Irish culture following the 2008 crash can only be understood in light of the two decades of economic boom immediately prior: the Celtic Tiger. The Tiger embodied late capitalism in its fullest peacocking glory with its reliance on unregulated international flows of capital, its structural integration of tax evasion and social inequality, and its deadening insistence that, in Margaret Thatcher's favored phrase, "there is no alternative." As late as 2007—right on the cusp of the plunge—Irish historical materialist critic Joe Cleary warned that

> [n]ow, in a post-Cold War climate where it is conventional to assume that the social templates of the future are already given, since *all serious alternatives to liberal capitalism have been eliminated* from the world stage, that sense of dogmatically stupefied certainty seems to apply more to the artistic and intellectual worlds of affluent Western societies, including Ireland, than to any others. (2, emphasis added)

Just a year later, the very status of Ireland as an "affluent Western society" was in question. As Gerry Smyth noted in 2012, by early 2008 "Ireland's place amongst the global economic elite was [still] guaranteed" (133), but this guarantee then collapsed with astonishing speed. We all know what happened next, as Smyth summarizes:

> Credit Crunch leading to Financial Crisis leading to Global Recession . . . . Ireland's great economic miracle was built upon very, very shaky foundations indeed; and once those foundations began to shake, they brought the whole edifice of the Irish economic miracle crashing to the ground in record time. (133)

The journalist Fintan O'Toole has noted the symbolic importance of Celtic Tiger Ireland to the neoliberal world-system, calling the Irish economy at the height of the boom "the poster child of free-market globalization," "a moral tale with a happy ending for all those who learned its lessons" (10). The revisionist historian R. F. Foster calls O'Toole "[o]ne of the most persuasive of the begrudgers." "Begrudger" here denotes an adversary of the Celtic Tiger's advocates, the "boosters." Foster himself, writing in 2007, prevaricated before siding with the "boosters." With impeccable comic timing he wrote

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that "[i]n the end it is hard not to side with the Boosters rather than the Begrudgers, and to recognise that in several spheres, not just the economic, a certain amount of good luck was maximised by good management" (188), even as the executors of that management were capering to light the fuses of their own petards. Such optimism was widespread—Smyth writes that "[t]he levels of corruption, ignorance, incompetence and sheer stupidity that precipitated economic disaster shocked everyone" (136).

Foster praised the Ireland of 2007 for its "mysterious achievement of prosperity" (36). This "mysterious achievement" was built on internal political cronyism and abject obsequiousness towards external investors: as Smyth again observes (with the advantage, over Foster, of hindsight), "[t]he Irish political community had sold the country to a free market ideology whose over-arching characteristic was its contempt for the sovereign governments" (133). The subsequent undoing of Ireland's mysterious prosperity would provoke the interrogative turn in Irish literature which this paper analyzes.

There is widespread critical consensus that Celtic Tiger art tended towards realism, and against the Irish modernist tradition. George O'Brien's *The Irish Novel 1960-2010* observes that "formal developments [of this time] show little interest in replicating, much less in adding to, the innovations that earned the modernism of Joyce and Beckett its international eminence" (xxii). Instead, "the contemporary Irish novel is on the whole narrower in scope," characterized by "a comparative formal conservatism, consisting mostly of modest modifications of pre-modernist novels" (xxiii). It should be noted at the outset that O'Brien does not say this disparagingly, and nor do I intend any insult to vaunted Irish writers of this period by pointing out that their work is not modernist. Indeed Foster, also drawing on O'Brien, praises the likes of Colm Tóibín and Dermot Bolger as a "new direction in Irish fiction" precisely on the basis that they have escaped the dead hand of Joyce and Beckett and begun to write an identifiably Irish realism (167). The point is that Irish modernism was largely submerged during the Tiger years (and, as I will demonstrate with reference to Eimear McBride, where it *was* written it was often unpublished), and that realism, particularly historical realism, was the era's preferred mode of narrative fiction. As Eve Patten argues, Irish fiction from the 1980s to mid-2000s is "for the most part" identifiable by a "prevalent social realism," and what she calls a "neo-Gothic idiom" with a recurrent retrospective outlook, in which "Ireland's history, and the recent past in particular, came under intense scrutiny as the testing ground of present-day cultural and political uncertainty" (259).

Similar assessments were being made among some younger and less established Irish writers, often with a strong antipathy towards this realist

dominance. Mike McCormack said in 2012: "[l]ook at the types of writing which governed the Celtic Tiger. Look back and see how many historical novels were published. . . . [A]t a time when we could have been curious we became curatorial" (qtd. in Nolan 95). Novelist Julian Gough, writing in 2010, laments this same conservatism in an angry polemic:

> If there is a movement in Ireland, it is backwards. Novel after novel set in the nineteen seventies, sixties, fifties. Reading award-winning Irish literary fiction, you wouldn't know television had been invented . . . . Mostly it's grittily realistic, slightly depressing descriptions of events that aren't very interesting. (qtd. in Jordan, "A New Irish Literary Boom")

Whether one shares Gough's uninterest or not, his observation regarding the hegemony of historical realism within Celtic Tiger literary fiction is accurate.

