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Unrepressing Fundamental Questions

Experiment in Contemporary Irish Fiction

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Ik verklaar me akkoord met de code of conduct van de faculteit Letteren voor geloofwaardig auteurschap.

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Introduction

After the heydays of experimental fiction in the twentieth century, literary experiment fell into a slumber while lyrical realism dominated the literary field. Authors expressed their feelings of exhaustion concerning postmodernist obscurantism, detachment and pretentiousness and turned therefore again to the conventional realist novel from the nineteenth century. Soon, however, writers realised that they did not need to take a step back but forward, which, predominantly in the case of American literature, led them into the direction of post-postmodernism. Their inspiration was revived by the proliferate changes in the 21st society, sparked off by the digitalisation of capitalist culture and the rise of the Internet, which translated into innumerable literary experiments with the medium of the book, with technology and with the new media.

Notwithstanding the rapid evolution of media-saturated experiment, Irish experimental fiction chose a different path. It burst from its winter sleep and came alive with the most radiant, sincere and dynamic forms of literary experiment. It became, not modernist nor postmodernist, but contemporary, which, according to Terry Smith,

> emerges from within the conditions of contemporaneity, including the remnants of the cultures of modernity and postmodernity, but which projects itself through and around these, as an art of that which actually *is* in the world, of what it is to *be* in the world, and of that which is to come.
>
> (Smith 2006: 692)

Furthermore, contemporary Irish literature confutes not only the assumption that Irish fiction pivots on realism and is less formally experimental as literature in the United Kingdom or United States, but it also invalidates the presumption that experimental fiction is an exclusively male enclave. With their highly acclaimed, experimental debuts, emerging female Irish authors Sara Baume, Eimear McBride and Claire-Louise Bennett break the sequence.

In this thesis, I will analyse literary experiment in three contemporary Irish works (two of which are a novel and one of which is arguably a short story collection), notably *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* by Sara Baume, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimear McBride and *Pond* by Claire-Louise Bennett. Before that, I will give a give a short conceptual and contextual background, which will delineate the concept of literary experiment and offer a limited overview of experimental fiction in history (and more precisely modernist and

postmodernist literature), followed by a concise summary of experimental tendencies in contemporary fiction. The next three chapters will then explore the three case studies with a specific focus on literary experiment, thereby asking the questions as to what extent they use modernist, postmodernist or entirely new fictional techniques and which specific purposes these literary experiments serve. Finally, I will conclude by making some generalisations based on my analysis of the three novels about literary experiment in contemporary Irish fiction.

Chapter 1: Experiment in Fiction

> The word *experimental* is a contested and historically contingent term when applied to fiction. Many readers, writers and critics are unsure about giving fiction the label *experimental*, and as a consequence, there are many questions that need to be fully considered before the label can be applied to literary works.
>
> (Armstrong 2014: 1)

As Julie Armstrong points out, the notion of experimental fiction is so inconclusive that it defies any simple definition. A first complication arises with respect to the relation between literary experiment and literary innovation and the question whether the former unequivocally implies the latter. Another question concerns the correlation between experimental fiction and the assessment of literary value: does experiment in writing exclusively appertain to highbrow fiction? Does the label serve as legitimation for writers or rather as categorisation for reviewers? The literary debate has yet to reach a consensus on the intricately layered concept of experimental fiction.

The fathomless depths of literary experiment do, however, allow for some generalisations. Experiment in fiction seeks to expand the horizon of artistic practice and to reflect on the sum and substance of literature and verbal art in general. As Bray, Gibbons and McHale in *The Routledge to Experimental Literature* argue, mainstream literature tends to repress rudimentary questions concerning the inherent characteristics of literature, while experimental literature

> *unrepresses* these fundamental questions, and in doing so it lays everything open to challenge, reconceptualization and reconfiguration. Experimentation makes alternatives visible and conceivable, and some of these alternatives become the foundations for future developments, whole new ways of writing, some of which eventually filter into the mainstream itself. Experiment is one of the engines of literary change and renewal; it is literature's way of reinventing itself.
>
> (Bray, Gibbons and McHale 2012: 1)

Experimental fiction thus plays with, or even flouts, narrative conventions. According to the Goldsmiths Prize, the most prestigious literary prize devoted to experimental fiction, literary experiment strives for "an eccentric deviation from the novel's natural concerns, structures and idioms" ("About the prize"). These experiments, although ground-breaking in their own period and culture, eventually (yet not necessarily) percolate into standard literary practice, to which new experimental literature in its turn forms a challenge.

