotional experiences. One way in which cognitive literary theories have explored the relationship between embodiment and literature is through the concept of "embodied simulation," which refers to the process of mentally simulating bodily sensations and actions (Gallese and Sinigaglia). This process is thought to underlie a range of cognitive phenomena, including empathy, mental imagery, and even aesthetic experience (Gerrig).

Literature originates from the human ability to depict the complexities of human existence and interactions. However, the extent to which literary texts can help us comprehend these aspects of existence remains ambiguous. In a world where the body is no longer regarded as an objective fact of nature, it is necessary to reassess the cognitive framework employed to narrate individual corporeal experiences. Furthermore, if language affects thought and cognition, which are intertwined with the somatic on a common ground, then it has the potential to shape or influence the somatic as well. Thus, literature and literary texts have the power to create, transform, and

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convey cognitive-somatic experiences. Consequently, literature and the literary text can produce, modify and represent cognitive-somatic experiences.

IV. Bodies in Post Celtic Tiger Irish Fiction

Analysing various representations of the body in literature has become a well-established approach in literary criticism. According to critic Maeve E. Davey, the body is often the site through which "slippery concepts of national identity and ambivalence towards the prevailing conservative religious, cultural climate are represented" (12). The experience of living in a body has started to gain a special focus in contemporary Irish non-fiction writing. Sinéad Gleeson, a contemporary Irish essayist, has recently published a collection entitled *Constellations* that centres on a very personal yet equally universal theme of how it is to live through sickness, trauma, motherhood, and womanhood. The fourteen essays in the book tell the history of the female body, as the writer herself says: "it is about finding the parts you want to extract" (Dass, "Author Sinéad Gleeson"). She writes about the body in pain, which is considered a universal and almost inexpressible experience, yet, as Gleeson states," pain is as unique as a fingerprint, I was interested in the inexpressibility of it" (Dass, "Author Sinéad Gleeson"). She forces the reader into the living body through a meticulous female voice, described by Anne Enright as "coming from the blood and bone of her body's history" ("Reviewing Sinéad Gleeson's book").

In 2002 Jennifer Jeffers published *The Irish Novel at the end of the 20th century: Gender, Bodies and Power.* She conducted valuable research into the state of the Irish novel in the 20th century, meticulously analysing new voices and works that were dealing with the bodily: "1990s was a boom for the Irish novel, a new agenda for the genre of the novel" (1). She has noticed a wave of writers who abandoned or shifted 'classical Irish themes' and have moved the focus of attention to transnational topics, expressed through an attention to the somatic. She also points to a change from the "clichéd rural Ireland to the clichéd urban Ireland" (Jeffers 2). Her main argument relies on the idea that Ireland is in a "state of becoming" (Jeffers 7), arguing that Irish fiction that has challenged heterosexual culture has just started to gain strength. Her work mainly focuses on gender and the means through which certain writers like Emma Donoghue, Anne Enright, and Colm Tóibín challenge pre-existing modes of representation of the bodily and sexual identity. She

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uses the theories of Deleuze, Guattari, and Foucault to show why bodies matter and which bodies matter when it comes to narration.

In 2011 Susan Cahill published *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years:1990-2008: Gender, Bodies, Memory.* In many ways, she continues the work of Jeffers, examining the new wave of Irish writers with an intriguing focus on the bodily. Cahill looks at a set of Irish Celtic-Tiger writers: Anne Enright, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne and Colum McCann. Her work examines "how these writers raise questions in their fiction concerning the ways in which our conceptions of corporeal morphology influence our models of temporal relations and historical narrative" (Cahill, *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger* 26). The main argument suggests that Celtic-Tiger Ireland has gone through a boom of fiction writing and that the relationship towards the bodily and the narratorial mode of relating to the corporeal has created new perspectives that are worthy of critical examination.

The body and particularly bodies that differ from the regular white, male, heterosexual body have been ignored and repressed especially after the birth of the Free Irish State in 1922 leading up to the late 1960s. These attitudes can partially be explained by the influence of a religious mindset. As Cahill points out, most of these "discourses were deriving from Catholic attitudes towards the corporeal and a postcolonial mindset interested in establishing and maintaining an independent nation" (*Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger* 15). These artificially maintained norms started to crumble during the Celtic Tiger era and were severely exposed during the Post Celtic Tiger era. The official reports on the treatment of women in the Magdalene Laundries, alongside other Catholic Church and Irish State institutions, have affected the national consciousness. The body itself and the ways that body matters have changed within the realm of Irish society, affecting both genders. It is true that women were particularly the subject of these changes, and that the oppression was governed by a patriarchal control of the body, having consequences for the ways in which women experience their bodies. Nonetheless, the Post Celtic Tiger era shaped the country into a globalised society more broadly and changed the way its citizens understand the notion of belonging to that society. Globalization is an important factor in Ireland's history: many claims that it is one of the significant factors that has led the country towards a positive economic success owed to "the enthusiasm with which Ireland has approached the globalization of its economy and the opening up of its society to outside influences" (Fitz Gerald 55). In many ways, global attitudes, emerging as early as the Celtic Tiger era, have freed the country from the damaging effects of

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conservatism and insularity. At the same time, "a liberalized economy can generate high levels of inequality and poverty" (Kirby 211). The social outcomes of the economic success during the Celtic Tiger had severe consequences on people's livelihood, and it expanded the gap between the rich and the most vulnerable. It is important to view globalization with a critical eye, admitting its liberating effects that have freed the nation from a prescriptive agenda of a conservative mindset. On the other hand, it had laid the grounds for new, consumerist oppression operating in a hyper-capitalist context. The writers selected for this research explore both sides of this process through the lenses of individual life stories present in the narratives.

This thesis focuses on four Irish women writers, all active at the current moment but not all part of the same generation. Edna O'Brien and Anne Enright chronologically belong to earlier generations of Irish writers. One of the ties that bind these writers together is that they all encompass a global understanding of the Irish experience. Anne Enright, Sara Baume, Eimear McBride and Edna O'Brien create varying configurations of the body in order to generate queries surrounding gendered and intergenerational relations and human-animal coexistence. Their work asks how the body and embodied experience matters. The terms under which one understands bodily experience and the means that govern it cannot be viewed as a strictly national concern in their fiction. One needs to use global categories to grasp the complexity of the lived human experience in their novels. While all these writers remain Irish and their novels build on Irish experiences, they also extend the question of what it means to be Irish to what it means to be a human being living in an often chaotic and globalised world. In *The Green Road* by Enright, the Madigan family can be viewed as an allegory of the nation in its Celtic Tiger phase. At the same time, the Madigans' experiences can also be viewed as rather typical of any Western globalised, consumerist society. Enright opens the Irish reality and experience while critically questioning it through universal lenses. In the analysis of the novels that follow, I look at all these layers with a sharp focus on the body and the types of bodies that matter in contemporary society in conjunction with temporal and spatial relations that govern the embodied existence.

All four writers are women, but this thesis is not strictly governed by a feminist reading of the works in focus. It acknowledges the importance of these women authors within the stream of Irish literature, but it moves beyond fixed gender categories. This is not to deny the validity of a feminist reading, but the novels themselves configure the body in a broader context that implies nation and

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gender while looking towards general, global categories that influence them. The novelists explore both male and female bodies in their work, looking at how conceptions of the body are intertwined with the construction of histories, identity, memory, sexuality and language. All four writers share a concern in their novels to rethink the corporeal as a construct that moves away from a pre-existing set of expectations of what it should be.

The first chapter focuses on Edna O'Brien's novel *The Little Red Chairs*, analyzing the specifically somatic aspects of its narrative and style. I examine how the novel mingles fact and fiction while using the landscape as an active character of its own rights. O'Brien has been a taboo breaker in Irish society of past times. Her courageous engagement with the often-traumatic stories of the Irish households established a new language in Irish fiction in the 1960s. Most of O'Brien's works are rooted in an Irishness that for her is seen as a mode of identity and one that is "conditioned by a primal and almost predestined violation" (Nolan 18). Landscape, history and consciousness are all imbued in her fiction with a constant threat of aggression and physical violence. In her memoir *Mother Ireland*, she envisions the nation as predestined for suffering: "Ireland has been thought to have known invasion from the time when the Ice Age ended, and the improving climate allowed deer to throng her dense forest…It was inevitable that Ireland should be invaded by the powerful Saxons, her neighbours across the Irish Sea" (O'Brien 11-15). This view, in turn, is later expanded to her literary treatment of other nations. In her more recent novels like *The Little Red Chairs* or *Girl*, she explores the stories of other country's histories; nonetheless she still finds partial explanation in historical victimhood stemming from the countries' past.

In *The Little Red Chairs*, published in 2015, she focuses on the role that the body plays in the exploration of past and present relations. She is interested in both the collective and individual occlusions in narratives of national and global history. Her novel cuts into the layers of Irish historical consciousness but also looks at the similarities and differences with other national histories. Its visceral language exposes the impossibility of conceiving the body as a site of wholeness and fixity. On the contrary, her characters' bodies are fragmented and are scrutinised through language to an anatomic level. Similar to the other three novelists of the thesis, O'Brien gives a particularly important role to space and landscape in her novel.

Henri Bergson's ground-breaking theory of the body in the early 20th century outlines a crucial role for memories: "perception and recollection always interpenetrate each other, always exchanging

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something of their substance." (*Memory and Matter* 72) This, in turn, suggests that there is an interconnection between the body and the spaces that it traverses throughout its lifetime. Memories are stored, sometimes seemingly forgotten until the suitable external stimuli prompt the body to remember. The present is no longer seen as a sequence of successive moments but rather as something belonging to the past. The past is part of the present, and the present is concurrently constructed as the past. Bergson (*Memory and Matter*) uses the term perception to describe the complex process of acknowledging spatial and temporal coordinates. When we perceive an object, we select its boundaries, delineating it from what surrounds it. This perception also relies on the memory of that particular object that enables conscious recognition. Bergson observes this process of selection as emanating from the perspective of the body; thus, the physicality/morphology of the body dictates the mode in which we experience our reality. The same applies to memories; the body selects the elements of the past that are needed to sustain a coherent self. Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs* illustrates Bergson's thought through her portrayal of the temporal and the bodily conjointly. The narrative challenges the linearity of time and points to crucial interrelations between past and present through a privileging of memory that is material in its manifestations. O'Brien notices changes in the Irish society, admitting that her writing itself has adjusted to this new perspective: "the Irish psyche has changed, there is less fear. The judgmental umbrella is still there, but not as powerful, and it's not infiltrating ever y single aspect of life" (Freyne, "Edna O'Brien").

The second chapter looks at the narrative specificity of *The Green Road* written by Anne Enright and published in the same year as Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs*. There are many similarities between the two works, especially in how they render concepts such as identity, history, and memory by focusing on the bodily in a global context. Both novels dedicate a crucial role to memory, and they both deal with questions of storytelling. Born in 1962, Enright is of a younger generation than Edna O'Brien, but she has inherited O'Brien's taboo-breaking and fearless creative energy. She was the first female novelist to win the Man Booker Prize (in 2007) for her work *The Gathering* towards the last years of the Celtic Tiger era. Loneliness, ageing, motherhood, sexuality and depression are generic points of concern in her fiction, onto which the gradual layers of history and nationality are cast.

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Her latest fiction, described by critic Emer Nolan as her "mature fiction" (165) – *The Gathering* (2007), *The forgotten waltz* (2011)*, The Green Road* (2015), *Actress* (2020) – reflects this strategy, showing how these universal, human categories operate in a world severely hit by the effects of the consumerist, economically prosperous Celtic Tiger era. Chronologically she is of a younger generation of writers than Edna O'Brien, whom she praises for her fearless energy to break silences and her talent to capture "the precise emotional weight of objects, their seeming hopefulness and their actual indifference to those who seek to be consoled" (Enright, "Country Girl by Edna O'Brien"). She cannot be categorized as strictly a Post Celtic Tiger writer since, similar to O'Brien, at the start of the Celtic Tiger era, she was already a well-established writer. Nonetheless, in her recent fiction, she directly engages with neoliberal changes during the country's recent past. *The Green Road* analyses the complex relationship between memory, history, and the body within the realm of the history and experiences of one single Irish family unit. The novel sheds critical light on the hidden inequalities triggered by consumerist policies. Its plot explores the changes of the Celtic Tiger period, shifting the focus onto the body, which becomes a sight where pressing questions about sex, gender, nation, and memory emerge. The body is presented as an element of instability while also seen as fixed materiality through which memories and the experience of the present moment are filtered.

Of relevance to O'Brien's treatment of somatic experience in her fiction is Henri Bergson's view of the body as shaped through collision, continually coming into contact with other objects and bodies. The body adapts itself as early as infancy as the centre of reference: its distance from other objects determines the type of action and reaction needed (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 42-44). The distinction of inside and outside is merely that of a part (body) and the whole (all the other bodies and objects): "the notion of exteriority and interiority is merely the distinction between my body and other bodies" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 43). This understanding is more than merely suggesting that we are shaped by the outside experiences we gather: it explicitly points to the fact that we only exist because of the symbiosis with external reality. In Enright's novel *The Green Road*, the mingling of open and closed spaces as well as all the actions of the characters are also determined by the type of space they occupy. The members of the Madigan family lie at the centre of the narrative. They travel to various places in the hope of finding their identities and their purpose in a globalised world. This is staged in the novel through a heightened focus on the connections, symbolic and actual, that are created between the body and its surroundings. The

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chapter explores how space is permeated by memories, becoming a potent means of linking generations and embodied identities.

The third chapter turns attention to the work of a new generation of Irish women authors, beginning with Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. Claire Bracken describes McBride as the "forerunner of this recent explosion in experimentalism" and one who "harnesses the experimental form to take stock of the harrowing traumas of sexual abuse" ("A Continuum of Irish Women Writing I" 9). Representing a younger generation of Irish women writers, McBride was born in Liverpool in 1976 to Northern Irish parents. The family moved to County Sligo in Ireland, where McBride spent most of her childhood. She studied acting and drama at the Drama Centre London (Wilder, "In Conversation with Eimear McBride"). She has so far published three novels, her first, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, was published in 2013, while her latest *Strange Hotel* came out in 2020. In 2014 McBride has won the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction.

McBride's style is highly experimental, deploying a language that is visceral in attempts to express a pre-verbal state of thinking. Her novel operates with an intense focus on the bodily, especially on women's bodies, as targets of sexual abuse, rape and generational trauma. Her narrative enters the somatic realm, generating valuable insights into the situation of women in Irish society and the vulnerability of the human condition in general. McBride's novel is an experiment of returning to a pre-cognitive human state, capturing the reactive somatic manifestations of the body. Language often acts as a barrier in this respect, especially when the experience in question is located at the limit of personal experience. Bergson's understanding of time and memory being in a constant collision through physical experience provide valuable critical insight into *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. The Girl's narrative follows a heterogeneous, memory-impregnated timeline, not a homogeneous, measurable, fixed time interval. It is a manifestation of a time that Bergson described as the context that gives rise to "pure duration (durée)" (*Time and Free Will* 100), one that allows the "ego to refrain from separating its present state from its former states" (*Time and Free Will 100*).

The final chapter of the thesis considers two works by another new Irish female author, Sara Baume: *Spill, Simmer, Falther, Wither* and *A Line Made By Walking*. Sara Baume is a contemporary Irish writer and visual artist. Her fiction raises important questions about the limitations of art and the body, the struggles of early adulthood, Irish identity, womanhood, the

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transformation of the rural-urban attitudes, the relationship that humans have with their physical existence and, through it, with the natural world. Her fiction points to a heightened need for greater ecological awareness in the present times. Baume's novels are reminiscent of those of Enright and O'Brien in their exploration of the body and its position within historical and temporal paradigms. However, Baume's unique style and narrative structure set her apart from the previous generation. Her prose is innovative and true to the physical, emotional, and societal contexts she portrays. Baume is firmly rooted in the Irish cultural domain, yet her fictional world also confronts the existential crisis of the contemporary self. What binds her works together is the versatile presence of objects and "creatures", a diverse mix of animals, plants, and humans. Baume's approach can be understood in terms of Jean-Luc Nancy's suggestion that words are comprehensible through the body and are essentially linked to what the body as physical substance experiences (15). At the same time, the body as materiality is a complex "open space" and not a "filled space," a "place of existence" that is not settled but rather in a constant flow (Nancy 15). Novels have the power to carry their readers into an act of possession by allowing the entry into the experiences of characters so that through reading, our "emotional and cognitive repertoire expands" (Mahon 103). Baume's work can also be described as a novel that forces the reader into the centre of experience. Chapter three analyses the narrative language, showing how Baume stretches its possibilities. It also researched how landscape and space become governing forces in the novel.

This thesis presents a diverse selection of Irish writers who share a common interest in representing the human body as it navigates through time and space. These narratives portray the body as a dynamic entity that interacts with its surroundings and other bodies, and they explore the boundaries and intersections of bodily experiences. The thesis also examines the evolving landscape of contemporary Irish literature, highlighting significant shifts in its scope and content. The primary focus of analysis is on the body, and its various connections with space, history, and other bodies.

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V. Somatic language and Naturalism

In order to establish a comprehensive analytical framework, it is necessary to define specific terms and distinctions applied in the analysis. "Somatic language" is a phrase denoting language that pertains to the physical body, including its sensations, movements, and functions. This term is crucial for the analysis of the novels in this thesis, as the body is a primary focus and serves as a vehicle for expressing various themes and concerns. Through the use of somatic language, readers can gain a deeper comprehension of the characters' experiences and emotions, as well as the social and cultural issues that are examined in the novels. By paying attention to the somatic language in the novels, the reader can discern how the authors use the body as a medium for conveying meaning and representing various aspects of the human experience. Additionally, the use of somatic language can be seen as a means of engaging with the ethical and aesthetic considerations that arise when representing the body in literature. This term becomes relevant in cognitive literary studies-and theories.

Cognitive narrative theories explore how our brains process and make sense of narratives. These theories look at the cognitive processes involved in our understanding of narratives, including how we perceive and interpret them, how we form mental representations of the characters and events within them, and how we remember and make sense of the overall narrative structure. Cognitive literary studies apply these theories to the analysis of literature, exploring how the structure and content of narratives shape the way we think, feel, and respond to them. By examining the cognitive and emotional impact of literature on readers, these studies aim to deepen our understanding of how literature works and what makes it meaningful and engaging.

Cognitive literary theorists such as Antonio Damasio, Daniel Dennett, Oliver Sacks describe somatic narrative language as the way in which the body and brain respond to and interpret the events and experiences presented in a narrative. These theorists argue that narratives have a direct impact on our emotions, thoughts, and physical responses. Somatic narrative language is therefore focused on the ways in which a narrative engages and affects the reader's body and brain. Damasio in his work entitled *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Mind*, states that emotions and physical sensations are an integral part of our experience of narratives, and that our brain's

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somatic markers, i.e., the physical sensations associated with emotions, play a crucial role in shaping our responses to literary works. Dennett in his revolutionary study *Consciousness Explained* has explored the idea of "narrative selfhood," arguing that the stories we tell about ourselves, and our experiences are an essential part of our sense of identity. Somatic narrative language refers to the way in which narratives engage our bodies and brains on a physical and emotional level. It emphasizes the sensory and emotional impact of narratives, including the ways in which they elicit physical sensations and affect our emotional states. This approach to narrative analysis focuses on the embodied experience of reading and highlights the ways in which literature can shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Overall, the analysis of somatic narrative language in the novels addressed is an important aspect of understanding how the body is constructed and represented in contemporary Irish women's fiction. Nonetheless, it is important to note that somatic language is not uniform across all the works, but rather manifests itself differently within each novel. For instance, in Eimear McBride's novel, somatic language is characterized by the disintegration of language and its coherence, as it is rendered powerless in the face of bodily reactions. Her prose style destabilizes the boundaries between the body and the mind, reflecting the protagonist's fragmented psyche. Conversely, Edna O'Brien's usage of somatic language is concentrated on depicting moments of intense terror with a Gothic sensibility. O'Brien's prose style is more conventional than McBride's, but she still uses language in a highly charged, visceral way to evoke the physical and emotional dimensions of her characters' experiences. Enright also uses somatic language to explore the connections between the body, memory, and trauma. *The Green Road* features a diverse range of bodily experiences, including childbirth, illness, aging, and death. Enright's narrative style is more traditional than McBride's, but she still experiments with syntax and structure to convey the somatic dimension of her characters' experiences. The novel questions the idea of the body as a stable, enduring entity. As Rosaleen, the aging matriarch of the family, begins to experience the physical and mental decline of old age, Enright uses somatic language to explore the fragility and vulnerability of the human body. Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking* looks at the connections between the body and the natural world. The novel features detailed descriptions of the protagonist's experiences of nature, including both its beauty and its violence. Baume's prose style is highly poetic, using rich imagery and sensory detail to evoke the protagonist's bodily experiences. As such, the term somatic

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language is not entirely identical in each novel, but instead is employed in unique ways that are tailored to the specific narrative and thematic concerns of each work. Nonetheless, despite the stylistic differences between these four novels, they all use somatic language and style to explore the connections between the body, memory, and trauma.

Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, referring to the subjective experience of time, is closely related to the idea of somatic, embodied narrative language, which also emphasizes the sensory and bodily dimensions of literary experience (*Memory and Matter* 60). Both concepts focus on the subjective, experiential aspect of our engagement with narrative, emphasizing the ways in which we are immersed in the world of the text and how we experience it through our bodies and senses (Richardson 2002). Somatic, embodied narrative language seeks to create a sense of immediacy and intimacy in the reader's experience of the text by emphasizing the sensory and bodily dimensions of the story. This approach can be particularly effective in evoking emotional responses and creating a sense of psychological depth and complexity, as characters are depicted as embodied beings, shaped by their experiences and interactions with others (Woloch 2003). Bergson's concept of *durée* is also concerned with the experiential dimension of narrative, emphasizing the way in which time is experienced subjectively as a continuous, flowing duration rather than as discrete, measurable units. This approach can be particularly effective in creating a sense of temporal continuity and fluidity in the reader's experience of the text, inviting them to engage with the story on a more intuitive and experiential level (Ansell Pearson 1999). In this way, Bergson's concept of *durée* and the idea of somatic, embodied narrative language are closely related, both emphasizing the subjective and experiential dimensions of literary experience and inviting readers to engage with the story on a more intimate and immersive level. The thesis uses some of Bergson's theories on time, memory and also shows how these concepts affect the body and ultimately the narrative language.

The focus on how the body is represented in language and the usage of realistic, somatic language shows similarities with Naturalism. Naturalist approaches seek to accurately represent the physical and psychological aspects of the world, they differ in their emphasis on the subjective experiences of individuals and the role of language in shaping those experiences. It is a literary movement that emerged in the late 19th century and is characterized by a deterministic worldview that emphasizes

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the scientific study of human behavior and the natural world (Pizer 3). The movement's origins can be traced to the French novelist Émile Zola, who argued that literature should be like a laboratory, exploring human behavior through scientific observation and analysis (Bloom 27). Naturalism emphasizes the influence of social and environmental factors on human behavior and often portrays characters who are shaped by their circumstances rather than their own choices. It was also influenced by the rise of Darwinian evolutionary theory and the idea that humans are subject to the same natural laws as other animals (Lehan 11).

Naturalist narrative language, as described by Emile Zola, emphasizes the importance of empirical observation and scientific methodology in the creation of a narrative. Zola believed that the novelist should be a scientist, carefully observing and analyzing the world around them in order to create a faithful reproduction of reality in their writing. As he argued in *The Experimental Novel:* "it is undeniable that the naturalistic novel, such as we understand it to-day, is a real experiment that a novelist makes on man by the help of observation" (Zola 22). Zola emphasizes the importance of narrative specificity, the careful and precise observation of details and the faithful reproduction of reality in the novel.

While both somatic and naturalist narrative language are concerned with creating powerful and engaging narratives, they approach this task from different directions. Somatic narrative language emphasizes the emotional and physiological impact of a narrative on the reader, while naturalist narrative language emphasizes the importance of empirical observation and scientific methodology in generating a realistic and faithful portrayal of the world. Furthermore, a notable contrast between the Naturalist and Cognitive perspectives on literature and the individual pertains to the notion of free will. Naturalists argue that human behaviour is largely determined by biological, social, and environmental factors beyond our control (Pizer 4). This view stands in contrast to the belief in free will, that individuals have the power to choose their actions and shape their own destinies. Zola's emphasis on narrative specificity is closely linked to his views on free will. He believed that characters in the novel should be depicted as products of their environment, shaped by social, economic, and biological forces beyond their control (Zola, *The Experimental Novel* 6). Zola rejected the idea of free will, arguing that individuals are determined by their circumstances and that their actions are predictable based on their character and the environment in which they live

(Zola, *The Experimental Novel* 6). According to Zola, the task of the novelist was to reveal the determinism that governs human behaviour, not to promote the illusion of free will. He believed that the novel should expose the hidden forces that shape human experience and behaviour, and that this could only be achieved through careful observation and detailed description of the world (Zola, *The Experimental Novel* 8). Overall, *The Experimental Novel* emphasizes the importance of empirical observation and scientific methodology in the creation of novels (Zola 3). His focus on narrative specificity and the rejection of free will reflect his belief that the modern novel should be a means for uncovering the underlying forces that govern human behaviour, rather than an affirmation of individual agency and freedom.

In contrast, cognitive theories provide a nuanced perspective on the concept of free will. While acknowledging the interconnectedness of the mind and body and the influence of bodily functions on consciousness, cognitive theorists recognize that free will can still be present even within the context of the embodied human experience. This is because the self is understood as a process rather than a fixed entity, and is closely tied to autobiographical memory (Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind* 2010). Cognitive theorists emphasize that the scientific explanation of decision-making does not preclude the possibility of free will, but rather provides a more complex and multi-faceted understanding of human behaviour. Antonio Damasio argues that the human brain is capable of generating conscious, deliberate decision-making that allows for some degree of free will (Damasio, *Descartes' Error* 3). He offers the example of moving one's finger as an illustration of the interplay between unconscious and conscious decision-making. While the initial impulse to move the finger may arise unconsciously, the conscious decision to carry out the action ultimately determines the action (Damasio, *Descartes' Error* 52). Similarly, Damasio cites the decision of couples to get married as an illustration of the role of conscious decision-making in shaping our lives. While factors such as physical attraction and cultural norms influence our initial interest in a potential partner, the decision to marry ultimately involves a conscious evaluation of the costs and benefits of the relationship (Damasio *Self Comes to Mind* 96). His view emphasizes the role of emotions and feelings in shaping our decisions, but also acknowledges that our choices are influenced by both internal and external factors beyond our control. By highlighting the complex interplay between conscious and unconscious decision-making, cognitive theories offers a more nuanced view of the question of free will than the determinism of naturalism.

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While naturalism and cognitive theories like Damasio's offer different perspectives on the question of free will, they share a common interest in understanding the workings of the human mind and the factors that shape human behaviour. Through their respective approaches to the study of the mind and behaviour, naturalists and cognitive theorists have deepened our understanding of the complex forces that shape our actions and decisions. The examination of novels in this thesis reveals that the treatment of free will and language style share more similarities with the cognitive approaches to decision-making. While the novels explore deterministic and naturalist views, they also heavily incorporate the idea of free will by emphasizing individual agency and choice. The narratives delve into the psychological and emotional aspects of human behaviour, exploring the intricacies of decision-making and the possibility of personal transformation. Overall, these works highlight the complex interplay between external and internal factors that shape human behavior, while also acknowledging the role of individual choice and agency.

In conclusion, the thesis seeks to provide a holistic analysis of contemporary Irish women's fiction by eliding prescriptively ecofeminist or new materialist interpretations of the novels addressed. While these recently-developed theoretical approaches are illuminating in understanding the intersection of global accounts of human experiences and specific local concerns in Irish women's fiction, the focus of my analysis is that of tracing changes in the contemporary Irish novel rather than categorizing them immediately. As literary critic Eugene O'Brien notes in *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*, the contemporary Irish novel reflects a complex mixture of concerns, including globalization, gender, identity, and history, which resist simple categorization (15). Avoiding direct categorization of the novels addressed according to specific theories such as ecofeminism and new materialism, the thesis offers a more nuanced analysis of the ways in which contemporary Irish novels respond to these concerns and shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

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Chapter I.

Edna O'Brien, *The Little Red Chairs*

I.1. Introduction

Edna O'Brien is by no means the first Irish woman novelist, yet she is amongst the few who have achieved worldwide recognition. Nolan portrays her as "iconic Irish Woman Author" (17). Her courageous engagement with Irish history and the often-traumatic stories of domestic Irish households have established a new language in Irish fiction. Shedding light on attitudes and practices in past times, the hypocritical nature of that which often lay hidden, as well as the raw suffering of the human body, have always been the preoccupations in her writing. Her first work, *The Country Girls* (1960), was originally banned in the Republic of Ireland. Her language and the social issues that she tackled through it were considered too challenging to the official image of a pious Irish Catholic society during the 1950s, when a deeply traditional and conservative form of Catholicism was all-pervasive in the Republic. Of the abusive father in O'Brien's novel, Declan Kiberd notes how "in a country which piously urged its young women to treat their father as a kind of god, it was subversive to depict scenes of parental violence as routine" (62). It took more than fifty years for O'Brien to receive official recognition from the Irish State. In 2015 she received a public apology from the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, for the treatment that she received in her native country through the banning of her books. The President described her as a "fearless truth teller" (Vulliamy, "Edna O'Brien"). Her writing career evinces unfailing creative energy. Her works span over various historical phases and literary trends. At the core of her writing lies an unstinting determination to address and record the realities of the world in which she lives. O'Brien explores religion, immigration, sexuality, the situation of women, wars and nationalistic concerns on a global level. O'Brien began writing in an age when, as critic Claire Bracken observes, it was hard to "identify any literary foremothers" in Ireland ("A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I" 4). At the same time, she has maintained a continuum into the contemporary landscape of the post-Celtic Tiger era, characterized by "intensive visibility" (Bracken, "A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I" 1) of women writers who challenge neoliberal ideas. Her novel, *The Little Red Chairs* (2015), is part of this innovative phase of contemporary Irish women's fiction. Although coming from an older generation, O'Brien's recent work can still be listed alongside

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novels of younger writers like Eimear McBride, Sara Baume and Anne Enright. They all question the political and cultural current of the present times while urging the need to imbue this current with a greater sense of solidarity with the suffering of others.

Edna O'Brien distinguishes between three distinct periods of her writing career: the first "about myself and other women" and the second on "themes about my country, Ireland" (O'Shea, "Everyone needs a home"). She describes the recent third phase as "about the world, about the monstrous killing" (Wachtel, "Radio interview with Edna O'Brien"). In each phase, there is an implicit connection to homeland and to Irish culture. However, her two latest novels, *The Little Red Chairs* and *Girl*, reach beyond Ireland to world historical events. *Girl* addresses the horror that the Boko Haram girls faced in Nigeria, while the protagonist of *The Little Red Chairs* is based on Radovan Karadžić, the Serbian war criminal from the Balkans conflict of the 1990s. By broadening the perspective to a global humanitarian one, O'Brien also enters into the histories of nations unfamiliar to her. This carries some of its own dangers, even if fiction carries the paradoxical power to utter realities without being subject to tests of factual accuracy. Some critics claim that by focusing on micro-histories of other nations, O'Brien oversteps ethical boundaries and "is appropriating other people's stories" (Russell, "Edna O'Brien"). O'Brien has consciously ignored these objections and tackles her subjects with a great sense of responsibility, as she explained in one of her recent interviews: "the world is crying out for such stories to be told and I intend to explore them while there is a writing bone left in my body" (O'Hagan Sean).

I.2. Narrating the Body: Edna O'Brien's Somatic Language

In one of her early interviews Edna O'Brien states that "the body contains the life story just as much as the brain" ("Edna O'Brien interviewed by Philip Roth"). This suggests that the physical effects of the experience are just as crucial as the mental states that the event produces. The relationship between the written text and the affective human body has always been a topical concern in the literary field. The body is seen as constitutive of what we call the self. However, bodies are hard to define or describe, as David Hillman argues in *The Cambridge Companion to the Body*: "for the body it is notoriously difficult to theorize or pin down, because it is mutable, in

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perpetual flux, different from day to day and resistant to conceptual definition" (1). And whereas there are no actual bodies in the written text, literature can change the way we understand our embodied lives. Through the act of reading, the narrative is able to reveal details about what it is to be human in this world. According to critic Jean-Michel Rabaté, different styles and modes of expression can be attributed to different political, social and economic structures surrounding the birth of the literary work (231). Nonetheless, the actual linguistic "product" – the narrative itself – is always about "the interaction of the human bodies" (Rabaté 231) inside and outside of the text. Novels explore the unavoidable relationship between the body and language, a relationship that has the capacity to sublimate or redirect bodily activities as much as linguistic practices. Jean Luc-Nancy suggests that words are only comprehensible through the body and are essentially linked to what the body as physical matter experiences (15). At the same time, he points out that the body as materiality is a complex "open space" and not a "filled space", a "place of existence", that is not settled: it is in a state of constant motion (Nancy 15). By allowing entrance into the experiences of fictional characters, the readers' "emotional and cognitive repertoire expands" (Mahon 103).

Edna O'Brien has continuously tested this capacity of language in her literary works. Her narratives carry specific stylistic dislocations while always maintaining a guiding authorial voice. This transmits the emotions, the reactions of the characters, allowing the reader direct entrance into the psychic and somatic world of characters. Her writing is also directly linked to a general social experience through individual character experience. This implies a body-language-feeling tripartite relationship, one that is expressed through an objectively descriptive style of writing. She always tries to create a universal connection based on a shared human existence, but she also focuses on understanding a particular national/international historical state of a specific culture. O'Brien refers to the process of writing, in the following visceral manner: "it comes out of afflictions, out of the gouged times when the heart is cut open" (*Country Girl* 156). The personal is always mingled with public affections and events, creating a historically and somatically convincing fictional context for readers. O'Brien's language can be termed experimental because it 'touches' upon the body. In certain narratives she resorts to a depiction of minute details of bodily sensations and experiences. Sometimes she achieves this by using a first-person narrative, as in her novel *Night*. The story is narrated by Mary Hooligan, who reminisces on her past adventures, sexual encounters, and tragedies. Her honest, unique, first-person voice emerges from what the body feels and experiences.

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Her memories arise from a place where the physical experience occurs. The recollections reactivate the feelings that her body experienced during those crucial moments of her life. Henri Bergson's theory of the body outlines a crucial role for memories: "perception and recollection always interpenetrate each other, always exchanging something of their substance" (*Matter and Memory* 72). This in turn suggests the interconnection between the body and the spaces that it traverses throughout its lifetime. Memories are stored, sometimes seemingly forgotten, until the suitable external stimuli arise to compel the body to remember.

O'Brien's language cuts to the bone and draws the reader into the center of the narrated events. At the beginning of *Night* Mary Hooligan is sitting on her bed in a dark room with the curtains closed. Similar to James Joyce's central heroine in *Ulysses*, Molly Bloom, she opens up on all the details of her troubled womanhood and tries to understand the motivations behind some crucial life-events. Andrew O'Hagan describes it is a "state of language where words are steppingstones over the dark" (viii). The relationship between language and the experiencing body is crucial in this novel. Numerous O'Brien narratives, such as *The Country Girls, In the Forest*, and *The Little Red Chairs*, highlight the significance of physical experiences in shaping the stories that they tell. Through evocative descriptions and vivid imagery, O'Brien emphasizes the embodied nature of human experience, lending a palpable sense of realism and authenticity to her work. By foregrounding the body in this way, O'Brien challenges us to confront the complex interplay between physical sensations, emotions, and the narrative construction of meaning. O'Hagan states that this is exactly what makes her writing unique, the mode through which she encumbers this capacity of the literary language:

> You read Edna O'Brien for the sentences, for the quick invention. You read her for the heart that is in it and the music, the sense of people and a country discovering themselves in the light of something new. Writing as she did, the author inaugurated a new way of thinking about women and faith in Ireland, and, against the objections, she took sex out of the shadows and aired it in public. She does it with its style and she does it with the sentences, this unclosing of the mind (O'Hagan x).

