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TITLE: Eimear McBride's Ireland: A Case for Periodization and the Dangers of Marketing Modernism

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ABSTRACT:

Eimear McBride's multi-award-winning debut novel *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) garnered global attention for its invocation of recognizably modernist strategies. Yet there remains a conspicuous lack of analysis surrounding McBride's modernist project, as well as the wider cultural and political context thereof.

Such a contextual approach may run counter to the recent turn in modernist studies away from periodization, however, in the case of Ireland, it can revealed that the argument for periodization – both past and present – holds true. Given the nation's 2008 economic crash and resultant identity crisis, as well as its complex relationship with Europe and the UK, Ireland now finds itself in the midst of a second 'modernist' moment; one to which writers like McBride are directly responding.

Yet, despite these diagnoses, this essay will conclude by challenging the default 'modernist' vernacular which has come to dominate both critical and industry conversations surrounding McBride and her peers. For the gendered implications of these frameworks ultimately risk upholding the historical silencing of experimental women writers.

KEYWORDS: Ireland; Eimear McBride; Modernism; Periodization; Feminism.

MAIN TEXT:

Introduction

In 2013, the inaugural Laureate for Irish Fiction, Anne Enright, declared the following: '[s]ince the crash, a lot has been disrupted. There's a resurgent modernism in writers like Eimear McBride…'[1] Enright's reference to 'a resurgent modernism' immediately calls to mind the work of David James who has published extensively on the significant continuities that can be found between a number of contemporary authors and their modernist forefathers. And yet, while these forefathers often include Irishmen James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, the scholarly attention paid to their renewed influence on recent Irish work seems comparably lacking.

This essay, then, will begin by focusing on Irish author Eimear McBride, whose multi-award-winning debut *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) employs a range of innovative techniques which can undoubtedly be classified as 'modernist'. Indeed, almost every literary reviewer mentions Joyce's work when discussing McBride's, citing both thematic and formal similarities between the two. Despite this fact, McBride is yet to attract significant academic interest; two recent volumes *Joycean Legacies* (2014) and *Modernist Afterlives in Irish Literature and Culture* (2016) both mention McBride in their introduction, but do not take their analysis any further. Only Paige Reynolds's article 'Trauma, Intimacy, and Modernist Form' (2014) makes an attempt to unpack McBride's modernist tendencies, though ultimately reaches some rather surprising conclusions. So, by directly countering Reynolds's diagnoses, as well as by expanding its analysis to include McBride's second novel *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), this essay will serve as an important intervention on this increasingly significant author.

More broadly, this essay will also use McBride's work as springboard to examine the wider contemporary context. As David James and Urmila Seshagiri recently insisted, modernism must be considered 'as a moment *as well as* a movement,'[2] advising that academics thus employ a 'critical practice balanced between an attention to the textures of narrative form and an alertness to the contingencies of historical reception.'[3] Many have taken issue with James and Seshagiri's sustained belief in the exceptionality of the early twentieth century, given the narrow, Anglo-centric version of modernism this belief necessarily promotes. However, while this essay does support the recent surge of so-called 'alternative modernisms,' it will nonetheless reveal how Ireland does in fact provide a compelling case study for James and Seshagiri's 'metamodernism.' For by comparing the current state of the Irish nation with its original modernist moment, a number of undeniable parallels emerge. Such a comparison, then, will not only prove significant to the field of Irish Studies, but will also expand the ongoing conversation surrounding 'resurgent modernism' more generally, and the methodologies involved therein.

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[1] Enright quoted in Tramp Press, 'Twitter Post'.
[2] James and Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism', 88.

Finally, and despite the above interventions, this essay will conclude by taking a step back and questioning the more problematic aspects of the default 'modernist' vernacular which surrounds writers like McBride. By briefly unpacking the difficult position of experimental female writers, and the marketing (or market absence) thereof, it can be seen how this constant recourse to modernist labels becomes as much a thoughtful diagnosis as a lazy packaging tool, one that is undeniably gendered. This more industry-based reality has yet to be acknowledged by James et al, so its elucidation will contribute yet another strand to an increasingly popular field.

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[3] Ibid., 89.

Portrait of the Artist as a Half-Formed Thing

When it was published in 2014, Martha C. Carpentier's *Joycean Legacies* served as a welcome and overdue addition to the conversation surrounding 'resurgent modernism.' In this volume, critics analyze the specific ways in which certain writers since Joyce have attempted to reconstitute various aspects of his oeuvre; writers who, for the most part, are Irish themselves (e.g. Brendan Behan, Kate O'Brien, Frank McCourt). The volume's forward, 'Irish Writing After Joyce,' comes from Derek Attridge, who previously observed that 'we are indirectly reading Joyce … in many of our engagements with the past half century's serious fiction.'[4] This time, however, Attridge goes even further, insisting that *all* novelists are in fact either deliberately following or deliberately avoiding Joyce.[5] Those who choose the former path, Attridge explains, tend to adopt one of four different approaches: the *assertion* (that is, making an explicit comment about Joyce outside of their work); the *nod* (an overt Joycean allusion or quotation within their work); the *echo* (a particular stylistic or thematic similarity); the *counter-signature* (taking a distinct aspect of Joyce's work and conspicuously reworking it).[6]

In the case of the 'counter-signature,' the example Attridge cites is that of Eimear McBride's recently-published *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, which he reads as a conspicuous reworking of *Ulysses*'s final chapter. Indeed, he describes the entire novel as a cross between Molly Bloom's 'ungrammatical thought process' and Leopold Bloom's 'fragmented interior monologue.'[7] Elsewhere, Attridge actually begins his forward – and thus, the entire volume – with the anecdote McBride tells about her first encounter with *Ulysses*: 'I started reading the book, got off at Liverpool Street, and just thought: that's it. Everything I have written before is rubbish, and today is the beginning of something else.'[8] Both this epiphany, together with Attridge's classification of McBride's work, gesture towards two fascinating lines of enquiry which could have been taken much further, finally shining a light on a truly contemporary Irish example. However, given the volume was only published the year after the novel's release, it seems it must have been too late to include an entire chapter on McBride. As such, the volume's focus remains primarily on late-twentieth century examples instead.