Literary criticism generally defines experimental fiction in relation to traditional realist literature. In *Experimental Fiction: An Introduction for Readers and Writers*, Armstrong explains the relationship between realist and experimental fiction in terms of the mimetic and synthetic dimension of literature. The former predominantly pervades realist fiction, which endeavours to "reproduce the *real* world in the imagined world of fiction" in an attempt to "engage a reader's emotions and bring about empathy" (2014: 4). The latter prevails in experimental literature, which seeks to "subvert a sense of the *normal*" in order to "provoke the reader to consider ideas and concepts" (5) through experiment with form, typography, genre and discourses. In other words, realist fiction aims for lifelikeness in its creation of the story-world, whereas experimental literature presents a deliberately distorted picture of reality. Consequently, the former invites the reader to immerse him- or herself completely in the fictional realm, while the latter draws attention to the constructedness of the fictional world, thereby initiating a heightened awareness of both the writing and reading process. Yet, Armstrong concludes, experimental fiction may, paradoxically, resemble real life the most "in that *real* life is tangled, non-linear and complex; it refuses to be packaged into simplistic plots" (6).

In her essay "Two Paths for the Novel" (2008), Zadie Smith similarly sets up an opposition between lyrical realism and experimental fiction, represented by Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* respectively. Lyrical realism, for Smith, celebrates "the transcendent importance of form, the incantatory power of language to reveal truth, the essential fullness and continuity of the self." Authenticity only resides in one's own subjectivity and the personal is therefore assiduously aestheticized for "everything must be made literature." The realist idea that "the random detail confers the authenticity of the Real" thus translates into "adjectival mania" and "voracious image," resulting merely in "a nicely constructed sentence, rich in sound and syntax, signifying (almost) nothing." Experimental fiction, by contrast, seeks to constructively deconstruct nineteenth-century literary conventions, thereby offering an alternative path. The experimental novel "empties out interiority entirely" for everyone's actions and relations with reality are utterly inauthentic.

Meticulous attention to detail remains, yet, in the sense that "every detail is attended to except the one we've come think of as the only one that matters in a novel: how it *feels*." Experimental fiction thus offers "a series of physical events, rather than emotional symbols." In conclusion, Zadie Smith casts a strong light upon "the fundamental division between those who want to extinguish matter and elevate it to form (…) and those who want to let matter *matter*."

1.1 Experiment in History

The following overview will broadly outline the general evolution of literary experiment, primarily focusing on modernist and postmodernist fiction in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Experimental fiction first peaked in the twentieth century with the emergence of the avant-garde movements, yet a few individual authors experimented with literary conventions in their fiction before this period. In this respect, Bray, Gibbons and McHale (2012: 2) refer to the *essais* or "try-outs" of Michel de Montaigne in the sixteenth century and the eighteenth-century paragon of experimental literature, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne. Experimental fiction, however, truly set off with Emile Zola's nineteenth-century naturalist novels, in which he adapted the model of scientific experiment (Bray, Gibbons, McHale 2012: 2). Zola found inspiration in Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médicine expérimentale* (1865). Following scientific examples, Zola wanted to write literature via observation and experimentation. He considered the experimental novel "la littérature de notre âge scientifique" (Zola 1881: 22), while naturalism defined itself through the experimental method and observation. The naturalistic novel was therefore a scientific, yet literary, experiment (Ghesquière 2008: 144) according to Zola, who proved to be hugely influential on the avant-garde movements of the following century.

a. Modernism

The early-twentieth-century artistic movements, grouped under the term 'modernism', are famous for their reaction against artistic conventions and traditions they considered out-dated. Different avant-garde movements (such as Futurism, Expressionism, Dada and Surrealism, and Existentialism and Absurdism) proudly claimed the label "experimental" as they experimented with syntax and typography, thus considering art a game (Meylaerts 2014). This poetics of art for art's sake spread through the whole of Europe, but the following synopsis will mainly focus on the United Kingdom and Ireland.

English modernism emerges at the end of the nineteenth century when Victorian values were under attack, among others by Thomas Hardy. In his poem "The Darkling Thrush" (1900), he announces the decline of the old world and consequently the beginning of a new, modern era (Ramazani and Stallworthy 2012: 1888). Modernism thus sought to "express modern life as a break from the past and its classical traditions" (Armstrong 2014: 15). Additionally, the emergence of the popular press and its mass readership in the late nineteenth century had changed the literary field for publishers, writers and readers. As Armstrong points out:

> Modernism can be seen as a response to the condition of modernity, a transformation that swept through the arts in response to the huge developments in technology, science and psychology and the social and ideological changes in beliefs, systems, ways of life and attitudes to class structures and values – the new mapping of landscapes and frontiers.
>
> (Armstrong 2014: 17-18)

Consequently, modernist literature sought to mirror the chaos in twentieth-century society, for which a traditional realist framework was no longer deemed credible. Modernist authors therefore rejected realist fiction and the Victorian novel, while experimenting with different literary techniques and forms as alternatives to the conventional plot (19). In other words, fiction underwent a modernist linguistic turn, which comprised, on the one hand, the dismissal of "the Victorians' realist project" and, on the other hand, "the rejection of materialist externality" (Ramazani and Stallworthy 2012: 1903).