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Style is crucial in the O'Brien oeuvre. What Anne Fogarty expresses in a review about contemporary novelist Eimear McBride is true of O'Brien's works as well: "style is not just a literary accoutrement in this novel, it is an existential recourse" ("It was like a baby crying" 23). This chapter focuses on O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs* with the direct intent to analyze her specific somatic narratorial language and style. It also details how the novel mingles fact and fiction while animating the landscape into an active personality in its own right.

The Little Red Chairs is a novel of contemporary history based partly on events from recent Bosnian history, namely the Siege of Sarajevo at the end of twentieth century. The male protagonist of the narrative is modelled on the Bosnian Serbian leader, Radovan Karadžić. The narrative is divided into three parts, separated by different spatial and temporal coordinates and connected through the main heroine, Fidelma. The first part takes place in a remote village in the west of Ireland, the second in multicultural London and the third in The Hague in The Netherlands. The novel explores the human condition through a vivid depiction of international political concerns and female experiences in global contexts. Mingled into these concerns are minor but crucial sub-plots, enriching the narrative with contemporary issues around women's rights, refugee problems, racism, rural living conditions, war and victimhood.

The Siege of Sarajevo is considered the longest in modern history, during which half a million civilians struggled to survive (Bedford, "Meet Bosnians"). Bosnian Serb army troops supported by the Serbian military besieged Sarajevo on 5 April 1992. The siege lasted for almost four years. Over a quarter of a million people were stuck in a city that was bombarded from all sides. The siege ended on the 29 February 1996, a total of 13952 people having been killed (BBC "Witness Programme"). One of the leaders of the Serbian troops was Radovan Karadžić. He managed to escape and hide from authorities for over thirteen years. During this time, he lived in various countries under several false names, including that of Dr. Dragan David Dabic (Borger, "The Hunt for Radovan Karadžić"). Using his training as a psychiatrist, he earned his living practicing alternative medicine and became known as a "mystique healer" (Borger, "The Hunt for Radovan Karadžić"). He was eventually caught while travelling on a bus towards Belgrade, after being closely watched and followed for several days beforehand by secret security forces. He was arrested in 2008 and held at The Hague. In 2016 he was pronounced guilty of several crimes, including

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genocide, ethnic cleansing and rape. He was sentenced to forty years in prison (Rauch, "Radovan Karadžić"). Edna O'Brien conducted thorough research before writing *The Little Red Chairs*. She borrowed elements from Radovan's real life and consulted with experts, including Edward Vulliamy, a British reporter who was in Sarajevo during the Siege and witnessed many of the horrors (Parker, "Edna O'Brien"). Vulliamy is also one of the few journalists who had the opportunity to interview Karadžić during his trial at The Hague. It was with his help that O'Brien had the opportunity to attend some of Karadžić's trials at The Hague in person (Parker, "Edna O'Brien"). She admitted in an interview that the idea of the novel was born from a picture of the captured, long-bearded Karadzic seen in a newspaper: "I was writing about the metamorphosis from healer to killer […] from power to the image of this healer who was taken as a 'holy' man from a bus" (Lang, "Interview with Edna O'Brien").

In *The Little Red Chairs*, the character based on the real-life figure of Karadžić is a man named Dr. Vlad Dragan who escapes from Serbia to seek shelter at a small Irish mountain town called Cloonoila. The story mingles factual and fictitious details, combining first and third person narration. The grounding of the plot in historical reality is made evident from the very beginning. The title of the novel is the name of an artistic installation created to commemorate the children killed during the Siege of Sarajevo in 1992 to which O'Brien refers to directly: "On the 6th of April 2012, to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the start of the siege of Sarajevo by Bosnian Serb forces 11,541 chairs were laid out in rows along the eight hundred metres of the Sarajevo high street […] Six hundred and forty-three chairs represented the children" (O'Brien, *The Little Red Chairs* 2).

The epigraphs of the novel also mingle fact and fiction. One of the quotations is from Chilean writer Roberto Bolaῆo: "An individual is no match for history" (*The Little Red Chairs* 1). O'Brien augments her narrative with a quotation from Bolaῆo's story, *By Night in Chile*, that centres on the struggle of an individual to witness and confess the horrors of modern Chilean history. O'Brien signals the vital importance that literature plays in uttering individual stories that are often left out from the grand narratives of history. At the same time, she aligns the Bolaῆo reference with another quotation taken from a Serbian saga: "The wolf is entitled to the lamb" (*The Little Red Chairs* 1). The "lamb" refers to the innocent victims of the Serbian war, with the wolf referring to Vlad

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Dragan, called the "wolf-child." Animalistic features are thus interwoven with the human, and much like the landscape itself, the characters too resemble animals in the novel. O'Brien offers an alternative narrative of history, connecting Karadžić to Ireland as the hiding place of this criminal. The histories of Ireland and the Balkans are aligned, compared and contrasted in the novel. As critic Dan O'Brien observes: "contemporary Ireland is implicated in the fratricidal violence of Eastern Europe" (195).

As early as 1984 writer Philip Roth interviewed Edna O'Brien and described her writing as "a prose like a piece of fine meshwork, a net of perfectly observed sensuous details." O'Brien's narrative creates a language that dwells on the infinitesimal details of the experience. The opening lines of *The Little Red Chairs* reach out to all the senses, capturing the visual, auditory and tactile elements of the Irish landscape:

> The town takes its name from the river. The currents, swift and dangerous, surges with a manic glee, chunks of wood and logs of ice borne along its trail. In the small sidings where water is trapped, stones, blue, black, purple, shine up out to the river bed, perfectly smoothed and rounded and it is as though seeing a clutch of good-sized eggs in a bucket of water. The noise is deafening (*The Little Red Chairs* 3).

O'Brien creates a specific balance of the real and fantastical states of the landscapes. On the one hand the natural elements become characters in themselves. After the almost poetic description of the wild, remote forces of nature, the narrator extends the horizon of the reading to contemporary history. The reader is never allowed to fully forget the exterior context in O'Brien's prose, nor to be flummoxed by the scintillating atmosphere of almost fairy-tale landscapes. The aesthetically appealing description is posited as background to the political, historical elements that introduce the human character into the illusion-type mystery:

> Had he ventured in further, the stranger would have seen the flags of several countries, an indication of how much cosmopolitan the place has become and in a bow of nostalgia there is old farm machinery, a combine harvester, a mill wheel and a replica of an Irish cottage, when the peasants lived in hovels and ate nettles to survive (*The Little Red Chairs* 3).

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The protagonist, Vlad Dragan, refers to himself as the "wolf-child." The text itself offers several unencumbered close-up enactments of horror and physical vivid imagery. Through death our readerly attention is also shifted to the body itself, more exactly to the dead bodies. There is a constant juxtaposition in the narrative of living bodies and of corpses. The chairs of the installation that the novel's motto uses stand for the absence of the living as well as for the emotional gap left on the consciences of survivors. Jean Luc Nancy described these bodies best when addressing the killings in Bosnia: "there are tortured, violated, wounded, humiliated bodies in Bosnia […] bodies that are denied their being as bodies" (122). By the vivid and direct link to a wider historical context, O'Brien allows the capacity of the literary text to both distance the reader from the harshness of the event yet also to re-live it as a first-person insider. As Steve Connor argues, literature is an ideal tool to relive traumatic experiences because of its mediated nature. Literature makes the experience less powerful; it affects our bodily senses, but maintains a dimming linguistic distance:

> The body and the world are both mediated by the fact that they are both forms of mediation […] Literature is likely to remain central to the work of making sense of the senses precisely because of its lack of immediacy - because, as in the past it continues to provide a kind of theater into which the experience of the senses can be displaced (Connor 192).

Franz Kafka considers how this softening effect created by the linguistic distance is just illusionary. In his view the characters and events of a novel are meant sometimes to have a more powerful effect on the reader than the actual event itself:

> We need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us (Kafka 16).

O'Brien's novel both distances us from the experience even as it "banishes us into a forest" where the acuteness of all bodily sensations are maximized. It uses language with an affective element. The term affect refers to the emotional response that a literary work elicits in the reader. It

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encompasses a range of emotions, from joy and pleasure to sadness, fear, and anxiety, as well as more subtle emotional states such as ambivalence or confusion. Jean-Michel Rabaté explores the ways in which literature can elicit emotional responses in readers and the role of affect in the reading experience in his essay *Literature and Affect* (2015). This includes the use of sensory imagery, such as descriptions of sights, sounds, and smells, as well as the portrayal of characters' emotions and the use of language to create a specific mood or atmosphere. Rabaté argues that affect is a crucial aspect of literary interpretation and that an awareness of the emotional impact of a text can deepen our understanding of its meaning and significance. For cognitive literary theories and the representation of the body in Irish contemporary fiction, an understanding of affect and affective reading is particularly relevant. In Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs*, affective narrative language is used to create a sense of unease and emotional intensity in the reader. For example, in the opening chapter, the descriptions of the arrival of the stranger, the tense interactions between the villagers, and the foreboding atmosphere created by the storm all contribute to a feeling of impending danger and suspense. The use of vivid, sensory language to describe the setting and characters' emotions also adds to the emotional impact of the novel. In addition, the forest in the Edna O'Brien novel has its own mysterious affective language. It carries anthropomorphic characteristics of a monstrous kind. It is not some idyllic rural setting. While it resembles natural elements, it is an almost mystical place, a part of the world where everyday reality is suspended. It is as if this forest manipulates and controls its inhabitants, already suggesting through its fearsome wildness that it will become a location for terrifying events. The forest as a setting sets up a challenging terrain where public-personal boundaries become blurred.

The Little Red Chairs recalls O'Brien's 2002 novel *In the Forest.* After the novel's publication many reviewers complained that the clear reference to the real event has overstepped a moral boundary, objecting that "there is simply no artistic need for so close an intrusion into other people's grief" (O'Toole, "A fiction too far"). However, O'Brien, by means of a tragic and apprehensive tone, was offering lamentation and respect for these victims. *In the Forest* is not only a fictional re-imagining of a triple murder, but a symbolic re-interpretation of the then contemporary state of Celtic Tiger Ireland. As Shirley Peterson states, it is the "product of Ireland's geopolitical moment" ("Homeward Bound" 45). While the social-economic growth the Celtic Tiger brought a new set of behaviors, traditional ways of living and social attitudes were still

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vividly present in rural spaces. As critic Antonela Trombatore states: "the real triple murder of Imelda, her son and Father John […] [are] taking place in the interstitial suspension between two historical moments" (223).

Likewise, there is a direct link in *The Little Red Chairs* with the historical figure from the Serbian war. This connection however is extended into an indirect reference to the state of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland and even of the political, transcultural state of European society. After an economically disastrous post-Celtic Tiger era, Ireland has slowly started to regain its economic balance. However, as O'Brien suggests, the rural-urban divide still exists. The people of the remote west of Ireland as depicted in *The Little Red Chairs* are very similar in attitude and mentality to those seen in *In the Forest.* Although contemporary in historical time, the setting in *The Little Red Chairs* is that of a traditional community in which mythology and folk beliefs still retain some measure of influence. The most important means of acceptance into this community is still based on the Catholic faith and that which connects to it. When a new stranger arrives in the village, his status is defined according to his ties with religious faith. In a discussion with the local Roman Catholic priest, Vlad has to argue defend his 'profession' as a so called "healer and sex-therapist" as well as the validity of his Serbian Orthodox Christian faith:

> The thing is – word has circulated that you intend to practice as a Sex Therapist and this is a Catholic country and chastity is our number one commandment. […]
> I am not here to snatch away souls or bodies from your faith. I am here to do good (*The Little Red Chairs* 25).

It doesn't take too much convincing for Father Damien to accept the newcomer, especially considering that he himself is interested in the mysterious new, modern and "alternative" methods. However, he never admits this and keeps interrogating the "healer" about his religious knowledge. Through the third person narrator's transmitted comments, we get access to the priest's thoughts: "He is completely flummoxed now" (*The Little Red Chairs* 25). Dr. Vlad, as he calls himself, is presented as a highly intelligent figure who has the power of rhetoric and manipulation. Even in the simplest conversation he is able to directly apply to the body and the senses, so vital in Catholic mysticism:

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> Mainstream and alternative (he is told) go hand in hand, a prodigious leap due to the discoveries in neuroscience and cognitive physics, an acoustic resonance, a dance within the body's particles, by which illness can be stopped in its tracks, good cells, like good soldiers, fighting bad cells. He is Messianic in his enthusiasm, citing the secrets in plants, in fern, in the husk of a sunflower, in the innards of a nectarine stone, predicting that a time will come when medicine can enable patients to listen to the sound of the soul itself (*The Little Red Chairs* 25).

Working at the peak of his ability, Vlad convinces everybody of his spiritual, "messianic" saviour traits. The false image will only be reversed towards the end of the novel when his blood-filled past and deeds are revealed. This strong contrast between his outward profile as a friendly healer and his hidden reality as a vicious killer highlights the profile of a psychopathic individual. It is truly frightening how these separate sides mingle throughout the narrative. He becomes amorously involved with one of the local women, a married woman called Fidelma. Her only wish is to conceive a child, living as she is in an unhappy marriage and having been through several miscarriages. Vlad refuses to help her at first and remains spiritual and distanced as a "healer" at the beginning until he breaks down and confesses to Fidelma: "I thought I could be the scientist and not the man, he said eventually […] He put his arms around her then and said 'You are mine now, I can drown my eyes in your hair' […] The stranger and she, like lovers now, as in a story or in a myth" (O'Brien, *The Little Red Chairs* 101). This is one of the only moments in the novel when he is portrayed as having genuine human emotions. Nonetheless, his sympathy and popularity grow steadily in the village. At a certain point, "his name is on everybody's lips, Dr. Vlad this and Dr. Vlad that. He has done wonders for people, women claiming to be rejuvenated just after two treatments" (*The Little Red Chairs* 75). To the reader, these controversial characteristics have a dampening effect, elevating him into the position of a saviour. By giving a complex portrayal of this character, O'Brien puts the moral decision into the reader's hand to decide on the extent of evil and hope of redemption regarding Vlad. Lindsay Duguid argues that "O'Brien stands back from the narrative, allowing, collating the stories of her briefly described character without comment" ("Holistic Healing").

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From this perspective, Vlad shares a lot in common with a character from one of O'Brien's previous works, Mich O'Kane from *In The Forest*. Like Vlad, his character is also based on a real-life counterpart, an Irishman named Brendan O'Donnell who murdered three people in a remote part of the west of Ireland in 1994, while the siege of Sarajevo entered its second year on the other side of Europe (*The Irish Times*, "Bodies of mother and son"). Like Vlad, Mich O'Kane is also presented as both a monstrous individual and a victim of circumstances. Like Vlad, Mich is a multi-named figure, his complex personality being reflected in the names he has been given: "The Kinderschreck. That's what the German man called him when he stole the gun. Before that he was Michen, after a saint, and then Mich, his mother's pet and then the Boy, when he went to the place, and then the Child, when Father Damien had him" (O'Brien, *In the Forest* 2). Mich was a child who has been ripped from his childhood after his mother's death and raised by the priest, who paradoxically is also called Father Damien. Mich is also called "dog" by some of the villagers with the connotation of being inferior to the other people but also preceding the figure of Dr. Vlad Dragan as the wolf in O'Brien's later novel from thirteen years after *In the Forest*. Mich is viewed as not fully human, more a part of the non-socialized animal world. This contrasts with Vlad in *The Little Red Chairs*, a man whose wolf-like character elevates him as strong and fearless among the villagers of Cloonoila. Yet Mich is proud of his animalistic nature, regarding himself as a son of the forest ("Caolite" in Irish) and the reincarnation of a fox. In O'Brien's portrayal of Mich's character in this light, we encounter not so much a gothic mirroring as an uncanny foresight. Mich is based upon the real-life killer Brendan O'Donnell, who ritually murdered a Catholic priest, a single woman and her three-year-old son in a remote part of the west of Ireland. He is a forerunner to Vlad Dragan as the character whom O'Brien bases on the real-life war criminal Radovan Karadžić. If Mich is the killer fox, Vlad is the killer wolf: the remote woodlands of rural Ireland and the Balkans territories are their hunting grounds. Unlike Vlad though, he is less intelligent, a more pathetic creature, who may attract some level of sympathy from the reader. At the end of the novel his doctor gives the following sober assessment of Mich's upbringing:

> He said the young man did not deserve to stand there alone because the country itself was on trial, it had failed him, the system had failed him as from the age of ten he was shuttled from one institution to another, motherless, fatherless, never with them and never without them (*In the Forest* 234-44).

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In the case of Vlad, the reader cannot be sure about the effects of his childhood, as we know little about his upbringing, nor about his family life. He does mention brief memories about his childhood, describing his wild, harsh and almost insane father, who was a skilled hunter:

> My father make me walk to where the wolf lies dead. Look in the eyes. Look at the flank. Now touch it. Then made me lick the blood from my finger and do the same. He make warrior sign on my head and initiate me into the mystery of the kill (*The Little Red Chairs* 94).

He also carries a deep resentment towards the so called 'enemy' that destroyed his culture and his people. He directly expresses this resentment at his court trial at the end of novel: "It was only when he realized that his country and his people were about to be torn apart that he became a reluctant player. His corps never once neglected the laws of war, the legitimate customs of war" (*The Little Red Chairs* 263). He doesn't consider himself guilty at all, not until the final moments in the novel: "Oh Kafka, come back and help me overcome those shitty ladies and gentlemen enrobed, on their high thrones, because truthfulness is dead and I am the one who must prove it" (*The Little Red Chairs* 268).

Another important element that accentuates the mixing of myths, sagas and reality is the portrayal of the landscapes in both *The Little Red Chairs* and *In the Forest.* It suggests that the severity of the events described is so strong that it almost makes it impossible to re-tell such stories in a direct, realistic fashion. At the same time, O'Brien's evocation of landscape also accentuates the evil of the characters, portraying them as part of another, mystical, haunting world of evil presences: animals of the forest that yet live in contemporary human society. Last but not least it refers back to the socio-historical contradictions of the Irish landscape itself, caught between rural fairy-tales and modern socio-economic advancements.

In *The Little Red Chairs* the forest is described with a surplus of adjectives, emanating as a goddess, with "the melting ice" that drips from "the slenderest twigs of the overhanging trees", creating "soft, susurrus sounds" and "a straggling necklace of icicles, bluish in that frosted night" (*The Little Red Chairs* 3). There is stylistic tension between the specific understatements of the characters in

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this narrative language and the visually rich descriptions. The anticipated danger and fantastic character of the environment is accentuated by the folk-tale through which O'Brien conveys it:

> Long afterwards there would be those who reported strange occurrences on that same winter evening; dogs barking crazily, as if there was thunder (…) The child of a gipsy family, who lived in a caravan by the sea, swore she saw the Pooka Man coming through the window at her, pointing a hatchet (*The Little Red Chairs* 4).

O'Brien often starts her narratives by providing the reader with a direct landscape depiction and a clear setting that at first acts as a character in itself, without any human presence. Then the focus slowly shifts to the people who live in a locality, but in an unusual, reversed manner: the animate world resembles the inanimate. The people seem to be reflections and products of this setting and the town itself "takes its name from the river" (*The Little Red Chairs* 3). Its inhabitants are myth-shaped, religious people with deep connections to the land.

After the almost poetic description of the wild, remote forces of nature, the narrator extends the horizon to a contemporary historical one. The reader is never allowed to fully forget the exterior context, nor to be too flummoxed by the scintillating atmosphere of almost fairytale landscapes. O'Brien's aesthetically seductive description of the locality is balanced out by the political, historical elements that introduce the human dimension into the mysterious and compelling landscape: "Had he ventured in further, the stranger would have seen the flags of several countries, an indication of how much cosmopolitan the place has become and in a bow of nostalgia there is old farm machinery, a combine harvester, a mill wheel and a replica of an Irish cottage, when the peasants lived in hovels and ate nettles to survive" (*The Little Red Chairs* 3).When the mysterious stranger arrives in the town, the first connection that comes up in the discussion is the similarity of the local Irish landscape to that of the Balkans:

> He heard of the beautiful scenery of Montenegro, mountains that rivalled the Alps. […] Hewn into the rocks were monasteries without windows, where people came to pray in the same way that Irish people were known to pray. Celts, he was told, had lived in the gorges of the Dolomite Mountains and along the river Dina in the centuries before Christ and he link between Ireland and the Balkans was indisputable (*The Little Red Chairs* 7-8).

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Thus, in the first eight pages of the novel, the reader knows little of the characters, but much about the environment: the natural forces that surround and guide the characters as they emerge in the narrative. Even the name of the stranger who enters this locality is not revealed until later. We learn more about his physical appearance than his past or history. He almost perfectly blends into the fantastic, bewildering remote western Irish landscape. After the detailed descriptions of the natural elements, the omniscient narrator gradually narrows the wide focalization, arriving at the main element, the stranger: "He stays by the water's edge, apparently mesmerized by the river. Bearded in a long dark coat and white gloves, he stands on the narrow bridge" (*The Little Red Chairs* 8). This posture adds a feeling of anxiety to the narrative, not only in that the mysterious man with a "long, dark coat and white gloves" (*The Little Red Chairs* 8) appears as an uncanny element of the locality into which he enters, but also through the anticipation of danger that O'Brien's slow-motion method of narrative focalization generates.

Gothic elements feature strongly in the narrative. The stranger's name, dr. Vlad Dragan, alludes to Bram Stoker's famous gothic novel and its protagonist Vlad Dracula. Like Dracula, Dragan also acts as a seducer, his physical beauty and charisma attracting local women, while his simple presence brings disturbance into the remote Irish village. At first, he is viewed with curiosity by the locals, who are all shocked to discover that his real nickname is the "Beast of Bosnia" (O'Brien, *The Little Red Chairs* 128). Fidelma – a woman with whom Vlad becomes romantically involved − declares that her relationship with him has brought "a terrible curse" to the village and the child that she conceives by him is described as the "beast's child" (*The Little Red Chairs* 142). The locals fear that this child could become "the wayward branch of a family tree that threatens the legitimacy of the national trunk" (*The Little Red Chairs* 293). Dragan escapes from Eastern Europe to hide and to spread his mysterious power. Stoker's Dracula, the vampire, also leaves the safety of his homeland, which happens to be Transylvania in Eastern Europe, to spread his curse and look for new victims. Irish and Eastern European histories are thus connected in the novel not only through historical allusion but also through gothic myths. The Irish landscape proves to be the perfect environment for a gothic villain. Its remoteness and beauty resemble the double-nature of Vlad himself. He is intelligent and mesmerizing yet, at the same time, carries a dark past, guilty of crimes against humanity. Cloonoila becomes a space devoid of civic morality: a wilderness where human,

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animal and monster mix in disturbing ways. The animal-human mingling is a constant element in the plot and a recurring motif in Edna O'Brien's *oeuvre*.

The narrative of the novel shifts from third to first person, mixing dreams, surrealistic images and vivid descriptions. After his mystic portrayal, "the stranger" enters the pub, where he engages in discussion with the locals. They all seem to be captivated by the newcomer, who eventually reveals his name as Dr. Vladimir Dragan, a "healer and sex therapist" (*The Little Red Chairs* 9). Obviously, O'Brien chooses this name for its proximity to one of the false names mentioned above, under which the real-life Karadžić travelled after the Balkans War: Dr. Dragan David Dabic. The figure claims to have been brought to Ireland by a woman that appeared in his dreams. Vlad gets into several discussions with the townspeople and shows great knowledge of history, religion and culture. His worldview clearly exceeds the limited horizon of Cloonoila village. Reality and dream keep mixing, as we have the social context of the pub, while topics jump from history to mythology and folk tales. When mentioning that he came to Ireland after having a weird dream of a woman, the barman is reminded of the Irish "aisling" ("dream") poetic tradition: "one night in the monastery, there appeared to him, pale-faced and with tears streaming down her cheeks, a woman, saying *I am of Ireland*, entreating him to come here" (*The Little Red Chairs* 9). Adjectives and adverbs are not only ways of visual descriptions but are also elements of O'Brien's forensic style. The syntax of the language is built of long, complex sentences that, in order to flow, are augmented with anticipatory, vivid adjectives and adverbs. The reader is always kept a step ahead of the characters themselves, and the constant comments of the narrator maintain an atmosphere of suspicion. The conversation in the pub is brief. The townspeople try to be welcoming, but Vlad mainly keeps silent and answers questions with short statements only. He tries to explain the origin of his nickname, Vuk,[3] doing so with "a tentative smile" (*The Little Red Chairs* 9). His name comes from a legend of a "woman who lost had lost several infants in succession, deciding to name her newborn Vuk, meaning wolf, because the witches who *ate* the babies would be too terrified to confront the wolf-child" (*The Little Red Chairs* 9). This animalistic element is present on every level: narrative, characters and plot. It functions as a constant reminder of the contrast between appearances and realities in the story. The whole pub scene unfolds like a scene from a film, because of its swift switch of focus from one character to the other, enriched with the account from

[3] The father of the real-life counterpart to Vlad Dragan, Radovan Karadžić, was a cobbler who was also called Vuk.

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a mystery tale of a stranger and his unknown past. The Irish characters appear only in flashes, "like members of a chorus stepping forward" (Sayers, "The Little Red Chairs"). Dara, the barman, is very talkative, Mona is a widower who adores romance novels and who desperately hopes that the newcomer "will bring a bit of Romance into our lives" (*The Little Red Chairs* 13); Plodder policeman, Diarmuid the ex-schoolmaster; Dante "the town punk" (*The Little Red Chairs* 10), Ned, "who'd done time for growing marijuana in window boxes" (*The Little Red Chairs* 10); Desiree, "a strapping girl in her pink mini-dress bursting for news" (*The Little Red Chairs* 10). All members of the community are presented at the iconic place of gathering in Irish culture, the pub. They all are various representations, almost comic-like stereotypical embodiments of different character traits. Nonetheless their comic features don't undermine their authenticity. O'Brien provides a very accurate social depiction of a small Irish town.

Among the other cosmopolitan citizens of the town from different backgrounds are Eastern European workers, who came to Ireland during the economic boom period of the Celtic Tiger in the early 2000s but who now struggle with integration. These characters are similarly portrayed in a panel-like description at their gathering space (the verandah), like the locals before at the pub. They all work at the local Castle, which runs as a hotel: "The kitchen staff have all gathered on the veranda, as they do most nights, for the smokers, the odd beer, to unwind (…) They are a mixed group, Irish, Burmese, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Slovakian, Polish" (*The Little Red Chairs* 49). They all tell stories to each other about their lives and their cultures: fairy-tales, actual events, memories. This is what keeps this strange sub-community implicitly connected within this Irish context. Their Otherness in this Western European landscape is further strengthened by the broken English that they all use. Most of them have come with the hope of a better life: "In my small town they say Ireland good place, good wages. Homeless for one month when I arrive to Dublin. I go to one shelter and another and another, ask *Can I please spend night here.* (…) After two weeks I get job down in Limerick working with cows" (*The Little Red Chairs* 52). O'Brien provides a vivid and apt description here of current political, cultural and social problems that operate under such false idolizations of the West. Nonetheless, the Ireland that is presented here is a very different one from that of the pre-Celtic Tiger of the twentieth century. Its ties to a patriarchal society and religion are still strong, but there are signs of a new type of community, less insular and more cross-cultural.

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In the Forest opens in a very similar manner to *The Little Red Chairs*. It provides a detailed narration of the setting. It is a rural landscape and a forest, anthropomorphized with human traits. The *in medias res* beginning to the earlier novel opens up the fantastic, mythical elements associated with this forest, again anticipating the dangerous horror events ahead:

> Woodland straddling two counties and several townlands, a drowsy corpus of green, broken only where the odd pine has struck up on its own, spindly, freakish, the stray twigs on either side branched, cruciform wise. […] there is a wooden hut choked with briars and brambles where a dead goat decomposed and stank during those frantic suspended and sorrowing days. It was when the wood lost its old name and its old innocence in the hearts of people (*In the Forest* 1).

The language doesn't overstate, yet with the precise adjectives and the seemingly affectionless diction through which the corpse of the decomposed goat is presented, it appeals to all the senses with a striking force. The elements of the forest are compared to giants moving with threatening power: "tall trees are no longer static but moving like giants, giants on their grotesque and shaggy roots" (*In the Forest* 1). It is an atmosphere that mingles the mythical and the real. The dream element is also very important here. In *The Little Red Chairs* Vlad is invited to Ireland by the mysterious woman in his dreams; in this narrative there is also a woman in the dreams. In the very second paragraph "Ellen, the widow" (a minor character, local of the small Irish town) sees her dead and furious friend coming towards her: "Eily, the dead woman with her long hair walks towards her and says, 'Why didn't you help me?'" (*In the Forest* 1). This first scene turns into a dream-like episode, shifting the focus from the wilderness to the human character. The whole novel is built upon a retrospective retelling. In this aspect *In the Forest* and *The Little Red Chairs* are using very different rhetoric of narration. While both signal from the start the element of horror that will strike, in *The Little Red Chairs* the time is mostly linear, interrupted with flashbacks into the past of the characters. The danger is thus strengthened by the anxiety created through the step-by-step hints about the protagonist's past and the torturous events ahead. Fidelma will be forced to have an abortion in the middle of the woods. In *In the Forest* the time is also seemingly linear, but there is no anticipatory anxiety: the retrospective aspect directly affirms that there will be a killing

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with the name of the victim revealed from the start. The landscape itself is also more surreal and dream-like in *In the Forest*, where the setting barely changes.

In *The Little Red Chairs* the last two chapters zoom out of the rural atmosphere and present the cosmopolitan London as well as giving a glimpse into the Human Rights' Court at the Hague. At the end of *In the Forest* the writer relates back to the real characters and the tragic event of the murders. However, the forest in this novel is made more imaginary by acquiring a voice through the delusional vision of O'Kane. He hears the forest talking to him and directing him: " 'Welcome home son…you did us proud…didn't let the bastard get to you.' It is the woods talking to him, the trees thicker now, the tree where he hid and where his mother came and found him" (*In the Forest* 61). The forest's centrality as a character of the plot with its own identity is contrasted by the many references to it as also empty, "an emptiness that is ghastly" (*In the Forest* 119). The 'ghastly' element can also refer to the haunted feature of the place, it being the scene where O'Kane's dead mother visits him and also the place where Eily and her son will be sacrificed. The damaged and wild state of the forest point to the connection with the damaged state of Ireland itself, via its own soil. In both novels there is an element of ecological awareness with the environment presented as decaying or neglected. O'Brien renders attentiveness as a much-needed attribute for human societies that have lost their vital connections with the natural world. This is why Vlad and Mich, the two animalistic protagonists, are conveyed through an almost sympathetic tone, because they both represent an ancient connection between animate and inanimate creatures. O'Brien's language and style carries its affective capacity by appealing to our bodily senses directly. By allowing the landscape to be as much part of the narrative as the acting characters themselves, she creates another character-like element that is partially intended to blur the line separating fact fiction.

I.3. Female Bodies and Female Experience in *The Little Red Chairs*

Most of what is revealed about Vlad is portrayed through the eyes of the women with whom he comes in contact. On the level of the narrative itself, the first-person narration is limited with regards to Vlad's thoughts and emotions. The narrator allows access to Vlad's inner feelings, but he is mostly presented and described externally. On the very first pages he is shown with vivid detail in slow motion focus on his clothes, physical traits and the movement of his body across the

landscape: “bearded in a long dark coat and white gloves” (*The Little Red Chairs* 2). The image of him as this mysterious stranger, so different from the locals, is strengthened in the pub scene, where everyone is watching him with amazement and excitement: “a Holy man with a white beard and white hair, in a long black coat” (*The Little Red Chairs* 4). While he talks about his past and engages in conversation, he clearly prefers to remain vague about the details. The narrator adds to his mysterious features by blending him into nature: his secretive appearance and the way he is dressed resemble animalistic and natural forces. Dara, the local barman, watches him leaving and envisions him as an almost hero-like wanderer: “under the silver moon, watched the man go down the slip road, the ice cracking under his feet, footsteps getting fainter and fainter as he crossed the bridge away from the river” (*The Little Red Chairs* 4). He is, in a sense, born out of the forces of nature: “Vuk, the wolf.” (*The Little Red Chairs* 9). Although this might account for his monstrous deeds in terms of his animalistic nature, paradoxically it also strengthens his ‘holy’, eerie quality. The narrative distance from Vlad’s inner personality is O’Brien’s way of maintaining an ethical distance in *The Little Red Chairs*. His metamorphosis is strong and happens before the readers’ eyes. Readers have the freedom to make their own judgments, mostly based on Vlad’s deeds and the effect that he creates in the other characters. There are hints that foreshadow some tragic, traumatic events and Vlad is clearly full of secrets but there is no forced sympathy nor antagonism in his portrayal.

While the novel’s central narrative instigator is the figure of the Serbian war criminal, Vlad, *The Little Red Chairs* is also a novel about women. Throughout the whole plot these different women - wives, single mothers, nuns, refugees - speak out and tell their stories. Edna O’Brien is well known for her talent in constructing authentic women characters who express unlicensed female experiences. As Eimear McBride observes regarding O’Brien’s first novel trilogy *The Country Girls*: “with their creation O’Brien gave voice to the experiences of a previously muzzled generation of Irish women” (“Eimear McBride on Edna O’Brien”). O’Brien’s fidelity to event and character are crucial elements of her writing. She often creates these women from her personal memories, exceeding the level of fictionality. She writes about what she knows from experience or about which she makes meticulous research. In the later period of her career, she often moves beyond specifically Irish contexts and concerns. With *The Little Red Chairs* O’Brien creates a serendipitous narrative that stems from the Irish gothic, addresses issues of contemporary post-

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Celtic Tiger Ireland and the Balkans history while imbuing it all with the need for global humanitarian solidarity. It also mingles a broader contemporary context of women's stories and their perilous experiences.

Women characters are given more narrative space than Vlad; the entry into their thoughts is deeper, creating an almost stylistic dislocation compared to Vlad's plotline. The small Irish village does seem to be 'short on men', leading to a situation in which most of Vlad's clients are women. Fidelma is the main heroine of the plot. She is a local with whom Vlad becomes romantically involved. Her thoughts and emotions are often narrated in first person. In the second chapter of the novel, we are presented with Fifi's voice, a woman who is still mourning her long dead spouse, John. The first-person verbs are augmented by third person retellings, creating an interesting mode of free indirect speech. Through direct access to her inner fears, the reader is pulled into a world of ghostly hauntings and dreams. The Ireland that is presented here still carries the attributes of religious guidance. There is a Catholic Sister Bonaventure living in the village and for Vlad to be accepted, he first needs to settle his religious standpoint with the Catholic priest in the village. At the same time pagan myths still exert residual influence on people's outlooks and dispositions in the west of Ireland locality. Fifi talks to the ghost of his dead husband:

> Fifi weakened hearing voices. It could only be John, John dead almost three years and still paying his regular visits, 'channeling' as he would call it. […] She never feared his ghost, it could only be an influence of good (*The Little Red Chairs* 15).

She is not intimidated or frightened by the haunting experience; but rather inviting it. Her husband is portrayed as a man of conflicting beliefs: "they would sit at the kitchen table, John expounding on God, paganism, Gaia, and St John of the Cross" (*The Little Red Chairs* 15). The whole atmosphere of the place is a constant mingling of Christian and pagan sagas. Added to this are the clear, honest testimonies of women in this landscape. Their traumas and the ontogenetic context of their lives are revealed through the memories, direct access to their thoughts through first person narration, detailed descriptions of their bodies and bodily functions.