A surprising variation on Gough's disillusionment comes from a 2003 lecture by Declan Kiberd. Kiberd also finds Celtic Tiger literature to be impoverished, and also observes the preponderance of historical fiction, citing "Brian Friel's 1930s, Frank McCourt's 1940s or John McGahern's 1950s" ("The Celtic Tiger" 276) (he acknowledges Éilis Ní Dhuibhne and Keith Ridgway as partial exceptions [277]), which he likewise diagnoses as a failure of Irish literature to engage with its present circumstances.

> It would be hard to imagine a James Joyce or a Sean O'Casey passing up the rich pickings for an artist in such a profound social change, yet that, most incredibly, is what the current generation of writers, with only rare exceptions, has so far done. There is no major celebration or corrosive criticism of these developments [of the Celtic Tiger] in good novels, plays or poetry. ("The Celtic Tiger" 276)

However, rather than "corrosive criticism," Kiberd demands "celebration" in a "booster" mirror-version of O'Toole's "begrudger" position. Kiberd wants Celtic Tiger fiction to celebrate the Tiger's "opportunity" because "the current affluence, far from threatening art, imperilling identity or killing the Celtic soul, is a great opportunity for a second national flowering" ("The Celtic Tiger" 287). This demand for a *second* flowering presupposes a starry-eyed interpretation of the first: that Irish high modernism was a carnival of arch-capitalist excess, of which the Celtic Tiger is a second coming: a beast with "shiny surfaces" ("The Celtic Tiger" 276) whose hour has come forth at last. In fact, Irish high modernism of the 1920s emerged from a context of significant national upheaval, as Kiberd has observed elsewhere when noting that "France in the 1940s must have reminded Beckett of Ireland in the 1920s:

blasted, inchoate, but with the potential to start all over again" (*After Ireland* 16). The style begotten by the late capitalist "brave new world" (Foster 176) of Celtic Tiger Ireland was not a troubled and troubling modernism, but a self-consciously mature realism in which "history remains the preoccupation" (Foster 170).

The gruesome terminus of Kiberd's train of thought is that "the unfinished project of national renewal could come to fruition, and economics and art might harmonise," if only we let the capitalists take the wheel. "Then the bohemian and bourgeois might be as one, as they were briefly at the close of Joyce's *Ulysses* when an ad-man named Leopold Bloom took an artist named Stephen Dedalus back to his house, in order to explain the workings of the real world to him" ("The Celtic Tiger" 287). In identifying capitalist authority with "the real world," Kiberd reasserts the premise which underpins neoliberal hegemony in late capitalism: There Is No Alternative. For McCormack, Kiberd here demands a lack of formal interrogation:

> people like Damien [sic] Kiberd [are] continually asking, where is the novel of social overview? Where is the socially engaged novel? They're asking for the nineteenth century [but] Joyce, Flann [O'Brien], and those lads have shown us the lead. Experiment is the way to go. Until we reclaim those instincts we won't find a novel of social overview. (Nolan 97)

A 2006 article by Patten, previously cited, agrees with the consensus that "the fiction of the contemporary period . . . remained formally conservative" (259), but also keenly notes exceptions. "In fact, several novelists continue to exploit non-realist or metafictional devices in their work" (271). Her chief example is the "[m]etafictional and philosophical writing" of John Banville (272). Patten's analysis is a valuable corrective to any claims (including my own) that might imply utter uniformity in Irish fiction in the Tiger years. Her counterexample is also worth examining, since the anti-realism she finds in Banville is not a resurgent modernist aesthetic, as I will attribute to Eimear McBride, but "metafictional devices" and "indulgence in a post-modern gothic" (Patten 272). This undoubtedly provides a valuable counterbalance to realist dominance, but, Patten acknowledges, Banville's generation of authors "may not have constituted the critical counter-tradition of Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien" (273-74).

What happened, then, to provoke writers such as McBride and McCormack to revivify Irish modernism in the second decade of the twenty-first century?

First, the economy collapsed.

Ireland was among the worst-hit Western countries of the "great recession" catalyzed by the 2007-08 global financial crisis. With an economy largely dependent upon foreign investment and property development, Irish prosperity ended almost immediately when the bubble burst. The Irish government's reaction was meek compliance with the ensuing Anglo-American-EU culture of "austerity."

As demonstrated above, Celtic Tiger literature was dominated by temporally displaced social realism. Since the banking crisis, however, these historical-realist tendencies came to seem inadequate to express the lived realities of Irish, particularly rural Western Irish, psychology. As McCormack has said, one result is an anti-realist trend in Irish fiction:

> The collapse of the Celtic Tiger was a dramatic and surreal event which was both physically tangible and a collapse of abstract values. Therefore it seems likely those fictions which would deal with it would have to step outside the bounds of the realist novel. (qtd. in Flynn)

What was needed, instead, was a modernism which—as Gregory Castle writes of Joyce—"brings to the fore the ideological assumptions about what aspect of [the] world is 'real' and proper for representation" (*Modernism* 181). This has evinced itself in an emergent genre which could be called *stream of damaged consciousness*, where Irish and Irish-diasporic writers offer space on the page to traumatized, mentally ill, and even dead characters, depicting an Ireland defined negatively against the glib corporate idiom of the Celtic Tiger. Significantly, this genre draws openly on the techniques of Joycean literary modernism.