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[4] Attridge, 'Reading Joyce,' 1.

[5] Attridge, 'Foreword,' vii.

[6] Ibid., ix-x.

[7] Ibid., xv.

[8] Ibid., vii.

Unsurprisingly, Attridge was not the only one to draw immediate parallels between McBride's work and Joyce. Justine Jordan, writing for *The Guardian,* declared McBride 'firmly in the Irish modernist tradition of Beckett and Joyce,'[9] while *The Observer* felt confident enough to identify McBride's specific intentions: 'She set out to pick up the experimental modernist baton from James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and she has done just that.'[10] Such remarks were an attempt to classify the novel's radical formal experimentation; its staccato, syncopated vernacular, wherein traditional sentences are replaced by short sharp bursts of often barely-connected words. Traditional punctuation is also sacrificed; reviewing for the *London Review of Books,* Adam Mars-Jones cites McBride's 'starvation diet in terms of the comma,'[11] while McBride elsewhere omits what Joyce termed 'perverted commas' or speech marks, such that dialogue, thought, action and impression are all rendered on a similar, similarly-chaotic, linguistic plain. Here is the oft-quoted opening paragraph:

> For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. 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 day.[12]

The narrator, still a foetus in her mother's womb, goes on to become a young girl growing up in small-town Ireland; a coming-of-age tale marred with sexual abuse, familial conflict and, of course, the overbearing influence of the Catholic Church. Though these sound like familiar Irish themes (and ones which McBride herself admits she tried to avoid), upon publication the novel immediately stood out as a result of its form which was seen as anything *but* familiar compared to its peers, and far more indebted to its modernist predecessors.

Of her relationship with these predecessors, McBride herself was initially very candid, willingly discussing her interest in modernism (although the circumstances surrounding such discussions shall be revisited later). And yet, McBride was also eager to assert that she was not 'interested in experimental writing purely for the sake of it.'[13] Instead, she insisted that it was the specific preoccupations of that period which most interested her, given that, like the modernists before her, her formal decisions were driven by the desire to discover a viable means through which consciousness might be rendered into language; or as she puts it 'the moment just before language becomes formatted thought.'[14] Elsewhere she elaborates:

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[9] Jordan, 'Review'.
[10] O'Keeffe, 'Review'.
[11] Mars-Jones, 'Review'.
[12] McBride, *Girl*, 3.

> I'm interested in trying to dig out parts of human life that cannot be expressed in a straightforward way, that don't fit neatly into the vocabulary and grammar that are available. To do that you have to make language do something else. I didn't really know how to do it, I just tried and that's what happened.[15]

Such explicit discussions of her modernist motivations, together with the complexity of the work itself, meant McBride was ripe for the kind of analysis David James had been performing on contemporary British and American authors, scrutinising not only the texts, but also the wider contexts thereof.

In 2016, then, Paige Reynolds's volume *Modernist Afterlives in Irish Literature and Culture* seemed like it might perform precisely such an analysis. Reynolds begins by explaining the volume's desire to unpack 'how Irish writers and artists from the mid-twentieth century forward engage with modernism as they endeavor to forge new modes of expression.'[16] Meanwhile, in the volume's afterword, James himself expresses his support for the essays which precede him, pre-empting any criticism they may invite given their narrow national focus:

> That this volume operates within a national context of cultural production furthers rather than discounts modernist studies' recent efforts to embrace the transnational genesis and translational reception of multiple modernisms across time.[17]

Returning to the introduction, it is here that Reynolds directly cites McBride, discussing 'the enduring potentiality of modernist forms, themes and practices, as evident in the upsurge of Irish fiction by contemporary writers such as Eimear McBride or Sara Baume – fiction that overtly and knowingly recapitulates modernist technique.'[18] However, like

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[13] McBride, interview by David Collard.
[14] Ibid.
[15] McBride, interview by Susanna Rustin.
[16] Reynolds, 'Introduction', 1.
[17] James, 'The Poetics of Perpetuation', 180.
[18] Reynolds, 'Introduction', 4.

Attridge before her, Reynolds fails to take this point any further, and instead introduces a collection of essays which remains decidedly confined to the previous century.

Where Reynolds *does* elaborate somewhat, is in her article 'Trauma, Intimacy, and Modernist Form' (2014). Here she begins by comparing McBride's debut not to *Ulysses,* but to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which likewise begins with the fragmented voice of a young child. That said, Reynolds does point out that the two novels diverge from this point onwards: 'unlike Joyce's experimental Bildungsroman, the narrative voice of [*Girl*] never changes or matures: the broken sentences, the snarled syntax, and repetitive phrases remain consistent throughout the entire novel.'[19] However, while Reynolds is correct that McBride's verbal syncopation never evolves into the comparative eloquence of *Portrait*, there are in fact a number of linguistic shifts which occur at significant moments in the text. For example, when the protagonist endures a particularly violent sexual encounter with a stranger, the spelling and spacing of the words starts to crumble: 'Done fuk me open he dine done on me. Done done Til he hye happy fucky shoves upo comes ui.'[20] As the incident grows more aggressive still, McBride uses capital letters to add extra force and disfigurement to her words: 'HoCk SPIT me. Kicks. uPshes me over.'[21] So McBride bridles form to content, as the violence of one impacts directly on the other.