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The novel is divided into three parts, separated by the different spatial and temporal coordinates and connected through the main heroine, Fidelma. The first part takes place in a remote village in the West of Ireland, the second in multicultural London and the third in The Hague, Netherlands. The main quest of the narrative can be considered as the exploration of the human condition through a vivid depiction of international political concerns and global female experiences. Mingled into this are minor, but crucial, sub-plots of other characters, enriching the narrative by addressing issues of feminist rights in global context, refugee problems, racism, the state of Irish countryside, wars and victimhood. The women of Cloonoila are described as decent, well-dressed citizens, who at the same time are mostly single, unhappily married or widower characters. When the unusual traveller arrives, they all examine him carefully, “curious to know if the guy was presentable and married or single. Did he wear a ring?” (*The Little Red Chairs* 10). This adds a comic element to the plot. James Wood suggested that the sarcastic and humorous elements in the novel serve the purpose to soften the authentically cruel and shallow aspects of human nature. He states that “the story hovers between recorded history and green fancy and ends theatrically as it began” (Wood, “Stranger In Our Midst”).

The women come across as stronger, wiser and more sophisticated than the men in *The Little Red Chairs*. According to Lorna Rooks-Hughes, most of Edna O’Brien’s fiction deals with the exploration of “the female experience of the body” (Hughes-Rooks, 83). Most of the women characters of the plot are portrayed as confined the domestic area of the household. Their status as either married or single forms the basis upon which their bodies are assigned meaning. There is even a significant de-sexualization of these female bodies, through the idealization of the roles of wife and motherhood. The constraints stand in sharp contrast to the sexual desires and the strong need to rebel against the patriarchal ties and prohibitions of religion. Sister Bonaventure embodies these traits strongly. She is a woman of faith, but also a woman of complex worldly desires. Like all other female characters, she is described through an abundance of adjectives and nouns: “She wore a navy skirt, navy jumper, black stockings and good, black strong shoes” (*The Little Red Chairs* 33). She lives with three other nuns “in one wing of an old convent”, all having “their different duties” (*The Little Red Chairs* 33). She fulfills all the traditional tasks of a nun: visiting the sick, traveling a lot for charity and “bringing Holy Communion in her wooden pix to those who were crippled and housebound” (*The Little Red Chairs* 33). Paradoxically she is the first person

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from the town to book an appointment with Vlad, the new "healer and sex-therapist". The vigorous care that she takes when preparing for the visit portray a different aspect of her character. The narrator emphasizes the way that she gets her body ready: "she took extra care when she showered and with the big powder puff, dusted herself with lily of the valley" (*The Little Red Chairs* 34). The whole chapter focuses on bodily functions and sensations. The room where the massage session takes place resembles an intimate, holy space: "the treatment room itself was a temple, lights so very dim (…) and sacred music" (*The Little Red Chairs* 34).

The body occupies a central role: objects are vividly anthropomorphized to resemble the mechanics of the human body and deepen the sense of physicality: "out of the open mouths and empty eye sockets of wooden figures, gods and goddesses, plumes of light poured." (*The Little Red Chairs* 34). Sister Bonaventure is scared at the beginning, viewing Vlad as "a devil or maybe a Red Indian, because of the bandana that kept the hair out of his eyes" (*The Little Red Chairs* 34). But then she "felt herself giving into it (…) when he leant on her chest and caused it to ease under his weight, she feared she might dissolve altogether" (*The Little Red Chairs* 34). The whole scene is built up from slow motion details, as if the lexis would performatively take the position of the bodily sensations. O'Brien is a master of description, her prose flows like poetry. Bersani (1978) suggests that in fiction the receptive body is an "incomplete category, because reception is inseparable from expulsion" ("A Future of Astyanax" viii). O'Brien's language however makes the reader feel, sense the anatomy of the human body through marvelous textual exposure:

> He placed some stone on the flab of her stomach, which he had not touched, and ran the sides of other stones along her veins, the heat just this side of burning, her insides warm and gooey. (*The Little Red Chairs* 35).

Sister Bonaventure is lured into a state of erotic pleasure in an almost sexual type of fulfillment. She "uttered a quick ejaculation to her Corpus Christi and the Holy Innocents" (*The Little Red Chairs* 35), but she also "did not want it to end" (*The Little Red Chairs* 35). The phrase 'Corpus Christi' carries double meaning as both sexual and sacred. In this instance the nun utters the prayer *Corpus Christi* as a beleaguered attempt to control her own bodily desire. The term 'ejaculation' has been used in past centuries in the Catholic tradition as referring to the uttering of an incantatory

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prayer. In modern times, however, it is difficult to dissociate the term from its sexual, anatomical meaning. In this instance one can see the enduring influence of Joyce on Edna O'Brien, particularly *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.* The nun's visit ends with an apotheosis-like revelation: Sister Bonaventure is described as having a strong, animalistic deliberation that for minutes totally expels her from the strict, religious confines of the holy femininity that she represents within the community:

> …her energy was prodigal, a wildness such as she had not known since her youth, out in the fields when she pissed against trees, the way men did, pissed unashamedly. She would not tell them that (*The Little Red Chairs* 37).

O'Brien's fiction is daring and shocking at times by its fearless, almost sacrilegious honesty concerning the female bodily experience. The way in which O'Brien depicts this nun's body as exposed on the massage table creates new levels of narrative anatomic depths. By the added attention to the tactile characteristics, the body here also becomes uncannily real; it occupies the space of the fictional setting. When referring to bodies in literature, Jean Luc-Nancy argues that certain narrative languages are able to add a suspension of sense when ascribing the human body to the linguistic (104-106). Nancy suggests that "the body declares in language: there is mouth there, tongue, muscles, vibrations, or else hands, keyboards, graphs, traces, and all the messages are long chains of material scratches and grafts" (113). O'Brien's language is certainly visceral, where flesh and text mingle together in an authentically radical honesty.

Fidelma is a crucial collision force in the novel as she is the only woman who appears categorically throughout all the three parts. Despite her important role in the narrative, her first textual appearance presents her as a minor and usual creature of the town: "Fidelma, the draper's wife, all muffled up in grey raincoat with a squirrel collar, a wet sheen on her face" (*The Little Red Chairs* 28). After Vlad's true identity is discovered, he is sent to jail, having to face trial at the Hague. Fidelma, also flees the villages, running away from the pain and the shame that awaits her. She loses her baby - conceived by Vlad – in a violent incident, being aggressively forced to have an abortion in the middle of the woods by some of Vlad's old friends, now enemies. Fidelma resembles a realistic hero in many ways. The traumas that she carries, and the tragedies of her life

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resemble an authentic portrayal of a lonely Irish woman. At the same time, she also carries an element of a pagan goddess, in her features. She is a flâneuse, who walks, deliberating her mind through the act of walking, wandering aimlessly across the Irish woods:

> She loved those woods, especially in winter, trees without lea, trunks somber and grey, fallen boughs caught on one another and a hush, despite the roar of the river and the far-off sound and yodel of the hunters and their gillies. It was where she could be most herself. (*The Little Red Chairs* 39).

The landscape is given its own language here, the sounds and scents of the forest stimulating all the senses. And Fidelma blends into this forest: through her body the reader can also sense the delicate details of every element. Through an indirect free speech form of narration, her past is revealed meticulously. She represents beauty and feminine taste; we find out that she once owned a shop "where wives of rich builders and developers came from far and wide to try on the latest fashions" (*The Little Red Chairs* 41). Her business however was destroyed, mainly because of the new suburban infrastructure of the country:

> There was a motorway to be built six miles away. It meant that ladies could then drive to the city for their couture and moreover, summer visitors would not stop to admire the novelties in her window (*The Little Red Chairs* 41).

This gives a glimpse into the contemporary state of small Irish towns, becoming more isolated and less connected to the fast-developing modern cities. This is what happens with Cloonoila: hotels are less popular, the pub is mainly visited by the locals, shops close and every newcomer brings excitement. Fidelma misses her busy businesswoman life, but at the same time finds comfort in the Irish countryside. She is a complex and mature figure, religious in her own way, yet peculiar in the way of living it. She befriends a fallen priest, who "had been defrocked, a disgrace brought upon him by loving a woman" (*The Little Red Chairs* 42). They meet in the library, because she loves to read, especially romantic Greek tragedies:

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> He had all the Catholic writers that were new to her –Bernanos, Gide, Mauriac – and she gave him the story of Abelard and Heloise, the twelfth century lovers, nun and priest who, for their illicit and rhapsodic passion, were forced to withdraw to a contemplative order never to meet again (*The Little Red Chairs* 43).

Her love for the tragic heroines suggests a resemblance to her own existence. She romantically believes in love and tenderness, but leads an empty, lonely life with her much older husband. In this respect she incorporates some of the features of Kate, the heroine from *The Country Girls.* She is the Kate who is no longer naïve and young anymore, yet carries an eternal longing for happiness, the Kate from the *The Lonely Girl.* Fidelma married young, just like Kate, to an older man, and though the love was there at the beginning, she now leads an unhappy, bitter life. However, unlike Kate, who is still living in a male-hegemony that she fails to escape, Fidelma is an independent, strong and free woman. She was once a successful businesswoman, rising above the traditional constraints of an Irish Catholic housewife. It is clear from her nostalgic memories that she took pleasure in governing her shop. She ordered clothes from Paris, London and felt important and respected. After her business fails, due to the lack of customers, she retreats to her home. Although she travels with her husband, Jack, she longs to become a mother. She has been through two unsuccessful pregnancies: "believing the failure to be hers, she grieved alone" (*The Little Red Chairs* 43), she even "once considered going to China to adopt a child" (*The Little Red Chairs* 44). The desire is so strong that she also "went to a psychic for guidance" (*The Little Red Chairs* 44). To Fidelma, being childless is not only another failure, but a fracture in her womanhood. This is the state in which the new, mysterious healer, Vlad, finds her when he arrives in the village. It is obvious from the start that she will seek help from him; this becomes even more evident when she agrees to rent his former shop to Vlad, to function as his therapy room.

Fidelma begins an adulterous relationship with Vlad, meeting secretly in hotel rooms. Their first meeting is portrayed as an almost 'holy' union, although Vlad at the beginning refuses to let any emotions interfere in their purely "business-type" agreement. The event is presented from Fidelma's perspective, with every raw, visceral detail. She sees him as a hero, a Greek huntsman: "no longer the healer in the loose smock and the bandana, a huntsman, in his high black polished riding boots" (*The Little Red Chairs* 91). The poetic description of the room, of the bodies of the

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lovers typifies the poetic, visceral O'Brien style that in this case softens the emotionally disturbing nature of the encounter. Fidelma has her own pre-vision of their union:

> She imagined that if someone were to look in that window, it would be like some painting in a grand house, the huntsman come home from the chase, the wife with her sleeves rolled up, doing the bidding of her master, an intimacy that was a prelude to love (*The Little Red Chairs* 92).

In her imagination she devotes herself totally to this man, fulfilling her sexual desires, becoming subservient, no longer a strong, independent businesswoman. She wants to be subdued, to become the sexual and emotional victim of "her master." Vlad notices this and also notices her strength loosening, declaring: "You think I am a Don Juan" (*The Little Red Chairs* 95). Fidelma believes that she has discovered the true soul of this man and their unison is to her an act of love: "She has broken through the real him, the poet, the man of feeling that she always knew to be there. She held his beard and wagged it, as she has done so often in her imagination" (*The Little Red Chairs* 101). O'Brien uses a visceral language to describe the intimate moments, while at the same time, through the omniscient narrator's voice, she comments on the scene. Time seems to be suspended, indicated by the syntactic pattern of short, embedded subordinate clauses: "Her breath came in little gasps, their limbs entwined, the healer and the she, the stranger and the she, like lovers now, as in a story or in a myth" (*The Little Red Chairs* 101). This narrative style is suggestive of myth, that the moment itself carries a fairy-tale type of apotheosis in *The Little Red Chairs*. At the same time, it also conveys the unsettling, eerie nature of these two characters in their unison.

Fidelma becomes pregnant, but her fate is very tragic as she loses her baby when some of Vlad's former allies, now enemies, brutally attack her. As some critics argued "the scene is almost unbearably visceral" in the novel (Wood, "Stranger In Our Midst") This traumatic experience and the revelation of Vlad's true identity make it impossible for her to stay in the village. As a true heroine, she perseveres, but moves to London in order to try and start a new life far away from her past and memories. In the last part of the novel, she is seen attending Vlad's trial at The Hague. This section of the novel, subtitled *The Conjugal Room*, recalls the hotel room scene of Vlad's and Fidelma's sexual encounter. It is a fantasy scene in which Fidelma imagines being united with Vlad again. Despite the suffering and anger that she feels towards this man, in her vision she relives the

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same love and desire that she felt before Vlad's identity was discovered. Vlad is portrayed as her dying husband, whom she visits in prison in order to care for him in "his last six weeks of his life" (*The Little Red Chairs* 275). The whole scene is delusional, Fidelma trying to comb Vlad's hair and comfort him: "Was your essential nature always evil…were you ever innocent? – she asks" (*The Little Red Chairs* 277). While this section of the novel is not so visceral as other parts, the constant reference to hair shows its somatic element. In a symbolic manner Fidelma tries to comb Vlad's "mop of hair" (O'Brien, *The Little Red Chairs* 274) as a gentle gesture of care, but the comb breaks. This reminds her of an old story: "So it was true what a cracked old man used to say […] where there was evil within, the comb broke to tell the tale, to confirm it." (*The Little Red Chairs* 274). Hair is, in this instance, a symbol of strength, as well as attractiveness. In Greek mythology Medusa's hair was turned into destructive serpents, whereas early Christians believed that "unruly hair was sinful and made onlookers prone to temptation" (Sherrow 251). By trying to comb Vlad's hair, she is trying to cleanse him, but her attempts prove futile. Fidelma loses her identity in the moment of the discovery of Vlad's identity. However, she makes an important discovery when she realizes the need to rediscover who she is, confessing to her friend in London: "I could not go home, until I could come home to myself" (*The Little Red Chairs* 294). Critic Estévez Saá argues that the varied settings, spanning from a remote area in Sligo to cosmopolitan London and The Hague "deploys the intimate and inevitable connections in our society between the rural and the urban, the local and the global, the personal and the political" (81).

The Little Red Chairs explores what Henri Bergson calls *durée* (*Memory and Matter*) throughout the novel, specifically in the description of the ways through which Fidelma grapples with the fluidity of time and her own subjective experiences of it. Through the use of the somatically-charged language and its introspective musings, O'Brien creates a sense of immersion in the present moment for the reader, even as she explores past memories and events. For example, when Fidelma remembers a moment from her childhood, the narrative shifts to the present tense, creating a sense of immediacy and making the memory feel present and alive: "But I am only a little girl again, looking at the flower, the yellow rose, feeling the velvet texture of the petals against my fingers" (O'Brien 75). This use of narrative language approximates to Bergson's idea of *durée*, which emphasizes the subjective, experiential aspect of time, and how our perceptions and experiences shape our understanding of it. The novel also explores the impact of memory on

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personal identity, as characters struggle to reconcile their past experiences with their present selves. Fidelma's memories of a traumatic event (later on in the novel it is revealed that she has been sexually assaulted when she was young, which likely involved a knife as a weapon) continue to haunt her, shaping her perceptions of the world and influencing her decisions: "She had always been afraid of death, of the lonely, naked, unknown journey from life to whatever was to come after it. The memory of a knife at her throat had fed her fear" (*The Little Red Chairs* 43). This use of memory and its impact on personal identity emphasizes the subjective and personal nature of time and its relationship to individual experience.

The female characters in the novel experience physical and emotional pain, trauma, and loss, and their bodies become a site for these experiences. For instance, Fidelma, suffers from infertility, and her body becomes a symbol of her struggle with both her own physical limitations and society's expectations of motherhood. The novel's portrayal of her bodily experiences suggests a larger issue in the representation of women's experiences and autonomy. The lack of cultural models and discourses for women to articulate their experiences suggests a larger societal problem where women's voices are silenced or ignored. The sensitive portrayal of these experiences highlights the need for a cultural shift in which women's voices are centered and heard. Furthermore, the novel's depiction of the bodily experiences of women highlights the importance of the body in the representation of experiences and emotions. As stated by Judith Butler, the body is not just a passive vessel but is an active agent in the construction of identity and subjectivity (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*). By focusing on the bodily experiences of women, O'Brien provides a nuanced understanding of the relationship between the body, experiences, and identity.

The intricate and difficult narratives of silenced women and victims in *The Little Red Chairs* highlight the importance of acknowledging the perils associated with exploring evil through storytelling. The animalistic depiction of Dr. Vlad and the subsequent inscription both of the landscape and of Vlad's character with tropes of myth, the animal, and the irrational can present an ethical problem. This characterization of Vlad tends to both irrationalize and psycho-sexualize evil, thus risking a dampening of personal responsibility and accountability. While O'Brien's depiction of Vlad is adhering to a trope inherent in the Irish Gothic style of writing and should not be viewed as an accurate representation of real-life evil, it is important to acknowledge that there

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is an undeniable nuance to this ethical problem when reading this novel. The Gothic tradition often utilized supernatural elements to explore the darker aspects of human nature. As noted by critic Fred Botting, "The Gothic has always been fascinated by the irrational, the supernatural, and the monstrous" (Botting 2). While the use of mythical tropes to represent evil is not inherently objectionable, it can become ethically problematic if it is used to deflect the complex system of complicity through which genocidal practices are undertaken. There is no indication in *The Little Read Chairs* that O'Brien's treatment of Vlad and his relationships is culpable in this respect. If anything, the novel is a warning against the charisma of the leader that is a constituent element in the performance of genocide.

The Little Red Chairs presents women who are bereft of discourses and modes of articulating their bodily experiences. The sexual allure of Vlad to these women serves as a warning in the novel, while also demonstrating the risks that O'Brien consciously takes when presenting a war criminal as an objected of beleaguered women's sexual fantasies. O'Brien is certainly risking a potential ethical pitfall in presenting Vlad as the subversively appealing, unique figure of 'evil'. However, it is equally important to keep in mind the distinction between narrative fiction and historical reality in *The Little Red Chairs*. In many respects, the novel is a gothic narrative charged with somatic language that confronts its readers with a question of their responsibilities as readers. While O'Brien's use of the Irish Gothic style of writing and somatic language may present an aesthetic façade, it does not necessarily entail a glamorization of evil, but instead points to how charisma can serve to obscure crimes of mass-killing and sexual violence.

In *The Little Red Chairs*, factual and fictional elements merge through a visceral somatic language that adds a unique dimension to the narrative. This chapter has explored the intricacies of the narrative style, revealing how the somatic is evoked through language to depict the interrelated configurations of history, memory, and female experience. The landscape is personified, becoming an active character in the story, while the alternating third and first-person narration weaves together the various strands of the complex historical and fictional plot. Through the third-person perspective, the narrator describes the characters in the context of "appearances," where normality reigns. In contrast, the first-person monologues and third-person narratorial comments provide a space for the exploration of the chaotic workings of the mind and its desires. The body and its

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sensations play a crucial narrative role in this first-person layer. What the reader encounters here is a skillfully constructed realist world that unravels under the weight of hidden violent and animalistic somatic compulsions as they rise to the surface.

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Chapter II.
Anne Enright, *The Green Road*

II.1. Introduction

Anne Enright has been a strong presence on the Irish literary scene for the past thirty years. Her approach is characterised by specific, realistic settings that are sometimes blurred by surreal details and enveloped in dark humour. Her creative work is rooted in awareness of Irish tradition yet with an innovative and compelling focus on quotidian pressing issues. This is why critic Alex Preston portrayed her as “the chronicler of contemporary Irish life” (“The Green Road”). She is amongst Ireland’s most celebrated writers, the first female novelist to win the Man Booker Prize (in 2007) for her work *The Gathering.* Enright was chosen as Ireland’s first Fiction Laureate by the Arts Council from 2015 to 2018, becoming the official public face of Irish fiction for three consecutive years (Morrison, “Anne Enright”). At the ceremony, Taoiseach Enda Kenny described her writing as “eloquent and powerful […] with a fiercely individual voice and unyielding commitment to her craft” (Barry, “This woman”). Success came gradually to her, a process that she defined in an interview as an Irish specificity when it comes to recognising writers: “Ireland is one of those countries with a culture of reluctance when it comes to praise. It is almost as if you have to succeed in every corner and cranny of the universe before you are accepted in Ireland” (Preziosi, “An interview with Anne Enright”). She has started her career working in television as a director for RTÉ’s *Nighthawks.* Her first short story collection, *The Portable Virgin,* was published in 1991. Her early writings capture the suburban atmosphere of the 1970s, and 1980s Dublin, focusing on the tension between the modernising tendencies and the traditional Catholic heritage. She often builds on topics from earlier traditions in twentieth-century Irish fiction, including the broken family unit, sexual abuse, historical memory, and rural Ireland to shed light on the transformation of the Irish middle-class world.

Although most of her writing deals with Ireland, she has refused to be constrained to any such limiting factor: “I can’t be Irish all day long; it’s too much of an effort. I can’t be a woman all day long; the work of it is far too strenuous, it needs constant attention” (Maloney and Thompson 63). She has been a strong advocate of Irish rights, especially those concerning women, the gay

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community and children. At the very beginning of her career, her fellow novelist Colm Tóibín praised her for the ability to show a Dublin that "was post-feminist and of course post-nationalist" (xxxiii). During the last few years, she has written and lectured on Edna O'Brien whom she praises for her fearless energy to break silences and her talent to capture "the precise emotional weight of objects, their seeming hopefulness and their actual indifference to those who seek to be consoled" (Enright, "Country Girl by Edna O'Brien"). Similarly, to O'Brien, Enright's style also enshrines the infinitesimal details, animate and inanimate, that imprison a person trying to escape the chains of history. Her characters struggle to find meaning in an unstable world desperate for communal support, in communities that have become collections of isolated, estranged family units.

Enright's place on the line of a continuum of Irish women writers is malleable. Born in 1962, she is of a generation younger than that of Edna O'Brien, but she has inherited O'Brien's penchant for breaking taboos and telling uncomfortable truths. Although her style is not as confessional as O'Brien's, she is also engaged in showing the burdens of a historical past, casting a sarcastic eye on Irish realities. She writes from the general towards the specific, from the human towards the national. The country itself is never the central object of her investigation but rather the "crust" that surrounds the questions of being human, of being a woman, of being vulnerable on the Irish soil: "I don't write about Ireland so much as from Ireland" (Harte 14). Loneliness, ageing, motherhood, sexuality and depression are generic points of concern in her fiction onto which the gradual layers of history and nationality are cast. Her transnational views, prevalent in these later novels, are not imbued and conditioned by the burden of nationalist histories, but rather show a new, contemporary focus on a generation that is more concerned with broader international humanitarian problems. Her latest novels focus on issues like climate change, gender identities, human rights, womanhood and existential threats generated by consumerism. The Irish specificity becomes an additional element rather than a focal one in such a worldview. This is why, although of an older generation, her fiction was termed by critics like Emer Nolan as very much "contemporary" (164). Enright occupies a prominent position in the fiction of contemporary Irish women writers, sharing a community with younger novelists like Eimear McBride, Sara Baume and Sally Rooney. What ties them together is the strong focus on the present, on transnational issues, the failings of neoliberalism and wider humanitarian dilemmas. They all imbue a vision of a future constructed on the reinterpretation of national histories in connection with the need to be more attentive to both the animate and inanimate world around humans.

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One of the most characteristic elements of Enright's novels, especially the recent ones, is the meticulously visceral investigation of the body. Her language operates on a close analysis of the workings of the human body, showing how all the layers (nationality, gender, ageing) modify and determine its existence. Certain critics compared her writing to that of Flann O'Brien for its play with narrative conventions and to that of Jonathan Swift for her marked focus on the bodily: "what is Anne Enright like? Flann O'Brien, yes, Tristram Shandy, a little, or Jonathan Swift meeting Kurt Vonnegut on speed?" (Foster, "When blood runs thicker"). She uses words of muscle and bones, keeping the narrative focus in close proximity to what the body feels and senses. At times she juxtaposes the process of writing itself to that of opening up the body. Veronica, the main character in *The Gathering*, compares writing and the process of putting experiences into the language to the exposure of the flesh: "I lay them out in nice sentences, all my clean, white bones" (Enright, *The Gathering* 1). In her only non-fiction collection, *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, Enright ties this body-consciousness to awareness and attention: "I have always paid close attention to what the body is and what it actually does" (2). The process of being attentive permeates the narratives, creating a style that captures every detail and movement of the characters who inhabit it. When asked about literary precursors, Enright lists James Joyce as an influence: "I like Joyce […] He was a wonderful writer. He makes me feel free" (Maloney 57). Like Joyce, she has no fear when it comes to the portrayal of the human body with all its desires and materiality. In her writing Enright refuses to pin down the corporeal as a stable, fixed entity, and rather shows bodies that lack any form of totality. The body to her is not a finished thing; it is shown in movement, processes of becoming and interconnectedness with its surroundings. In this sense, her interpretation of the corporeal comes close to what Deleuze calls "body without organs," a constantly reorganised entity bombarded by sensations ("Francis Bacon").

The following chapter examines Enright's *The Green Road* with a particular focus on how she uses language to portray and situate the body in a broad interpretative context. It also takes a closer look at how Enright operates and twists the realist novel genre to portray the realities of the Celtic Tiger era. *The Green Road* sheds critical light on the often-hidden inequalities in consumerist society. Its plot explores the changes of the Celtic Tiger period, shifting the focus onto the body, which becomes a site where pressing questions about sex, gender, nation, and memory emerge. By portraying the body as an element of instability and movement, Enright exceeds the notion of stillness proposed by Cheryl Herr, who observes that "in traditional as well as colonial and

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postcolonial Ireland, the body has frequently been associated representatively with danger and has been scrutinised with an intensity that *stills* (photographically)" (6-7). Enright's novel not only ties into the new emergence of women writers in Ireland but also connects to a new type of somatic writing.

II.2. Wandering bodies: Attention and Landscape in *The Green Road*

"In the end, here and now, your own gaze touches
the same traces of characters as mine and you read me, and I write you" (Nancy 51).

In his work *Corpus* Luc Nancy offers a reinterpretation of the body, beyond that of a limited mass or a space with boundaries. The body is an open place of existence, fully exposed and engaged with the external world: "Bodies aren't some kind of fullness or filled space […] they are open space. Bodies are places of existence. The body makes room for existence" (Nancy 15). One's body is exposed to other bodies in an agonising need to be seen and recognised. Attention is a crucial act in this process of enabling, an attention that needs to be both received and shared. Nancy views the body as a space that can only operate properly if it is shaped into being by other bodies: "A body is an image offered to other bodies, a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body, local colour and shadows, fragments, grains, areolas, nails, hair, tendons, skulls, ribs […] pains and joys, and me, and you" (121). The act of "gazing something into being" is especially important when it comes to communities, human relations, gendered bodies and the act of deciding what bodies matter and can matter in society.

Anne Enright incorporates this process of attention into her novel *The Green Road*. The narrative ends with a salient concern and warning, uttered by Rosaleen, the Madigan family's matriarch: "I have paid so little attention', she said. 'I think that's the problem. I should have paid more attention to things'" (*The Green Road* 310). By "things" we can understand both living and non-living entities, history, her family, other bodies and her own body to which she has failed to accord the necessary attention. In Irish culture, although the practices of Catholicism are closely linked to the somatic, "the body has been a rather under-theorised matter and has only recently filtered to the

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field of Irish Studies" (Cahill 2). While it would be exaggerating to speak of a literary movement in contemporary Irish literature, works by writers like Anne Enright, Sara Baume and Eimear McBride signal a move toward the material in their approach to history and narrative techniques. They direct their critical focus to the body, from which all other aspects are perceived, paying attention to how and which bodies matter, how they are configured, and what impact this might have on other living entities. In *The Gathering* Enright envisions history as a corporeal construction, built from the experiences of bodies living together, and delimiting the context of the existence of future bodies: "History is only biological [...] What is written for the future is written in the body, the rest is only spoor" (162-163). Vision carries essential force in the narratives of Enright. In one of her first interviews, she described her writing process as being built on acutely observing life: "I'm interested in what people at the bus stop are interested in. Looking at what happens to people, and how you come undone. I think that is very much the job of the novelist" (Kelly 235).

The Green Road is a realist work that captures the jumbled, inconsequential and endlessly unfinished business of ordinary existence. It is also a stylistically experimental, prophetic novel. Although it is set in Celtic Tiger Ireland and it mirrors the realities of that era, it also indirectly touches upon issues that since then have become even more urgent. With the focus on one single Irish family, the perspective opens up to engage with perniciously pressing topics like eco-awareness, the interconnectedness of individuals in society, poverty in Africa, the importance of the body, especially its vulnerability in the face of illness and ageing, rights of homosexual couples, and the undeniable entanglement of the animate and inanimate in the Anthropocene era.[4] This wide narrative perspective at times prevents the novel from according enough critical detail to all these aspects. The plot is at its strongest and most confident tone when it details the Irish setting and the various characters that inhabit it. The female body occupies a crucial place in the novel, showing how it deals with various changes of motherhood, ageing, sexuality and the simple act of being 'attentively' seen and recognised in society as such. Thierry Robin argues that a suitable term to describe Enright's writing would be "*feminine* in all the subtlest and implicit pressures and nuances of the term" (172).

[4] The term Anthropocene denotes our current geological era characterised dominantly by human inflicted damage on the environment (Falci, Reynolds, 2020; Braidotti, 2017).

The Green Road gathers a lot of 'Irish ingredients' while casting a critical eye on each and amassing them with universal humanitarian themes. If there is any imaginary, 'invented' idea of what an Irish novel should be like, Enright's work would pass the test. Writer Belinda McKeon described it as "Irish-novelly in such an unashamed fashion […] as to be provocative" ("The Green Road"). It is undeniable that the plot, the characters, and the novel's context are built from stereotypical Irish elements: the broken family unit, religious hypocrisies, egregious silences, wild landscapes, lousy weather, failed priests, repressed emotions. At the same time, Enright uses these topics to create a propitious and forceful account of a family, whose complex struggles and relationships exceed the context of a strictly Irish reality. The temporal threads of *The Green Road* encompass twenty-five years: from 1980 with sudden jumps to the year 2005. It follows the Madigan family, the mother Rosaleen and her four children: Emmet, Dan, Constance, and Hannah. The setting spans from the town of Ardeevin, in the west of Ireland, to places as far as Mali, West Africa, and New York. Despite the temporal polyphony, the structure of the narrative is held in coherence through the family saga. It starts with the Madigans gathered for their Sunday lunch in 1980, and it ends by taking a bold return to the same place in Christmas 2005, when all the siblings are summoned home by Rosaleen, who is planning on selling the family home. The second part of the novel is suitably entitled "Coming Home", The story culminates at Christmas Eve, when Rosaleen wanders out to the green road, gets lost, and the whole family is in despair trying to find her. She survives the adventure and is eventually found, but the narrative doesn't end here. As Fogarty observes, Enright "allows her main protagonist to live past her death" (Fogarty, "Someone whose kindness" 140) in order to create an open ending. Critic David Leavitt suggests that "*The Green Road* seems to say that the lives of people who inhabit them go on. They go on and on" ("The Green Road").

Shortly after its publication, Margarita Estévez-Saá portrayed *The Green Road* as "probably Enright's most interesting experiment with the genre of the novel up to date" (52). The first part is narrated in free indirect speech with sudden temporal shifts within the same storyline. Each chapter is dedicated to one of the Madigan siblings' stories, bearing their name as the title. The tone, the words, the authenticity of the language draw the reader directly into the murky intricacies of this Irish family from County Clare. Enright deliberately chose this setting. Born in 1962 Dublin to a father who originated from County Clare, she spent some of her childhood years in the west of Ireland. This experience has proven to be crucial to her later making it the main setting of *The Green Road*. The west of Ireland is covered in limestone cliffs, known as the Burren, that look out

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towards the Aran Islands. It is an iconic region in Ireland that was severely affected during the Irish Famine of the mid-nineteenth century (1845-52). Many writers have explored it in their writing, including Yeats, Synge and Lady Gregory. Enright describes it as a "wild and beautiful part of the world (…) the rocks themselves tell you all you need to know about your own humanity and its impermanence" ("A Return to the Western Shore"). The title of the novel, *The Green Road*, refers to an actual road that traverses the Burren region, opening up to a view to the Atlantic Ocean: "this road turned into the green road that went across the Burren […], and this was the most beautiful road in the world, *famed in song and story.*" (*The Green Road* 15). It is the place into where Rosaleen Madigan wanders, seeking solace and compassion. Walking this road becomes a symbolic act of reconnection both with the past and the present.

The act of wandering and attentive walking stems from an earlier tradition in Irish literature. At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, many writers portrayed the modernist self through the act of wandering. The physical labyrinth of the emerging urban city life was an ideal setting to portray and reflect the inner complexities of the self. Dublin for Joyce was a space of constant interactions and sudden discoveries: a place where the wandering Leopold Bloom could engage in unexpected meetings, encountering strangers, various Others in order to gain the experience of life that he was seeking. As Declan Kiberd argues: "Just as blood has to course through the human body for it to remain healthy, bodies have to move through the streets in order to encounter the Other – to live with the 'stranger' in themselves" (Kiberd quoted in Pushkarevskaya 140). The famous *flâneur* figure of modernist writing was a "leisured wanderer, who was able to inconspicuously observe the vivid modern city" (Mullin, "Capturing and creating the modern"). Although a different type of the modernist *flâneur*, the Madigan characters in *The Green Road* can be interpreted as its rural manifestations. Each one of them in their own way is a wanderer, lost and looking for means to escape the sense of isolation. Some of them travel to busy cities and urban labyrinths only to return at the end to the rural Irish village that they call home. From this perspective, the Irish setting in the novel is a symbolic one, a place to escape from and yet one that cannot be abandoned entirely. The characters feel estranged from the comfort of the home, trying to find their place in the context of the new Celtic Tiger reality. Rosaleen, the mother, is the representation of the traditional values while her children are embodiments of a new Celtic Tiger Irish identities.

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Space is a key element throughout the narrative. The family home is the setting where all the individual vulnerabilities become more evident. Enright juxtaposes the old, traditional imagery of home with the expectations of the current era in order to cast a critical eye on the present. According to Kiberd, the heightened privatisation of public space during the Celtic Tiger era has also brought a loss of connection with the landscape itself: "everything was privatised – not just businesses but consciousness itself. And the Irish people themselves lost their ability – which they have been very good at – of using public space" (Kiberd quoted in Pushkarevskaya 141). The kind of wandering through Dublin portrayed in *Ulysses* was no longer possible with a generation that was "being brought up by car from one private experience to another, to a music lesson or whatever, and the streets were no longer felt to be safe and hospitable" (Kiberd quoted in Pushkarevskaya, 141). What happens now is that these spaces are taken up by the immigrants who, as Kiberd argues "come from cultures where the use of public space is enthusiastic and widely practised […] countries like Eastern Europe where there is the promenade and the whole idea of walking in the evening" (Kiberd quoted in Pushkarevskaya 141). The Joycean *flâneur,* the curious wanderer, needs to be reintroduced in Irish reality. Kiberd sarcastically suggests that this type of engagement with reality, (through meaningless strolling of the streets) will inevitably reappear since people won't be able to afford other means of entertainment, resulting in a "rediscovery of the pleasures of Joycean culture out of a sense of deprivation" (Kiberd quoted in Pushkarevskaya 141). Walking and exploring is a crucial feature of *The Green Road*.