If realism was the attendant mode of the Celtic Tiger's confident, muscular capitalism, the fracture of this 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. The crash was, of course, global, and I do not claim that post-crash modernism is a uniquely Irish phenomenon; for example, English novels such as Jon McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (2010) and Will Self's "De'Ath trilogy" of *Umbrella* (2012), *Shark* (2014) and *Phone* (2017) participate in a parallel phenomenon. However, an occasional tendency in Anglophone writing overall has achieved something close to critical mass in the Irish novel, at least within newly emergent authors of literary fiction. Two factors help to explain why Irish authors in particular have enacted a resurgent modernism: one is that the recession hit Ireland so badly that the "maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal" of modernity (Berman 15) was made obvious. Ireland, forced into

disillusionment with capitalism and its attendant aesthetic modes, needed alternative art (an obvious extra-literary parallel is the dynamism of punk rock in the early years of Thatcher's Britain). Secondly, Ireland has a canonized modernist literary heritage which equips writers with the tools of modernism—after the crash, these tools were smashed out of the boxes labelled *Break Glass in Case of Emergency*. McCormack summarized this trend in a 2017 interview:

> I sometimes think we forget that Irish writers are experimental writers. Our Mount Rushmore is Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien, and if you're not talking about those writers then you've lowered your gaze. For me they're the father, son and holy ghost. They've nothing in common except they all went to some trouble to expand the received form, and there's something of that happening again – a rejuvenation of the experimental instinct. (qtd. in McCormack "On My Fifth Novel")

Key texts in this modernist resurgence include McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), Kevin Barry's *Beatlebone* (2015), Anakana Schofield's *Malarky* (2012) and *Martin John* (2015), and McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016). Barry, quoted in 2015, said that while "it would be smug and premature to herald a golden age," "maybe a proper radicalism is at last starting to re-emerge in Irish writing . . . . We should always remember that being innovative and wild and not afraid to go completely fucking nuts on the page is what built its reputation in the first half of the 20th century" (qtd. in Jordan, "A New Irish Literary Boom"). These novels are not simple recapitulations of Joycean or Beckettian prose styles, but revivifications of a modernist textual ethos.

The most significant commonality between these contemporary Irish modernists is their shared thematic interest in damaged or a-normative consciousness: these writers all use modernist style to portray characters whose minds do not work according to normative social grammars. These themes are exemplified in Eimear McBride's 2013 debut *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*.

Conventionally, we treat a text's year of publication date as the moment of its creation. Thus, *Ulysses* (published 1922) is a novel of the nineteen-twenties, despite its serialization in the previous decade. *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) thus introduces a temporal problematic. By this conventional reckoning, it is a novel of 2013, when Galley Beggar Press published it. As a 2013 novel, *Girl* was an immediate success. It rapidly garnered awards, and a one-woman stage adaptation followed, directed by Annie Ryan and performed "with frightening intensity and power"

(Crompton) by Aoife Duffin. The playscript—consisting of McBride's prose, abridged but otherwise unaltered—was published in 2015. Seen as a 2013 novel, McBride's *Girl* is the critical and commercial figurehead of the new school of Irish modernism.

Girl is, however, not a highly visible post-crash novel, but a submerged novel of the Celtic Tiger itself. *Girl* was written "in six months, during 2003 and 2004" (McBride, "How I wrote"). Had a publisher picked it up immediately, *Girl* might have entered booksellers' charts underneath Cecelia Ahern's *PS, I Love You* (2003), which topped those charts for nineteen weeks (Byrne), and which emphatically represents the celebrity glamour of the Irish boom years. Instead of competing in the Tiger marketplace with *PS, I Love You*, however, *Girl* languished in publishers' slush piles until the small English publisher Galley Beggar took a risk on it nine years later (Rustin), by which time the Celtic Tiger had spectacularly self-destructed.

This contradiction—that *Girl* is a 2004 novel published in 2013, or rather a 2013 novel written in 2003-2004—illustrates the changing publishing industry across that decade. In many respects, *Girl* 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. It is no coincidence that when *PS, I Love You*'s "strangely antiseptic, coy sexuality" (O'Toole 186) was a runaway success, commercial publishers were unwilling to publish *Girl*. To the Celtic Tiger literary marketplace, there was no indication that a work such as Girl was *necessary*. Indeed Irish modernism was seen as a largely old hat, and realist authors celebrated precisely for their avoidance of modernist experimentation. It took the crisis in Irish late capitalism for an Irish modernist writer to find a receptive audience. But *Girl* also bears a closer relationship to Celtic Tiger literature than *Solar Bones* or *Martin John*, which represent a cleaner break. Its setting, for one thing, is historical: *Girl* does not go so far back as "Brian Friel's 1930s, Frank McCourt's 1940s or John McGahern's 1950s" (Kiberd, "The Celtic Tiger" 276), but it is set at an appreciable historical distance from the reader of 2004, let alone 2013. David Collard writes that *Girl* is "about the 1980s" because this is when McBride lived in the West of Ireland, but that there are few "contemporary details" to prove this in the novel itself (10).