Where this essay takes particular issue with Reynolds's reading, however, is when she goes on to argue that such formal decisions belie a specific agenda on McBride's part; that is, an immense degree of *calculation*. For, according to Reynolds, when writing about sexual abuse, McBride employs 'modernist form' as a kind of 'buffer' for her readers: 'McBride's use of modernism offers a prophylactic from intense absorption, keeping us at bay with is difficulty, its obfuscations, its knowing invocations of literary tradition.'[22] Indeed, it is precisely because of the novel's controversial material, Reynolds believes, that McBride has devised a modernist 'armor' which at once lets the reader in, but also keeps them out, protecting them from the full impact of the content. This is a strategy which Reynolds locates elsewhere in David James's discussion of Toni Morrison, where he cites Morrison's use of certain formal and linguistic devices to provoke what Morrison herself termed a

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[19] Reynolds, 'Trauma, Intimacy, and Modernist Form'.

[20] McBride, *Girl,* 193.

[21] Ibid., 194.

[22] Reynolds, 'Trauma, Intimacy, and Modernist Form'.

‘double consciousness of absorption and impersonality.’[23] However, this ‘double consciousness’ of which Morrison speaks, actually refers to *herself* during the writing process; at once involved in and removed from her material, even as she sets it down on the page. As such, it is not in fact a reference to the reader’s experience, despite how Reynolds takes it as such.

From here, Reynolds goes on to elaborate even further:

> [McBride] uses modernist form to remind us of our alienation and distance from her protagonist’s experiences… The armature of modernist intertextuality provides readers protection from identifying too closely with the protagonist’s abnegation.[24]

Despite Reynolds’s excellent work elsewhere, there are many problems with this claim. Firstly, and most obviously, as an approach it seems far too affected, and indeed, almost the exact opposite of what McBride herself has said she was hoping to achieve:

> I was attempting to take what I considered to be the successes of that era [modernism], then turn them inside out to achieve the opposite effect so while … the non-specialist reader finds those books [*Finnegan’s Wake; The Making of Americans*] obtuse and alienating, I wanted mine to go in as close as the reader would reasonably permit.[25]

Of course, it would be remiss to set too much stock by authorial interviews – or worse, authorial intent. However, even more problematically, Reynolds’s claims make it sound like modernism – or as she has it, ‘modernist form’ – is just a specific mask that can be put on; a fixed, finalized construct that exists and can be added and removed at will. Whereas such a notion is *precisely* what the likes of David James and Derek Attridge have warned against, reminding us again and again that modernism is not a dead entity, or rather an *entity* at all, but rather a living breathing impulse; a source of inspiration and reformulation which, by its very definition, generates forms which are entirely new. ‘Modernism after modernism,’ James quotes Attridge, ‘necessarily involves a reworking of modernism’s methods, since nothing could be less modernist than a repetition of previous modes, however disruptive they were in their time.’[26] Furthermore, Reynolds’s claims ignore the fact that McBride’s techniques do not in fact match up with any fixed, pre-existing modernist formula. Reynolds herself cites linkages to both *Ulysses* and *Portrait*, while other reviewers observe a closer resemblance to the work of Samuel Beckett or Edna O'Brien, as well as the ways in which McBride subverts and destabilizes all of the above. So it is not McBride's adherence to some fixed formal template, but rather her sensibility, her aesthetic agenda, which is distinctly modernist.

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[23] James, *Modernist Futures*, 173.
[24] Ibid.
[25] McBride, interview by David Collard.
[26] James, *Modernist Futures,* 4.

Finally, what Reynolds – and indeed, the majority of commentators to date – fail to acknowledge here are the circumstances of the writing and publication of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, whereas this essay believes that there are in fact a number of ways in which the wider context surrounding McBride's modernist impulses directly recall the wider context surrounding those of Joyce et al. As mentioned, such a contextual focus may run counter to those who oppose the 'patently ethnocentric' notion of periodization;[27] however, in their recent conception of 'metamodernism,' James and Seshagiri make it clear that they are not interested in asserting some geographically limiting endpoint for the modern period, rather they are calling, simply, for the recognition of 'modernism as an era, an aesthetic, and an archive that *originated* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (my emphasis).[28] This shifts the desire for periodization onto the moment of origin without imposing limitations on any resultant incarnations; a move which, James and Seshagiri believe, 'amplifies, rather than constrains, scholarly discourse about modernism, its several legacies, and the moment of contemporary literature.'[29] Of course, there will be many who still take issue with this stance – not least since the notions of 'origin' and 'resultant incarnations' immediately connote problematic inferences of the centre and the (derivative) periphery. However, in the case of Ireland, this essay will reveal the usefulness of comparing the context of the country's modernist origins and, in James and Sesahgiri's terms, 'the moment of contemporary literature.' By analysing first one and then the other, these parallels will begin to emerge, allowing for a deeper understanding of McBride's literary project, whilst also contributing a new case study to the ongoing debate regarding periodization more generally.[30]

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[27] Gaonkar, 'On Alternative Modernities', 14.