The Madigan children, and Rosaleen, the mother, are all 'strollers', wandering aimlessly through urban and rural landscapes. The results of the Celtic Tiger privatisation process and the loss of confidence in using public space is prevalent in the plot. Although not strictly within an urban space, Rosaleen and her kids are all victims of the economic consumerist boom that has brought cultural and spatial alienation. The lack of interaction between people on the streets is portrayed vividly by Hannah, the youngest Madigan daughter. She is living as a failed actress in Dublin, struggling to cope with both womanhood and motherhood in a world that has failed her on so many levels. When contact-making by way of words fails, the essential element that holds one in the social order also collapses, and everything becomes uncertain: "It was not the darkness of the city outside, or of the bedroom, she shared with Constance at home in Ardeevin. […] It was the darkness between people […] the darkness of sleep, just before the dream." (*The Green Road* 15). Hanna remembers the comfort offered by her grandmother's little cottage, not far from the family house

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in Boolavaun: "Hanna loved the little house at Boolavaun: four rooms, a porch full of geraniums, a mountain out the back and, out the front, a sky full of weather" (*The Green Road* 15). Enright is a master of style when it comes to descriptions. She uses a strongly figurative language to narrate the aesthetic beauty of the setting. The cottage is shown as an almost romantic cliché, reflecting unearthly beauty. The details of the physical location of the house are substituted with the attributes that it stands for:

> If you crossed the long meadow, you came to a boreen which brought you up over a small rise to a view of the Aran Islands out in Galway […] This road turned into the green road that went across the Burren […] and this was the most beautiful road in the world. […] the cloud running their shadows across the water, The Atlantic surging up the distant cliffs in a tranced, silent spume of spray (*The Green Road* 15).

The home in the countryside becomes a symbol of freedom, where the body and spirit can roam unencumbered. This posits a sharp contrast with the modern city-life that Hanna is leading. In the Celtic Tiger chaos of Dublin, she feels lost and trapped in a body that failed her, trapped in a life that constrains her. Hanna's chapter is the starting point of the novel and, her story returns in the second part, in a separate mini-chapter entitled *Dublin*. This shows the particular importance of space, especially within that of modern-day Ireland. At the beginning Hanna is shown as a young girl, reminiscing on the beauty of the countryside to return in a later chapter as an adult mother, living in Dublin. She is no longer a curious wanderer but rather a victim of the present, lost in a city that cannot offer any solace. She is a failed actress, married to a seemingly successful director of soap operas at Ireland's national broadcasting television and radio station, RTÉ. She is suffering from post-natal depression, trapped in a city flat, on the verge of alcoholism. Enright uses strong, visceral language: Hanna is shown drinking, falling, cracking her head and narrating her own suffering as an outsider to her own body. It is a depressing first-person narration: "her body lying behind her on the floor, with blood browning on the tiles and then loosening around the bottle, where it was diluted with wine" (*The Green Road* 185). Hanna feels lucky to be a mother yet also trapped in this role, referring to her child as "a little opposite thing, that is what came out of her. A fight they wrapped in a cloth" (*The Green Road* 183). The city cannot offer her any support, unlike the countryside and the home that she ambiguously misses and despises. Enright portrays her as a typical modernist alienated soul. Hanna is financially stable; her husband is settled, and they lead

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a decent life in the city. However, despite the material excesses, there is failure and alienation: "She thought there would be a path, one that wound from the school musical all the way up to the red carpet at Cannes. But there was no path. No *trajectory.* No career even." (Enright 2015a, 193) She is holding onto a past that has become romanticized in a blurred nostalgia. As critic Estévez-Saá points out, "in the case of Constance and Hanna, the reader discovers the scars left by excesses in their way of living as well as physical and physiological illnesses" (50).

Enright fuses the stories of the Madigan children into a grand narrative of the family home, which functions as the main frame-plot. The first chapters, dealing with the siblings' individual life story, are developed as independent short stories. Constance's chapter especially acts as a separate narrative within this formally experimental cycle. She is the older daughter who is married to a real-estate agent. She also seems lost, wandering in a world that has seemingly become inhospitable to her. She is directly held in contrast with Rosaleen as a representative of the modern Irish Celtic Tiger identity. She is a genuine symbol of the concerns of Celtic-Tiger Ireland. Similar to Hanna, Constance's own body has become a stranger to her, an object of pleasure to others. She sees herself as an outsider trapped in a body that is no longer hers: "Constance used to be pleased with the body that has given her so many surprises over the years […] *Fun for all* the family, she thought, her body was a fabulous object, even Dessie her husband seemed to relish it. But Constance was fed up with herself" (*The Green Road* 74). This self-reflective scrutiny of her own somatic existence becomes the strongest when she is faced with the possibility of having cancer. When looking at the X-ray results of her breasts, she perceives her own body as an open space, a landscape: "it looked like a knot, a snarl of light. And everything around it – the exterior line of the breast, the map of ducts, or veins perhaps – was very beautiful like a landscape seen from space" (*The Green Road* 96). Constance is a mother herself who is struggling under the burden of maternal responsibilities. She feels trapped and betrayed by her body that has served its purpose for so many years. She loves her children. One of the humblest moments that reflects her motherly care is when after returning from the hospital she embraces her daughter: "Constance was also comforted, lying on the trampoline under the stars, with her daughter in her arms" (*The Green Road* 105). Despite her self-doubt, she is a responsible mother and caretaker. However, the material excesses of the economic prosperity in Ireland have taken a toll on her. Constance is living in a now prosperous Limerick of 1997. Her husband is a successful businessman: "Constance was lucky. Trips to New York were just the tip of the iceberg, Constance was spoilt with tickets to Bruce Springsteen and the Galway

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Races, a leg of lamb brought home on Friday, chocolates if she wanted them" (*The Green Road* 90). The weight of such wealth strengthens the loneliness, and the insecurities carried from childhood. The consumerist lifestyle that she has been leading have left emotional scars: "Constance had two sons who told her nothing and a husband who told her nothing and a father who told her nothing and then died" (*The Green Road* 91). She suffers from depression that seems to be a recurrent illness in the family: "everyone was so disappointed these days, Constance thought, it was like an epidemic" (*The Green Road* 95). Despite her sufferings, she is able to see the fortunate position she is in. Constance meets another woman in the hospital, Margaret Dolan, who is also waiting for a diagnosis. Unlike Constance, she is poor. Watching her fills Constance with empathy and gratitude: it is a moment of epiphany: "And Constance started to cry for Margaret Dolan […] crying too for her own selfishness […] because she had everything, more than everything, her life was overflowing and Margaret Dolan had so little to call her own" (*The Green Road* 99).

A similar self-reflective process is discernible in Rosaleen, the matriarch of the Madigan family. She is also lost and seeking solace as a mother and as a member of a community to which she belongs to. Enright casts a shrewd eye on the disadvantages and losses of Celtic Tiger Ireland. As critic Estévez-Saá points out: "Enright's revision of more than twenty years in the recent history of Ireland vindicates the need to look at the past so as to discover the shortcomings of Ireland's present" (52). Rosaleen is the main wanderer of the narrative: "every day she drove out her Citroen, and she walked. She was the old woman of the roads" (*The Green Road* 151). She is living "in the wrong house with the wrong colours. And where could you put yourself: if you could not feel at home in your own home?" (*The Green Road* 165). Nonetheless, she also arrives at a healing discovery: "I have paid too little attention" (*The Green Road* 310).

Enright has a specific talent when it comes to positioning bodies in a domestic space. The realisation of meaninglessness in the home makes the space eerie to Rosaleen, who recognises how commodified it has already become. Through the Madigan family home in Ardeevin, the west of Ireland emerges as the metaphor of the destruction of historic authenticity brought on by the Celtic Tiger economy. The house has functioned for so long as a home for several generations; it was the crucial space where Rosaleen has lived most of her adult life. Now, however, it is seen as a commodity. Rosaleen realises that the time has come for her to sell the house: "I'm putting the

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house on the market" (*The Green Road* 235). While her children struggle to cope with the decision, it becomes clear that they all need the money that such a sale would bring: "they wanted to say that they had money or that they did not need money, but their failure gaped back at them, and they just stood there" (*The Green Road* 236). The reality is that it is the right moment for such a sale, "the truth was that the house they were sitting was worth a ridiculous amount and the people sitting in it worth very little" (*The Green Road* 240). Nonetheless, it is seen as an act of cruelty by the Madigan kids: "each of them silently shouting that she could not take it away from them, whatever it was – their childhood, soaked into the walls of this house" (*The Green Road* 239.) Through the story of a single Irish family, Enright captures the process of commodification, showing how easily a family home is being replaced by a globalised non-place, an item on the market. When analysing this process critic Mary McGlynn argues that the notion of home has been transformed in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger era into an empty concept: "a place already identified with privacy and the individual, the commodified house offers an ideal means of tracking the conversion of subjects to consumers" (35) while strengthening the neoliberal idea of the "futility of public or collective action" (35). The narrative climax of *The Green Road* is achieved during the Christmas dinner when Rosaleen announces her decision to sell the house, declaring her intention to move in with Constance. After Constance announces her refusal "they heard Rosaleen's little car coughing life outside and the wheels chewing the gravel" (*The Green Road* 44). What follows is the exploration of the green road. Rosaleen, the wanderer, gets lost and entangled in haunting memories of her past. On this journey, the anthropomorphized land awakens, and the narrative captures how it affects the wandering body.

Rosaleen loses track of the path on the green road, and reality gives way to imagination. The boundaries of her physical senses expand and merge with the effects that the environment has on her body: "Head low, swaying from side to side. She could not feel where the ground began, and the flesh stopped, it was all one pain" (*The Green Road* 272). The road is a space where the varied mental rhythms are caught in a suspended reality. The body's physical experiences lead to a complex sensual understanding and mental processing: "Rosaleen opened her lungs and filled herself up. It hurt her chest. It hurt the inside of her. The air was cold, and she was cold, so Rosaleen thought hot thoughts" (*The Green Road* 261). Rosaleen's wandering on the green road point to a deep need to escape the closed space of a body that had been constrained to the domestic space of the family home as well as to the roles of motherhood. She wishes to be free, to metaphorically

transcend the physicality of the body: “How long would she have to continue like this? Being herself” (*The Green Road* 260). She wanders out to the ‘open’ wilderness of the Burren: “she came out to […] take the sharpness of the air inside herself. To get the sea air” (*The Green Road* 261). In an interview about *The Gathering* (2007) Enright claimed that “the body is the problem […] very strong problem so I suppose, that too, is connected to the theme of metamorphosis. The yearning of some sort of metaphorical shift which is contained already in language” (Schwall, 17). This “yearning” is prevalent in *The Green Road.* The feeling of being a victim of one’s own body (so accentuated in the case of Constance, Hanna and Rosaleen) is partially caused by the socio-historical context and its effects. Rosaleen’s self-healing wandering on the green road is a means to refine and transcend the limitations of her present. The surreal blending with the limitless beauty of the Burren is also a newly found ‘openness’ towards the understanding of her role as the matriarch of the family, as a woman, as an Irish citizen and as a human being.

There is a constant mingling of open and closed spaces in this novel. The openness is represented by the depiction of the landscape itself, the rural countryside or, in the case of the Madigan boys, the vastness of the city and the vastness of Africa. Enright creates a fascinating parallel between the unencumbered experience of the countryside and that of faraway countries. Emmet and Dan Madigan represent the Irish emigrant, but contrary to the traditional descriptions of emigration as a daunting process, both characters are seen as well integrated into their new environments. Emmet is successful in his mission of international welfare. As a doctor he is exposed to the devastating poverty and suffering witnessed in African villages: “the street was a medical textbook […] people with bits missing. The bulge of tumour about to split the skin” (*The Green Road* 118). When he returns to Ireland for the family gathering at Christmas, he casts a new, devastatingly critical eye on the contemporary Irish way of living: “Since the money came in, Ireland depressed Emmet in a whole new way. The house prices depressed him. And the handbag thing, the latte thing, the Aren’t We All Brilliant thing, they all depressed him too” (*The Green Road* 206). His success in international affairs and the exposure to poverty strengthen his distaste towards his native country. Ireland is still a ‘closed’ country; in his eyes the play with ‘closeness’ is also expressed on the level of mentality. Despite the fact that Ireland has become a highly international society, Emmet has to realise that the integration of foreigners is not yet settled. This realisation is the strongest when he decides not to invite his Kenyan friend, living in Dublin, to the family gathering at Christmas: “After all the hospitality he himself had been offered, in so many towns. […] The only route to the

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Madigans' Christmas table was through some previously accredited womb. Married. Blessed. *I am sorry. I can not invite you home for Christmas because I am Irish and my family is mad*" (*The Green Road* 212).

The seemingly dominant materialistic mindset of the country creates a longing for the romanticized, traditional lifestyle represented via the symbol of the *green road*. Everyone is devastated: Rosaleen escapes to the green road, to the 'openness' in order to free her mind and reconnect with the past: "she had come to cleanse herself of forgetfulness and of fury" (*The Green Road* 265). Through the free indirect speech form of narration, she views her journey on this road as the "road of her youth" (*The Green Road* 264). The Madigan house has become a closed physical space to her, one that represents confinement, routine, matter itself: "The wall itself was a dusty rose […] like living in a shell […] the whole place should be stripped and done properly – better yet – the wall turned to glass, dissolved" (*The Green Road* 145). Enright uses the "house" motif as a structural device in the narrative. It is the main setting of the plot. It is shaped by memory; it is a space of domestic as well as that of confinement. According to Matthew Ryan, Enright denounces the traditional values associated with the classic Irish family home, seeing it as "more venal and acquisitive" (8). The Ardeevin house is not a hospitable place anymore, it is a ruin, as Rosaleen states: "where could you put yourself: if you could not feel at home in your own home? If the world turned into a series of lines and shapes with nothing in the pattern to remind you what it was for" (*The Green Road* 165).

Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* implies that there is a heightened psychological significance attached to certain spaces, particularly intimate and domestic spaces. Bachelard argues that our experience of space is deeply connected to our bodily sensations and our sense of self. He writes, "We are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of a poetry that was lost" (Bachelard 7). In other words, our relationship to space is not just intellectual, but also emotional and sensory. He also connects our bodily experience to our perception of space, noting that "the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (6). He suggests that our bodies shape and are shaped by the spaces we inhabit: "Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It applies itself to space like a hand to an instrument, and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object" (63). This connection between the body and space is also crucial in

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the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who argues that our sense of self is fundamentally tied to our bodily experience. In *Corpus*, Nancy states that: “the body is that which constantly carries us beyond ourselves, that which constantly carries us toward the outside” (Nancy 16). Both Bachelard and Nancy suggest that our relationship to space is deeply connected to our embodied experience, and that our sense of self is shaped by the spaces we inhabit.

The Green Road also grants a heightened relevance to the spaces in the Madigan household. Rosaleen’s private space in the attic is described as: “the safest place she knew” (Enright 47), highlighting the emotional significance of physical space. Additionally, the physical structure of the Madigan home mirrors the emotional and psychological fragmentation of the family: “the house itself was a source of tension … it was big and misshapen and could not be made to feel like home” (13). The role of intimate spaces in the Madigan household highlight the ways in which physical space can shape and reflect psychological experience. The role of the body is also deeply connected to the way physical spaces reflect the psychological experience. Bachelard’s assertion that “the house shelters daydreaming” (6) is evident in the Madigan home, where the characters’ bodily experiences are deeply tied to their emotional and psychological states. When Dan retreats to his bedroom, “the skin on his face grew slack and cold” (8), emphasizing the somatic effects of emotional distress. Furthermore, the language used to describe the house reinforces the idea that it is intertwined with the bodies of its inhabitants. The staircase is described as “the artery of the house” (14), and the very structure of the house is said to “breathe” (15). The somatic language used in the novel emphasizes the embodied experience of its characters and the way physical spaces reflect and shape psychological states.

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II.3. Memory, History and the Attentive Body in *The Green Road*

In *Matter and Memory* Henri Bergson suggests that there is a symbiotic relationship between the outside environment and the body itself. In his analysis, the material world, what he terms "closely linked images" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 21), comes into collision with the body via direct stimuli. The physical affects that the body receives through this collision with the external reality are recorded in the brain, acting "as an instrument of analysis and an instrument of selection" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 20). As external stimuli come into contact with the body, it produces an immediate spontaneous reaction: "mechanical impulsion is followed by a necessary movement" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 22). Idealist notions of perception might determine this as a level of consciousness. Bergson revises this idea and suggests that the association of perception with "a kind of knowledge" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 28) is misleading. The brain is always directed towards action; it does not give birth to any sort of representation. His theory transforms the understanding of the interior and exterior, the body as the interior becoming a mechanism directed strictly towards action. Bergson rejects the idea of consciousness as something born in the brain prior to action: "why does everything happen *as if* this consciousness were born of the internal movement of the cerebral substance?" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 24). The body, based on this understanding, can only perceive by being exposed to the outside world. If perception doesn't stem from some conscious-mind function but rather happens in the object itself then it doesn't represent the material world, but rather reflects it, selecting everything that can lead to a possible action. The outside is not constructed by our inner perception but rather our inner perceptions depend on the material world that surrounds us. This interpretation ties closely to Nancy's understanding of the body as an open space "that makes room for existence" (15). It is a place that only functions as a meeting ground, where outside stimuli are transformed into possible actions. Nancy argues that "nothing exists without a place" (15). A body needs to "make room for existence" (Nancy 15), mainly because there is no transcendental governance, but rather "an indefinite modification and spacious modulation of skin" (Nancy 15). These words echo Bergson's views. Nancy clearly sees the materiality of the body as a space among other spaces, individualized only by the type of exchange that it houses: "The body-place isn't full or empty, since it doesn't have an outside or an inside, any more than it has parts, a totality, functions, or finality" (15). The essence of the body originates in the type of spaces, the type of outside affects that it comes in contact with: "the

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ontology of existence is ontology itself: being is in no way prior or subjacent to the phenomenon, the body *is* the being of existence" (Nancy 2008, 15). In Bergson's view, the body is shaped through the process of collision, of coming into contact with other objects and bodies. Its individuality relies upon the simple need for an adopted centre. As early as infancy, the body adopts itself as the centre of reference from where distance is measured, that in turn determines the type of action and reaction (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 42-44). The distinction of inside and outside is merely that of a part (body) and the whole (all the other bodies and objects): "the notion of exteriority and interiority is merely the distinction between my body and other bodies" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 43). This is more than merely suggesting that we are shaped by the outside experiences we gather; it explicitly points to the fact that we only exist because of the symbiosis with the external reality.

In Enright's novel *The Green Road*, the actions of the characters are determined by the type of space they occupy. The metonymic house-home substitution signals the ontological attachment that all the Madigans have towards their primordial space of existence. Although all of them are living far away from the house in Ardeevin, whenever they return, they revive a specific way of being. The commodification of houses, through the era's heightened interest in real estate, has transformed the domestic space from a private, Bergsonian memory-filled location to that of economic capital. The monetary value of houses increased during the Celtic Tiger era in Ireland, but this posited a threat to the private value of the home and through it, to that of the individual itself. For the Madigans, the idea of losing the house means a loss of private history. During the Christmas dinner, there are direct references to the symbiotic relationship that they all have with the house. Whenever they return to it, they symbolically metamorphose into their younger selves: "The people inside the room" who "were older, too" yet "all of them so child-like still, despite the absurd grey hairs and the sagging skin in which their familiar eyes were set" (*The Green Road* 239). Memories carried through the walls and objects of the place become more prevalent to the Madigans, "their childhood soaked into the walls of this house" (*The Green Road* 239). The novel captures an Ireland that is in the process of losing its topographical identifications and, as certain critics suggests, "its narratives of cozy homes" as well (McGlynn 37).

Memory is a key element not only in the closed space of the Madigan house in Ardeevin but also in the space of the land itself. The haunting past persists through images of anthropomorphic and gothic illusions when Rosaleen becomes lost on the green road. The wide, open space of the

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landscape carries national history, and at the same time to Rosaleen, it is a path filled with personal memories. It is important to note that the name, Rosaleen, is also deeply embedded in Irish history. It is the name of the daughter of the Irish mid-sixteenth century lord, Red Hugh O'Neill. Her beauty had been evoked in numerous sixteenth-century ballads, all entitled *Róisín Dubh*, as according to certain critics, "her hair happened to be dark" (Dalton 349). The name had slowly begun to symbolically represent Ireland itself. In the nineteenth-century, one of these songs has been rewritten by poet James Clarence Mangan, "Dark Rosaleen" (Dalton 349). This poem recurs in the novel, Rosaleen reciting it to herself continuously on the green road: "*O my dark Rosaleen/Do not sigh, do not weep*" (*The Green Road* 160). Anne Fogarty suggests that it functions as a mantra "that provides a metaphor for her conflicted emotions but also entangle her with the spectral traces of Irish history" ("Someone whose kindness" 137). In Mangan's *aisling* poem Rosaleen - as a metaphor of the Irish nation - is in need of rescue from oppressive forces. The voice of the male allegorical figure of Irish nationalism in the poem expresses his heroic determination to save the object of his longing: "My life of life, my saints of saints/ My Dark Rosaleen!/My own Rosaleen!" (in Hogan, 37). Rosaleen Madigan in the Enright novel recalls how Pat Madigan also used to address her as "my own Rosaleen" (*The Green Road* 263). This appears to be an act of cleansing as well as reclaiming. Pat Madigan envisioned her as the object of his personal longing and desire. Fogarty suggests that the poetic allusions in the narrative serve the purpose of "capturing the physic state of a modern, ageing woman, who self-importantly rails against her lack of purpose in the world" ("Someone whose kindness" 137).

Bergson's theory of the body identifies the crucial role that memories play as the selective regulations that shape perception (*Memory and matter*). There is an element of judgement in every perception, although not as a consequence of the workings of some transcendental conscious mind. According to Bergson, the body selects parts of the material world that are seen as useful, as possible triggers of immediate or delayed action (*Memory and matter*). Rosaleen's wandering on the green road brings up memories because, as Bergson suggests "perception is impregnated with our past" (*Memory and Matter* 24). The green road is a crucial space of memories to Rosaleen; concurrently, it is also the historical road on which suffering and death took place. The west of Ireland was the region that was hugely affected during the Great Famine (1845-49) when "over one million people died of hunger and an even greater number emigrated thus cutting the population by over 25%" (Kinealy 2). The failure of the potato crop - which has been one of the main sources

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of nutrition in many Irish families – in mid-nineteenth century Ireland resulted in devastating poverty and famine. The results were catastrophic as most of the farmers were already struggling to provide for their families and to concurrently supply the British market. Those who managed to survive emigrated to Britain or North America. Some of the ruins of these abandoned "famine cottages" are still in place as a vivid remnant of a fatal national history. During the devastating years of the Famine, some of the Irish (who did not choose to emigrate) were forced to build roads in the west of Ireland in exchange for food. These later became known as *famine roads*, on which many of those forced labourers have died. These roads were purposeless s they led nowhere and were often left unfinished. In quotidian Ireland they act as a strong reminder of a dark past. Rosaleen's body comes into collision with this space of historical memory on the green road. She becomes overwhelmed with feelings of remorse and a fear of death. She starts to see ghosts, visions of a past life: "she too was going to die. This she knew because her dead husband Pat Madigan was beside her on the road" (*The Green Road* 278). Rosaleen manages to gather enough strength and seeks refuge in an abandoned famine cottage. She is flooded with historical memories: "a famine cottage of tumbling-down stone, with one door, one window, no roof" (*The Green Road* 278). She even recalls an Irish myth: "once she was across the hungry grass she would be safe from the weather. Of course, after she crossed the hungry grass then she would be hungry forever. That was the curse of it" (*The Green Road* 278). According to the "curse", the hungry grass that grew in the threshold of these cottages used to mark "the site where a body fell when a victim of a famine died" (Ryan 8). Anyone who touches the hungry grass "will be burdened by the famine, in the form of an insatiable hunger" (Ryan 9). These ruins left in the landscape serve as warnings and reminders, urging reconciliation with the past. They also function as traces that symbolically represent the continuous path described by Fogarty as "the ongoing human endeavor to plumb the nature of existence" ("Someone whose kindness" 140).

The ephemerality of the cottages is held in parallel with the ephemerality of the body. Rosaleen perceives her surroundings through flummoxing memories which signal a subjective engagement with reality. Stimuli from the outside world are stored by the body as sources for possible action (Bergson, *Memory and Matter*) so that when a suitable moment arrives, they are manifested. Rosaleen seems to be remembering long-forgotten events from her past because her body received the triggers needed for these in the past. They were stored to be manifested at the right moment. She remembers things to which her body was exposed but of which she had no knowledge or

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memory: “Rosaleen recognised, in her reflection, the good bones of her youth. He never lost it. From a distance, if you keep the hump out of your back, you might be any age at all” (*The Green Road* 151). According to Bergson pure perception that is “absorbed in the present” and is “capable of giving up every form of memory” (*Memory and Matter* 26) is impossible since “at every moment memories complete our present experience, enriching it with our perception of the present” (*Memory and Matter* 70). Rosaleen is incapable of perceiving a present in its reality of representation, as her body keeps “mingling a thousand details of past experiences” (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 24). On her journey along the green road in a state of oblivion, she finds the famine cottage that triggers memories of an inescapable family history and, through it, of the nation’s history. The physical landscape activates the mnemonic body and memories arise: “it was here she walked with her lovely dog, Milly, and with Pat Madigan when they were courting […] it was here they kissed, and more” (Enright, 265). The intensity of the memories paradoxically strengthen the validity of the present, conforming to the Bergsonian idea that there is no present without the imprint of the past, “perception and recollection always interpenetrate each other, always exchanging something of their substance.” (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 72) Remembering thus becomes an ontogenetic need:

> Her body was shaking her loose; she was just holding on. She had to remember as much as possible; now, she had to be sensible. […] She had to remember everything. The names of the tables and the names of the diseases, the names of the parts of the body that was trying to leave her now. But she had no intention of going (*The Green Road* 280).

Anne Fogarty suggests that Rosaleen reaches an apotheosis on this road, “metamorphosed and reduced to an elemental animality […] Rosaleen in effect dies on this journey of self-discovery” (“Someone whose kindness” 140). It is the symbolic road of her life as she recalls her youth: “It was time to get on with it. Her walk on this road, which was the road of her youth.” (*The Green Road* 264). The narratorially omniscient remarks coherently complement Rosaleen’s thoughts and feelings: “This is why Rosaleen had come up here, to this wild place. She had come to cleanse herself of forgetfulness and fury. To shout it out loud and leave it behind” (*The Green Road* 265). This creates a complex narrative style, where the character’s free indirect speech is assisted by a commenting omniscient voice. Sometimes, Rosaleen’s direct interjections function as sarcastic self-criticism of her own thoughts: “Hah!’ she said because she was dead and still alive, up here on

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the green road." (*The Green Road* 264). The language describing this journey is vividly somatic. Rosaleen perceives the natural forces as individual acting personae. The narrative creates an imaginary entrance into the physical realm. The body unifies with the forces of nature: "The cold was in her hand now. Each breath hurt. She pulled the air into the tiny parts of her lungs. Her flesh was pierced in microscopic places by the air of the vast world as it pushed itself into her blood" (*The Green Road* 266). This is what Bergson terms "affection": when perception is directed to the body itself as the proximity between the images that the body comes in contact with is reduced to the minimum, forcing the focus inwards (*Matter and Memory* 60-70). The environment affects Rosaleen's body on this journey, triggering memory-filled perception. However, affection also arises through self-reflection on her ageing body: "she was stuck in the sounds of her own breathing, dragging and rough, an immense clattering in her teeth when she pulled the air into her" (*The Green Road* 273). Psychologist Bessel Van Der Kolk states that even when experience, especially a traumatic one, is treated as forgotten, the body works as a precise mnemonic device: "the physical effect on the organs go unabated until they demand notice when they are expressed as illness […] the body continues to keep the score" (46). Every emotion, every life event is carved into the body, awaiting materialisation.

Rosaleen's recollections emerge from a totality of memories that acquire new meaning in her advanced years as a mother of children who have all grown up and gone on their own separate roads. When she recalls her childhood, time seems to be out of joint, but the bodily experience actively reimagined: "There was a medicine that her father used to spoon into her when she was a child. […] And as soon as she swallowed it – out like a light. Asleep" (*The Green Road* 280). Medicine and its effects on the body are recurring motifs in this physiologically-aware novel: "There was great company in morphine […] They put Pat on it, at the end – Fentanyl patches that she stuck on his thigh. It made him happy. The morphine made him love her again, and then it made him constipated and cross. And then he died" (*The Green Road* 280). Her experience of memories and time is characterized by continuous, flowing duration rather than discrete, measurable units woven together through the use of narrative language. When Rosaleen is thinking about her past, Enright writes, "There was a deep sense of before and after in Rosaleen's life, but time was never linear, was not that simple, for the memories of the same time came to her at different times, with a different strength" (Enright 53). This passage highlights the non-linear nature of memory, emphasizing the ways in which our experiences are woven together through the

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subjective experience of time. Enright's use of narrative language to evoke a sense of *durée* described by Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory.* The narrative creates a sense of psychological depth and complexity in Rosaleen's character. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Rosaleen's experiences of loss and grief have shaped her in profound ways. Enright writes, "The missing, and the dead, were all around her. She could feel their presence as if they were still alive, though she could not see them" (Enright 219). This emphasizes the ways in which Rosaleen's memories and experiences are woven together, blurring the boundaries between the past and present. Through the use of narrative language, Enright creates a sense of temporal continuity and fluidity, inviting readers to engage with the story on an experiential level. In the case of Rosaleen, Enright's use of *durée* is particularly effective in creating a sense of psychological depth and complexity, emphasizing the ways in which our memories and experiences shape us over time.

Enright's staccato sentences often strike with a demolishing effect, adding sarcasm to those precious moments in the novel that are given elevated standing. Rosaleen seems to be talking through the third person narrative in these remarks, mocking her own life-threatening situation in the cold: "if she bared her teeth, the clattered against each other, like a pair of joke dentures, so she tried to press her lips together, to stop them cracking and breaking in her skull. The expense of it" (*The Green Road* 279). Likewise, when she remembers her husband, she reminisces on the last loving and painful days, before the narrative suddenly switches to profane details, ending with a sudden short statement: "it made him constipated and cross. And then he died" (*The Green Road* 280). As the memory-filled perceptions gain strength, the focus on the body also become excessive. Rosaleen contemplates the emptiness left in her body after her husband's death, only to arrive at the stark conclusion that all things come to an end and bodies dissolve in the ground: "What did it mean when the man you loved was gone? A part of his body inside your own body and his arms wrapped about you. What happened when all of that was in the earth, deep down in the cemetery clay? Nothing happened. That is what happened" (*The Green Road* 266).

The desperate need for touch and for company block any kind of relief in life, as Rosaleen's loneliness becomes magnified: "how long does she have to continue being like this. Being herself. […] and why was there no one to love her?" (*The Green Road* 260). She is portrayed on this road as a vulnerable, old woman who has received very little affection from her family. Despite the empathy for Rosaleen that this portrayal triggers in readers, she is still not pictured as an ideal

mother to her children. Her offspring have greatly suffered from a lack of maternal connection as she was often aloof and absent. In the very first chapter, Hanna describes Rosaleen as unpredictable, prone to hysterical reaction, disappearing for days in her room: “This was not the first time their mother took the horizontal solution, as Dan liked to call it […] the bed creaked from time to time. The toilet flushed, and the door of her room closed again” (*The Green Road* 13). Nonetheless, when her life is in danger, her sons and daughters seem to realise how desperately entangled they all are in this motherly love or more specifically, how desperately they need this maternal affection. According to Bergson, perception is covered with memories of the external reality. The affects of the material world, including the experience of other bodies, are registered selectively according to the parts that are seen as useful to the body for immediate or delayed action (*Memory and Matter*). The Madigan children - in their desperate search for their mother - all seem to recall a different image of Rosaleen: “The comedy of it was not lost on them, the fact that each of her children was calling out to a different woman” (*The Green Road* 284). Bergson denies the possibility of ideal perception (*Memory and Matter*). This could be the reason why Rosaleen cannot be fully seen in her entirety by her children. She is the collection of the various memories that shape the way her children connect with her. Even she herself admits that “it is a very hard thing – said Rosaleen finally - to describe your mother” (*The Green Road* 264).

The process of wandering and of being exposed to the elements prompts a change in Rosaleen. The “shrinking” to a state of vulnerability makes her realise how very little actual attention she has paid to everything around her, including her family, all throughout her life. She feels fury “they’d be sorry, to find her gone […] Rosaleen had two feet, had a car. Rosaleen could also walk out of that door and not come back” (*The Green Road* 272). This feeling slowly turns into nostalgia and remorse. She is wondering why “her lovely children, why she could not be nice to them” (*The Green Road* 273) The road, the darkness and the exposure to the unknown all contrive to create a more reflective Rosaleen. Her first-person diction is smoothly fused into the third person narrative allowing access to her inner thoughts. She reminisces on her motherly aloofness, stating that she “didn’t know” how to love them: “they were so beautiful […] they were so trusting and good. It made her feel not good. Unappreciated” (*The Green Road* 273).

In the sense defined by Simone Weil, attention plays a pivotal role in the novel. The narrative is constructed on the tangled threads of slowed down internal and external observations. In *On the*

Abolition of all Political Parties, Weil situates attention at the core of what it means to be a human being. She argues that humans are highly susceptible to various forms of manipulation, governed by hope and fear, often forgetting the vital need to pay attention: "true attention is a state ever so difficult for every human creature, so violent, that any emotional disturbance can derail it" (21). In another work, she further clarifies this type of attention that generates mutual respect with other beings and the world around us: "Attention consists of suspending our thought […] Our thought should be in relation to all particular and already formulated thoughts, as a man on a mountain who, as he looks forward, also sees below him, without actually looking at them, a great many forests and plains" (Weil, *Waiting for God* 111-112). This state is what Rosaleen eventually reaches on her journey along the green road. She is seeking healing, reminiscing on her childhood, her marriage, and the relationship with her offspring: "she left them to get on with it, whatever it was – their lives" (*The Green Road* 261). As she slows down, walking and remembering her past, she achieves a supreme level of attentive connection with the landscape, its history, and her own self. If the past has become lost in a world of commodification, then the only way to preserve it is through a meaningful engagement with the present.

II.4. Entanglement and the Future of the Anthropocene in *The Green Road*

Bergson suggests that there is no present that is not already permeated by the past so that an attentive engagement with the present is a way of fully embracing one's reality authentically (*Memory and Matter*). The Celtic Tiger Ireland portrayed in *The Green Road* can only be rebuilt by individuals who value its present, as critic Mary McGlynn argues that "if progress is a disaster and backwardness a shame then there is an embeddedness in the present moment" (37). By the end of her wandering Rosaleen embraces a newly found state of awareness: "Rosaleen saw a satellite moving through a delicacy of stars above her, and it was as though she could sense the earth's turning. […] *I'm awake*, she said. *I am alive*" (*The Green Road* 280). This vision of being cosmically connected is one of circularity. It also brings into context the human-nonhuman continuum type of embodied history described by Braidotti ("Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism"). In *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti constructs a new understanding of a time continuum, one that is not linear and that allows "the simultaneity of our being in the world together" (210). It

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is a "rhizomatically" interconnected existence (Braidotti, "Four Theses on Posthuman Feminism" 31) that focuses on the relation between the species. Such a perspective on history has, for long, been the focus of several theorists in the humanities. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway argues that the main quest of our contemporary era is "to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response […] to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in thick present" (1). She treats "trouble" as an unavoidable adjacent facet of history, arguing that the goal is "learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (Haraway 2). She urges that the term Anthropocene be re-interpreted. Harraway introduces the Greek term 'Chthulucene' instead to describe our current era. She suggests that the main goal is to learn how to co-exist with the already inflicted damage: "learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (Haraway 1-2). Enright's collage of Irish characters in the novel also points to the need for this type of living, urging an attentive focus on a meaningful global present.