A few such details, however, can be found—enough to date *Girl* to the 1980s or 1990s. Few things date a novel so accurately in late capitalism as consumer trends and the Ireland of *Girl* uses pounds as currency, even at Girl's nineteenth birthday (96): Ireland adopted the Euro in 2002, meaning she cannot have been born after the early 80s. More impressionistically, Girl's appreciation of blueberries as "something in New York like muffins lattes and

ice-tea" (66) dates the setting to the late twentieth century, before these three consumables' twenty-first century ubiquity across the British Isles, as clearly as the now primitive-sounding video games played by her mentally disabled brother. His complaint that "the computer game's stuck in the tape thing" (90) dates to the late 1970s at the very earliest (more likely to at least the late 1980s after Sega consoles became commonplace: Girl's poor rural family are unlikely technological early-adopters), and at the latest to late-90s video game technology, before discs supplanted "tape things" (and long before downloads supplanted discs). *Girl* represents continuity with late twentieth-century Irish fiction in other ways; it is thematically coherent with the historical realism popular at the time of its writing: as McBride has said, it invokes "the much feared 'Irish' themes of sex, death, family, guilt and religion—all done up in a parochial bow" (McBride, "How I Wrote").

Sex, death, family, guilt, and religion do, indeed, provide the narrative backbone of *Girl*. In McBride's novel, the eponymous and unnamed "Girl" has an older brother whose intellectual development is stunted by a brain tumor suffered in infancy (Girl refers to the brother only as "you." I will identify him henceforth as Boy, and the extended family, as Girl does, as Mammy, Uncle, and Granda). This disability becomes a living parallel for the Girl's own "half-formed" status as a female in the deeply patriarchal Catholic society of late-twentieth-century rural Ireland. Gina Wisker writes that "[f]or traditional Christianity, a girl, any girl, is 'a half-formed thing,' because she is only formed from the rib of Adam, always lacking and secondary" (63). This partial subjecthood is compounded when the Girl is viciously raped by her uncle in her early teens, the trauma of which supports and infests the remainder of the novel until the Girl's eventual suicide some years later, echoing the doctors' assessment of her brother's tumor: "it's all through his brain like the roots of trees" (3).

But as McBride says in the same article in which she identifies the "'Irish' themes," there is more to *Girl* than a recapitulation of these familiar archetypes. Her explanation continues: "When I tried to circumvent [these 'feared' themes] my sentences immediately dried into platitudes, so I knew something different was called for and this was when Joyce's quote woke up in me" (McBride, "How I Wrote").

"Joyce's quote" here is "One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot," which Joyce wrote in a 1926 letter regarding the composition of *Finnegans Wake* (Ellmann 146), and which McBride had "pinned above her desk" whilst writing *Girl* (Collard 69). McBride's novel follows its ideology. The fragmentary, dissonant prose

distances *Girl* from historical-realist texts which share its themes, and turns it instead into a modernist novel of Joycean lineage. Paige Reynolds' perceptive review summarizes *Girl*'s navigation of this distance:

> In some ways, the novel's content offers little that is new. McBride trots out almost every trope of modern and contemporary Irish literature: the rural poverty, the unhappy family, the sexual abuse, the oppressive Catholicism. However, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* does something fresh and important with these themes, thanks in part to its canny adoption of modernist form. It deploys modernist tactics in an innovative way, using them to convey a feeling of intimacy with the protagonist.

The opening sentences of *Girl* introduce these "modernist tactics" immediately: "For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her sin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did" (3). This beginning has become totemic of McBridean modernism: Wisker quotes it to exemplify how McBride's "style reflects her narrator's fragmented and damaged psyche" (71), Reynolds to introduce a "disjunctive prose style" which she claims "never changes or matures" (I discuss this claim below). Martin Paul Eve cites the same line to demonstrate that McBride "evoke[s] modernist minimalism and syntactic experimentation within the frame of late Beckett" (73), and Kira Cochrane to show that McBridean language is "devoid of commas, a fractured, poetic, preconscious voice, pregnant with full stops and half rhymes." David Collard, in his hagiographic "Reader's Guide" to *Girl*, writes of these opening lines that "[w]hile all these words can be correctly read and spelled out by an average eight-year-old child, they appear here in combinations that actually unsettle or intimidate the unwary" (24). One simple explanation for why the first few sentences of *Girl* have proven such a frequent resource for critics is that McBride's jarring narratological aesthetic makes an indelible first impression. Furthermore, as Collard writes, the scrutiny applied to these opening lines "could be applied to almost any other passage in the book," given McBride's close-textured prose (31).

As *Girl* proceeds, it can be discerned that these oft-quoted opening lines are not the protagonist's own thoughts, or not entirely: they are words she hears while still in the womb. They are Mammy's words to Boy, telling her firstborn that he can choose his little sister's name when she is born, and affirming it—"yes you"—when Boy questions her. This introduces the reader to the critical strategies that are necessary to make sense of *Girl*. David Lodge has referred to stream-of consciousness writing as being "like wearing

earphones plugged into someone's brains" (47), an interpretation which may be called "psychological realism." But more is required than simply tuning into the Girl's uterine brainstem and passively listening: there are levels of mediation between the unborn Girl, the text and the reader. As Reynolds puts it, McBride "uses modernist form to remind us of our alienation and distance from her protagonist's experiences, even as she mesmerizes us with vividly candid interior monologue." The opening exchange, although taking place between Mammy and Boy, prefigures and overlaps with the novel's governing perspective of second-person narration, where Girl is the narrator and Boy the intended interlocutor, referred to throughout as "You." This second-person address continues even after Boy dies from his brain tumor, indicating on a diegetic level that the Girl's grief leads her to continue to think as though "to" her brother, even when he is gone. It also ruptures further the idea of placing any comprehensive schema of narrative frames onto *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, for these frames are shifting and their authority is incomplete and irreducible to clear categories of narrative distance – as has always been the case in the modernist (as opposed to psychological realist) novel.