[28] Ibid., 88.

[29] Ibid., 91.

[30] It is worth acknowledging that this is not the first time the Irish context has been selected as a case study for this kind of exploration. Pascale Casanova has likewise used Ireland as a paradigm, given the country's dramatic shifts in circumstance over a concentrated period of time, and its resultant need to 'create' a literary tradition (Casanova, *World Republic of Letters,* 304).

Modern Ireland

In literary terms, Ireland in 1922 immediately conjures the publication of James Joyce's modernist masterpiece, *Ulysses*. However, it is difficult to overemphasize the fact that 1922 also marked both the establishment of the Irish Free State, as well as the beginning of the bitter Civil War regarding that State's very existence. Contentious though its terms may have been, Ireland's newfound statehood signified the end of hundreds of years of British rule, and called for a complete reconfiguration of all aspects of Irish life. To this end, Michael Rubenstein states that 'Irish modernism was largely a literary engagement with the problem of how to forge an Irish modernity after colonialism.'[31] Of course, there are many who still vehemently resist the use of the term 'colonialism' with regard to Ireland, but the basic of premise of Rubenstein's summary remains undeniable; that is, now independent, modern Ireland found herself tasked with establishing a brand new national identity – one which she would henceforth project onto a global stage.

The problem was that for many – including those who now found themselves in power – the easiest way to 'discover' such an identity was to look backwards instead of forwards, drawing inspiration from the country's ancient past. Indeed, in his seminal – and significantly-titled – text *Inventing Ireland* (1996), Declan Kiberd reveals how the politicians of the time appeared 'intent on using all the old imperialist mechanisms in the name of a national revival.'[32] Thankfully, this period also saw the emergence of artists who were determined to resist this obsession with inheritance and nostalgia, striving instead to forge something wholly new. The most extreme example of this was of course James Joyce, who moved away – both literally and figuratively – from Ireland, preoccupying himself less with the question of national identity, and more with the question of discovering new modes by which human consciousness could be expressed. However, it was actually through forging these new forms, these new modes of expression, that Joyce did in fact contribute to the devising of a new Ireland. For he invented, in Kiberd's terms, 'a national idea by means of a renovated style,'[33] and thus ultimately did 'more than any politician to liberate Irish consciousness into a profound freedom of form.'[34]

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[31] Rubenstein, *Public Works,* 14.

[32] Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 333.

[33] Ibid., 127.

[34] Ibid., 267.

Of course, Joyce was not alone in his forging of new modes of expression. In his deliberately pluralized 'Irish modernisms, 1890-1930,' Adrian Frazier discusses how 'Wilde, Moore, Yeats, Shaw, Bram Stoker and others turned to literature to forge in new circumstances identities that were no longer secured in material and social realities.'[35] From here, Frazier also goes on to discuss the role that small, newly-established publishers had in disseminating this work, such that they became 'channels of new Irish writing to the wider English-reading public.'[36] Alongside these publishers, Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker have also revealed how 'Irish magazines in the same period had the task of questioning issues of identity, of attempting not just to uncover new talent or to set the artistic tone, but to define the culture of a new nation.'[37] A number of these were established directly after the foundation of the Irish Free State, both the more avant-garde *The Klaxon* (1923) and *To-Morrow* (1924), as well as the slightly more conservative *The Irish Statesman* (1923) and *The Dublin Magazine* (1923).

From this brief survey, then, some key features of the original Irish modernist moment emerge; features which will prove useful when turning to the present day. Firstly, the political context of Ireland's independence meant that the country found itself charged with the task of forging a brand new, autonomous identity. Secondly, while politicians and certain cultural outfits endeavored to draw heavily on the narratives of Ireland's past, many emerging artists were willing to challenge such a lazy, homogenizing approach, instead developing new and exciting forms more befitting of Ireland's complexity and flux . Finally then, with the help of small presses and magazines, these artists gained recognition beyond Ireland's shores, and set in motion an Irish modernism which we can now trace to the contemporary moment.

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[35] Frazier, 'Irish modernisms', 121.

[36] Ibid., 123.

[37] Brooker and Thacker, 'From Revolution to Republic'.

Contemporary Ireland

If the beginning of the twentieth century spelled a time of major political upheaval in Ireland, so too was the end of the century marked by a number of seismic shifts. In 1990, Ireland elected its first ever female president. In 1993, homosexuality was legalized, despite the Church's continued influence on the state. In 1998, the Good Friday agreement was signed, marking the end of decades of devastating conflict in the North. So it seemed Ireland was finally ready to face up to her position as a modern European nation who had 'not so much solved as shelved the problem of creating a liberal nationalism.'[38]

This 'creation of a liberal nationalism' instantly recalls Ireland's quest for a new identity almost a century earlier, and was a quest once again embraced by politicians and artists alike. Indeed, after describing how Irish culture at this time was 'in a state of becoming,' Jennifer M. Jeffers argues that the whole purpose of the Irish novel at the end of the twentieth century was 'to reformulate the Irish identity as a complex and indeterminable entity.'[39] Eve Patten likewise explains how 'since the mid-1980s, the rapid transformation of the Republic of Ireland's domestic and international profile has been accompanied by a heightened political engagement in Irish fiction.'[40]

Of all of the transformations of this period, however, it was in fact the economic shift that had the biggest impact. As a character in Anne Haverty's 2006 novel *The Free and Easy* jokes, 'Ireland as we know it – and let's thank whoever or whatever – was born some time around nineteen ninety-four.'[41] For it was in 1994 that an American merchant banker working in London coined the now-infamous term 'Celtic Tiger.' The name was a product of Ireland's sudden and significant economic growth, one that was reminiscent of the Tiger economies of South East Asia. Such a trans-global comparison was also particularly apt given that, from 1995 onwards, Ireland was consistently ranked in the top three countries in the world on the Ernst & Young Globalization Index. As such, Ireland now found itself re-invented as a global player; as a source of high immigration and uncharacteristically low emigration; as a beacon of international trade and unprecedented prosperity.