Every character in *The Green Road* speaks with the acute power of noticing. The body plays a key role in this strategy. It is as if the body is the coordinator; the events unfold based on the rhythm that the senses perceive. When portraying Rosaleen's walk, the narrative magnifies the wandering itself, narrowing the attention to a sensory geo-awareness: "the movement of her legs, one in front of the other, and the senses under her cold feet, of the rocks and earths and tussocks of grass on the green road" (*The Green Road* 265). The act of touching and, by doing so, interfering with the physical landscape, introduces the importance of ecological awareness. The irreversible damage by which human life has changed and altered the local environment is a key element in the novel. The Burren landscape is not only a background setting: it is used as a differentiated space that functions as a unique temporal and geographical spot. According to Enright, the limestone that covers this area "satisfies the child's eye: the geometric lines are an invitation to play. And the grey is very minimal, of course. Very now. You might be in a Richard Long piece" ("A Return to the Western Shore"). Richard Long is a contemporary performance artist and sculptor who travelled around the world, creating artworks outside in nature. He is famous for his piece entitled *A Line Made By Walking*, created in 1967. He walked for hours backwards and forwards in a field in Wiltshire until the "turf caught the sunlight and became visible as a line" (Long, Tate Gallery). He

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then photographed this line, a mark left by his own moving body on nature's canvas. He has created several similar pieces, always being interested in the traces left in the grass by his feet, as a fixed line of movement yet as an ephemeral trace, on that is systematically erased over time by nature. As he stated in an interview, his works are about "being there at the moment" (Cole, "Forever: A Conversation with Richard Long"). There is always an element of attention in all his works. Rosaleen's journey on the green road is a similar process: while walking she leaves her trace on the landscape and finds a new, meaningful way to engage with her present.

The road motif that circulates the novel can also be seen as the representation of an emotionally charged terrain. It is the path towards self-understanding and a quest to find a new type authentic living. Physically it is only traversed by Rosaleen, but it rises into a metaphor of the psychological road that all of her children go through in the novel. The value of the present and the tracing of the natural world are important elements of another contemporary novel written by the Irish writer Sara Baume. Besides the same reference to the Richard Long performance, Baume's *A Line Made By Walking* signals a similar urgency to engage in a more attentive way with the present. Frankie, the protagonist also goes through a journey of self-discovery. She is her twenties living in Dublin, working as an art consultant at a museum, when suddenly she decides she cannot bear the suffocating atmosphere of the city anymore and moves to the countryside in the West of Ireland, into her grandmother's old, abandoned bungalow. She spends her time lamenting her past, trying to understand her own being and the source of her sadness while re-establishing her place in the material world. She is imbued with the serenity of nature, but constantly has to face the damage done to it by people.

Like Rosaleen in *The Green Road*, Frankie spends her time wandering, paying attention and re-discovering her connection both to her past as well as her present. The rural landscape and its depiction as both a corrupted place yet also a place of remedy ties Baume's novel closely to Enright's *The Green Road*. Moreover, the history carried in places, memories that are triggered through the body's exposure to these spaces, are salient aspects in both narratives. The bungalow that Frankie moves into is only empty because they haven't found a buyer yet, as the family tries to sell the property. This is the same consequence resulting from the Celtic Tiger real estate boom: houses that were once homes, personal spaces transformed into capital value. To Frankie this house is the very space where her body can function in its authenticity, because it triggers memories. Just

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like Rosaleen on the green road, Frankie also starts to become more attentive, viewing the natural world, objects and animals through a newly discovered form of perception. Both of Enright's Rosaleen and Baume's Frankie reach an almost "pure perception" (Bergson 1929), one that is informed by past experiences but not distorted by past judgements, allowing a more egalitarian existence. After her nearly deadly journey on the Famine Road, Rosaleen is portrayed visiting her son, Emmet, in his suburban house. Here she arrives at her final conclusion: "I should have paid more attention to things" (*The Green Road* 310). This compassionate attitude is echoed in Frankie's discovery at the end of the Baume novel; she realises that she is capable of showing "concern for a creature other than myself" (Baume, *A Line Made By Walking* 297).

In many ways Enright's novel, like Baume's novels, questions and challenges the notion of belonging and, through it, the understanding of national identity. In *Postnationalism, Postfeminism, and Other 'Posts' in Anne Enright's Fiction* Ana-Karina Schneider highlights how Enright's use of narrative techniques such as fragmentation, somatic language and multiple perspectives disclose the complexities of Irish national identity and feminist politics. The novel challenges traditional ideas of both nationalism and feminism, and instead offers a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of these concepts. In *The Green Road* trauma, memory, and the body intersect with broader explorations of identity and belonging. Declan Kiberd has noted that "cultural memory is the preoccupation of much contemporary Irish writing" (Kiberd, *After Ireland: Writing the Nation from Beckett to the Present* 197), and this is certainly true of Enright's work. In *The Green Road*, Enright explores the legacy of colonialism, the effects of the Famine, and the changing social and cultural landscape of Ireland in the twentieth century. One of the key themes of the novel is the idea of the body as a site of memory. Rosaleen is struggling to come to terms with her past and her present. Her body is inscribed with the scars of her personal and family histories, and these scars are both physical and emotional. As she travels along the Famine road, she experiences extreme vulnerability, reminding her of the scars that have been inflicted on the bodies of her ancestors. Enright's use of language is particularly effective in this regard. Her descriptions of the natural landscape, the Famine road, and the bodies of the characters are vivid and visceral, and they serve to highlight the physicality of memory. As Anne Enright stated in an interview, "I'm interested in how the physical world affects the body... I'm always trying to find ways to describe things that are more than just 'this happened, and then this happened'" (O'Reilly). Rosaleen's aging body is a central focus of the novel, and her physical decline is linked to the ways in which she has been

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affected by Ireland's history of colonization and emigration: "Her body was failing her; betraying her, more like, she thought with a spark of indignation. As if she'd done something wrong, as if she were responsible for the gradual breakdown of her own flesh and bones" (Enright, 56). As Ana-Karina Schneider notes, Rosaleen's body is "a site of history and memory" (Schneider 413), and her experiences are shaped by the cultural and political forces that have impacted Ireland over the years.

It is important to note that the novel does not present a single, unified vision of Irish identity or cultural memory. Enright herself has stated, "There's no such thing as a single Irish identity... I think there's an ongoing argument about what it means to be Irish" (O'Reilly). The Madigan siblings perfectly reflect this diversity of perspectives, as they all have very different experiences and attitudes towards their Irish heritage. Their stories intersect and overlap, but they also diverge and conflict, highlighting the complexity of Irish cultural memory. Declan Kiberd sees this type of Irishness as specific to contemporary Ireland: "the postnational Ireland of the present is a place of overlapping, clashing, and sometimes complementary histories" (Kiberd, *After Ireland* 198). Enright's novel is a testament to the ongoing conversation about Irish identity and the role of cultural memory in shaping that identity. In *After Ireland*, Kiberd argues that contemporary Irish writers are moving beyond the national narrative and embracing a transnational perspective, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of different cultures and nations. *The Green Road* can be read in this context, exploring the experiences of a family that is connected to Ireland but also has a presence in different parts of the world.

The Green Road's episodic timeline, with the systematically organized chapters about the lives and circumstances of each Madigan child, constructs a collaborative story. The sensorial intensities of each chapter, the juxtaposition of the past and present, and the sharp focus on the bodily also situate Enright's novel within a noticeable corporeal turn in contemporary Irish fiction. In an interview she described her style as one built on honesty to reality: "whatever postmodern impulse I have, it is an attempt to be more honest. It is not an attempt to be cleverer, it's an attempt to be more honest" (Bracken and Cahill, 18). As shown in the first part of this chapter, Enright uses various narratorial techniques in order to construct a genuine new mode of writing. Her honesty resides in the capacity to adapt the novel form as a genre in order to utter the conflicting issues of the past and present: global and the local, unity and fragmentation. She is critical of the progress that Ireland has made,

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and is suspicious towards the advances that humanity has achieved on the planet. In her fiction she shows an understanding of human reality and of a truth that can only be reconstructed from the ground up, through a new use of language. Through her strong engagement with the bodily and her uncanny somatic language she constructs a new understanding of what is real, urging the need to "pay more attention to things" (*The Green Road* 310).

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Chapter III.

Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

III.1. Introduction

In 2008 the Celtic Tiger era started to dismantle through "the collapse of the property industry and the destabilization of the banking industry" (Bracken, Harney-Majahan, "A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I" 1) but literature gained a new force. Critics Claire Bracken and Harney observe that "what we see in the post-boom period is a paradox of explosive literary activity" ("A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I" 2). The term which can be used to capture the essence of the contemporary post-Celtic Tiger Irish fiction is: innovation. Contemporary Irish fiction is going through a period of prosperity, and women's fiction, in particular, is in a phase of vitality (Bracken, Harney- Majahan, "A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I").

Eimear McBride is a contemporary Irish novelist whose works reflect this innovative momentum. Claire Bracken portrays her as the "forerunner of this recent explosion in experimentalism" and one who "harnesses the experimental form to take stock of the harrowing traumas of sexual abuse" ("A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I" 9). On the historical timeline of Irish writers and especially when compared to Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien, she represents a younger generation of Irish women writers. Her style deploys a language that is visceral, attempting to capture a pre-verbal state of thoughts. In all of her emotionally charged narratives, she emphasizes the bodily, especially women's and girls' bodies in relation to various traumas: sexual assaults, rape, abuse, body-shaming. Susan Cahill maintains that these core traumatic markers figure strongly in many post-Celtic Tiger women's writing ("A Girl is a Half-formed Thing"). There is a noticeable engagement with the body, especially the female body, in many Irish post-Celtic Tiger novels. From this perspective, Eimear McBride shares some characteristic narrative and stylistic elements with Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien. They all expose the somatic to utter valuable observations about the situation of women in Irish society and the vulnerability of the human condition in general. Like Enright and O'Brien, McBride's use of language is characterized by intricate details

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that compel the reader to fully immerse themselves in the characters' consciousness, enabling them to experience every sensation along with the characters themselves.

If, during the Celtic Tiger years, realism was seen as a predominant style (O'Brien, *The Irish Novel 1960-2010*; Ward Sell, "Half-Formed Modernism"), then the period following it can be characterized by a surplus of various new-modernist tendencies: "the fracture of [Celtic Tiger] capitalism stimulated the need for innovative and hermeneutically demanding art, in a manner analogous to the need for high modernism in the early twentieth century" (Ward Sell, "Half-Formed Modernism"). Eimear McBride's debut novel *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* is part of this modernist revival, despite Joe Cleary's claim in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* that: "modernism today is part of a receding history" (1). Irish contemporary literature has been reconnecting to modernism from a century ago. Eimear McBride strongly ties into the wave of new contemporary writers, all sharing a drive to create strikingly innovative and challenging new narratives. Like Sara Baume, Lisa McInerney and Sara Clancy, McBride uses narrative devices and a language that attends closely to the mechanisms of the body, while sharing a "thematic interest in damaged or a-normative consciousness […] portraying characters whose minds do not work according to normative social grammars" (Ward Sell, "Half-Formed Modernism"). After the publication of her second novel, *The Lesser* in 2016, some reviewers portrayed her as not only a writer of a modernist spirit, but in a rather exaggerated manner, an 'avant-garde' one: "McBride has a rare gift as a writer, she combines high modernism, page-turning plot and melodrama into a narrative that will appeal to mainstream audiences and fans of literary *avant garde*" (O'Malley, "McBride Revives Irish Modernism.").

A Girl is a Half-formed Thing was published in 2013, but it was initially written in 2004. The work went through a challenging publication process which reflects the challenges of the consumerist, market-driven Celtic Tiger times. McBride wrote the novel in 2004, and after nine years of continuous rejections from publishers', it was finally presented to the public in 2013 (Ward Sell, "Half-Formed Modernism") as a 2013 novel, it can be classified as a contemporary, post-Celtic Tiger work of fiction with modernist aspects. However, it is also a product of the Celtic Tiger period. McBride's struggle to have her work published points to several important aspects of the Irish cultural scene of the time. It was written "in six months during 2003 and 2004." (McBride,

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"How I Wrote the Girl is a Half-formed Thing"). Although the notion of censorship is not a valid constraint anymore, its capitalist counterpart had similarly controlled effects. Publishing houses can decide – often based on subjective reasons - what they consider to be "sellable" material. According to McBride, her work was rejected because "it did not fit into any niche" (Kellaway, "Eimear McBride"). Eventually, the Galley Beggar Press, an independent Norwich firm, published the novel in 2013. Certain critics suggest that in many ways *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* was ahead of its time; its brutal depiction of sexual trauma and its Joycean, pre-linguistic prose, clearly needed to wait until the Tiger's collapse to find a sympathetic publisher" (Ward Sell, "Half-Formed Modernism"). In many ways its realistic plotline and the re-evaluation of the past and its effects on contemporary Irish consciousness ties it to the Celtic Tiger period: "its setting is set an appreciable distance from the reader of 2004, let alone 2013" (Ward Sell, "Half-Formed Modernism"). However, its experimental language and its focus on the somatic through a widened interest in humanitarian issue anchors it in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland's vital age.

The following chapter focuses on *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, analyzing how it responds to the challenges posed by both the Celtic and Post-Celtic Tiger eras, as well as the modernist and postmodernist literary movements. In particular, it highlights the novel's innovative narrative style, which combines elements of these different traditions to create a unique and compelling work. The initial section of this chapter focuses on the somatic narrative language employed in the book, elucidating how it utilizes distinct techniques to explore the bodily experience in a more nuanced and visceral manner. It is suggested that drawing parallels with the works of Enright and Edna O'Brien, the novel adopts a historical perspective, shedding light on Ireland's specific traumas and the repercussions of evolving historical demands. The second part of the chapter focuses on the novel's heightened attention to memory and attention, culminating in an innovative fictional structure and style that employs cognitive narratorial devices.

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III.2. Neo-Modernist challenges in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

McBride stated in an interview that her main ambition when constructing the language of her novel was to show: "how a person is feeling or reacting, what they're feeling about the feeling […] what other thoughts are going through their heads and their gut reactions and physical sensations" (Cochrane, "Eimear McBride"). There is no direct speech communication in the novel. It operates following the non-coherent workings of the protagonist's memory. The dialogues are constructed reflexively: rather than following an utterance, they follow the visceral reactions that the spoken and heard words produce. McBride develops an experimental narrative which, as Gorra argues, "attempts to get under the readers' skin of thought, indeed to find the point at which thought and physical sensation prove inseparable" ("Eimear McBride's Toolkit").

The plot of the novel is rather simple: it follows the deeds and thoughts of a girl starting from her childhood throughout her adolescence, stopping at the important events that shaped her as a human being. Her name is not revealed, nor are those of the places or those of the other characters. They all inhabit an unmistakable if unspecified Irish environment. The structure is divided into five chapters referring to the different stages of the protagonist's life: Lambs, A Girl is a Half-formed Thing, Land Under the Wave, Extreme Unction and The Stolen Child. The timeline is constructed in a peculiar retrospection: logic dictates that it is clearly built upon the self- re-evaluation of the girl's memories. The verb forms are all positioned in the present, creating a thwarted sense of an ongoing time lag.

The protagonist, a young teenage girl, is a product of a broken family unit: her father abandoned the family before her birth. She grows up with an emotionally distant mother and a mentally and physically ill older brother, for whom she feels responsible. She is also portrayed as a product of the religious Irish rural environment from which she continuously struggles to escape: "we're living in a country cold and wet with slugs going across the carpet every night. Now when you are seven eight. Me five. This house, green growing up the outside" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 9). As Cahill observes, the focus on the girl in this story can be viewed as a postfeminist articulation of anger directed at the neoliberal consensus of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland ("A Girl is a Half-formed Thing"). The narrative attends closely to the troubles and traumas of this girl who is bullied at school and feels abandoned while trying to keep her brother safe. She is also sexually

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molested and raped by her uncle. The narrative voice is monolithic since the entire story is told through the eyes of a first-person narrator.

In the psychological quest of the main character there is a gloomy and implicit depiction of a future that reiterates generational faults and sins. The plot ends in an ambiguous tone, implying that the Girl possibly commits suicide. This can be perceived both as means of escaping domestic terror as well as a protest against the conditions producing this terror: “The coldest water. Deepest mirror of the past and in it I am. […] and we are very clean here like when we wash our hands” (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 202). The Girl[5] refers nostalgically to a past that was “clean,” yet it was full of trauma, loneliness and betrayal. She wishes self-deceivingly for the past to be changed, thereby suggesting that one can only achieve a livable present and presence by changing the past itself because there is no redemption in the future. There is no possibility of religious salvation in a context where some of the traumas spring from the unrecognized falsity of that very system within which salvation is offered. The Girl learns at an early age that “there is no Christ here” (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 58) and that the female body is something that presents a threat to religious society, something that is meant to be hidden and is often abused. The only possible hope for change lies through re-evaluation of the past, starting on an individual level: “What if. I could. I could make. A whole other world a whole civilization in this city that is not home […] no one cares. And no one’s falling into hell” (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 88). This lonesome quest for a meaningful existence creates a strong feeling of isolation. The Girl can never be sure that her pain is acknowledged. Language often acts as a barrier for her, as an impervious tool for uttering what is going on inside her body.

Anne Fogarty describes *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* as one of those narratives that shows “that the modernist project is not complete; its quest ‘to make it new’ lives on in a present-day Ireland marked by its formidable commitment to nostalgia, to memory, to commemoration” (“It was like a baby crying” 4). There have been several debates around the validity and timespan of modernism. Certain critics suggest that modernism did not end in the mid-twentieth century but that its practices and forms continued. Susan Friedman (quoted in Reynolds) points out that modernism is not a fixed temporary phenomenon but a “multiple, polycentric and recurrent” (Friedman quoted in

[5] Due to the anonymity of the protagonist, the capitalized ‘Girl’ is used in this essay to denote the main character.

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Reynolds 1). At its heart lies a quest to value the present while seeking to find new modes of expression that can make that meaningful. McBride's novel carries elements of this recurrent modernism. It attempts to stretch the language and dismantle syntax while giving direct access to the character's consciousness and visceral experiences. It fixates the plot in a recurring present, which is valued as the only possible path, but continuously shows how memories and effects of the past permeate every moment of the character's life. The stream-of-consciousness narration allows direct access into the Girl's thoughts, immersing the reader "in a space of language formation that seems to exist before articulation" (Cahill, "A Girl is a Half-formed Thing" 159). This style mirrors a Beckettian world, especially that of Beckett's *Unnamable* (1953) where the language is also corporeal. Similar to the McBride novel, it tries to go beyond uttered thoughts, showing the body as site of anxiety and pain rather than pleasure and comfort. There is also a constant questioning of 'being' as a fixed construction in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. The value and substance of language is a significant concern of the plot, and the reader is viewed as an active participant and possessor of the fictional world. It is a style that transcends and also fulfills modernism, being termed by some reviewers as "astoundingly innovative" (Cahill, "A Girl is a Half-formed Thing" 159).

III.3. Narrative Language and Somatic Attention

Presence and participation are key aspects of McBride's narrative. At certain moments in the plot, the language functions as the direct expression of the physical reactions. Sounds and tactile experiences that apply to the senses feature strongly in the plot. The novel demands to be read both with the mind and the body: "Lungs heave up blood they would if I. […] Eyes burn with thud through arteries and eyeball veins" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 19). Contemporary neuroscientist Michael S. Gazzaniga highlights how our emotions and the physical reactions in our body precede conscious thought: "feelings happen before we are consciously aware of them – and most of them are the results of nonconscious processes" (*Who's in Charge? Free Will and the Science of the Brain* 78). This view comes almost a century after Henri Bergson interpreted perception as governed not by a specific consciousness but rather dependent on circumstances and the surrounding environment (*Memory and Matter*). In his understanding, the material world is not

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constructed by our perception, but rather our perception arises from this world. The external is perceived by our body and develops into immediate action or is stored as a potential for possible action (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 22-24). These viable affects are stored as memories, the body registering possible actions, and they are expressed as an action when the suitable moment arises: "perception is master of space in the exact measure as action is master of time" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 23). Through the use of fragmented syntax and stream-of-consciousness narration, McBride creates a sense of subjective, experiential time for the reader, emphasizing the immediate nature of bodily perception and action. The protagonist's memories are often triggered by sensory experiences, such as the smell of her brother's skin or the taste of soil in her mouth, highlighting the intimate connection between the body and memory. As Bergson notes, "the body is a centre of action in the world" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 235), and McBride's narrative language emphasizes the ways in which bodily sensations and memories shape the protagonist's understanding of herself and her environment. Moreover, the novel explores the impact of trauma on personal identity and the subjective experience of time. The protagonist's traumatic experiences are woven into the narrative through a nonlinear chronology, with past events often bleeding into the present moment. This use of narrative structure reflects Bergson's idea that "the past survives in the present" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 5), emphasizing the ways in which past experiences continue to shape our present perceptions and experiences.

McBride's novel can be interpreted as an experiment in returning to this pre-cognitive state and captures the instinctive reactions that the body stores. The characters are not given a name, so that the primary signifier that could denote fixation and identity is removed from the plot. Language often acts as a barrier in this respect, especially when the experience in question is located at the limit of personal experience. When the physical sensations are the strongest, the words of the Girl dismantle into a semi-conscious mumbling of obscure sounds:

> Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos the fuck the fuckink slatch in me. Scream. Kracks. Done fuk me open he dine done on me. Done done Til he hye happy fucky shoves upo comes ui. Kom shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking cmin up you. Retch I. Retch I (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 193).

The text does not use grammatical order, nor does it apply syntactic relief from statement or question, yet it is still comprehensible. Anne Enright portrays this type of prose as an experiment

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of a "pre-verbal state," and as such, it is not only a story of the Girl but an experiment in linguistic communication ("A Girl is a Half-formed Thing-review").

As the Girl reflects on a traumatic event from her childhood, she describes how it has impacted her ability to communicate: "I couldn't explain. I couldn't tell anyone. I don't know why. I didn't want to tell" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 24). This struggle to articulate her experiences is a recurring theme throughout the novel, reflecting the impact of trauma on language and communication. While the novel emphasizes the destructive impact of trauma on the narrative, there are also instances where memories of events have a constructive impact. For example, when the protagonist reflects on her relationship with her brother, she describes how memories of their childhood experiences bring them closer together: "He tells me things that only he remembers. I tell him things I only remember" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 140). In this way, memories of past experiences become a way for the siblings to connect and understand each other. This use of memory as a means of connection is reflected in the narrative strategy, as the fragmented structure of the novel allows for moments of connection and understanding amidst the protagonist's experiences of trauma and isolation. The narrative language demonstrates how traumatic events can act as a destructive force upon language and narrative, but also explores the potential for memories of past experiences to serve as a means of connection and understanding.

According to Jean Luc-Nancy, words are comprehensible through the body and are essentially linked to what the body experiences (15-16). Concurrently, the body as materiality is a complex "open space" and not a "filled space," a "place of existence" that is not settled but is in a constant flow (Nancy 15). If bodies are "places of existence" (Nancy 2008, 15), then they also are spaces of interchange, where "events of the body: rejoicing, suffering, thinking, dying, sexing, laughing, sneezing, trembling, weeping, forgetting" (Nancy 17) unfold. There are no actual bodies in the literary text, but this body-space can be opened up and occupied through the process of reading. Nancy describes writing as "thinking addressed, thinking sent to the body […] the writing "I" is being from bodies to bodies" (19). Literary works can have the power to carry their readers into this act of possessing a "body-space" by allowing entry into characters' experiences so that through reading, our "emotional and cognitive repertoire expands" (Mahon 103). The Girl from the novel goes through the laborious denouncement and repossession of her body and identity. After being raped by her uncle, the sense of ownership over her body and her sense of self are

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shattered. As a mantra and healing process, she paradoxically starts to hurt her body and gets involved in various sexual encounters as if to regain control over her embodied life. It is a quest of repossessing that can be best described with Nancy's words as the "constant, silent assertion of lone presence" (154).

By the act of reading, the individual reader is also invited to step into this presence and possess it. The "for you" addressing at the beginning of the narrative is also an invitation for the reader to inhabit this somatically affective fictional world. The performative aspect of both plot and narrative embedded into the experimental language create a genuinely new type of *Bildungs* genre. Enright calls it "an account of Irish girlhood," ("A Girl is a Half-formed Thing-review") but it is more than that: it is an authentic account of an individual embodied existence. The introductory words of the novel function as an offering: "For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 3). These words convey an *in medias res* type of guidance, and they constitute a point of address and access as well. The narrative mechanism and the linguistic strata of the text mingle in a complex manner. The plot is rather simple: it follows the unnamed Girl's deeds and experiences from her pre-birth state to her adolescence. Chronologically it sustains linearity, but the perspective only allows glimpses into selected events that are meaningful to the main character. There are no past verb forms, thereby emphasizing the value of the present moment, bringing the experience closer in a repeated framework of happening. In the first part of the novel, the "I" as a locus of individuality is blended into a plural, "we." The Girl "speaks" from the womb so that her existence is still physically linked to the mother's body. Her experiences are felt and created in a multidimensional location. The dialogues also blur the meaning of the pronouns because they occur within the text's continuity. However, the narrator signals the difference in the positions: "she says, she saw"; as if also suggesting that even from the womb, she already has acquired the space of her own "I", one in which she forms thoughts:

> In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your name. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and a day. [...] I want, she says. I want to see my son. […] I know. The thing wrong. It's a. It is called (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 3).

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The first "I" here is the Girl's pronoun, whereas all the others are the mother's. The Girl sees through the mother's eyes: she sees his brother falling from the stairs, taken to hospital and being diagnosed with an incurable disease. She also feels the worry and anxiety of the mother, who senses the seriousness of the situation. The mother's cognitive and physical state also affects her directly; there are verbal indices in her diction: "She praying in a coat until I am froze. Hard chapel-kneelers bare-kneeled real repents. She does. And our father was. Where? Somewhere there. I think. […] Jesus in her blood that minute" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 4).

The "I" here is that of the Girl's. On an experimental level, it is really interesting how the Girl also feels the touch of her brother, who is a constant presence in her life from her pre-natal existence: "poke belly of baby that's kicking is me. Full in myself […] And I loved swimming to your touch" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, 5). The brother is the bearer of the first and the last "you" of the novel. He is the one who is promised the right of name-giving at the beginning, and he is the one with whom the Girl wishes to unite just moments before her death. His function is more than that of a sibling; some critics termed him as "a lost twin and an alter-ego" (Fogarty, "It was like a baby crying" 24).

At an early age, he is diagnosed with cancer and suffers severe brain damage due to the necessary operations. He is a silent character in the narrative: his voice is never audible through the mediated language of the Girl, but he is the primary addressee: "for you" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 3). She talks to the older brother, preparing him for his sister's birth: "you'll give her name" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 3). Thus, the Girl's whole existence is "offered" to "you", to the brother, by the act of name-giving. However, it can also be the Girl's voice, who directs her retrospection towards her beloved brother. The Girl is "half-formed" because her other half is her brother, and with his death, she loses all hope for "wholeness" and balance. The narrative ends soon after the brother's death with the Girl's suspected suicide, described by Fogarty as "an effort to re-unite with her brother who now has become a kind of succubus luring her to death" ("It was like a baby crying" 23). There is a desperate outburst just after the brother's death when the Girl asks hopelessly: "who am I talking to? Who am I talking to now?" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 189). On the textual meta-level, this moment is the ending of the main narrative itself, the narrator questions the viability of her utterance after the death of the main addressee.

However, she does not stop communicating and even in her last goodbye, before she drowns herself, she clings onto the “listening brother”:

> And under water lungs grow. Flowing in. Like fire torch. Like air is. That choke of. Eyes and nose and throat. Where uncle did. No. Gone away. Where mother speak. Is deaf my ears. Hold tight to me. I. Will I say? For you to hear? (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 203).

The mother’s “speech” here is not comprehended. It falls on “deaf” ears, but the brother is imagined as receptive, the one who will “hear.” The narrative is also structured as a story told within a story. The Girl remembers her past, reiterating everything in a stream of consciousness utterance that is tied to the present. The memories are vivid and relived in this metafictional level, where she ‘talks’ to the brother, creating a story within the story, while the whole plot is held together through the consciousness of her actual, temporal “now.” By choosing to relive the painful memories vividly, she also suggests that the past permeates every moment of her present consciousness. Bergson’s interpretation of perception (*Memory and Matter*) refers to a very similar process that the Girl goes through. Every sensation that the body is exposed to via its collision with reality is registered in the present moment; however, it can be infinitely extended as recorded memory that will eventually develop into action. From this perspective, the Girl suitably refers to the present moment as something that flows through memories and can never be obliterated from the imprinted past moments.

Interestingly, the Girl’s internal language is meant to be received by a character who cannot master language and cannot use it as a tool for communication. The brother has trouble learning and is constantly bullied in school. The Girl tries to be protective but gradually gives up hope of his brother’s salvation. There is a continuous and gradual dehiscing and estrangement in the Girl’s life: from religious comfort, from family ties, from her own body, from her own language, and yet her whole narrative is built upon the wish to be heard, perceived and accepted. Áine Mahon suggests that the language of the first-person narrator in the novel is meant to be understood even if it is syntactically broken (112). The Girl addresses both her brother and herself with the desired aim of being heard and acknowledged. She seems to be speaking to herself, but she uses this inner language as a tool of connection. As Mahon argues, she “can never be sure that her pain is

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acknowledged or appreciated by others around her" (111), but she secretly always hopes to be heard. This also accentuates the peculiar character of language itself: though the narrative follows the inner, pre-verbal state of language, it still is − even in its most privatized moment – a means directed to and understood by others. Even pain that is believed unutterable at times finds its ways through language to seek acknowledgement and sympathy from others.

It is not only the Girl's language that has seemingly lost its communicative value. The other characters are also unable to express and utter their thoughts and emotions meaningfully. They all inhabit a world of estrangement: no functional relationships survive in this landscape. There is no authentic mother-daughter bond, although the Girl longs for it: "Is Mammy with you? Ah no of course. Ach she's not able. She said that alright before" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 11). The mother is authoritative, and she also carries the weight of generational hurt. When the grandfather visits, the dialogue transmitted through the Girl's first-person utterance is emptied of communicative elements. It is more the monologue of the grandfather who is not compassionate and who uses language to express her disappointment and blame: "And when I went to have that eye test you never called. […] But sure what's the point. It's like talking to that brick wall" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 15). This powerless and submissive mother is the only female role model available to the Girl. The general circumstance approximates to the image portrayed by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman of our contemporary European society, suffering because of moral insensitivity, "compassionless and heartless type of behavior […] an indifferent posture manifested towards other people's trials and tribulations" (*Moral Blindness* 13). Bauman also questions the dynamic of "human togetherness" (*Moral Blindness* 13), of the human communities. Nevertheless, as shown in McBride's novel, everyone seeks to be heard, and connected to others.

There are several types of social micro-communities captured in the novel: the family, the sibling cohesion, the mother-daughter relationship, the school, the church and the little town. Thus, in a multi-layered structure, *A Girls is a Half-formed Thing* portrays different social groupings throughout an individual's life, making it a universal (her)story and a nation's microhistory. The Girl always refers to her parents from the plural of the "our": "our mother, our father." Nevertheless, as a physical presence, it is only the mother who stays in their life; the father is the

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"empty space" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 3). He leaves the family before the Girl's birth. The coined expression "our father" denotes both the paternal figure and the transcendental entity, God. The Girl's language keeps reiterating religious phraseology, ripping words out from their context, thus giving them new power. The prayers and sermon quotations should function as a means of deprecation and purification for her, but they become mere "empty spaces" as well. The mother continually prays, and the Girl overhears it as early as from the womb: "Gethsemane dear Lord hear our prayer our. Please. […] Please God don't take. Our. Holy Mother of all, humbly we beseech thee" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 4). The Girl and her brother are taken to church regularly. One of the prayers that is continuously overheard in the novel is "Our Father," its rhythmical mumbling lingers around the Girl's life. From the moment of her birth, she is promised this prayer: "For this grant of Nurse I will. Learning you Our Fathers art. And when you slept I lulled in joyful mysteries glorious until I kingdom come" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 5).

"Our Father" acts as a performative word in the religious context, able to recall a divine presence by its pure utterance. For the Girl, there is no performative capacity behind it, only the lack of presence. She attends church and mass from a young age, but as it is revealed from later scenes, she doesn't find protection in the religious spirit. It is rather seen as a desperately needed but ultimately meaningless aspect of her identity. It is very telling when the grandfather visits them (the Girl is already five) and quarrels with the mother about the lack of 'religiousness' of the kids. He argues that they don't know the prayers well enough:

> And that child only made his communion a year ago and he can't even his Hail Mary. Have you no morals? I mean what kind of way is that to rear you son? [...] And look at that one. What way is that to rear a girl? Look at her. Forward rolls in a skirt. It's disgusting. It is perverted. […] How's she supposed to be a child of Mary? (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 15-16).

The novel's Catholic atmosphere is one of the indices that point towards an Irish context, but there is no direct reference to a place. The setting is blurred in its geographical specificity. Other possible Irish elements include the following: a small, enclosed community (probably in the West of Ireland as Fogarty speculates ("It was like a baby crying"), the Catholic Church as an overarching presence

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in the lives of the characters, revealing the hypocrisies underlining it, conflictual family ties and an absent father. Behind these specifically Irish references, there is a need to universalize: the main philosophical queries evoked, and the Girl's existential struggle is a human one. The author admitted that there was an inescapable Irish perspective at work, but she also wanted every reader "to feel they were her and that what was happening to her and inside her was also happening within themselves" (McBride, "How I Wrote the Girl is a Half-formed Thing").

Regarding the theme of girlhood, Anne Fogarty maintains that the novel's Bildungsroman quality is a form embedded in Irish tradition: "Narratives focusing on the child and adolescent are nothing new and have always featured centrally in the European novel and formed an especially vital and distinctive vein in Irish fiction" ("It was like a baby crying" 13). She also claims that this type of *Bildungsroman* is still viable: "paradoxically it survives as a mode because many of its characteristics are inverted or suspended especially by modernist authors" ("It was like a baby crying" 14). McBride's novel can be termed a neo-modernist Irish Bildungsroman that focuses on the refusal to embrace social norms and grow up. Refusal is a crucial element of the Girl's existence. It is not always a conscious denial but rather an incapacity. From the moment of her birth, she regrets the bodily separation from the mother. The external world cannot offer her a graspable and livable presence: "A vinegar world I smelled. There now a girleen isn't she great. Bawling. Oh Ho. Now you're safe. But I saw less with these flesh eyes. Outside almost without sight. […] Dividing from the sweet mother flesh that could not take me in again" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 5). She continually fails to inhabit this world and her body adequately while striving to take control and ownership of her body. This quest is further eschewed after the rape committed by her uncle. That particular event in the Girl's life is portrayed by her as something willed and rejected at the same time. This creates an ethical imbalance in the plot and a total loss of moral balance in the character's life. She wants to be in charge of her own sexuality:

> I am lying. I am not I am. By the cold rage in my white drip shirt. Caught me. Went about me tooth and claw that I wanted. Felt within the time has come. No Christ here in the kitchen floor. […] Oh God. It hurts me take it out. […] No. Take me down under. […] I must be almost I am dying when he does it […] My nail my nail. That's it. I've done to him. What's done in me (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 57-58).