In its subjectivist portrayal of a mind's development from before birth to young adulthood, *Girl* is a modernist Bildungsroman—continuing a lineage in Irish literature stretching through Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* and Frances Molloy's *No Mate for the Magpie*. The original *Bildungsroman* form typically constitutes a "coming of age" text, which culminates in the successful socialization of the now-mature youthful protagonist. Franco Moretti offers an authoritative account of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman:

> [I]n the course of the nineteenth century, the Bildungsroman had performed three great symbolic tasks. It had contained the unpredictability of social change . . . established the flexible, anti-tragic modality of modern experience. [And f]inally, the novel's many-sided, unheroic hero had embodied a new kind of subjectivity: everyday, worldly, pliant – "normal". . . the Great Socialization of the European middle classes. (230) [1]

But then, as Virginia Woolf writes in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," "human character changed" (4), although Moretti locates the turn not at Woolf's favored 1910, but at the outbreak of World War I in 1914: the same year that Kafka and Joyce ended the classic Bildungsroman and introduced the modernist one through *Amerika* and *A Portrait* (229).

Moretti calls the Joyce-Kafka model (which I extend to include Deane, Molloy, and so forth, later in the twentieth century) the "late Bildungsroman"

(230). I amend this classic/late bifurcation to a tripartite schema: the classic, the high modernist, and the contemporary modernist. Of the high modernist Bildungsroman, Moretti writes that rather than culminating in socialization, "Youth begins to despise maturity . . . the relevant symbolic process is no longer growth but regression" (231). For Moretti, the late Bildungsroman was not a potent reimagining of a failed form, but a failure itself (243), paralyzed by World War I trauma: "the insoluble problem was the trauma . . . . In the end nothing was left of the form of the Bildungsroman: a phase of western civilization had come to an end" (244).

Gregory Castle offers a less moribund diagnosis of the modernist Bildungsroman. In his view, "the modernist return to classical Bildung is a return with a difference" (*Modernism* 249), which does not culminate in socialization but in self-sufficiency: "Self-sufficiency does not mean solipsism or isolation. It is rather an ethical frame of mind that entails a readiness to turn towards one's inner resources, one's inner life, in order to critique and restructure social relationships" (*Reading* 249). A particular facet of the Irish modernist Bildungsroman is that as the protagonist turns psychologically inwards, they journey physically outwards: Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Molloy's Ann McGlone take ship from Dublin for Europe, deciding that rejecting socially mandated "maturity" entails rejecting Irish society. Stephen returns, after some years in Paris, to adopt the mantle of co-protagonist in *Ulysses*. The maintenance of his self-sufficient outlook, however, is signaled by his continued insistence on flying by the nets of social nicety: even upon his return, he will not pray at his mother's deathbed to satisfy her or fellow-mourners; he chooses instead consistency with his own atheistic beliefs.

Castle's account of the late Bildungsroman is both more favorable and more convincing than Moretti's. However, the twenty-first century modernist Bildungsroman takes a form closer to Moretti's diagnosis of regression: while the classic Bildungsroman protagonist becomes socialized, and in the high modernist Bildungsroman they become independent, in the contemporary modernist Bildungsroman such as *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, they are defeated. One interesting overlap is Sara Baume's *A Line Made by Walking* (2017), which, although written in the twenty-first century, cleaves closer to the Joyce/Molloy model by ending with self-imposed exile from Ireland, although Baume's character Frankie frames this exile more defeatedly than Stephen: Frankie knows that she will take her depression with her into exile, and concludes her narrative by asserting "Art, and sadness, which last forever" (302).

Stephen Dedalus "combats the identitarian philosophy at the heart of a bourgeois ethics of socialization" (Castle*, Reading* 250), but *Girl* goes further

in its rejection of closure. Although Paige Reynolds' claim that, "unlike Joyce's experimental Bildungsroman, the narrative voice of *A Girl Is Half-Formed Thing* never changes or matures" is questionable—Girl's narrative voice as a traumatized adult is unsurprisingly different to her voice as a pre-trauma child, let alone as a fetus—Reynolds is correct to point out that *Girl*'s narrative voice never becomes socialized like Stephen. While Stephen ends *A Portrait* writing neatly lucid diary entries, in *Girl* "the broken sentences, the snarled syntax, and repetitive phrases remain consistent throughout the entire novel" (Reynolds). As Anne Fogarty writes with reference to McBride, Ciarán Collins, and Emma Donoghue, "[g]rowing up or becoming adult in these fresh permutations on the Irish Bildungsroman is never represented as a viable alternative" (25). Girl struggles through adolescence into young womanhood, but with her brother's death and her uncle's repeated sexual abuse, she has no opportunity to become adult in the Bildungsroman sense of a mature and stable self. Instead, Girl decides that the ongoing trauma of her existence cannot be continued—especially after her brother's death—only ended, and she drowns herself in a lake. It is the sexual trauma which governs her psyche from adolescence onwards that proves insurmountable. As David Collard writes, "[t]he book doesn't so much end as stop dead" (76), with the lines:

> Floating hair. Air damaged eyes. Brown water turning into light. There now. There now. That was just life. And now.
> What?
> My name is gone. (203)