Given this significant shift in circumstances, Eve Patten describes how the Irish novel of this period necessarily moved away from its inward-looking, national impulse, and instead could now ‘be defined by its pursuit of a *post-national* ethos’ (my emphasis).[42] That said, despite this energized and increasingly-liberated time, Patten does admit that ‘the emphasis on thematic treatments of social issues has restricted formal experimentation in the Irish novel, endorsing a realist conformity.’[43] Elsewhere, Sylvie Mikowski reveals how, for some, Irish art during this period found itself ‘enslaved to the dictates of the market economy and the pursuit of a social status,’[44] while Anne Enright herself admits ‘it was hard to write in Ireland during the Tiger times – there was a sense of “Get with the programme, you’re off message.”’[45]

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[38] Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland,* 578.
[39] Jeffers, 'The Irish Novel', 7.
[40] Patten, 'Contemporary Irish Fiction', 259
[41] Haverty, *The Free and Easy,* 112.

But it was what came next that led Enright to draw parallels with more exciting (and, necessarily, uncertain) creative times. As she put it: ‘[s]ince the crash, a lot has been disrupted. There’s a resurgent modernism…’ Because crash it did – in 2008 the ‘Celtic Tiger’ completely collapsed, with the property industry, banking and financial sectors suddenly and entirely destabilized. Stringent austerity measures were soon put in place; immigration slowed dramatically; emigration resumed at a furious pace, all of which served to completely undo the Tiger narrative Ireland had just begun to embrace. As Fintan O’Toole declared: ‘at the moment it is not quite clear what the Irish story is. What is the state of “us”?’[46]

However, despite – or precisely, because of – this destruction, this renewed sense of uncertainty, the years that followed the crash have seen some of the most fertile and exciting developments in the Irish cultural landscape. Where Patten noted a stylistic conservatism during the Boom, Neil Murphy points to a subsequent renewed interest in narrative form and style: ‘Contemporary Irish writers assert their aestheticizing agendas in diverse ways but a declared awareness of the transformative process that governs the process of narrated experience remains constant.’[47] Meanwhile, novelist Julian Gough draws parallels between pre- and post-crash culture in terms which directly invoke the original modernist moment:

> Irish literature had gotten smug and self-congratulatory during the boom; lots of novels about how terrible Ireland’s past was, with all its sexual repression and

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[42] Patten, ‘Contemporary Irish Fiction’, 274.
[43] Ibid., 271.
[44] Mikowski, ‘What does a woman want?’, 100.
[45] Enright quoted in Jordan, ‘A new Irish literary boom’.
[46] O’Toole, ‘The State of Us’.
[47] Murphy, ‘Contemporary Irish fiction’, 184.

> poverty. Heritage literature, and very conservatively told. All old-fashioned lyrical realism, not a trace of the wild experimentalism of Beckett, Joyce and Flann O'Brien. [Whereas now there are] New zines, new writers, new arguments, lots of experiments … Everything's improved since 2010, except house prices in Leitrim.[48]

These 'new zines' to which Gough refers are also another key development during this supposedly-troubled period. In the years directly following the crash, a huge range of new literary magazines and journals were established and, despite the economic turmoil, found themselves thriving – from *The Moth* (2010) and *The Penny Dreadful* (2012), to *Banshee Lit* (2015) and *Gorse* (2014), to name but a few. Focusing on more avant-garde or innovative work, these journals now serve as invaluable launchpads for emerging, risk-taking writers, once again recalling the aforementioned plethora of Irish journals which were established in the wake of Ireland's statehood. *Gorse* in particular explicitly identifies with its modernist equivalents, with the founder and editor, Susan Tomaselli, explaining:

> There's a great tradition of experimental writers in Ireland like Laurence Sterne, Joyce, Ethel Lilian Voynich, Beckett, Flann O'Brien and Blanaid Salkeld, and I wondered if they would struggle to get published [nowadays], and I suspect a good few of them might.[49]

Finally, as well as all these newly-founded journals, a number of small publishing houses also emerged at this time. Tramp Press, for example, was founded in 2013 by two young female editors, and has since launched the careers of some of the most exciting new Irish writers, such as Oona Frawley and Sara Baume. Meanwhile, in 2012, Galley Beggar Press was established, and after publishing just one book, agreed to take on *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing.* So, having endured nine years of rejection; of unprecedented national boom and then bust, McBride's modernist manuscript finally found a home.

Having drawn these parallels between Ireland then and now, it can be seen how, in certain instances, the use of periodization can in fact still prove productive. However, this essay will conclude by focusing on the marketing realities of such a process. For while the concept of 'resurgent modernism' undeniably generates a number of fruitful and productive conversations regarding contemporary experimental authors, there is a more problematic aspect of same which has thus far been overlooked. Sticking with McBride as a case study, what will follow is a brief survey of the history of experimental women writers, followed by an analysis of the market position and reception of McBride’s novels, all of which will allow a number of troubling truths to emerge.