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The language describing the rape is the least articulate as if to suggest that the body cannot utter it into comprehensive language when the experience is overwhelming. On the other hand, the impressionistic, terse, somatic sentences communicate far more authentically what she experiences physically than a more polished, controlled narration could achieve. The rape scene is also the moment of an inverted epiphany. She loses her body, her control and her own being in a way, "who turned the sound back on? […] my eyes back" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 59). It is moment of total blindness and insanity "I am laughing all the way up the stairs" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 59). She drags herself into the illusion that this was the moment of her rebirth, of the total possession of her body. Later on in the narrative, she seeks to relive this moment by an "enraged and disaffected take on her sexual body" (Fogarty, "It was like a baby crying" 23). She involves herself mercilessly in several sexual encounters throughout her school years. As a university student, she invites the uncle to her house, asking him to beat her while having sex with him. She implicitly craves the affection and motherly care that she lacked as a child. The abusive connection is the only meaningful one that she knows, and by inviting the uncle, she can also appear to regain control while swirling deeper into self-loathing: "Well I'm here doing what you want. Put yourself on me then, in me. […] Do whatever you want. The answer to every single question is Fuck. Save me from all this" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 131). Even when horrible things are happening to her, she wants to regain agency: "Saying yes is the best of powers" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 71). Anne Fogarty describes this as a constant "restaging of the primary scene that has defined not just her sexuality, but her very Being" ("It was like a baby crying" 23).

Nancy claims that the character of human existence and knowledge is essentially embodied and not abstract. At the same time, being means possession of this embodiment:

> In truth "my body" indicates a possession, not a property. In other words, an appropriation without legitimation. I possess my body (it) however in its own turn possesses me: it pulls or holds me back, offends me, stops me, pushes me away. We're both possessed, a pair of demonic dancers (Nancy 154).

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The Girl can never separate herself from the body that she abuses and offers up for mistreatment. She is seeking control and wishing for purity, pretending that she can cleanse and repossess her body. With its symbolic subtitles the novel's structure reflects this gradual loosening and invasion of the body/being. It is divided into five parts, all carrying a distinctive title. The first one is entitled *Lambs*, signaling the body's purity and vulnerability, freshly ripped from the mother's corpus. The second contains the traumatic encounter with the uncle: 'A Girl is a Half-formed Thing.' As if signaling that there is no chance of a full formation, of a controlled presence for her from this moment onwards. The body becomes something that cannot be possessed by the "I": it is continuously claimed by other bodies, invaded and taken over. The focalized viewpoint changes in this part of the narrative to a narrator who lives the illusion of being in the locus of presence and possession while remaining only a failed and damaged outsider. It is also important to note the significant cover of the novel's 2014 Faber edition that pictures an apple. This image suggests the connection to the biblical storyline of Adam and Eve and the woman as "half-formed" from its very origin, being formed from the rib of Adam. This also points to the woman as the bearer and initiator of the first sin. The image of womanhood is thus that of a space of sin, as something built upon a loss of wholeness. On the other hand, the novel doesn't portray men as an innocent. One reviewer stated that "the men are completely depicted in negative ways" (Wisker 66). Patriarchy is lurking at the core of the Girl's family: the father is absent, the grandfather is a tyrant who dominates and accuses, and the uncle is a seductive aggressor and an abusive incestuous rapist. At the funeral of the grandfather, the Girl volunteers to guard the corpse throughout the night and in that strange encounter, she feels in control, she is the possessor:

> So Granda. I don't talk to the dead. So now. That's strange to see him here. Dead. I could give him a kick if I liked. But it is not worth the hassle now. I could undo his flies for shame. […] Poke him. Squeeze out an eye. I'd lift it but. No. Better not to touch (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 101).

The only character who escapes the tyranny of men in this family is the Girl. The religious hypocrisies that restricted all of the other women in her family have no power over her. However, in the end, she also fails to free herself of this patriarchal oppression and eventually chooses suicide. In this perspective, the "half-formed" aspect of womanhood portrayed here is not a given one but artificially sustained. The Girl remains a half-formed thing because the restrictions of the

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patriarchal community and the religious society that violate her existence and don't allow her to have a "fully formed existence." The only masculine character in the novel that is not described as an invader of woman space is the brother. As the alter-ego of the narrator, the other half, he is himself also "half-formed." The Girl struggles to grasp her body and through it to control her existence, whereas the brother is blocked of this possibility from the beginning. He is condemned to live in a body that doesn't allow control. Being terminally ill means that his body allows him less and less control of life: "I touch your hands. I know they are going wrong. They're not doing all what they should ever should. Your eyes. Turned back" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 166).

Derrida argues that language is a constant game of exchanges, all of which leave traces endlessly, but none can be pinned down (*Of Grammatology* 68). As such, it cannot be enclosed in a structure heading for either transcendence or any final signifier. Derrida questions the concept of "direction" itself − there cannot be a forward or backward movement in language that is suspended in a presence-present of de-reconstructed connections (*Of Grammatology* 35-37). He consciously takes away the notion of control by revealing the motion behind each sign and showing language as a space, a locus that allows the constant interchange of signifiers (*Of Grammatology* 13). However, the right to control and the need for being to be present cannot be denied. The illusion of presence, of a certain control, is an almost anthropological necessity. When one uses writing and language there has to be an assertive aspect to it. Despite the knowledge that there is no final center or logos, there has to be a decision of an accepted presence, and a grasping of control, even if such control may only be temporary and ultimately illusory.

Maintaining a fragmented first-person voice in a continuous present, McBride's novel allows the reader greater power to assert his/her presence in the fictional world. Through its somatic language the novel directly admits its readers into the Girl's space of being. The over-use of the first-person pronoun "I" strengthens ownership both for the readers as well as on a meta-level for the protagonist. Through the process of uttering her thoughts and feelings, the Girl opens up her own body space to relive and examine her experience. Using the "I" repeatedly allows her temporary control over this process. She sometimes self-interrogates this body, looking for means to inhabit it meaningfully: "Where. I. Hello. Hello. Is he are you there? Ssssss. There? I'm only here in my bones and flesh. Now you've gone away" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 198). At times

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it seems that she is trying to get rid of her body. She is seeking to suspend her embodied being by imagining that her true self is a guest in the body that is being abused: “I learned to turn it off, the world that was not my own. Stop up ears and everything” (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 61). There is no escape from the corporeal though: the Girl cannot escape her space of being, except by confronting death. The readers have more freedom: ‘occupying’ the body-space of the Girl through reading is a temporary cognitive exercise.

Heidegger contends that there is no clear direction in language and meaning-construction, yet there is a finality determined as “Being” (1). This is the ultimate end/signifier that cannot even be addressed with the classical tools of definition. He describes how being became “the most universal and emptiest concept. As such, it resists any attempt of definition. Nor does this universal and thus indefinable concept need any definition” (Heidegger 2). The possibility of “being” has to be granted to the human in order to grasp presence and existence. Heidegger claims that being can be understood and grasped by *Dasein,* by an asserted presence conscious of its own end. This also means that being as an end signifier is intelligible for and from the standpoint of *Dasein,* which is a dynamic experience of living. This *Dasein* is a temporary possession of presence heading towards death. Heidegger doesn’t name it as human or individual: it is a meaningful existence in the world capable of understanding being. However, there is an almost anthropological need for presence in our everyday interactions and existence. It is also essential to step into the locus of a seemingly fixed “being” when reading texts of literature. Derrida considers literature to be a play of presence and absence, “a reappropriation of presence” (*Of Grammatology* 144), one that is also effaced continuously by every new reading of the text. McBride’s novel uses a language that can sustain this game of reiterated presence and absence to its maxim capacity. With every reader, there is a new presence and assertion created, thereby sustaining flux. At the same time, since it is a language experimenting with the pre-verbal utterance, it emerges directly from the body. The Girl’s body bears the experiences that manifest themselves through the narrative’s instinctive expressions. McBride creates a written text that doesn’t distance itself from the body. By focusing on the experience, itself, it bears the signs of the body and its reactions. This allows the main character to open up her whole quest as an understanding of “being” through immediate bodily experience. The novel also experiments with the readers’ capacity for imaginary and temporary presence and possession of both a language and a body.

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III. 4. Somatic memory

In addition to creating a narrative that reveals the inescapability of the body, drawing the reader into the intensity of the experience, McBride's novel also reveals the inescapability of memories. Memories occupy a strong position on the Girl's stream of half-formed thoughts and are also inherently linked to the somatic. In the second chapter of *Memory and Matter,* Bergson (1929, 86-169) proposes that the brain is not the residual place for memories. Memories exist separately from the brain and they are of non-material quality (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 86-96). He differentiates between two types of memory: body memory and independent memory. The first is acquired by repetition, and through lessons, it is engraved in the body. In Bergson's interpretation, this type of memory is associated with space, whereas the latter, 'independent memory', functions separately from the bodily and records the past, connected as it is to time. "Pure memory" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 72) or independent memory is related to the subconscious or, as Bergson suggests, to the 'spiritual': "its primary function is to evoke all those past perceptions which are analogous to the present perception [...] and to suggest to us that decision which is the most useful" (*Memory and Matter* 303). It appears unexpectedly in various situations as potential memory directed towards action. This creates a strange dualism that sustains matter as conditioned to automatic recognition without any record of conscious memory, and another domain, that of 'pure memory', which operates with attentive recognition and perceives by relying on memories (Nakatomi 166).

In Eimear McBride's novel actions derived from both types of memory are detectable and transmitted through the Girl's first-person narration. She has somatic, automatic memories that are manifested in action, related to the specific spaces that trigger immediate bodily reactions. At the same time, her story is permeated by an almost uncontrollable realm of "pure memories" that arise randomly and consciously situate her story on a biographical timeline. These systems exist independently, although both are directed towards action and conditioned by space (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 302-303). Space is a key determination force, as "there is no material image which does not owe its qualities [...] in short its existence to the place which it occupies in the totality of the universe" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 304). The body exists in reality as one of the "images" in the world of "other images", from which it perceives and selects the ones relevant and useful for actual or possible action: "perception [...] eliminates from the totality of images all

those on which I can have no hold and then from each of those which I retain, all that does not concern the needs of the image which I call my body" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 304). Utility is at the core of perception and of both types of memory. In McBride's novel the Girl sometimes recalls body memories, automatic reactions triggered by situations and specific spaces, but these are not always augmented by conscious pure memories and the potential actions that they can initiate. This is especially true in the case of traumatic memories.

From the start of the narrative, the Girl's utterance is entwined with reflections on strong traumatic experiences. According to psychologist Bessel van der Kolk, traumatic experiences are retained in the somatic memory. Consequently, the automatic action/reaction arises if a situation resembles anything related to the event, the 'bergsonian body-memory activates often without the presence of the pure memory. In the Girl's world, every single sexual act that she restlessly engages in after the rape by the uncle activates this body-memory that evokes to the primordial trauma:

> I met a man. I met a man. I let him throw me round the bed. And smoked, me, spliffs and choked my neck until I said I was dead. […] I met a man who hit me a smack. I met a man who cracked my arm. … I met a man. And I lay down. And slapped and cried and wined and dined. I met a man and many more and I didn't know you at all (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 96-97).

The descriptions of these events involve a rhythmic and cumulatively repetitive language that mimics the gradually increasing severity of the actions. The broken syntax and the limited vocabulary also signal the excessive impact of the experience, as well as the child-like ontogenesis of the Girl, as a young teenager. The rape with the uncle is described as being similarly aggressive "went about me tooth and claw" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 57). It is also felt as an 'attack' on her body "and kissing choking me…the air squeezed out" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 58). She vividly describes her helplessness and the physical pain: "Pain. Scratch him. Pain of it. […] My pain. […] I am dying when he does it. With the pain. Suffocating" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 58). The uncle tries to pretend that this encounter was not abusive, suggesting that they are engaging in an affair. After the horrific abuse, he tries to calm the Girl: "Just be calm. […] You're fine. You'll be fine" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 59). On the next day, he tries to court her: "He kiss me said I'm away today and you make me insane. I've never done that before" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 60). According to Téllez "she does not see her uncle as a sexual aggressor – neither does her uncle think he is a rapist" (7). This leads to distorted notions of sex in the Girl's

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life: it becomes primarily associated with violence. The Girl's language that describes the abuse resembles that of a child with simple vocabulary and a limited understanding of the severity of the event: "Quick. Put his thing back in. Men's trousers" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 59). This makes the whole situation even more abhorrent, in addition to the disgusting nature of the paradoxically parental attitude of the uncle afterwards: "Do you feel sick? You are going to be fine. It is just a shock when. He can't say" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 59). Moreover, years after, when the Girl meets the uncle again, he endearingly and shockingly addresses her as "my little girl my little come her to me […] I can't say no when I'm with you he says. I feel the penis on my leg. Ever he keeps me under […] But my guts are free" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 144). His uncle betrays her on several levels and keeps her locked in a power-struggle, keeping the Girl under his control.

In her repetitive framework of other sexual situations, the Girl's body-memory recalls these reactions and acts automatically, producing the same painful reactions and reactive body movements. However, they are not accompanied by reactions of the pure memory, as that would mean conscious recollection. It would force the Girl into acknowledging herself, her biographical persona from that past memory. The body records it, triggering an automatic reaction but the conscious aspect remains suppressed. She reflects at a certain moment in her recollection on the fact that some parts of her memories were "to be left alone […] I turned it off, the world that was not my own" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 61). She tries to remove herself from that experience: although her somatic memory is active, her reflective recollection is switched off as if it would have been someone else's memory. Bergson claims that pure memory is powerless unless it "borrows life and strength from the present sensation in which it is materialized" (*Memory and Matter* 163). Body-memory can only "give a passive perception with the mechanical reactions that accompany it" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 163).

The Girl degrades herself or wishes to degrade herself to this level of empty, passive body-reactions, governed by somatic memories. At the same time, she also longs for control since she lost it when the rape occurred, so "she paradoxically thinks that, by means of submission in her sexual encounters, she is expressing her agency, which could be more accurately described as passive agency" (Téllez 7). She even affirms that "saying yes is the best of powers" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 71). In every sexual encounter, she portrays herself as an active

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accomplice: “she believes that if she ‘gives’ her body as an offering to these strangers, she occupies a controlled position since these men are obliged to engage with her. There is no real power involved however, she is repeatedly submerging herself into a position of vulnerability” (Téllez 7.) Her body is perceived as sinful and as a passive element, as Téllez observes: “a corpse that does not correspond with her ‘real’ self” (10). This results in her obsessive-compulsive cleansing ritual: “Wash my body on or off and think I’ll be some new disgrace” (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 88). She constantly washes herself and often goes to the nearby lake as well. The element of water in the plot carries vital memory-based connotations. It is both a body-memory as well as a pure memory, as it reminds her of the comforting state, the automatic relaxing reactions of her body in the pre-natal womb state “swimming to your touch” *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 5). At the same time, it produces conscious memories associated with comfort and love: “full in myself […] lay on the lining of you secret pressed hello’s.” (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 5).

The Girl’s ‘real self’ is her autobiographical identity, one that positions her within the present moment on the timeline of events. The Girl shuts down connections to this identity after the traumatic rape. The sensations felt and recorded on the body activate automatic memories, but the conscious perception filled with “pure memories” often remain. Language acts as a ‘refleshing’ device that operates with vivid adjectives and a multitude of verbs pointing to momentary, bodily reactions: “Breath. My eyes I can’t. Full of my own hair. Screaming. Shut up. Is that me I am am I I […] Break my. Face” (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 193). At the same time, the broken state of the language also sees the body as a site of shame. The constant and mantra-like repetition of the first person ‘I’ adds to this sense of remorse and shame, also indicating desperate attempts to find control. Unfortunately, they remain futile aspirations: the Girl remains half-formed, forever longing to be the master of her life and memories. This can be detected in the tireless repetition of the first person “I.” In *The Secret Life of Pronouns* James Pennebaker, describes a research that he conducted, analyzing the usage of different pronouns in several utterances with computer assisted programs. He was trying to determine their connection to social status and individual personalities. According to his findings, the first person “I” and its overuse signals honesty, subjugation and a high degree of self-reflection: “The word *I* is the prototypical stealth word. […] Because people think that I-words must reflect self-confidence and arrogance” (Pennebaker 414). On the contrary, it is used more commonly by people who are “self-focused, insecure, self-effacing.” (Pennebaker

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416). In the Girl's narrative she is an insecure character who, through her repetitive 'I', is trying to come to terms with her own past and present.

Place acts as the residue of memories in the narrative. The memories often arise by the specific auditory and kinesthetic characteristics of that space. As a foetus, the Girl was exposed to the sounds, the strong heartbeat of her mother. McBride uses staccato sentences and an amalgamation of interjections: "Bile for. Tidals burn. Sssh. All over. Mother. She cries. Oh no. Oh no no no" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 3). The smell of the hospital that she seems to remember from inside the womb, and the first smells of the "real-world", "vinegar world" (McBride 2015, 5) create vivid somatic memories. When she accompanies her sick brother to the hospital, the memories arise and produce automatic body reactions: "Knocking my heart out its whack. Going red and green before my retinas" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 126). Similarly, when she touches her brother's hand as he is lying powerless in his bed, trying to offer some solace, a rush of memories permeates her present moment:

> I knelt next to your bed. I put my face in the hook of your arm. […] You're dying soon. […] Your life was better than it been I said I love you. Please tell me you love me. […] Once upon a time. I'll mind you mind you. […] the bone's hurt no I'm young" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 171).

She lives in the past, her present being an eternally repeated framework of a past that has left her stuck in a half-formed state. Memories act as a fluctuating mode of connection rather than fixed, stored elements. They monitor and shape the Girl's present and they also moderate her language, giving birth to somatic impulses that prime her body to act. On the one hand her reflections reveal a mechanical memory habit, echoing a somatic past; on the other they operate a complex, broken utterance that engages in a flow of broken pre-uttered subconscious thoughts. According to Bergson "anyone who approaches […] the classical problem of the relations of soul and body, will soon see this problem as centering upon the subject of memory, and even more particularly upon the memory of words" (*Memory and Matter* xiii).

The Girl's narrative follows the heterogeneous, memory-impregnated timeline and not a homogeneous, measurable, fixed time interval. It is a manifestation of a time that Bergson described as the context that gives rise to "pure duration" (*Time and Free Will* 100), that allows

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the "ego to refrain from separating its present state from its former states" (*Time and Free Will* 100) The Girl's reliance on an interior monologue-type narration exposes the workings of this "duration" where continuity on a rational timeline is suspended. There is a sense of chronology, but it is often interrupted by sudden memories that lead in turn to other memories triggered by what is being remembered. The Girl also often gets lost her memory-driven storytelling. This swirling of layers of memories is especially evident in a scene that she recalls from her early childhood, playing with her brother and as she remembers the moment, other strong memories arise:

> Two me. Four you five or so. […] Patterned in my brain. I feel the carpet under that scratch me when you drag my leg. I know its gold and turquoise coils. Flowers on. Leaves for green. […] Singing long long ago in the woods of Gratnamona I heard a blackbird singing in a blackthorn tree. Oh. That's come from. Come from where? I can't remember any before (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 7).

The song that is recalled here seems to be connected to a previous or in any case separate memory: "I can't remember any before." The Gortnamona is a reference to an Irish ballad written by Percy French in the 19th century. It focuses on the tragic event of loss: the narrator of the song declares his suffering over the tragic death of his young wife in childbirth (MacMonagle 132). The Girl cannot identify the origin of this memory, the song arising as a memory within a memory, possibly linked to another moment in her life. She might have heard or been taught this song, a melody strongly focused on death and love. It also functions as a pre-signaling of her own brother's forthcoming death.

There is always an implicit tension between the body's automated rhythms and the free variations of the uncontrolled memories in the novel. The Girl vividly describes the very last moments of her brother's life, the scene filled with sudden outbursts of sounds and meaningless words. These are not merely adjuncts of a physical event but rather layered accents of memory and the automatic reactions of the body: "Silent. Breath. Lungs go out. See the world out. […] My. Lllllllllll. Love my. Brother no. […] What's that? Nn. My heart comes broken now" (McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 188). As Bergson argues, by allowing the collision of multiple durable, probable memories into the space of perception, this provides us with a type of free will:

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> By allowing us to grasp multiple moment of duration, it [memory] frees us from movement of the flow of things, that it to say from the rhythm of necessity. The more of these moments memory can contract into one, the firmer is the hold which it gives to us on matter (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 303).

The Girl has tried to gain control, to access a state of free will. At the same time her somatic automatic actions emptied from thoughts often override her capacity to situate herself in a position of agency. The medium of language also acts as a destructive force of the real intensity of emotions and experiences as it fixates them in static forms. Despite this barrier, the language that the Girl uses brings the somatic in focus, often being the carrier of the visceral only, emptied from conscious or coherent thoughts.

The body remembers even in the very last minutes of the Girl's life. A vivid body-memory arises as she touches the water bringing back the pre-natal experiences: "Turn. Look up. Bubble from my mouth drift high. Blue tinge lips. Floating hair. Air famished eyes. Brown water turning into light. There now. There now. That just was life" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 203). The water feels soothing, the physical automatically reacting to previous memories that are retained on her body. She keeps recording the affects until the very end. Memories permeate the moments as she slowly disconnects from life. This is her way of rebelling and at the same time of escaping from all memories and from all the trauma, "by no longer being a material body, i.e. a 'thing', the Girl can finally achieve full disembodiment" (Téllez 12). This act can also be understood as her attempt to get rid of the sinful past and the sinful body that to her was only a source of pain. Her body, her name, her identity is dissolved in the 'purifying water': "My name was gone" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 203).

McBride's novel creates a unique conundrum of memories and experiences that revolve in a closed circle, each following the other in an endless motion. The dynamic aspect of the narrative is not only built via its complex style that operates a chronologically mixed flow of thoughts but also by the mingling of memories. Bergson's memory theory provides a suitable context of understanding for the various memory-types that novel operates. Body-memory and pure-memory are continuously mingled and at times restricted by one another in the flow of the Girl's existence. While the former acts as an automated device, learned patterns and strong reactions force the body to act in often repeated patterns, the latter carries the biographical data and augments the reality,

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putting her life experiences on a timeline. Pure memories are very often blocked or are seemingly absent as the somatic takes lead and the traumatic life-experiences prove too strong to be consciously processed.

Bergson's understanding of the workings of memories and the body is only one possible means of interpretation. Further research into the character of memories and their structure could be to link the 'bergsonian "pure memory" to what Astrid Erll calls "collective-autobiographical memories" (105). He suggests that certain autobiographical memories can be interpreted in a dualistic fashion as intimately personal yet as shaping forces of the collective cultural subconscious: "through collective autobiographical acts of memory, group identities are created, the experience of time is culturally shaped, and shared systems of values and norms are established" (Erll 106). In this sense the Girl's story and suffering becomes that of a symptom of that nation and, on a grandeur scale, that of humanity. According to Drong McBride deliberately fuses different memories, playing with the malleability of memory to imply a Joycean strategy and "deploy realism in order to make larger (i.e. supra-individual) historical and/or political claims" (3). Dong notices a strong link with other contemporary novelists, like Edna O'Brien's *Little Red Chairs* which is also built on a post-Joycean heritage while implying a realistic context. Both use a somatic language, to open up the body, its thoughts and its experiences in order to interrogate humanitarian issues and global existential problems.

McBride's novel is an original narrative, encompassing a strongly somatic style that creates a distinctive language which attends closely to the bodily. Despite its complex and polyphonic structure, alluding to older genres (*Bildunsgroman*) and resonating with earlier Irish writing, it avoids stylistic dislocation and manages to maintain a coherent and original plotline. It is a "narrative of self" (Drong 3) that follows the protagonist, a seemingly precocious Girl from the womb to adolescence, focusing on the traumatic experiences that formed her as a person. Its implicit yet strong traits (setting, motifs, cultural context) of Irishness concatenates the novel into the flow of innovative Celtic-Tiger literature. At the same time, it is also a novel of a generic life-story, a universal story, similar to Joyce's *Ulysses* (to which the novel's style alludes to strongly). It is, as McBride termed it, a story that is built on a "stream of existence." ("How I Wrote the Girl is a Half-formed Thing"). The Girl is a victim of Irish society but also a victim of a universal trauma, "remaining halfway between body and language, reality and fiction" (Drong 3). Attention

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and possession are key terms in the novel. Attention to the infinitesimal workings of the bodily as well as to the striving struggle to take possession of one's own disturbed memories and experiences. In this perspective McBride's work shares characteristics with Anne Enright's *The Green Road*, a novel that also prioritizes attention as a key element in the understanding of the self and that of the community in which that self-embodies a vital role. Possession of one's experiences also means taking responsibility, something that Rosaleen in the Enright novel gradually comes to understand. It also means facing our own bodies with all the traumas and hurt that have formed one as a human being. This is one of the key quests that the Girl fails to lead to success: she remains half-formed. Nancy explains the body as "a possession not a property […] an appropriation without legitimation. I treat it as I wish […] however, in its own turn, possesses me: it pulls or holds me back, offends me, stops me, punches me, pushes me away. We're both possessed, a pair of demonic dancers" (155). The Girl also 'possesses' her own body, uses and mistreats it, trying desperately to obtain control and peace. She does not realize that, as Nancy implies, her body also "possesses" her and at the end she become the victim of her own body (155). Unlike Molly Bloom at the end of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the Girl does not arrive to the conclusive "Yes." On the contrary, when faced with the possibility of taking possession of her life, of her memories, of her existence, her answer is a flummoxed "No.": "I met a man. I met man. […] I met a man with condoms in his pockets. Don't use them. He loves children in his heart. No. […] Who said come back marry me live on my farm. No. […] Who said he'd keep me up style and I'd be waiting when he arrived. No is what I say" (*A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* 96-97).

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Chapter IV.
The Fiction of Sara Baume

IV.1. Introduction

Sara Baume is a young, contemporary Irish writer and visual artist who has so far published three novels (her most recent *Seven Steeples* was published in 2022) and a non-fiction book entitled *handiwork* that appeared in March 2020. She was born in 1984: "when her parents were travelling in a caravan on the road to Wigan Pier and raised in county Cork" (Estévez-Saá 87). As an art graduate in Dublin, she found herself in the economically trying recession period of Post Celtic-Tiger Ireland: "I think I'm one of lots of educated people who graduated into a society with no opportunity and was completely lost" (O'Keeffe, "Sara Baume"). Although facing initial challenges, Baume has emerged as a prominent voice in contemporary Irish fiction, noted for her innovative approach. Her works grapple with a range of themes, including the relationship between art and the body, the difficulties of coming of age, Irish identity, womanhood, the decline of rural life in Ireland, and humanity's connection to the natural world. Moreover, her fiction underscores the pressing need for increased eco-awareness in the face of environmental challenges.

Baume's prose can be described as innovative in style and faithful to the physical, emotional and societal context she writes on. As a writer, she clearly attaches herself to the Irish cultural domain. At the same time, her fictional world encompasses the existential crisis of the contemporary self. Declan Kiberd claims that Irish writing as early as in the 2000s moved beyond classical themes and topics like the family unit, the historical past and the religious, cultural context, to a focus on present-day Ireland:

> To contemporary Irish people, nothing seems more remote than the recent past. So for them as for overseas audiences, Ireland must be forever staged as the Other (rural, storytelling and heroic) but not for the present – only a measure of how far we've travelled getting here. […] Actual Irish behavior has more usually been innovative (Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* 276-282).

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Sara Baume's literary style embodies the innovative spirit that is emblematic of Post-Celtic Tiger Irish writing. Her distinctive approach is characterized by poetic and vivid descriptions that propel the plot forward, genre hybridity, and a multi-medial aspect to her narratives.

Her first novel, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* was published by a small Irish independent press, and since then, it has been translated into several languages (Crim, "In Conversation with Sara Baume"). It has won several awards, including the *Rooney Prize for Literature* [6] (Doyle, "Sara Baume awarded Rooney Prize") in 2015. The novel can be termed experimental prose or, as the writer herself declared, a novel that seeks to "break the rules" (Crim, "In Conversation with Sara Baume"). The sense of genuine creativity or "rule-breaking" is manifested through its narrative language and the mode of rendering seemingly classical Irish topics like the broken family unit, religion and rural existence through a fascinatingly new perspective. The center of the novel's universe is the individual and the various ties that control her existence, yet it also points to the possibilities of societal co-existence. Her second novel, *A Line Made By Walking*, is similarly unique in its narrative language and style. The plot is very simple, as several reviewers observed. It is narrated through the voice of a young female protagonist who feels disillusioned with the world, desperately trying to find her place in it. Its power relies on its philosophical grasp of the universal human condition while concurrently revealing aspects of the Irish social reality.

In one of her interviews Baume stated that she discovered the innovative power of prose when she realized that "writing was not just sentence structure and narrative" (Clark, "Sara Baume"). She positions herself as a carrier of the rural tradition, naming as predecessors, John McGahern and William Trevor (Crim, "In Conversation with Sara Baume"). She is also a sculptor and an artist: her third work is a non-fiction piece, augmented with photos of her own sculpted works of small birds. According to Baume: "in comparison to making sculpture, the practice of writing is magnificently compact and easily dispersed. It allowed me to say precisely what I meant in a form understood by everybody. And yet, at the end of book two I was so tired of my own voice and the things I had said and meant with it. I longed to silently to make small objects" (Baume, "I was so

[6] This is an award that was first given in 1974, the main purpose behind it being to recognize a young (under 40 years of age) promising Irish talent. It is administered by the Oscar Wilde Centre for Irish Writing and the School of English at Trinity College. Past recipients include Anne Enright, Frank McGuinness, Mark O'Rowe, Colin Barett. (Doyle 2015)

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tired of my laptop"). There is an implicit hint in her words towards a certain ubiquitous character of language as something fixable, "understood by everyone." Nonetheless, Baume fuses art, references to art and sometimes even actual photographs into her works, as if signaling that language is malleable and capable of amalgamation with other mediums of expression. What unites all her works is a versatile presence of objects and 'creatures' (animals, plants and humans in a mixture of appearances). She does not strictly conform to a linear narration: the diction adheres to a flow of thoughts in the conundrum of experiences of the body. Memories play a vital role in the characters' narration, and time is on a 'bergsonian continuum, past and present evoked simultaneously. Place and landscape play an important role in the manifestation of these memories. Similar to Enright and McBride, the space that the characters occupy determines and governs their ontogenesis. Memories create a mingling of boundedness and openness. The stories are paradoxically private yet also universal. Reading Baume is a re-discovery of what makes us human and, as such, vulnerable. She questions the validity of humans as being the most knowledgeable, sentient creatures on this planet.

The following chapter focuses on two of her novels: *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* and *A Line Made By Walking*. It analyses the narrative language, showing how Baume stretches its possibilities. It also discusses how landscape and space become governing forces. Baume's style is somatic and innovative, endowing the narrative with "a self-reflective even metaliterary meditation" (Estévez-Saá 87). This creates a unique cognitive structure that fuses memories (the various experiences of smells, sounds, touch) with the present moment. A special attention is accorded to the way the body features in the plots, both animal and human bodies, to show the various meanings of their co-existence in the world.

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IV.2 Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither*

IV.2.1. Landscape and Language

In Baume's prose, the natural landscape is presented without geographical specificity, and it functions as anthropomorphic projection of different states of human emotions. Nature has a destructive and constructive power in the narrative; it becomes a separate character of the plot. The narrative style conveys the immediate experience of nature with all its sounds and silences. The plot follows the uncanny co-existence of an old, solitary man and his pet dog. They are forced to run away from the village where they live because the dog is unfairly accused of biting a little child. The threat of possible euthanasia is unbearable to the old owner, leading to the adventurous decision to leave the well-known environment. Through a first-person utterance suspended in an eternal present of remembering, the protagonist retells and confesses his past life to his dog while traveling across the rural Irish countryside.

Ray, the protagonist, is very much an outsider, suspected of suffering from childhood traumas. He was raised by a single father who did not show much affection towards his offspring. He is also an outcast from his community. He lives in a small seaside village but never actually spoke to anyone. His social interactions were confined to his father and a neighbor, to whom he refers to as "aunt". He was also denied a formal education by his father, who simply degraded his son by lying that he was handicapped and unable to attend school. From this perspective, Ray shares a lot in common with his nonhuman partner. The dog was suffering at a shelter house, physically damaged after a fight with a badger. Ray appears as a savior because no one wants to adopt him. Throughout the course of their journey, they also become similar and the dog eases into Ray's loneliness. The dog becomes less feral through the care he receives while Ray adapts a similar observer, vigilant towards the world as his animal companion. The dog is named One-Eye, referring to his physical handicap; he has lost one of his eyes in the respective badger fight. However, his other senses are very acute; he smells and hears other animals from a far distance. By spending time with this creature, Ray also learns a new mode of existence and starts to view the world animate and inanimate in a peculiar new detail, gaining a beauty that he was unable to find in human society.

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Although language can act as a barrier in the process of evoking the bodily experience itself, Baume's style attempts to bring the reader as close as possible to *qualia* as defined by cognitive psychologists like David Herman ("Narrative Theory"). He enumerates *qualia* (a term borrowed from Daniel Dennett) among the main capacities of every literary narrative (Herman, "Narrative Theory"). The term is described as "a state of the mind that arises from the feeling of what it is like to be someone or something having a given experience" (Herman, "Narrative Theory" 173) Baume's novel applies meticulous descriptions, using a surplus of adjectives that relate to all the senses, so that the style draws the reader into the character's experience. At the same time, qualia has another layer in the text, the protagonist often carried away by his memories; he reveals moments from his childhood through the eyes of that long-gone child. Ray distances himself from the experience, commenting on them in the manner of qualia, trying to see himself as someone else. He makes himself the subject of his own understanding: "when I was a boy, I used to sit here in this window and watch children […] I didn't really believe I was of the same species as the children" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 63-64). He also experiments with qualia whenever he tries to envision how living would feel in a dog's body: "What do you smell? Fox spray and honeysuckle, pine martens and stinkhorns, seven different kinds of sap?" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 133). He is often amazed by his dog's complex olfactory ability: "You learn each new stopping spot detail by detail, by its symphony of smell, and never by its signpost" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 140). The language of the narrative gives direct access to his thoughts, capturing the vivid emotional, visual and sensory experiences. From the very beginning, the landscape acts as a crucial element in the character's life. Ray is staring into the distance and describes with minute detail both the view itself as well as the effects of it on his body:

> At high tide, the sea rises to lap against the bird walk's wall, and gulls bob at beak-level with the concrete. At low tide, the water falls back to expose a no man's land of stinking mud. It's at low tide that the wading birds come. Oystercatchers with their startled eyes […] little egrets freshly laundered, whiter than white. […] As I turn back you're still hustling amongst the greenery (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 40).

The narrative focalization starts from a bird's eye view, and it slowly approximates itself towards the internal focalizer, the narrator. The human element is gradually introduced, being the endpoint

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of the description. Language functions here with almost total dramatic inertia, communication is reduced to a minimum. When the characters do interact verbally, this is relayed through indirect speech and always as a recollected moment. This is partly due to the fact that the protagonist himself is an old, cantankerous, solitary man who has lost almost all social connections with the human world. Language is made into a living organism capable of producing an affective reading experience, one that can strongly apply to the senses. It is a language that makes the reader see, smell, and feel. At the same time, there is also a paradoxical mistrust of its expressive forces. Ray absolutely dreads human communication yet puts a lot of trust in sensations that he values as authentic forms of expression: "the outer noises are important to me. It doesn't matter what form they take or how loud they are […] I depend on them to gag my thoughts" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 162).

The close connection to the natural world, animals, and the wordless beings drives the narrative in this novel. Silence is also crucially important; it is a productive silence that lends itself to contemplation. Although transmitted through language, the descriptions of nature appeal directly to the senses and don't involve any communicatively informative purpose as a human verbal interaction would:

> The clifftop is studded with scabious, chamomile, campion. Ladybirds hug the grass stalks. Hoverflies tread the air. […] Now there's silverweed, its under-leaves gilded like the scales of a white fleshed-fish. The track leaves down slope. The earth and furze give way to sea pinks and lichen" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 94).