Thus *Girl* ends, not with affirmation, but with deletion. It offers a new, defeatist conception of the Irish modernist Bildungsroman: recovering Irish modernism but also reworking it. Hector Ramírez offers a useful generic categorization when he calls *Girl* a "broken Bildungsroman," never completing its protagonist's "passage" (17). The choice between integration and exile is denied to her by the traumatizing experience of sexual abuse:

> McBride herself seems genuinely frustrated with the limitations and conventions of the Irish bildungsroman. She breaks the language apart not to demonstrate some arbitrary linguistic pyrotechnic skill—she does it to demonstrate the limitations of the form she nevertheless feels obliged to deploy in order to tell her story. *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* is a frustrated novel, as it should be. (Ramírez 17)

Another commonality between *Girl*'s "frustrated" development of the modernist Bildungsroman, and Moretti's assessment of that development's

original emergence in 1914, is the function of trauma in its narrative politics. Fogarty provides an astute summary: "The half-formed language of the girl is wielded by McBride to question every aspect of Irish reality, but particularly the way in which adults wield social and sexual power over children whom they lastingly damage and misshape" (24). This damage reaches its fullest expression after the Girl's Uncle assaults her, but it, and Ramírez' frustration, are present in *Girl*'s language throughout. Damage and frustration are both exemplified in the following quotation, taken from an early chapter when the Girl is thirteen, shortly before her first assault. The Girl's Mammy tells her, while driving home, that her older brother is educationally "subnormal," and that this is pathological in nature: "Well that tumour could've done more harm than we," Mammy says (the sentence is left unfinished) (41). The Girl reacts furiously, grabbing her mother's statue of the Virgin Mary from Lourdes and smashing it:

> Stop. I belt young Virgin Mary on the dashboard. Take it. Take that. Wobbling the car. She. Swerve it. What the stop it stop it stop. I don't want to. Hear. I don't want. In my life. Stop the car. She stop the car. I must get. Out. On the roadside. Stop it. Let me out. Pull in.
>
> Fuck that virgin onto the tarmac. Take her head does she like it? What's the. Don't tell me. Don't tell me that. What do I do? Aha. Aha. It makes my head run. Makes my face run. I fall in the grass. I graze my hand. I feel lungs closing up under the breathless. No. No. Breathe it. Breathe it.
>
> (41-42)

McBride's jagged stream of consciousness prose combines splinters of plot summary—"She stop the car," "I graze my hand"—with a breathless flurry of pre-linguistic fragments, communicating both the content and the nature of the Girl's distress. This hybrid style clearly refuses the authority of an omniscient narrator, but it also refuses the easy summary that stream of consciousness is simply psychological realism, or Lodge's "earphones plugged into someone's brains" (47). In this hybrid, fragmentary style, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* connects to those "feared themes" of death, sex, family, guilt, and religion, but ruptures the realist meta-language in which they have traditionally been framed, thus allowing for the objects of those discourses to assert their subjectivity in a way which requires a constant hermeneutic act by the reader, demanding that they not only observe, but actively attempt to interpret and understand the Girl's subjectivity.

The Girl's impulse to destroy the Virgin Mary icon, in an act of literal iconoclasm, prefigures the violent loss of her own virginity and her subsequent self-destructive actions, where she seemingly attempts to endlessly

re-lose her virginity to obscure this initial trauma—for example, on a train journey when the experience of this trauma begins to overwhelm her, she swiftly propositions the nearest available male for sex in the train toilet. She does not take physical pleasure from the act but emotional relief: "I'd be sick but what else. It's what I have to do. And watch him bobbing. For he must do my thing. Under my skin . . . . Let the pus run out" (150). The young girl's decision to smash the statue also shows the symbolic value that her cultishly Christian surroundings place upon conservative feminine docility, highlighting that these regressive principles have not disappeared, despite the foundation myth of social progress as an automatic side-effect of Celtic Tiger prosperity. Although at this stage the Girl's frustration with her taboo-led upbringing is still formative, she can already identify that shattering a Madonna statue from Lourdes is a means by which to rebel against one strand of the web of taboos which prevent a young girl from attaining full subjecthood.

She regrets breaking the statue, but the act cannot be undone: "Sorry I broke the statue I say wet with cry. Don't mind. Don't mind the statue. Don't mind that. I don't want. Shusha shusha. I. I. No. I don't want. And I feel a sinus. Feel a brain erase" (42). Here, again, the unmediated confusion between these sentences—which the Girl says, which she hears her Mammy say, which are extradiegetic description, and which are the direct transcription of her inner monologue—means that the scene must be actively interpreted by a critically alert reader. Although the scene may be thematically congruent with Celtic Tiger realism, the means of its telling renders this an interrogative, modernist text.

Later, in moments of still greater distress, the prose breaks down yet further, disassembling into spelling errors and near-unintelligibility. When Boy dies, *Girl*'s sentences are further truncated and staccato: "My. lllllllllllllllllll. Love my. Brother no" (188). During the repeated rapes by her uncle—the traumatic roots of the psychological instability which Girl experiences even during everyday life, consensual sexual encounters and non-sexual relationships with family members and college friends—the prose shatters: "Jesus. I nme. Go. Away. Breeting. Skitch. Hear the way he. Sloows. Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos the fuck the fucking slatch in me . . ." (193-94). There is a parallel here with Schofield's *Malarky*, in which the prose becomes disoriented when the focalizing character is grieving, but in *Girl* the disorientation is far stronger, and its effects are not limited to (although they are intensified by) passages of particularly acute distress. The Joycean textuality of McBride's prose foregrounds the damage which the Girl's traumatic experiences have done to her, impairing her ability to think

according to a normative thought-grammar which would align her thoughts with the logic of the social formation which objectifies her.