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[48] Enright quoted in Jordan, 'A new Irish literary boom'.

[49] Tomaselli quoted in Gilmartin, 'The Irish literary journal's irresistible rise'.

Marketing Modernism

In her introduction to *Modernist Afterlives in Irish Literature and Culture,* Paige Reynolds briefly acknowledges the surge of avant-garde writing in Ireland in the last five years. As mentioned, she cites Eimear McBride and Sara Baume as authors who 'overtly and knowingly recapitulate[] modernist technique,' before concluding that the use of 'old modernist form provides women writers with a valuable new tool for the critique of abusive patriarchal structures and practices.'[50] These remarks once again recall Reynolds's earlier stance regarding McBride's deliberate use of 'old modernist form' as a kind of 'armor' or 'buffer' to keep the reader at bay, however, this time Reynolds goes somewhat further, gesturing towards the gender politics inherent therein. And yet, the examination of such politics still needs to be taken much further. For while certain modernist impulses may indeed serve as a direct challenge to 'abusive patriarchal structures and practices,' there is also a risk that through the constant recourse to modernist frameworks, these women writers are in fact finding themselves forced into yet another set of 'patriarchal structures and practices' instead.

In her essay 'Illiterations' (1989), Christine Brooke-Rose muses on the historical challenge of being an 'experimental women writer': 'Three words,' she says. 'Three difficulties.'[51] Meanwhile, the recent *Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* (2012), contains a total of thirty-seven chapters, only one of which is dedicated to writing by women, and which is placed alongside chapters exploring African-American and postcolonial writing, all under the heading 'Experiments with Identity.' As the chapter's author, Ellen G. Friedman rightly laments: 'For the most part, women experimental writers in the twentieth century were absent from surveys of innovative writing, and they were also absent from studies that focused entirely on women writers.'[52]

Elsewhere, Friedman, alongside Miriam Fuchs, analyzes (and attempts to rectify) the lack of critical attention paid by male critics to great female modernists such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Dorothy Richardson.[53] This lack of attention begins with early twentieth century critics, but then moves on to consider those writing more recently, such as Anthony Burgess, with whom Friedman and Fuchs take particular issue. For even when attempting to dispel accusations of sexism – to critically engage with these writers – Burgess reveals he is only capable of doing so by constituting them in terms of their male counterparts: ‘In considering… the masterpiece of Dorothy Richardson I did not say that here we had a great work of women’s literature, but rather than we had a great work which anticipated some of the innovations of James Joyce.’[54] It is such observations which lead Friedman and Fuchs to conclude that ‘the implication is clear: a woman writer must either use traditional forms, or, if she dare experiment, she must be imitating an old model.’[55]

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[50] Reynolds, 'Introduction', 4.

[51] Brook-Rose, 'Illiterations', 55.

[52] Friedman, 'Sexing the Text', 154.

[53] Friedman and Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence,* 4.

Friedman and Fuchs certainly make an admirable start on the mammoth task of reclaiming early female modernists. However, turning to the present moment, it is worth examining what progress has been made in terms of the critical attention and reaction to contemporary female modernists. As discussed, McBride completed the original manuscript of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* shortly after the turn of the twenty-first century, but despite multiple attempts, publishers were unwilling to take a risk on this strange, uncomfortable novel. One editor did suggest there could be some potential if McBride framed the text as an autobiography – one which would just about fit into the recent trend of Irish ‘misery memoirs’ – but when McBride refused, she was forced to abandon hope and start work on something else instead. It seemed Brooke-Rose’s warnings about the difficulties of being an ‘experimental women writer’ were as true as ever.

Thankfully, in 2013, the tiny, newly-formed Galley Beggar Press was willing to take a chance. When it first appeared, the book’s cover was plain black, adorned only with the name of an unknown writer and the logo of a virtually-unknown publishing house. In marketing terms, this was something of a blank canvas. However, shortly after this decidedly-understated publication, the novel received its first print review in the decidedly-canonical *Times Literary Supplement.* Here, David Collard sang the novel’s praises and immediately drew parallels with Joyce (and, to a lesser extent, Henry Green and Samuel Beckett). This was a huge seal of approval – one which was rendered quite literal when the publishers decided to create a sticker with a quote from Collard’s review and affix it to the book’s cover. The canvas was no longer blank.

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[54] Burgess quoted in Friedmand and Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence,* 8.

[55] Friedman and Fuchs, *Breaking the Sequence,* 65.

Stanley Fish has written at length about 'interpretative communities,' that is, groups of cultural readers who share certain sets of competencies, customs, codes and interests. In Fish's terms:

> Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way round.[56]

Building on this, Claire Squires, in her excellent book *Marketing Literature* (2007), describes the power which certain reviewers and literary critics have in shaping these communities' tastes and opinions by offering (and therefore, enforcing) particular interpretations.[57] So Collard's early reading – and branding – of *Girl* was significant, particularly given the weight of the publication for which he was writing, and particularly given the Joycean influences he immediately brought to the fore.