Baume states that her writing functions in the same way as a film: "I try to approach it with the sensibility of a filmmaker, to conceive of my fictional world as sound and vision as opposed to static letters of the alphabet arranged on a page to capture something" ("The Ormonde." 2). This is why her narrative captures every modicum element of the setting or event that is described. The narrator carefully shows the different visual, auditory and olfactory aspects of objects at close proximity as well as of those in the distance. Ray functions as a cameraman who silently transmits, and verbalizes all the colors, scents and sounds. According to critic Jean-Michel Rabaté, the different styles and modes of expression in novel writing can be attributed to different political,

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social, and economic structures surrounding the birth of the work (231). But the actual linguistic "product," the narrative itself, is always about "the interaction of the human bodies" (Rabaté 231) inside and outside of the text. Novels explore the inevitable relationship between the body and the written word, having the capacity to sublimate or redirect bodily functions.

Jean Luc-Nancy suggests that words are comprehensible through the body and are essentially linked to what the body as physical clothing experiences (15). At the same time, the body as materiality is a complex "open space" and not a "filled space," it is a "place of existence," that is not settled, but rather in a constant flow (Nancy 15). Novels have the power to carry their readers into an act of possession by allowing the entry into the experiences of characters, so that through reading, our "emotional and cognitive repertoire expands" (Mahon 103). Baume's work is also a novel with a distinctive style, with a language that forces the reader into the center of the experience. Everything is narrated through the eyes of the first-person narrator Ray who acts as an acute observer. He talks directly to his dog, addressing every sentence to his companion, often asking questions too: "Have I told you about my birthday?" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 90). He reveals memories of his traumatic childhood, his loneliness and plays with the idea of imagining certain experiences from the perspective of the dog. His utterances are viscerally driven, and also function as a re-living of all those emotions and sensations: "my father is the man you can smell all over the house […] you'll smell his dead skin cells in the leather bind of never-opened books" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 84). He often examines his ageing body, commenting on it sarcastically: "even though my feet are uncommonly long and flat to balance the plundering mass of my limbs and pork of my gut" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 84). The whole narrative is a portrayal of the history of his body augmented with comments on how this ageing body finds ways to reconnect with the world around him. His bond with the dog strengthens his awareness of the beauty of both animate and inanimate objects, by the end of the novel, the cantankerous Ray grasps an aesthetic vision of life, declaring that: "everything holds a diaphanous kind of potential" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 277).

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IV.2.2. Animal and Human Bodies

Kathryn Kirkpatrick suggests that animals have always been an essential part of Irish writing: not only as added plot elements but on a symbolical level as representations of Irishness. The evocation of the animal in literature can symbolically expand the understanding of concepts like race, ethnicity, gender, and class. As Kirkpatrick points out, the Irish have often been compared to animals, "justified by the colonial use of force to subdue and constrain" (1). One of the earliest literary accounts on the Irish was given by the half-Norman half-Welsh priest, Gerald of Wales, in *The History and Topography of Ireland* (1185) (O'Meara transl.). His perspective is driven by the dominating force of the colonizer, denoting that Irish people as a "wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only and live like beasts" (Gerald Of Wales 101). Kirkpatrick suggests that the "representations of the animals have literal consequences for nonhuman animal lives" (3), creating a subordinated, degraded category of animality. She urges the need for a new methodology and means of understanding that can be initiated by literature:

> If, as scientists maintain, we are now living in the Anthropocene era, then clearly reframing of life on earth has produced the awareness that humans must better understand the other creatures with which they share the planet in order to come to grips with the fouling of both human and nonhuman habitats (Kirkpatrick 2).

Literary representations of animals can shape the way us humans relate to these creatures. Sara Baume's novel seeks to dismantle old, traditional representations of the human-animal relationship. The narrative's experimental power lies not only in its language but also in its thematic innovations. On a meta-textual level, the main addressee of the text is a one-eyed dog, "I address it all to you. You who never spoke anyway. You who misunderstands everything" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 163). The human and animal bodies are a major element of focus in the novel. Baume chooses a character who lacks the ability to use the full communicative potential of language, who lives a lonely, resigned life. At the same time, Ray manages to arrive at a deep understanding of the natural world through his senses. This suggests that the later means is a more authentic form of communication. The thought-driven, sometimes 'overthought' societal mode of human life is meticulously compared to the rhythm of the natural world. This comparison is further

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sustained by the chosen narrative structure signaled in the title, denoting the rhythm of the four seasons. The seasonal changing of the landscape is concurrent with the moral, emotional changes occurring in the character's life. Ray slowly transforms from an old cantankerous, lonely man to a vulnerable, forgiving, kind member of the community. The pace of existence is slowed down in this novel, undertaking the inanimate world's unhurried movements. However, there is also a constant experience of motion. Even the transformed season names become verbs in the title that denote physical action: spill, simmer, falter and wither.

The reader sees the dog constantly running, roaming through the landscape, and this movement becomes a stylistic device. It can be compared to a cinematic technique, where the protagonist is the camera that functions as a projector of the setting, without any judgmental diction. The motion of nature is there, captured through descriptive language, but there is no real human action. The whole plot operates within this device. Ray himself reflects on this process in the plot: "I close my eyes, and our life is a film, and we are rolling, rolling, rolling" (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 276). This way, the focus of the narrative is expanded, creating a third nonhuman character in the plot, that being nature itself. As Ray learns to cope with silence, paradoxically, he gives voice to the natural world through his monologic utterances. Baume herself admits that the novel is "very much about nature too; the setting is very important" (Crim, "In Conversation with Sara Baume"). It can be suggested that through her innovative prose style, she anthropomorphizes the nonhuman world into a body: a felt, throbbing physicality. This strategy may lie open the charge of pathetic fallacy. The term itself denotes the process through which humans present the natural world around them in terms of their own personal feelings. This leads to the conclusion that whatever is visualized and described by language is processed and modified by the viewer's internal emotional bias. Baume's prose may lie open to the charge of pathetic fallacy, yet in her case, it cannot be considered a falsification. Even if the landscape is transmitted through a distorting subjective mood, the process itself is authentic. The narrative carries the readers into the process through which the character experiences the natural environment. It attempts to apprehend our natural habitat and the world of animals in a reverential way. The process of symbiotic pathos-generation rather than the outcome as putatively a pathetic fallacy is what is important here. This is still a process through which, as Elaine Scarry argues, humans relieve themselves of their own pain and suffering (9).

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The novel can also be termed a geographic, almost scientific itinerary through Ireland's wild, rural landscapes. Ray knows all the elements of nature, from plants to trees and rocks. By the end of the novel, he almost gains a superhuman ability to sense, smell, view these as acutely as his hunter dog. He embodies the dog through an almost intimate connection, trying to feel the world as the animal to an almost anatomical degree:

> You shift your weight to lean against my shin. You're dry and warm and soft yet solid. I feel the bulge and fall of your ribcage as you sigh. I find it strange because I always thought of sigh as an expression of the sort of feeling which animals are not supposed to be capable of, and I wonder do you sigh because you have the smog inside you, my sapping smog. Does it build within your chest until your muscles spasm and push it out, away (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 75).

There is interplay between human and animal perception in this novel. The adjectives point to the tactile sensations that Ray experiences as "dry, warm, soft" yet the proprioceptive description of the sigh is shown as a human sensation that he envisions as felt by the dog. Baume's narrative is experimental in this explorative manner of using the narrative language with expressive power. This mode comes very close to that suggested by Kirkpatrick, one that can reshape the imbalance in the human-animal relationship. It reiterates the "anthropocentric existence" by using degraded outcast characters from both worlds, who yet achieve the deepest mutual understanding. Baume herself stated that the intention was to "give voice to the overlooked guy, the strange guy on the street who doesn't stand for anything visual or tangible but has a soul as well" (Crim, "In Conversation with Sara Baume"). One-Eye similarly is the least appealing creature, yet through the eyes of Ray, he is viewed as an equal, without a discombobulated sense of its "Otherness." There is a crucial moment in the narrative where this equity liberation is carried to a heightened persuasive level. On their adventurous journey, Ray notices a family stopped at the side of a road, with a woman crying while staring at something. As Ray comes closer, he notices that the scene is prompted by a dead body of a swan. This reminds him of all the other dead animals that they encountered on the roadsides:

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> Now we see it, lying in the middle of the road. A swan, a mute swan […] We see its wings are tucked back as if the tar is liquid and the swan is swimming. […] The woman is kneeling down besides the swan. I think she is crying. […] I think of all the creatures we've seen since we set out. [...] Why didn't anyone stop for the jackdaw? Because the swan looks like wedding dress that's why. Whereas the jackdaw looks like a bin bag. Because this is how people measure life (Baume, *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* 148-149).

Crim points out that this is a pivotal scene, strengthening the argument against anthropocentrism and showing the unjust way through which "we value animal life versus human life" ("In Conversation with Sara Baume"). Crim's perspective lies in sympathy with Derrida's argument in his work, *The Animal That Therefore I am*, where he states that the human-nonhuman binary has been for too long based upon false assumptions. The animal-human opposition has been characterized by a deceptive recognition of failure that needs to be re-addressed. While one cannot escape the human experience through which we unfairly project ourselves into animals, we can change the way we think about them. Instead of defining it in the same methodological context, we should accord a distinct mode of existence to them that is not constrained by human attributes. Derrida asks: "whether what calls itself human has the right rigorously to attribute to man (…) what he refuses the animal" (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I am* xi).

Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither is a living experiment. It is innovative in many ways and at the same time uses the ancient capacity of language to carry and express intimate human, somatic experiences like fear, love and ageing. Ray offers a new means of co-existence with the natural world and also with our bodily limitations. His fear of death that features strongly at the beginning of the narrative transforms into a zest for life. He learns to appreciate the world he lives in and discovers a new humility towards the natural world. The connection he has with his dog does not involve inequality, degradation or dominion. In our Anthropocene era, this is an important path that we need to discover because in it lays our only collaborative survival. Only through a deep reverence for the natural world can a viable future be built. One is reminded here of anthropologist's, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's account of the matsutake mushroom in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. It is a species that grows in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Pacific Northwest but interestingly only in human-disturbed forests. Thus, this mushroom becomes a

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metaphor of a new type of humanity, one that is serendipitously interconnected to other species and the natural world. Baume, in her novel *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* via her character Ray, also imagines a similar future, urging us to re-construct our relation to the world and our own complex bodies.

IV.3. Baume, *A Line Made By Walking*

IV.3.1. The Bodies of the Living and the Dead: Documenting Bodies

A Line Made By Walking is Baume's second novel, published in 2017. Its style is in many ways similar to that of her first novel, but the structure takes on a new intriguing path. The prose remains poetic, appeals strongly to the senses, and the narrative voice is persuasively authentic. Some reviewers claimed that: "its subject matter comes far closer to home than that of her previous work" (Harrison, "A Line Made By Walking"). This is partially due to the fact that it is set in the West of Ireland, in a remote countryside where Frankie, an art graduate, discovers a peculiarly congenial rhythm of existence. Baume shared in an interview that this work "feels like a first novel – perhaps because of the semi-autobiographical element and because the bones of it were written before *Spill, Simmer*" (Gow, "Sara Baume: An interview").

It developed from a non-fiction work about summer, when Baume, herself as an art graduate, spent some time in the countryside in her grandmother's bungalow:

> I was twenty-five and felt I've failed at everything in life - re-writing it at thirty-one/thirty-two, there were so many times I was rolling my eyes at Frankie, and wanted to update what she was saying. It wasn't a reflection of me anymore and I had to stop myself from doing that because that was Frankie's version of me at twenty-five (Gow, "Sara Baume: An interview").

Despite its undeniable autobiographical traces, the narrative also carries a ubiquitous sense of reality, "a believable account of one small life trying to put itself together" (Sprackland, "The Caught by the River Book of the Month"). Its journal-like aspect allows the reader to meticulously follow Frankie's everyday rituals. Often, these seemingly meaningless events, like taking a walk,

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cleaning a room, preparing food, strengthen the meaning of life itself in the narrative. Through a unique language that sets its own rules of narrative meaning, Baume includes references to paintings, performances, as well as actual photographs embedded into the text. It is a novel about life and human expression: the various modes and ways through which human beings connect to both the societal world of fellow human beings as well as to the 'voiceless' world of nature. The narrative structure is seemingly traditional by keeping all the important elements of classical storytelling. It has a main character whose life events unfold gradually through the narrative, it has a linear unfolding of events, while retrospectively allowing the reader to get glimpses into the past of the character's life. There is no action by the strictest sense in this narrative. It follows the first-person voice of a young protagonist in her twenties called Frankie. Despite its classic narrative structure, it is a piece of meta-fiction that questions its own status and genre. The first-person voice constantly reflects upon the writing process itself, moreover upon the limitations and purpose of bringing human experience into language. At a certain point in the plot, Frankie reflects on the purpose of human speech and writing itself, dreading it as a useless yet inevitable instrument:

> When I finally started school, I refused to speak at all […] I don't remember the jabbering, nor when I stopped. These are just stories my mother has told me over the years: the legend of how I first struggled with expression. As the years passed […] I fell, carelessly, into the habit of speaking properly. I became one of the regular, unremarkable children (Baume, *A Line Made By Walking* 116-117).

The struggle with words will constitute a continued quest for meaning throughout her life, Frankie is constantly searching for other means of expression. Even at the peak of her ability to use language, she struggles to utilize it as a reliable means of communication. When watching a film on television in Hungarian, she realizes that although she doesn't understand the words, there are other channels that augment language:

> I stay up late and watch a foreign film on the Irish language channel. It is spoken in Hungarian, subtitled in Irish. I can't understand either, but I still have the little gestures and noises and faces people make in order to express themselves; I still understand the film, enough. How prosaic words are, I realize, how insufficient (*A Line Made By Walking* 225).

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She discovers photography, art and various connections to the animate and inanimate world. After graduating from art school, Frankie settles for a while in Dublin, working at a museum. However, depressive insecurity overcomes her as she tries to make sense of her adult life. She is portrayed at the very beginning of the novel, lying on the carpet of her apartment. Unable to stand up for days, she starts to pay attention to details that remained unnoticed before. She develops acute smell and experiences her surroundings to almost inhuman levels. She listens to all the noises and sounds that the exterior world transmits: the downstairs neighbor's footsteps and the almost unnoticeable humming of the dust-mites on her carpet:

> I remember, this is how it started. It started with the smelling of the carpet […] I became intimately acquainted with that faded pile, the scent of mouldy timber rising up from the boards, the particular shade of amber it had faded to, the colour of watery cider. I'd dig my fingernails down and scratch the lining, as if it was a short-coated pet. My mother says that a male dust-mite lives for an average of ten days […] There are people who think they see dust-mites […] but these things aren't true. Dust-mites aren't able to eat skin scales unless they're already dead [...] They are everywhere and they are nothing (*A Line Made By Walking* 19-20).

The contemplation of dust mites and the meditative immersion in the flow of experience signal Frankie's despair. It is a breaking point, she shifts her focus inside, excluding the confusion of the outside reality. Her desire to make meaningful sense of the present remains awry, so she decides to retreat to the countryside. Frankie moves into her grandmother's abandoned bungalow (the grandmother has passed away years before) and begins to re-build herself. Similar to her previous novel, the language carries the reader into the body. The physical sensations of the human corpus are given primordial focus, with an explicit visual focus on the body. While discovering the healing potential of the countryside, Frankie engages herself in a photography project. She takes a picture of the accidentally found road killings. The photos become structural elements of the narrative, dividing the plot into chapters: Robin, Rabbit, Rat, Mouse, Rook, Fox, Frog, Hare, Hedgehog and Badger (Annex). The main rule that she confines herself to is not to photograph anything that she kills:

> Here is another rule for my project: no pets, only wild things. So it can be about the immense

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> poignancy of how, in the cause of ordinary life, we long to look closely at the sublime once it had dropped to the ditch, once the maggots have already arrived at work (*A Line Made By Walking* 27).

She spends her days carefully observing her surroundings, the wildlife and the objects; abiding the dictum of clocks and calendars, following the rhythms of nature. Painter Lucian Freud, renowned for his often-eerie nude paintings of various human bodies, described his method as follows: "The subject must be kept in closest observation. If it is done, day and night, the subject – he, she, or it – will eventually reveal the all […] through some and every facet of their lives or lack of life, through movements and attitudes, and through every variation from one moment to another" (Babafemi, "Why I Love Painting Nudes"). This technique of analyzing the human subject over a prolonged period of time to capture its 'life' or its essence is similar to what takes place in this novel. The reader observes Frankie, following her every move throughout her first-person dictum. Simultaneously, on another layer of the narrative, Frankie follows and reflects on her life and actions, carefully documenting the process.

The first dead creature that she finds accidentally on the side of the road is a robin's (Annex):

> A smudged-sky morning, mid-spring. And to mark it, a new dead thing, a robin. […] 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 (*A Line Made By Walking* 1-2).

Frankie views this dead animal as a representation of her own struggling body. She finds it intriguing though that she feels closely connected to the dead when it is spring, "the season of renewal?" *A Line Made By Walking* 3). The place that Frankie inhabits while being in her grandmother's bungalow becomes a new universe of discovery. The things, the inanimate objects, the dusty shelves, sofa, the carpet, are seen in a new perspective. In a way, they become 'extensions' of her own body. Her experiences become impressionistic; the light that moves across the wallpaper becomes a haunting spirit that she carefully examines throughout the day. Everything is slowed down, forcing the reader too to meditatively examine. The narrative language itself excludes the presence of the material body in its physicality, the focus shifting to the translation of bodily experience into language. Sinead Gleeson expands this latter idea when she explains that in

everyday life, people tend to assume as given the material coordinates of the body, its weight, the working of the organs:

> Unless it's involved in pleasure or pain, we pay this moving mass of vessel, blood and bone no mind. The lungs inflate, muscles contract, and there is no reason to assume they won't keep on doing so […] The body – its presence, its weight – is both an unignorable entity and routinely taken for granted (Gleeson, *Constellations* 1).

Throughout human history, illness has remained a constant source of bodily awareness, prompting individuals to become more conscious of their biological mortality. This heightened bodily awareness is particularly evident during periods of sickness, old age, or when confronting physical limitations. For Frankie, one such experience at the limits of bodily capacity leads to a profound awareness of her own mortality and the finite nature of the human body.

Silence becomes both oppressive and meaningful to her. She learns how to listen and tries to blend her presence into this inanimate dimension on an almost obsessive level. In a journal-style life writing, Frankie recalls the clues and events that had led to her depressive destruction. The eerie sight of the dead robin creates a direct connection to the body, especially to questions like: 'what is a body?' 'what happens, how does the physical, biological 'shell' of our body looks like after life leaves it?' According to Maureen O'Connor the symbol of the bird and flight has been a strong element of Irish women's writing. The flight itself is "the fantasy of a femininity which defies the limits of the body, especially the female body" (O'Connor 941). The bird imagery recurs in the narrative later on as well, when Frankie finds a dying sparrow that has managed to get stuck to the melted tar of a freshly piled pothole. It is not dead yet, however, struggling for its life. This reminds her of the various attempts from her childhood when she tried to save different dying creatures, mostly without success: "One-legged pigeons, bats with snapped or fractured wings, rabbits with myoxomatosis. My sister and I grew up digging tiny graves" (*A Line Made By Walking* 249). The bird is a symbol of her own damaged, confused body and the incapacity of the flight or plight from a life that cannot be filled with meaning. Since it is yet not a corpse, she doesn't take its photo: "this is the rule remember? I am not allowed to kill something and then steal its spirit as well" (*A Line Made By Walking* 251). The temptation is there though, pointing to the ethical boundaries of

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art. Are we allowed to pose the suffering or dead body as art? The bird motif and the inability to fly and to escape from death are vividly featured in the character's childhood. Frankie spends a lot of her time as a kid in a "hut-which-should-have-been-tree-house" in their garden and often finds dead baby birds with busted necks: "eyes the size of its feet, as yet unopened, never to open. I'd bury the baby and steal its broken shell for classroom nature table" (*A Line Made By Walking* 9). Decay and death remind Frankie of loss and urge her for responsibility. To Frankie, life is not just followed by death. The dualism of opposing poles, of elevation and falling, are constant and concatenated elements of her life. Her depressive instability is strengthened by the inability to and fear of grasping these concepts without their opposite destructive other: "flying and falling are almost exactly the same" (*A Line Made By Walking* 11). She manages though to develop a delicate connection to the animal world, and the robin becomes one of her guardian animals: "Almost every time I sulked alone in the hut, a robin came to me. It would hop between the spindly trees and sing like a battered xylophone […] As a child, I used to believe that robin was my guardian angel" (*A Line Made By Walking* 9).

The sensation of emptiness and the incapacity to act seems to strengthen the value of the inanimate world and that of the non-human bodies. It is also a process of finding the true aesthetic value and the meaning of art for Frankie. She constantly looks for clues and tries to understand how our bodies function as a piece of art (performances). At the same time, she questions this possibility, looking beyond the human body and challenging the meaning of creation: of paintings, photography and performance art.

What sustains the structure is the slowed-down phase of life passing, descriptions and the interior reflections coming from the character's mind. Nothing 'happens' in the everyday sense, although there is a constant, gradual change taking place in the subject's consciousness. The novel itself can be described as one big retrospective time lag, starting with the effect – the character's present – and moving backwards through the causes and phases of self-discovery, depression and apathy. Through vivid and meticulous poetic language, Baume carefully observes and watches. She exposes not only the character's mind but her body as well as all the other "bodies" (both of the animate and inanimate world) that the protagonist observes, describes and relates to. Stephanie Turza in her review, terms it as a "meditative novel that doesn't emphasize plot over atmosphere"

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("A Line Made By Walking"). This style has an almost sedative effect on the reader; the unusual take on life by the protagonist is dampened by emotional flatness that can feel like a comforting refuge from the pressures of real life. Baume's narrative fiction corroborates what David Hillman admits when reflecting on the body-language relationship:

> Body and literature appear to be intrinsic rather than extrinsic to one another. For the body, for us, always already mediated through representation […] so that literature might in fact be understood as the place par excellence to the body to express itself (Hillman 3).

In the novel, the body is represented through a double perspective. Firstly, it is "described" through its motion, by verbs and adjectives that reveal small actions and interactions with other bodies. This can be termed the external gaze, the perception zone of the character herself. Secondly, there is the internal gaze manifested through the careful self-observations and detailed descriptions made by Frankie, focusing on the bodily existence of her own self. This can be described as the experience zone, the ways of feeling one's body as one's own. The preponderance of bodies is especially strong with regards to animal bodies and corpses through the photography project. The slow-motion narrative diction enables vivid and meticulous focus on shapes, forms and the materiality of the body. As early as the first pages of the novel, Frankie experiments with the feeling of what it is to blend as a human body with other inanimate objects. Writing on the relationship of the body and perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that one "could not grasp the unity of the object without the mediation of the bodily experience" (*Phenomenology of Perception* 235). In this sense, one is blended with its surroundings as the perception always differs according to how our body is positioned in the given, seen spatial arrangement. This way there is no fixity to any inanimate thing, it being perceived by the body in motion: "by conceiving my body itself as a mobile object that I am able to interpret perceptual appearance" (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* 236). At the same time I perceive the same object as a different unity according to the position from where the gazing happens. As a consequence, objects are as Frankie describes them, "the insides of our bodies" (*A Line Made By Walking* 28), stuck in their partial unity of becoming once the body perceives them in a given spatial context. Merleau- Ponty also refers to the dual experience of the body as the source of world-perception and the body as self-perceived presence (*Phenomenology of Perception* 235-245). Frankie tries to explore how her body

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experiences other matters around her but also tries to slow down this process in order to focus on her body as the agent of these deeds. This observing/observed dynamic is a plot-driving force as well. Bergson (1929) claims that our body is one of the "images" in the material world: "The images which surround us will appear to turn towards our body the side [...] which interests our body […] Our representation of things would thus arise from the fact that they are thrown back and reflected by our freedom" (*Memory and Matter* 29). According to Bergson, one only perceives aspects of the present that are of utilitarian interest, being able to link to previous or forthcoming images (*Memory and Matter* 29). The distinction between my body and other bodies is purely a result of a conscious center-periphery construction: we make our body the center of the experience. Bergson distinguishes between perception and affection, the latter being the point when our body itself becomes the object of perception: "my perception is outside my body and my affection within it" (*Memory and Matter* 59). Affection leads to sensation which arises inside our body when the body is self-perceived: "affection is the "impurity with which perception is alloyed" (Bergson, *Memory and Matter 60*).

In the novel, Frankie mingles the inside-outside constructs, reflecting their Bergsionian malleability. Baume reflected on her style in an interview stating that: "I think in images […] there is very little dialog in the books. […] My writing is driven by description and in my mind it starts with an image. And then I am building details around it" (Crim, "In Conversation with Sara Baume"). The body gains a focal interest in the novel not only through its paradoxical absence from the language but as a real absence in the world. The title *A Line Made By Walking* is a direct reference to a trace, a mark left by an acting body. It is a reference to performance artist's Richard Long's project from 1967. He walked for hours backwards and forwards in a field in Wiltshire until the "turf caught the sunlight and became visible as a line" (Long, "*A Line Made By Walking"*). Thus, what he eventually captured was a mark left by his own moving body on the canvas of nature. Frankie plays an interesting game throughout her narrative; alongside the photographs, she also refers constantly to performance art pieces, challenging herself to remember what she has learned as an art student. When mentioning Long's performance, she declares that "he specializes in barely-there-art. Pieces which take up as little space in the world as possible. And which do as little damage" (*A Line Made By Walking* 262). *A Line Made By Walking* is also a reference to Van Gogh's painting *Wheatfield with Crows* which captures a similarly lonely path in a wheat field

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leading into the unknown distance, its body/source remaining cryptic. This liminal zone of the body touching upon nature, leaving a trace in the world is a core element of the narrative. Of course, there are no actual bodies in literature. However, their trace is constantly there in the representation of how actual bodies move through space and time, affecting the means by which readers' sense and experience our own embodied existence.

IV.3.2. Landscape and Somatic Time

Baume describes herself as being "more of the rural tradition" (Crim, "In Conversation with Sara Baume"), referring to the influence of Irish naturalist writers like John McGahern or William Trevor. The setting of the novel is a rural one set in contrast to urban landscapes. Written in the Post-Celtic Tiger era, this implies a challenging question. By leaving the globalized world of the fast-moving city life behind, Frankie finds her sanity and peace in her grandmother's long-abandoned bungalow in the countryside. This connects to and reverses a well-known pattern in Irish literature: the exile that usually moves from the constraining patterns of rural life into the promising novelty of the modern city. Baume clearly laments the destruction of both the rural way of living as well as the destruction that the economic boom years have brought upon the Irish natural landscape. Frankie experiences a symbolic contemporary Irish experience, one that struggles to cope with the fast-changing new world. In this sense, the novel is also a lamentation of an old tradition and of a lost national identity. Yet it also transcends this national context and broadens this lamentation to an environmentalist level. It is clear throughout the narrative that the human body is paradoxically both the destroyer of the natural landscape as well as its symbiotic other. Sitting in her Dublin flat before the move to the grandmother's empty house, Frankie spends days laying her numb body on the carpet, listening to the sounds and slow movements of inanimate objects. During this existential crisis she watches a film, a Werner Herzog documentary:

> *Encounters and the End of the World.* This was the DVD inside the case. I watched it the night before the last day I lay down on the carpet. […] it is a documentary about the South Pole. The setting is vast and white and barren. The cast are people who feel compelled to travel to the extreme edge of human existence, who believe that forever reason, everywhere else on the entire

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> planet has squeezed them away […] And then, close to the end, there came the penguins (*A Line Made By Walking* 26).

Frankie's "South Pole" is the natural world of the countryside, her "edge of existence." However, she has to admit and realize that societal existence is part of her survival needs. The documentary contains an interview too with an ornithologist and a close-up footage of a lonely penguin, broken away from the group. According to the specialist the lonely runaway ones have no chance of survival yet for some inexplicable reason some still depart alone. To Frankie, this is a direct metaphor of her own exile and inability to say yes to her own existence:

> Was it from the deranged penguin that the huge and crushing sadness came? […] 'But why?' Herzog asked. But why […] The world is wrong. It took me twenty-five years to realize and now I don't think I can bear it anymore. The world is wrong, and I am too small to fix it, too self-absorbed (*A Line Made By Walking* 27).

The penguin's struggling body is described with acute detail, and it reflects the character's discombobulated state. The ebbing away of Frankie's connection with reality and the depressive sadness that overpowers her also transform her into an audacious observer. It seems as if her body becomes an eerie instrument that she explores as if she were a strange to her own self: "cheek against the faded pile of my bedsit carpet", "I raised myself up again, took a deep cathartic sniff" (*A Line Made By Walking* 19). This perception of herself as another and her body as an "intruder" is best captured in the scene when she looks at herself in the mirror:

> I catch the reflection of a figure in the wardrobe mirror, turn my head to face it. A person too old to be a child but too young to be an adult. Hair falling limply yet somehow wild, short yet somehow knotted. Baggy eyes, blotchy skin. I notice for the first time all day what I am wearing: a woolly winter cardigan that hangs down to my knees, even though it is warm, even though it is spring (*A Line Made By Walking* 30-31).

It is a moment of revelation and that of an inchoate self-discovery. Jean Luc Nancy describes how his own heart-transplant surgery and the rehabilitation that followed made his own body appear to

him as an alien machinery. He describes how the whole process made him question the 'I' as well as the ownership one has over his physical body: "If my own heart was failing me, to what degree was it 'mine', my 'own' organ? Was it even an organ?" (Nancy 162). It also made him realize that life, "this propriety does not reside anywhere within 'my' body […] a proper life not to be found in any organ, and nothing without them" (Nancy 166). Frankie goes through a similar path of personal discovery. However, in the end, what she realizes is that this body −be it art or intruder or machine– is a constant companion. She tries to detach herself from this body of hers though and repeats her mantra: "But I work hard never to think about what I look like. What I look like will not be left behind; only what I make" (*A Line Made By Walking* 178). One of the crucial moments in the novel is when in her total apathy, Frankie goes through an almost out of body experience:

> Now I notice the scuffing of the inside of my clothes against the outside of my skin […] It feels as if the labels at my hip and collar are scratting flesh away to bone, as if the elastic band of my pants is sawing a slit towards my organs. And now I notice trembling. Not just my right leg, but everywhere. Very slight but irrepressible. Have I always trembled? I can't remember. Was I born breached and blue, and trembling? (*A Line Made By Walking* 220).

The process of self-absorbed slowed down motions, and meticulous experiences of living inside physical materiality strengthen the acuteness of the senses in her body. Frankie's awareness of her surroundings, the house, all its objects as well as other people's bodies and every noise and movement around her heightens to an almost inhuman level. She discovers this capacity when she overhears a conversation in a doctor's waiting room between two old ladies: "I overheard two old women talking about the irritation of how, when they had their hearing aids switched up to full volume, it results in an unsettling din of white noise […] Now I recognize what the old women were talking about, the deafening silence" (*A Line Made By Walking* 222).

Frankie transforms external reality into an experiencing body through an anthropomorphic transformation. It is a game, but it is also a mental healing exercise. She moves between animal-human-object conditions and experiences with preternatural ease: "swerve around potholes and drowsy pigeons, pedaling faster in pursuit of rabbits, as if I am a fox. I am so absorbed in being a fox, it takes me a while to notice the vehicle stuck behind me" (*A Line Made By Walking* 235).

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Humans often get so attached to their belongings that they incorporate them into their own bodies, as if they were merely an extension of the somatic. To Frankie, this is a rather dangerous yet artistically satisfying experience: "how extravagantly attached we are to the things we own as if they were the insides of our bodies and not just the insides of our houses. […] Such that we end up devoting more effort to preserving the carpet than we do to preserving our intestines" (*A Line Made By Walking* 28).

Jean-Luc Nancy argues that writing also takes place at the limit of the material and the linguistic: "touching the body *with the incorporeality* of 'sense'" (11). Similar to language, our body can be manipulated and utilized as a tool of expression and, as Franke demonstrates as a piece of art. Baume's prose gives flesh to the words; it makes the reader feel, sense and understand in genuine ways. It inscribes the body into language, but it also gives new meaning to the body through this inscription.

IV.3.3. Anthropocene (Body)Places

The novel's title directly refers to a spatial movement "walking" and while there is more absence than presence in this "walk", the trace as "the line" suggests that it wasn't just carved there in the ground *ex nihilo*. The spatial and temporal aspects of movement are key elements of Baume's novel, as well as the indissoluble traces that the source of these movements create. The source being none other than the human body, the narrative itself is built on a detailed presentation of the constant interchange between space and body. The title's reference to Richard Long's performance suggests that we don't just 'exist' in space, but our presence leaves a visible mark, a physical effect on our surroundings. However, "the line made by walking" in Long's case leads to a reversible outcome, something that will be encumbered by nature again. This is the type of balanced interaction that is viewed as a desired one in the Baume novel too, although it proves to be a languid effort. The narrative has a clear, identifiable time-place coordinate: it is not outside of history, the character's quest is one of our present age. The plot of the story takes place during the Anthropocene epoch, a term coined by scientists to describe the present time period in which humans have had a profound and often detrimental impact on the natural environment. According

to ecological research, without any serious action taken and without change in the degree of human activities' destructive forces, our planet is in danger of destruction (Damian, "The Anthropocene Epoch"). This threat is present in Baume's novel as well, urging us to re-think our world and especially our humanness through the re-evaluation of the human body. From this perspective, the narrative can be termed an environmentalist novel.

The human body can exist within a mutual partnership with the surrounding environment, leaving reversible traces behind; or at least it used to be. Frankie is almost shocked to read about a tribe in the Amazon rainforest, "believed to be from the last 'uncontacted' tribe" (*A Line Made By Walking* 1). She is surprised by the novelty of this information: "What a thing, I think, that there are still. People. Out there" (*A Line Made By Walking* 1). That type of existence might have been capable of maintaining the reversible type of trace-leaving connection with the natural world. But such "tribes" are almost nonexistent now, the new type of body, that of the posthuman, cannot promise a mutually enriching ontology of the human person with her/his environment. This is not to say that the advances of technology have only brought only destruction to the world, but that humanity cannot disavow the consequences of its deeds. At the end of the novel, we can see the same tribe, shown in the news, walking out of the forest, leaving their world behind:

> The tribespeople are sick and hungry, the scrolling text says, slowly dying. In the undergrowth behind them, a path has been channeled by their emergence, a line made by walking. Out of the rainforest. Ambling in faulty time to, mouthing imperfectly along with the 'Blue Monday' by New Order. Waddling, stumbling, waddling. Casting off the uncontainable vastness, stepping into the known world (Baume, *A Line Made By Walking* 301).

This suggests that there is no sense of satiety or any viable option of sustaining that type of harmony with nature anymore. What the novel portrays as a possible means of re-orientation is the re-discovery of the countryside. Frankie moves to the Irish countryside. She spends her time lamenting her past, trying to understand her own being and the source of her sadness while re-establishing her place in the material world. She is imbued with the serenity of nature but constantly has to face the damage done to it by people. The rural environment is definitely described as a less corrupted space than that of the urban. It is the 'origin' to Frankie; she remembers how she once believed that

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everyone originated from the countryside: “When I was a child, I used to believe that everyone experienced childhood in the countryside and simply chose or didn’t choose to abandon their rural beginnings later on; that there was nobody under eighteen in the city at all” (*A Line Made By Walking* 22). Despite its elevated character, the rural environment is still acknowledged by Frankie as temporary, a locus of safety yet paradoxically also a place that is meant to be left behind:

> And I see the bus pass and think how amazing it was that there existed a vehicle which travelled all the way from this middle-of nowhere in the Irish countryside to the very heart of Western civilization: Victoria Coach Station […] I took it as a sign that in spite of who and where I was, escape to an enormous metropolis overseas remained a possibility (*A Line Made By Walking* 254).