Critical misreadings of *Girl,* however, abound. Tim Aubry's review opts to ignore the trauma which disrupts Girl's consciousness. This elision allows him to patronize *Girl* as a shallow and hectoring novel of a woman who "is not all that well psychologically" (par. 7), which "may go over quite well with American readers" (par. 16). Aubry's reading characterizes *Girl*, bizarrely, as a moral polemic against promiscuity. He believes that Girl's eventual suicide shows that McBride thinks she "must be punished for [her] sexual transgressions" (par. 15), a conclusion drawn from Aubry's, not McBride's, moral shrillness. He recoils from "the narrator's grotesquely dysfunctional sex life," and refers to her promiscuity as "her sins" (par. 9) and "dirty sexual acts" (par. 8). McBride never once portrays sex as "dirty," only that rural, conservative, Christian mindsets might find it so; indeed her text provides forthright arguments that such reactionary diagnoses are harmful: when the Girl, her sexual awakening prematurely forced upon her by her rapist uncle, begins having sex with boys at school, her brother's moralizing fury is portrayed as unsympathetic and informed by a morally conservative social context: "Do all that? You say. Dirty stuff. Dirty things . . . . Don't you lie. You don't lie here. Is it true? Bang me off it. Go on slut say that it's so" (73). Nonetheless, Aubry decouples Girl's sexual behavior from her trauma so that he can summarize this passage, callously, as a deliberate strategy on the teenage Girl's part: "sex serves as a means of gaining popularity in school" (par.6).

The equivalence Aubry creates in a text, which is skeptical about religious faith throughout, between compulsively seeking sex and "sins," which he claims "reaffirms a traditional Catholic ideal of female purity" (par. 3), is echoed by Dierdre Sullivan's review of Annie Ryan's play of *Girl*, in which she writes that "Sex, for Girl, is the same as prayer for her mother" (233). Sullivan does acknowledge "the impact [Uncle's] rape had on [Girl's] emotional and sexual development" (233), and Aubry does open his review with reference to the narrator's life being "emotionally terrorised by two separate traumatic ordeals" (par. 1) (her brother's tumor, and "her own sexual molestation" [par. 1]), and he occasionally returns to this, even admitting that "her relationship with her uncle makes it impossible for her to view sex as anything other than sinful, dirty and wrong" (10). Yet, in between these signposts, Aubry does not place any sustained weight on the role of trauma in mediating the narrator's thoughts: indeed his opening summary refers to her sexual molestation at the age of thirteen. This is only the age at which Girl is *first* raped; her uncle's molestation recurs throughout her life. Neither critic

acknowledges that the Girl's trauma precludes her enjoying sex: Sullivan writes of her cathartic sexual experiences as "physical pleasure" (233), and Aubry seems annoyed that the novel's conclusion "seems more like a continuation of than an escape from her destructive pattern of behaviour."

Girl's narrative aesthetic is a formal representation of the *inescapability* of rape trauma, making Aubry's sermonizing moral attempts to paint *Girl* as a sermonizing moral novel seem bizarrely unsympathetic. Thankfully, other critics demonstrate a greater command of the text and the rhythms of trauma, notably Fogarty, who summarizes Girl's psychological position with empathy and precision:

> The rape is depicted ambivalently as a seduction of and an unwarranted attack on Girl. Its horror is made all the more evident because it is at once willed and rejected by her. Thereafter, she internalizes the degradation at the hands of her uncle and seeks out numerous casual sexual encounters in which she both takes charge of her sexuality and perversely seeks out the role of victim. (23)

Aubry's is not the only critical reading of *Girl* which fails to interrogate the text in the way that McBride's modernist textual politics demand. Elsewhere, Wisker reads *Girl* with unparalleled—even by Aubry—inattentiveness, providing a cautionary example of what happens if modernism is read as though it followed a realist ethic; as if, that is, it is the novel's duty to lay all the facts plainly before the reader. Wisker fails to interrogate the text, and so her own assumptions, in this case Anglocentrism, come to dominate her reading. Wisker insists that the city where Girl goes to college is "an English city" (58), and, later, refers to "the bohemian possibilities of London" (73). This unnamed city is clearly in Ireland (and is probably Dublin), as indicated when Girl makes the journey to and from her west of Ireland family home by train (for example, pages: 90, 115, 121, 143), rather than ferry or airplane, by her college companions' use of Gaelic in their drinking games (115), and by her flatmate's threat to call, not the police, but "the guards" (145). Wisker also claims that "some critics saw her relations with her uncle as a romance" (73). This is a grievous accusation—that any critic would read an adult man's deliberate rape of his thirteen-year-old niece as "romance"—but a hollow one, as Wisker fails in her academic duty to cite her sources; the impression left is that Wisker has invented "some critics" for merely rhetorical effect. Bizarre critical oversight can also be committed by those who praise the novel: David Collard is fulsome in his praise for *Girl* ("if you're a reader who admires *Ulysses* then *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* is likely to knock your socks off" [(27]), but

also somewhat slapdash: he claims that his favorite McBridean coinage is the "portmanteau" word "glitching" (71), a term which has existed since at least 1973, and as "glitch" since 1962 ("glitch, v.").