After that, Joyce was everywhere. Indeed, all the early reviews of the books – from the *London Review of Books* to the *Irish Times* to Australia's *The Monthly* – categorized the novel in decidedly Joycean terms. Interestingly (and perhaps, already foreseeing a problematic trend), the only early reviewer *not* to mention Joyce was Anne Enright writing for the *Guardian*. Instead, Enright pointed to Marguerite Duras, Catherine Millet, Sean O'Reilly and Edna O'Brien (a telling combination of nationalities and genders), though she was careful not to overemphasize any overlap in particular.[58]

Squires has written eloquently on the difficult inevitability of marketing an author according to their nationality, the danger being that their work is simply elided with that of all their fellow countrymen and women.[59] Squires takes Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* as her example and the so-called Scottish 'literary renaissance' it inspired, warning against such simplistic marketing narratives which largely serve to lock authors into certain stereotypes.[60] Where Squires reveals this to be particularly damaging is in the case of female authors (especially female debut authors) who are marketed solely in terms of their male national counterparts. A prime example is Arundhati Roy, whose debut Booker Prizewinning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997) saw her repeatedly categorized as 'the female answer to Vikram Seth.'[61] Elsewhere, Roy was consistently discussed in relation to Salman Rushdie, despite the manifold differences between the two authors (not least their vastly differing styles; the fact that Rushdie is British-Indian and moved to the UK when he was very young; the fact that Rushdie is a man). So it is important to question whether the notion of a Joycean McBride is in fact just another, problematic version of the same.

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[56] Fish, *Is There a Text,* 14.
[57] Squires, *Marketing Literature,* 62.
[58] Enright, 'Review'.
[59] Squires, *Marketing Literature,* 142.
[60] Ibid., 121.

In November 2013, *Girl* was awarded the inaugural Goldsmith's Prize – an award specifically established to champion experimental fiction. After this, the novel was bought, re-packaged and re-published by Faber & Faber, and went on to win the 2014 Bailey's Prize for Women's Fiction, as well as a host of other awards. As such, it garnered attention from almost every review outlet, almost all of which mentioned Joyce. Though already quoted above, *The Observer*'s review is particularly interesting in this context, as it describes how McBride: 'display[s] huge ambition at a time when female writers are too often consigned – or consign themselves – to the chick-lit category. She set out to pick up the experimental modernist baton from James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and she has done just that.'[62] Firstly, this pronouncement is worth noting given the reviewer seems to believe female writers are somehow responsible for 'consigning themselves' to certain labels. Secondly, in situating McBride (yet again) alongside Joyce and Beckett, the reviewer seems oblivious to the fact that this does not represent some kind of successful 'liberation' of McBride from a lesser, gendered realm, but in fact represents her consignment to yet another, definitively gendered category – one where her work may be taken more 'seriously,' but only in terms of how it compares with her masculine predecessors. Elsewhere, James Wood, writing for the *New Yorker* (*Girl* was eventually published in the US in 2015) actively counters anyone who attempts to commend McBride as a unique talent in her own right: 'British reviews have emphasized the novelty of McBride's style. But to call it a new "style from scratch," as one did, may be excessive. Apart from the obvious Joycean influence, there is the example of Faulkner, and of Beckett.'[63] So yet again, McBride is tethered to these deceased males, as a troubling pattern begins to emerge.

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[61] Ibid., 139.

[62] O'Keeffe, 'Review'.

[63] Wood, 'Review'.

In a recent talk entitled ‘Revolutions in Literature,’ McBride was invited to reflect on this pattern. In her typically down-to-earth manner, she admitted:

> I understand why, certainly with *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, critics particularly used Joyce because it was a way of being able to speak about it.… I can see that Joyce is a shorthand, it’s a way of talking about particularly Irish writers who are interested in modernism or interested in language and using language in different ways.[64]

This point is certainly a valid one, and McBride is not the first to foreground the plethora of default terms which are employed when discussing what might be deemed ‘modernist’ work. Indeed, just as *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature* begins by clarifying how ‘experimental,’ ‘avant-garde,’ and ‘innovative’ have been and will continue to be used interchangeably (despite their varying connotations), so too can ‘modernist’ and ‘Joycean’ serve as lazy, catch-all terms for anyone who appears to be ‘making it new.’ That said, even if we allow for this initial struggle to classify McBride’s radically unique debut, given the novel’s phenomenal success it could surely be argued the McBride managed to carve out a fresh new territory of her own, and was now in a position to be appreciated in her own right.

In 2016, then, McBride published her eagerly-anticipated second novel *The Lesser Bohemians.* As with any follow-up to a tremendously successful debut, readers and reviewers were always going to be compelled to compare and contrast the new book with its predecessor, although at least this posed an opportunity for McBride to be framed in terms of her own back catalogue, and not just in terms of her literary forefathers. To begin, it is worth noting that there are a number of parallels between *The Lesser Bohemians* and *Girl.* Tracing the exploits of eighteen-year old Irish virgin Eily as she arrives to London, the novel once more interrogates issues of sexuality, consent, female promiscuity and abuse. However, while there are again a number of troubling moments in the novel, there is also a lot more joy than in *Girl* – a great deal of energy and sex and friendship and inerbriation – all of which is conveyed through McBride’s uniquely-fragmented, verbally-syncopated style. What this does, then, is further problematizes Reynolds earlier assertion that McBride’s stylistic decisions serve purely as strategies for dealing with traumatic subject matter. For in *The Lesser Bohemians,* even the scenes of ecstasy and intimacy are told in this same way.

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[64] McBride, ‘Revolutions.’

Furthermore, what is arguably the most traumatic sequence of the book – when Eily's boyfriend Stephen spends seventy pages recounting his utterly horrific childhood – is actually written in plain, experiment-free prose. So the concept of McBride's modernist style as an 'armor' or 'buffer' becomes even more difficult to uphold.