Her longing for a more urban landscape that she views as an “escape”; this is a commonly expressed desire of young people in our contemporary age, who often feel left without a purpose in little towns or villages. At the same time, it is also a sign of failure with regards to her project of self-healing. She moves there on purpose to be reconciled by nature, but the only sincere conversation is with herself and the only thing she finds is death, and so she realizes that nature is not meeting her emotional needs. At the end of the novel, she decides to leave the village and her grandma’s lonely bungalow behind, moreover leaving the country behind: “I think: goodbye city-which-broke-me, bungalow-scarred midlands, car-abandoned-in-alleyway” (*A Line Made By Walking* 298). Her plight evokes a common motif in Irish literary history: exile. Helena Wulff argues in her recently published anthropological study on contemporary Irish writing *Rhythms of Writing* that there are some very strong and continuously valid storylines in Irish fiction: the consequences of colonialism, the misdeeds of the Catholic Church, the Troubles, the economic boom and its following downturn and emigration and exile. One of the reasons for which there is still very little literary focus on immigration is - according to her - the dominance of these themes. On the other hand, these topics and historical traumas have paradoxically made Irish writing a profitable global commodity. Nonetheless, their persistence as characteristic pre-occupations of Irish literature don’t prove that there is no change in the Irish literary front. The topics are re-evaluated, sometimes re-analyzed, under highly contemporary parameters. Sara Baume’s work also touches upon many of these topics, but through new and innovative insight and style. The novel as a genre has always

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been one of the most innovative fields in literary history so that evoking old, traditional themes don't mean stagnation or lack of evolvement in the Irish field. Baume's novel is part of the classical line of 'characteristic' Irish fiction in many ways. However, it is also a work that evokes pressing contemporary issues in a highly experimental fashion. The polarizing distinction of traditional/innovative Irish fiction operates and has always operated on false dichotomies. There has always been a constant interchange of old and new characteristics in the means through which the Irish novel re-invents itself many times through its history. Sara Baume's work definitely blurs the line between the old and new. Anne Fogarty notices that there is currently an emerging group of writers who acknowledge the problems of breaking away from the expectations associated with being an Irish writer yet who challenge these expectations through new perspectives ("Helena Wulff Rhythms of Irish Writing").

The rural landscape and its depiction as both a corrupted place yet also a place of remedy ties Baume's novel to writers like John McGahern. McGahern's novels often explore themes of rural life and its struggles, and he has been celebrated for his descriptions of the Irish landscape and its impact on the characters who inhabit it. Through her vivid descriptions of the flora and fauna that surround Frankie in her rural home, Baume draws attention to the intricate relationship between humans and their environment, a central concern of the rural naturalist literary tradition in Ireland. In addition, the house itself, where Frankie grew up, was built as a consequence of the Famine:

> The house where I grew up was built more than one hundred and fifty years ago, at the tail end of the Famine. The building was originally supposed to function as a hospital, my mother told us, but by the time it bad been completed, the Great Famine was more or less over. Two million people had either died or deserted; a new hospital was no longer necessary. For many years I doubted this story (Baume, *A Line Made By Walking* 64).

The Catholic Church is also a strong presence in the plot. Frankie remembers the slow disillusionment she experienced with regards to religious hypocrisy:

> At quarter past midnight the priestly priest delicately suggested that for too long the Catholic Church has instilled fear- that now it needs to spread a message which is old but was there all

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> along: DO NOT BE AFRAID. How laudable, I thought. But then, at the end of the service, he sent an altar boy down into the congregation carrying a wicker dish, collecting money from pew to pew, and I was so angry about this intrusion that his laudable message, his small concession, didn't matter anymore (Baume, *A Line Made By Walking* 8-9).

The village itself also carries deep traces of an old era that still sustains its tacit religious influence in the present. Frankie's neighbor is an old man, a friend of her grandmother's called Jink. He is a lonely figure, resembling the village fool, who is at the same time an imperious defender of religious belief. He tries to gently "guide" Frankie towards spiritual conversion: 'Have you ever thought about initiating a relationship with Jesus?" Jink says. […] That isn't his word 'initiating'. That word belongs to some higher-ranking Born Again from whom Jink learned his spiel" (Baume, *A Line Made By Walking* 95). His house is also a sight of kitsch-type spiritual objects that create carry an almost comic effect, as Frankie describes it: "So here I am in Jink's living room, left in peace to snoop just like I'd hoped. I look first at the frames on the walls, they are holy pictures without exception. Here's Jesus carrying a lamb across his shoulders" (*A Line Made By Walking* 95). From this perspective, the narrative depicts a traditional Irish rural context with its remoteness and religious beliefs seen through the eyes of a heroine who sheds light on its damaging aspects. Frankie travels to the countryside to heal and to be redeemed by nature, but she only finds death and people mired in apathy. She still keeps trying to understand this forgotten world and through it, her own self. Her quest carries a double purpose. In a way, the portrayal of the Irish rural setting shows that the culture itself is still suffering from the consequences of history. Baume doesn't even try to hide nor disguise the exact coordinates: the story takes place in Lisduff, in the Republic of Ireland. This was a place that some decades ago during the protagonist's childhood was one of total isolation and racial discrimination: "I remember the first black person I saw in Lisduff; the first black person I ever saw anywhere" (*A Line Made By Walking* 54).

While it sheds light on pressing Irish topics, the narrative also carries a universal perspective. Frankie's quest is also about the irreversible damage caused by humans as a species and their various activities. The novel is a story of the Anthropocene, seeking to raise awareness and strengthen the need for responsibility towards our planet. This aspect of the narrative breaks away from exclusively Irish matters and portrays contemporary philosophical and ethical concerns for

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the human species as a whole. Frankie embarks on a project to take photographs of the dead animals that she encounters in the countryside. Most of these animal corpses are the results of human intervention, of technology's destructive encounter with the natural world: "Today's robin has been thumped by a speeding windscreen, launched into artificial flight, crash-landed" (*A Line Made By Walking* 10). The description of their corpses is visceral and disturbing, the fox's body is trapped in a tin can: "And on its head, the tin can. Yellow label of Pedigree Chum" (*A Line Made By Walking* 164). The hare's body is mangled to horrific scales:

> A hare is a rabbit crossed with a horse. All limb and no fluff, an air of prudence. One of the cars has somehow managed to split the bowel and draw out a strand of shocking pink intestine, the colour of sunburn. And to flick a piece of its own shit into its frozen open eye. This is how it will be for all of us, I think. Even the ones who do not harm (*A Line Made By Walking* 216-17).

The photos of these creatures are included in the narrative, fused into the typography of the structure. The mode through which the protagonist analyses, describes and laments these animal bodies dismantles the animal-human opposition. Moreover, what this narrative language accomplishes is allowing the animal-like existence, the bodily state of the animals to be experienced in its flesh and bone state. The humans are no longer the ultimate creatures of the Earth: they are represented as just as fallible as the animals. These descriptions of the grotesque dead bodies paradoxically give back some sort of dignity to the natural world. Even if humans destroy and pollute the environment eventually, they will also end up as corpses, ripped away from their wealth, beauty and material possessions. This is directly signaled through the portrayal of the hare covered in its own fecal remains, it being disgusting but no different from the decaying process the human body goes through after its death. While rediscovering her own human body, Frankie also tries to understand these 'other' bodies of the natural world. She apprehends herself as a body located in space but also transposes herself into this space. The anthropomorphic perspective upon these animals creates a locus of experience for the readers as well. The specific language allows the reader to experience her own body in similarly shifting ways and means, like Frankie. During this process, a greater understanding of the pressing environmental problems of our era can be reached: this empathy-creation may be a conscious purpose of the narrative. Certain psychological research suggests, that while reading fiction, people can be "transported in the story and they tend

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to become more empathic." (Bal and Veltkamp, "How does fiction reading influence empathy?"). Baume herself admitted in an interview that she considers empathy as a key element of literature: "I find it is often missing from the novels that experiment with form" (Leszkiewic, "The only right way of writing"). The Latin term for the capacity of identifying with a certain character through fiction is *qualia*, "a state of the mind that arises from the feeling of what is like to be someone or something having a given experience" (Herman 173). Sustaining Merleau-Ponty's assumption that every experience that a human being can have is essentially an embodied one- "rather than a mind *and* a body, man is a mind *with* a body" (*The World of Perception* 64). the reading experience itself can be termed as a bodily one too. Moreover, this is only one level of connection; narratives can also 'improve' our bodies' senses and our levels of our own empathic understanding.

Gilles Deleuze argues in favor of a so-called "essence" embedded in every art, a capacity for creating "transitory organs", through which the reception of the creation becomes a special corporeal experience (*Francis Bacon* 52-53). He concentrates specifically upon paintings, and by analyzing the painter's Francis Bacon's works, coins the term "body without organs" (a term borrowed from the playwright Antonin Artaud) to refer to the special affect they have on the viewer. Deleuze also accentuates the interconnectedness of mind and body, sustaining that every experience coming from the outside collides first and foremost with our bodies. However, some pieces of art can create such sensations that are able to restructure the organizational pattern of our organs. Bacon's paintings, according to him, are able to make us "see" with every part of our body, to "have eyes everywhere" (Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 52). The "body without organs" is essentially born and connected to the living physical body but also exceeds it: it is "an indeterminate organ" (Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 47). Although Deleuze focuses mainly on paintings, it can be suggested that through language, the literary narrative can also offer its readers similar "bodies without organs." Any given sensation experienced in this 'body', offered through literature, will have the power to affect external reality, but will never be able to replicate it to the level of "eeriness". Its paratextual and linguistic context will always constitute a clear-cut boundary. At the same time, the way that the human body itself is described in a literary text, together with the bodily experience that the reading process provides, can modify readers' intrinsic concepts of gender, racism, sexuality and the human/animal/natural relationship. Thus, it can be suggested that literature and

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the socio-historical reality in which it exists can modify and affect one through the bridge of the body itself.

Sara Baume's novels offer a fresh and exhilarating perspective on Irish life that transcends cultural boundaries and speaks to the universal human experience of the modern era. Her stories delve into the complex ideas of home and landscape, with protagonists Ray and Frankie wrestling to find their place in a world that seems to reject them. Along their journey, they learn to appreciate the small wonders of life, becoming attuned to the minutiae of their own physical existence as well as the world around them. In this way, Baume's work encourages readers to slow down and take notice of the beauty and complexity of the natural world that surrounds us.

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Conclusion: Traversing the Terrain of the Body in Contemporary Irish Women‘s Fiction

Literature in general stems from the human self, rooted in experience, both individual and collective. This holds as much for Irish literature as for the literatures of other countries. On a cognitive level, one can view literature as a mirror of local and global consciousness, as writer David Lodge observes: “Literature is a record of human consciousness, the richest and most comprehensive we have” (10). Transformations of the social environments that literature engages are natural and necessary. This is not to deny that there is also continuity and tradition. Irish literature for long was characterised by a preoccupation with certain themes, predominantly stemming from the history of a country shaped by colonialism, religious dominance and various nationalist movements. As shown in this thesis, Irish consciousness has gone through crucial changes in recent times, starting with the economic success of the Celtic Tiger era and continuing through the economics collapse and recovery of the Post Celtic Tiger. The affluence of the Celtic Tiger era was welcomed by many Irish people, as Fintan O’Toole points out: “it helped generate optimism, confidence, a new openness and ease, an absence of fear” (*Enough is Enough* 3). Immigration into the country has brought a new wave of citizens, many of whom have settled in the country. Their children have been born in Ireland and have a transnational attachment towards it, identifying as Irish under an umbrella term. Comparing the census of 2011 and 2016, there is a shocking 87.4% increase of people who have dual-Irish nationality, the largest proportion being Irish American, followed by Irish-UK and Irish-Polish (Central Statistics Office). This variety undoubtedly creates a melting pot of cultures and makes a deep impression on the host culture.

These salient transformations were initiated during the Celtic Tiger but continued and strengthened during the Post Celtic Tiger period. In the 1995 referendum, almost 49.72% voted to retain the divorce ban in the Irish Constitution (Elections Ireland). This shows that in the early 1990s, Ireland was a different place with significant Catholic Church influence remaining in place. By comparison, 82.7% voted to ease divorce restrictions in the 2019 Referendum on the regulation of divorce (Elections Ireland, “38th Amendment Regulation for Divorce”). The main goal of this referendum was to shorten the waiting period required before the Court could grant the dissolution of marriage and ease the regulations on recognizing divorces made in foreign countries. Social

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attitudes have changed profoundly. Cultural practices are also affected, both positively and negatively. In a detailed look at cultural changes of the Post Celtic Tiger era, Bonner and Slaby take note of the fact that "Ireland might be struggling with an anchorage of identities", which in itself forces it "to engage with the strange and to experience the familiar being made strange" (33).

All four writers of the thesis reflect these alterations as mirrors of a locally-rooted yet globally experienced change. Anne Enright's *The Green Road* is set in Celtic Tiger Ireland, but it already points to the emerging changes that become evident in Post Celtic Tiger Ireland. The Madigan boys, Emmet and Dan, live abroad, typical figures of the Irish immigrant. Within the frame narrative of the family story, their narratives subvert ideas of a local Ireland that is governed by local experiences. In the second part of the novel, when they return for Christmas, Emmet cannot seem to recognize Ireland anymore: "Emmet looked out of the window at the identical house on the other side of the road, alive in fairy lights. Since the money came in, Ireland depressed Emmet in a whole new way. The house prices depressed him. And the handbag thing, the latte thing, the Aren't We All Brilliant thing, they all depressed him too" (*The Green Road* 206). This is a very characteristic depiction of a consumerist, transcultural Ireland. The commodification of houses, through the era's heightened interest in real estate, has transformed the domestic space from a private, memory-filled location to that of economic capital. The changes are readily apparent, yet the Irish society seen in the Enright novel is still struggling to adapt. Emmet's and Dan's successful settling within international contexts shows a sharp contrast to "the pettiness of Irish attitudes towards foreigners" (Estévez-Saá, 51). Constance's affair with a Mongolian student (*The Green Road* 85), Emmet's Kenyan flatmate in Dublin (*The Green Road* 212). show an intercultural society. However, the fact that Emmet realizes that it would be unacceptable to invite him for Christmas dinner points to a society that is still "struggling to integrate its new citizens" (Estévez-Saá, 51).

Edna O'Brien's *The Little Red Chairs* shows a similar attitude towards the changing Ireland. While the Celtic Tiger's social-economic growth brought a new set of behaviors, traditional ways of living and social attitudes were still vividly present in rural spaces. The hotel workers in the Irish village are from various Eastern European countries, who came to Ireland during the economic boom period of the Celtic Tiger in the early 2000s but who now struggle with integration. Nonetheless,

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the Ireland presented here is a very different one from that of the pre-Celtic Tiger of the twentieth century. Its ties to a patriarchal society and religion are still strong, but there are signs of a new type of community, less insular and more cross-cultural. Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* explores the challenges of a girl growing up in this transition era from Celtic to Post Celtic Tiger. She is still judged by a religiously prescribed set of rules for conduct, she is fighting back however, her anger being symbolic of the frustrations directed as much towards the neoliberal consensus of Post Celtic Tiger Ireland as it is towards the traditional Irish Catholic society that neoliberalism has fatally undermined (Cahill and Mahajan, "A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing I").

Sara Baume's novels expose global attitudes, suggesting the need for a greater eco-awareness, not confined to Ireland, but rather as a worldwide emergent need. Frankie, the protagonist of *A Line Made by Walking*, leaves the globalized world of the fast-moving city life behind, moving into her grandmother's long-abandoned bungalow in the countryside. She feels isolated and depressed by the globalized materialism around her. This connects to and reverses a well-known pattern in Irish literature: the exile that usually moves from the constraining patterns of rural life into the promising novelty of the modern city. Baume clearly laments the destruction of both the rural way of living as well as the destruction that the economic boom years have brought upon the Irish natural landscape. Globalization is seen as a threat, hinting that the improvement of the living conditions and urbanization also meant the exploitation of the Irish landscape to fulfil these goals (Flannery, 2). In both of the Baume novels that are analyzed in this thesis, the plot captures a demolition of the local, historical landscapes characteristic of the property craze of Post Celtic Tiger Ireland. Enright's novel also explores this aspect. Both authors show a changing yet struggling Ireland, portraying some of the Irish becoming detached from, as Flannery portrays, "any sense of duty or responsibility to their landscape of places and the histories embedded within" (6).

Although different generations, all four writers discussed in this thesis are writing in a specific cultural moment that has been marked by social, political and economic changes. Their texts show both the successes and disruptions of transformation, often pointing to the aspects that disturb classical modes of linear progress. One of the main goals of this analysis was to point to this newly emerging wave of writers, who recognize, embrace and react to the new conditions within Irish

society and culture in the Post Celtic Tiger phase. This era is a moment of opportunity that reveals the strong connection between literature and the social, political contexts in which it is born. Post Celtic Tiger Ireland is a global society and there is fresh energy in the ways that works of fiction respond to and represent it. One of the paradoxical features that links the writers of the thesis together is their openness to diversity. They represent the eclectic scene of contemporary Irish fiction that is distinguished by a propensity to narrative innovation.

The means by which these writers engage the bodily in their narratives could to a degree be interpreted as a return to a naturalist approach in contemporary Irish fiction. The use of somatic language does not exclude the inclination of a naturalist, realistic narration. When we look at the works of Edna O'Brien and Eimear McBride, we can see elements of both naturalism and somatic narrative language. O'Brien's novel, *The Little Red Chairs*, is a powerful exploration of trauma, violence, and human suffering. It applies a vivid and detailed portrayal of the physical and emotional experiences of her characters, as well as a deep concern with the political and social forces that shape their lives. This attention to detail and emphasis on empirical observation can be seen as a continuation of the naturalist tradition in literature. Eimear McBride's novel, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, is a visceral and experimental work that uses language in new and innovative ways to explore the psychological and emotional experiences of its protagonist. McBride's writing is characterized by a fragmented, stream-of-consciousness style that seeks to capture the immediacy and intensity of her character's inner world. This emphasis on the embodied experiences of her characters, and the way in which language shapes and reflects those experiences, exemplifies somatic narrative language. Sara Baume's *A Line Made By Walking* and Anne Enright's *The Green Road* are novels that incorporate naturalist techniques in their exploration of the human experience. However, their use of somatically charged language is not limited to naturalism, as it reflects a contemporary cognitive attitude towards the human body. By foregrounding the corporeal experience, these narratives offer insights into the interconnection between cognition and the somatic, while avoiding the determinism associated with Naturalism. Ultimately, these works offer a nuanced portrayal of the human condition, characterized by the integration of the physical and the cognitive.

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Overall, the works of the selected novelists are complex and multifaceted, resisting easy categorization as either naturalist or somatic/cognitive narrative writing. While there are elements of both naturalism and somatic narrative language in their works, they also break with tradition in important ways and represent a new and innovative approach to narrative writing. They show a trend towards experimental, boundary-pushing writing in contemporary Irish literature, rather than a simple revival of a particular literary movement or style.

John Cleary's 2007 book, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital, and Culture in Modern Ireland* provides an insightful analysis of the economic and cultural changes that have shaped Ireland in the late 20th century and the role of naturalism in Irish literature and culture. According to Cleary, naturalism played a crucial role in shaping a critical and politically engaged mode of literary and cultural expression in Ireland. However, Cleary also notes that naturalism's emphasis on material conditions tended to overlook individual agency and free will. In contemporary Irish fiction, there is a tension between the desire to represent the world as it is and the recognition of the importance of individual agency and free will in shaping human behavior. This tension is reflected in the work of the four writers selected for this thesis. They use naturalistic modes of representation while acknowledging the role of individual choice and agency in human behavior in our complex global world.

All four authors exemplify or react to a revived consciousness of the bodily prevalent in contemporary society in general. The body is a salient part of human experience that cannot be elided. We relate to the world through the body. Our relationship with the world is mediated through the body, a key component of our self-identity. Recent scientific advancements in medicine, genetics, cryonics, and cloning have made the body an increasingly important topic of interdisciplinary study. The human body has become central to economic growth as a consequence of biotechnology industries. Illness and disease are becoming less of a constraint to many but rather a successful market in itself. In 2009 the American Sociological Association recognized the body and embodiment an as an area of professional growth and academic relevance (Turner 46). Although the body has been a constant important research focus of religious, philosophical, psychological and archaeological domains, it has gained fresh energy in the social sciences and humanities in recent decades. In *The Routledge Handbook of Body Studies*, editor Bryan S. Turner

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suggests that “the growing academic, social interest in the body is a consequence of the fundamental changes in the contemporary relationship between bodies, technology and society” (43). He also promoted the term “somatic society” as early as 1992, arguing that there is an “emergence of the body as a site on which major social, political and cultural issues were being fought out” (Turner 63).

The subjects of the novels are mostly Irish characters; however, they are shaped by both a local and a global understanding of embodied experiences. They represent the emergence of a new type of Irish identity, one that is evidently based on tradition yet overrides its confinements through the effects of a transnational, universal experience. This indeed shows a genuine mode of using the somatic in a way that reveals a strengthened agency. Whether this is new or newly discovered is debatable. Tradition and innovation are interconnected. Transnational does not mean an exclusion of what has meant to be Irish in the past. Through engagement with tradition and through a specific rendering of the somatic, these novels also explore what it means to be Irish today, in the Post Celtic Tiger era. Eimear McBride’s narrative is undeniably influenced by the innovations of James Joyce in the era of modernism during the early twentieth century. Sara Baume’s work re-evaluates the narratives of the Irish countryside while retaining the influence of previous authors, particularly William Trevor and John McGahern. (Crim, “In Conversation with Sara Baume”). Anne Enright’s novel *The Green Road* relies on the theme of the family and the land, two of the oldest preoccupations in Irish cultural representation. Nonetheless, as Ireland has become a global society, the terms under which one understands these themes and the bodily experience itself cannot be taken under an exclusively Irish historical set of perspectives.

Enright’s novel shows a society where being Irish is not only an inherited trait, and the land is slowly losing its symbolic and cultural value. The effects of consumerism and globalization have created a modern world in which the Madigan children see an opportunity to reinvent themselves. They travel to various places in the hope of finding their identity and their purpose in a globalised world. This is staged in the novel through a heightened focus on symbolic and actual connections that are created between the body and its surroundings. Space is reshaped, and it is permeated by memories, becoming a potent means of linking generations and embodied identities. As critic Genoveffa Giambona observes: “narrative itself [in *The Green Road*] has become a space in which to reimagine the nation and its past, to bridge old and new Ireland, the local and the global, to

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become the locus of the nation" (146). Female subversion is characteristic in the novel, the bodies of the women characters are shaped by experiences of pregnancy, sexual relationships, sexual violation, ageing, depressed and deprived motherhood: "the bodies of Rosaleen, Constance and Hanna are dealt within minute detail" (Estévez-Saá 50). In her writing, Enright confounds the assumption of the corporeal as a stable, fixed entity, and rather shows bodies that lack any form of totality. Her characters' bodies are not finished products; they are shown in movement, in processes of becoming and interconnectedness with their surroundings. In order to gain an effective of understanding of how these interacting bodies are portrayed via language, Jean Luc Nancy's theory on the body was used as a tool of analysis. He views the body as open space, noting that attention is crucial within the process of recognizing and writing the body. Nancy understands the body as a space that can only operate properly if it is shaped into being by other bodies: "A body is an image offered to other bodies, a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body, local colour and shadows, fragments, grains, areolas, nails, hair, tendons, skulls, ribs (…) pains and joys, and me, and you" (121). The act of "gazing something into being" is especially important when it comes to communities, human relations, gendered bodies and the act of deciding what bodies matter in society. As this thesis shows, Henri Bergson's theory of the body identifies the crucial role that memories play as the selective regulations that shape perception (*Memory and Matter*). His theory on memory and the body shed light on important narrative moments in the Enright novel. The intensity of the memories paradoxically strengthens the validity of the present, conforming to the Bergsonian idea that there is no present without the imprint of the past (Bergson, *Memory and Matter* 72). The struggles of the Celtic Tiger era presented in *The Green Road* point to this mingling of the past and the present, showing changes that are evident however, are still not settled within the Irish society.

Sara Baume's novels also address the body as a space, where past and present collide and reveal new layers of trauma and potential. *A Line Made By Walking* combines media in order to explore the somatic on various levels, stretching the capacities of language itself. She also stays connected to Irish themes, such as the family unit, the land and historical trauma, while concurrently showing what it means to live in contemporary Ireland, with all of its vicissitudes. At the same time, many of the Frankie's (the main character's) traumas stem from a universally disturbing human condition, especially valid in our contemporary age, described by Bauman as a flow of rapid changes: "the growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only

certainty." (Bauman, *Moral Blindness* 82) Frankie's quest is also about the irreversible damage caused by humans as a species and their various activities. The novel is a story of the Anthropocene, seeking to raise awareness and strengthen the need for responsibility towards our planet. The photos that are creatively embedded within the narrative show corpses of dead animals. Visually they complement the somatic language operated in the narrative. As Santos Barral observes in her thesis: "the pictures of the dead animals may not be directed to exclusively address the impact of our action on them, but Baume's narration *does* make us reflect on it with the countless examples of the exploitation of natural resources and animal abuse" (52). The main pressing problem that arises from her fiction concerns the apathy and ignorance of humans towards other living entities, which in turn also projects into the means by which humans view their own bodies. Baume's narrative style opens up an exciting narrative technique focused on transmitting bodily experiences via language. The diction adheres to a flow of thoughts in the conundrum of experiences of the body. Cognitively the novels explore the inevitable relationship between the body and the written word, having the capacity to sublimate or redirect bodily functions.

Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is A Half-formed Thing* is certainly the most experimental of the novels examined in this thesis. It foregrounds the body, especially women's bodies, as sites of sexual abuse, rape and generational trauma. Her narrative delves into the somatic realm, providing valuable insights into the experiences of women in Irish society, as well as the vulnerability of the human condition more broadly. It can be stated that there is a noticeable engagement with the body, especially the female body, in many Irish post-Celtic Tiger novels. From this perspective, Eimear McBride shares some characteristic narrative and stylistic elements with Anne Enright and Edna O'Brien. They all expose the somatic to utter valuable observations about the situation of women in Irish society and the vulnerability of the human condition in general.

Edna O'Brien reaches out to a global theme, drawing on the imagined life story of a war criminal, by juxtaposing collective experiences of Serbian and Irish historical traumas. As with the previous three writers, she gives a particularly important role to space and landscape in her novel; operating a visceral language that exposes the impossibility of the body reaching wholeness and fixity. In an interview Edna O'Brien stated that "the body contains the life story just as much as the brain" (Roth, "A Conversation with Edna O'Brien"). This suggests that the physical effects of the

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experience are just as crucial as the mental states that the event produces. Her novel explores the unavoidable relationship between the body and language, a relationship that has the capacity to sublimate or redirect bodily activities as much as linguistic practices.

In conclusion, this thesis offers a set of critical readings that demonstrate the courage and intelligence of contemporary Irish women's voices and narratives in confronting and representing a range of experiences through literary fiction. All of the works addressed are connected through their preoccupation with bodily experience in the context of a transformed Irish society in the Post Celtic Tiger era. As part of this shared concern each of the novels contends with global contexts for Irish bodily and cognitive experience in an age of heightened globalization. They reflect the fragmentation, the changes and fears of Post Celtic Tiger Ireland, while also producing new insights and perspectives with regard to the various topics that they address. The thesis identifies a relevant turn in Post Celtic Tiger fiction pointing to a globally conscious perspective through which experiences specific to the Irish historical context are understood and re-evaluated. Procedures that are interpreted as 'literary' are crucial tools to cognitive life. Narratives are fundamental means of understanding the way humans organize and negotiate the world. Core figures that guide and frame cognitive, literary and linguistic activity alike are substantiated in bodily experience. In order to holistically analyse the change in Post Celtic Tiger fiction the thesis offers a cognitive framework of understanding of the bodily through the reification of language, exploring the physical potential of words.

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Annex

Sara Baume, *A Line Made By Walking* (2017)

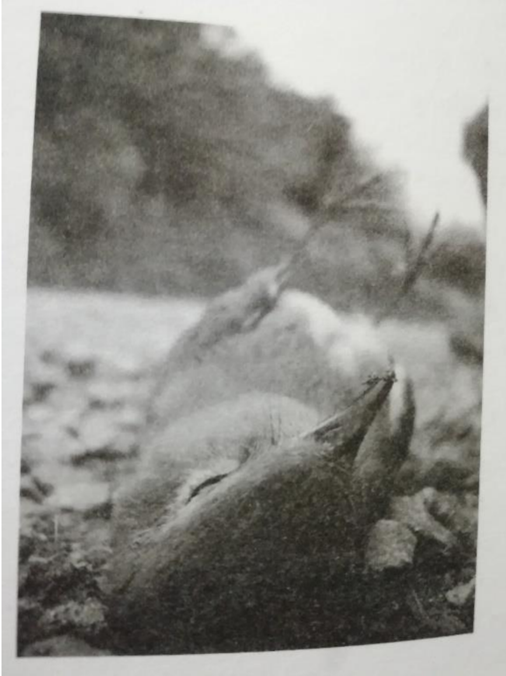

Figure 1 ROBIN (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 2)

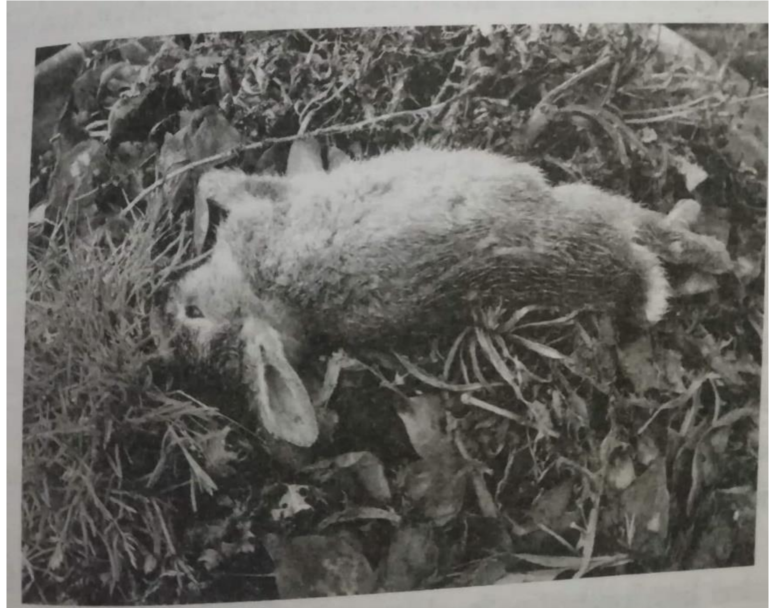

Figure 2 RABBIT (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 57)

Figure 3 RAT (Baume, A Line Made By Walking, 89)

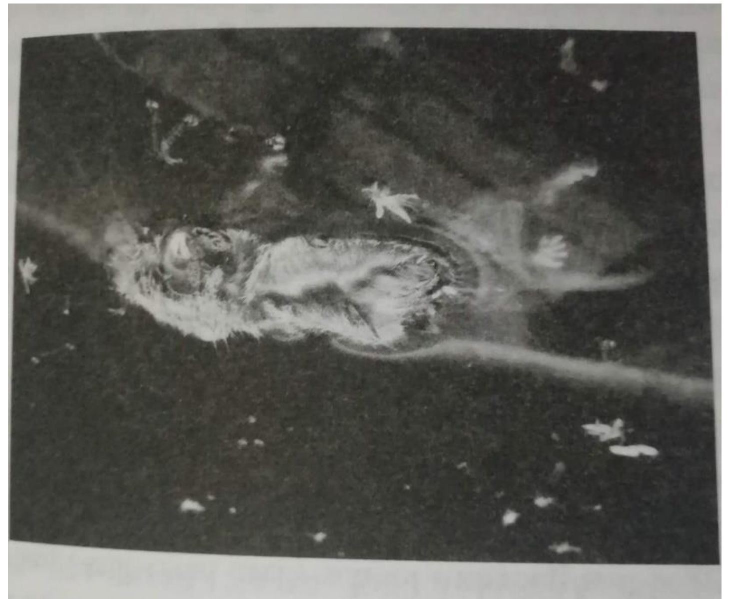

Figure 4 MOUSE (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 128)

DOI: 10.15774/PPKE.BTK.2023.004

Figure 5 ROOK (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 138)

Figure 6 FOX (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 163)

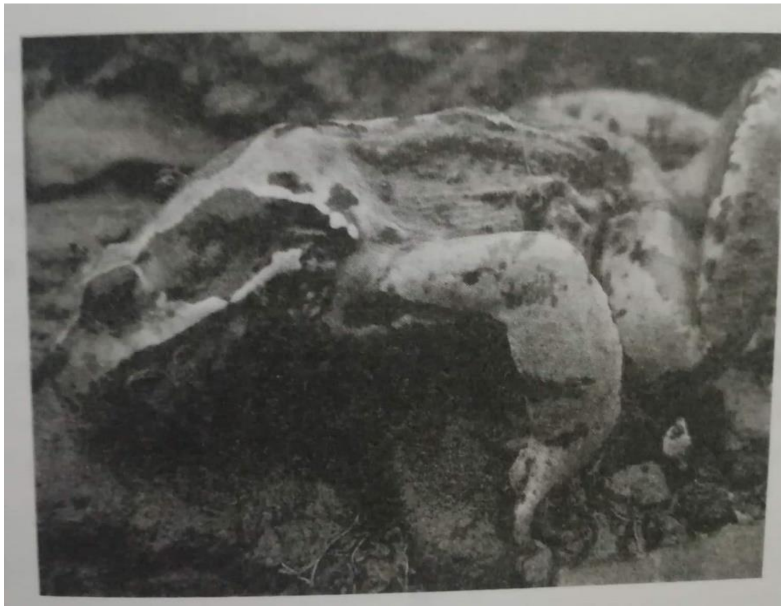

Figure 7 FROG (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 201)

Figure 8 HARE (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 216)

DOI: 10.15774/PPKE.BTK.2023.004

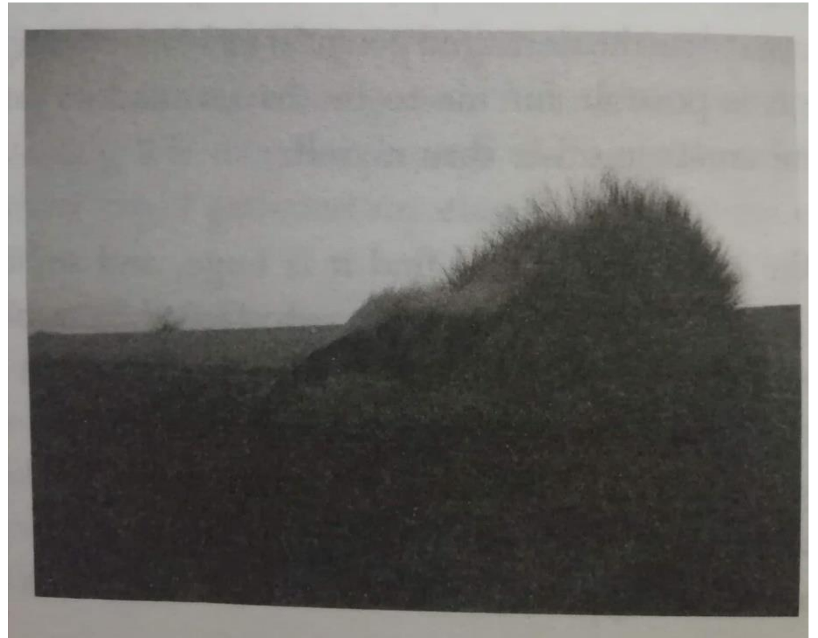

Figure 10 BADGER (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 296)

Figure 9 HEDGEHOG (Baume, A Line Made By Walking 245)