Aubry, Wisker and Collard's misguided readings of *Girl*, as stated, stem from a failure to engage with *Girl* on the level of form, and reading it with a passivity more appropriate to realism, which assumes a fixed, authoritative external perspective shared by reader and narrator. *Girl* must be rather read hermeneutically, with an on-line alert interpretation of the protagonist's traumatized consciousness, if its themes are to cohere. Joyce's prose ethic, as McBride indicates in quoting his aversion to "wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot" ("How I Wrote"), is resurrected and reworked, creating a contemporary modernist text which draws upon, without dully imitating, Irish modernism of the early twentieth century. Wisker, in a more perceptive moment, notes that while Joyce is the obvious high-modernist influence upon McBride's writing, in some ways Beckettian defeatism is a more immediate comparison:

> Beckett is less optimistic and positive. He uses stream of consciousness and an unnamed narrative voice to create a lack of control of any relationship with the world, a dissolution of self . . . . Language fails this unnamed character. The rhythms of [Joyce, Woolf and Beckett] are reworked in something new by McBride, whose style reflects her narrator's fragmented and damaged psyche. (71)

McBride's style does more, however, than realistically reflect her narrator's psyche: in making visible her novel's own textuality, she expresses that psyche in a manner which cannot be passively absorbed. The half-formed prose of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* voices most directly the traumatic experience of violent sexual abuse, but also interrogates the "already half-formed" status of a girl in a patriarchal society, and (by implication) the experience of the mentally ill Boy to whom Girl's lived experience is compared by the novel's title.

Irish literary modernism has been resurgent in the wake of the financial crisis, as exemplified by *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing,* which has become a figurehead text for this new school of Irish writers using experimental, modernist-inspired writing techniques to offer textual representation to damaged consciousnesses. It is not coincidental that capitalism's greatest crisis in a century should provoke—in one of its worst-affected western regions—a backlash to the dominant literary mode of that era. As Gerry Smyth writes,

> the crash of 2008 represented the return of the real with a vengeance, and it's clear to see that the waves from that momentous, ignominious fall are still crashing on the shores of the Irish consciousness today . . . . The question is: what does it mean – what can it mean – to be Irish in the wake of the Celtic Tiger? (136)

But it is also not coincidental that capitalism has carried on; these modernist texts are symptomatic of a modernity in which the cracks have appeared, which has catalyzed the capacity for and publication of protest. But it is also a modernity which has not been halted or replaced— which has catalyzed the need for that protest.

As Fintan O'Toole writes in *Ship of Fools*, "the Irish establishment has been both remarkably [and shamelessly] resilient and fiercely determined to insist that no fundamental change has happened" (216). The hegemon failed and yet remains. As O'Toole points out, noone was punished for corruption in Ireland (31-32). And as the decade wears on, the Ship of Fools—that is, the brazen political self-interest of Irish neoliberalism—can again be glimpsed, struggling to rise from the waters. Consider the Irish government's farcical attempts to avoid collecting €13bn in tax from American technology firm Apple: the Irish state is so desperate to bring the good times back that they must be ordered by the European Commission to collect tax receipts. Ireland would rather Apple keep the receipts (BBC News), and Ireland's reputation as an international tax haven be swiftly restored. Even more recently, Bertie Ahern's declaration that the UK's exit from the European Union can be successful, provided enough "blind eyes" are turned at the Republic-Northern Ireland border ("Bertie Ahern: Technology and Turning Blind Eye"), is deeply reminiscent of the atmosphere of extralegal cronyism over which Ahern previously presided as the Celtic Tiger's anointed leader.

The McBride-spearheaded re-emergence of modernist prose in Ireland is not a revolution; the capitalist hegemon lumbers on, denying that it was ever wounded, and there is no guarantee that Irish literature will continue to produce radical texts. But the Tiger's collapse has precipitated the emergence, at least, of a school of textual resistance in Irish literature, which uses experimental representations of damaged consciousnesses in an attempt to unpick the seams of twenty-first-century neoliberalism, or to query the continued existence of social forces, such as repressive patriarchy, which neoliberalism might claim to have already overcome.

McBride's first novel thus bridges the pre- and post-crash eras not only in its content, but also in its form. It evokes the dominant themes of Celtic Tiger literature, but gestures far beyond them in its refusal of a realist

meta-language or the consolation of closure. All of this, in hindsight, made McBride perfectly placed to emerge as an elder-stateswoman-in-waiting for the 2010s resurgence of the experimental Irish novel. As McCormack has said, in praise of her leadership in the rehabilitation of Joyce's influence:

> She made no bones about the fact that she was influenced by Joyce. And you never, ever hear Irish writers saying that, because Joyce seemed to be more a luring, disabling presence in many ways. She saw him properly, as an enabling presence, and she ran with it
>
> (qtd. in McCormack, "On My Fifth Novel").

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Notes

[1] At the time of writing Moretti is accused of multiple accounts of historic sexual harassment, and at least one rape, although he denies these charges (Hsu & Stone). I acknowledge the unpleasant irony, in this context, of using Moretti's literary analyses to elucidate the aesthetic politics of McBride's emancipatory representation of a victim of severe rape-induced trauma.

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