Jacqueline Rose, when reviewing *The Lesser Bohemians* for the *London Review of Books*, likewise charts the various ways in which the novel ultimately differs from *Girl,* citing a 'shift of place, of tone and mood' which surely 'should put paid to the idea that, in her second novel, McBride has repeated herself.'[65] Rose also points out how McBride's second novel differs from so much of the literary canon given the vast quantity of sex it contains. And yet, McBride has revealed how this fact meant the book fell victim to some rather unpleasant gender politics. In an interview with the *Irish Times*, for example, she describes how male critics were 'sniggery' about *The Lesser Bohemians*, making remarks to the effect of 'Oh, her knickers are a character all in themselves, they come up and down so many times.'[66] McBride admits she was embarrassed by this at first, but then decided: 'No, you are the reason that I am writing books like this. It's that kind of attitude, because you know what? I'm really sick of having to live to the agenda of angry men.'[67]

Rose's review cites a whole range of influences and echoes in the text – from Joyce and Beckett (of course), to Edna O'Brien, Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein.[68] There is also some Shakespeare, some Hannah Arendt, some May Sinclair, as well as a rather bizarre – and frankly, given the context, rather unfortunate – reference to *Bridget Jones*. However, elsewhere it appears that, even now, most critics seem incapable of – or, perhaps, unwilling to – look beyond McBride's male modernist predecessors. Malcolm Forbes, writing for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune,* insists: '*The Lesser Bohemians* recalls Samuel Beckett and Henry Miller;'[69] Scott Simon, writing for *NPR* declares the novel to be 'Joycean … filled with intricate, imaginative wordplay,'[70] while Claire Fallon in the *Huffington Post* celebrates how 'Eimear McBride, with her deployment of modernist technique reminiscent of James Joyce, elicits such a mental state throughout her new novel, *The Lesser Bohemians* — really, it's the only way to read it.'[71] So it seems Reynolds's 'patriarchal structures and practices' are as present as ever.

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[65] Rose, 'Review'.
[66] McBride, interview by Catherine Conroy.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Rose, 'Review'.
[69] Forbes, 'Review'.
[70] Simon, 'Review'.

Even McBride herself has admitted that while the endless comparison to Joyce initially left her 'flattered and gobsmacked,' by now she can recognize that there is a danger to it too: 'I think it can be obstructive as well, that people then only look at the ways in which it's like Joyce, or consider that it's kind of sub-Joyce because it's not doing what he's doing, rather than really realising that it's doing something different.'[72] Once again she tries desperately to point out how her work has evolved from the stream of consciousness tradition – a point she has made on countless occasions – before admitting that 'it does drive me round the bend a bit. Because it's a way of not being seen as well.'[73] The pertinent wording of this conclusion recalls the silencing of experimental women writers – and indeed, of all women – as well as the historical maleness of both the Irish and modernist literary canons. Furthermore, it also reminds us that even while McBride – whom Anne Enright has declared 'that old fashioned thing, a genius'[74] – forges her career, she finds herself relentlessly eclipsed by her male forefathers.

So this reveals an aspect of 'resurgent modernism' that has not yet been discussed – an important and damaging reality that must be added to the conversation. For while James and others may celebrate examining precisely 'why modernist impulses remain so politically enabling,'[75] it must be acknowledged that the constant confinement of certain writers to this modernist framework can in fact prove politically disabling too. As McBride herself laments: 'The Joyce thing has become problematic.'[76]

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[71] Fallon, 'Review'.
[72] McBride, 'Revolutions.'
[73] Ibid.
[74] Enright, 'Review'.
[75] James, *Modernist Futures,* 2.
[76] McBride, interview by Kate Kellaway.

Conclusion

James and Seshagiri conclude their controversial 'Metamodernism' article with the following assertion: 'As modernist practices continue to cross literary-historical and cultural frontiers, our conversations about the movement's twentieth-century genesis will enrich our conversations about its twenty-first-century regenerations.'[77] While arguments against the notion of such a specific 'genesis' will not cease, this essay has revealed how, in the case of Ireland, James and Seshagiri's claims can yet prove productive. By focusing on Eimear McBride, an author who is yet to receive the full critical attention she deserves, it becomes clear that the turbulent state of contemporary Ireland not only directly recalls that of the nation's 'twentieth-century genesis,' but has once again given rise to a wave of exciting and recognizably modernist authors. That said, where critics *have* begun to notice a significant difference in this wave, is in its high proportion of female authors. Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahaja, for example, recently described how 'the current moment in Irish women's writing is marked by excess and energy,' citing experimentation as 'a marked feature' of this work.[78] Meanwhile, Anne Enright explains how 'traditionally, Irish writing has been about breaking silences [and] the biggest silence has continued to be about the real lives of women,' whereas recently, there has been 'a confidence in female voices that I haven't seen ever before.'[79] However, in analyzing the way in which these new 'modernist' female voices are being marketed and evaluated by the literary world, this essay reveals how another type of 'silencing' can in fact occur, subjecting them to the kind of patriarchal frameworks their work deliberately attempts to write back against. In this way, this essay sounds a warning note to all conversations surrounding 'resurgent modernism,' one which must surely effect future readings and methodologies alike.

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[77] James and Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism', 97.
[78] Bracken and Harney-Mahaja, 'A Continuum', 8.
[79] Enright quoted in Jordan, 'A new Irish literary boom'.

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