Modernist authors wrote in a framework of shattered beliefs and the breakdown of grand narratives, which previously determined the traditional plot of the nineteenth-century Western novel (1901). Whereas the realist novel was embedded in a fairly stable Victorian worldview, "the modernist narrative refuses to mimic a plot resolution it finds missing in the real" (Weinstein 2005: 6-7). Consequently, notions of dramatic tension, suspense and closed endings make way for irresolute open endings, the fragmentation of form, and the disruption of linearity and causality. This then translates into plotless novels and formal experimentation (Armstrong 2014: 19). Additionally, while realism holds that "the representational field of space and time and others that its protagonist moves through corresponds to the objective world itself", modernism seeks to subvert this concept. As a result, the realist concern for an accurate mirroring of reality gives way to a modernist interest in the "representation of the

process of representation" (19). Thus, modernist literature poses self-reflexive questions concerning the act of representation in an attempt to make it more true to other dimensions of life, previously ignored in Victorian fiction.

Notwithstanding the modernist scepticism of grand narratives, modernist fiction still displays a belief in the true representation of reality. Rather than doing this by a focus on the objective, exterior reality, it represents life by a focus on the subjective experience of reality. While previously fiction zoomed out, modernist literature zooms in, as Woolf argues: "Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small" (1984: 161). Accordingly, modernist literature no longer accentuates narrative events, but rather foregrounds the psychology of its characters (Armstrong 2014: 20). In this respect, the classic authoritative narrator of the nineteenth-century Victorian novel is no longer considered competent to represent twentieth-century reality. Modernist fiction therefore foregrounds the unreliable narrator, who "dramatized the struggle to know, penetrate, and interpret reality, with his large rhetoric of the invisible, inaudible, impossible, unintelligible, and so unsayable" (Ramazani and Stallworthy 2012: 1902). In other modernist texts, the focus on inward life results in the use of personal narration, whereby the narrator gives way to one or more characters. The inner thoughts of these characters are rendered by means of free indirect discourse, which, if kept up for long stretches or even an entire novel, became known as stream of consciousness or interior monologue. The foregoing new forms all serve to reflect characters' "existential loneliness" (1902) and their attempt to grapple with the decline of the old world and the emergence of the modern world.

b. Postmodernism

In the second half of the twentieth century, postmodernism became the dominant new mode in the literary and wider cultural field. The term gathers various artistic and cultural movements that are a reaction to, or rather consequence of, postmodernity. Armstrong defines postmodernity as the new political, economic and sociocultural condition following modernity, which pertains to the dissolution of Soviet communism and the restructuring of capitalism. The result is "an increasingly post-industrial, information, service-oriented age, one where new forms of communication technology have altered the routines and relationships of everyday lives" (Armstrong 2014: 97). Postmodernism is undoubtedly a fluid term with many definitions and ambiguities, as Brian McHale points out: "One of the conventions of writing about postmodernism is to acknowledge (or boast?) that nothing about

the subject is certain, resolved or uncontentious" (Bray, Gibbons, McHale 2012: 141). Postmodernism is mostly defined in its relationship to modernism, both in terms of differences and of similarities.

Literary critics regard postmodernism either as an extension of or break with modernism (Armstrong 2014: 99). Tim Woods describes postmodernism as "a *knowing* modernism, a *self-reflexive* modernism" (1999: 8), which merely assumes a different mood or attitude rather than a radically altered poetics. Jean-François Lyotard, however, propounds a shift in attitude towards meta-narratives or grand narratives. While the modern subject still gives credence to the ideals of the Enlightenment, the postmodern critic exchanges these values for performativity in a technical and commercial framework (Armstrong 2014: 100). In *La Condition Postmoderne* (1979), Lyotard describes how postmodern cynicism towards overarching narratives results in a plurality of small narratives that "do not attempt to present an overarching 'Truth' but offer a qualified, limited 'truth', one relative to a particular situation" (Nicol 2009: 12). Consequently, postmodern fiction signals this fragmented plurality in its form, style and theme by replacing the realist master-narrative with "individual, localized stories" (12). The crisis in grand narratives also percolates into postmodern literature, which attempts to represent the unrepresentable without following a grand, underlying scheme. To draw on Lyotard:

> A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*.
>
> (Lyotard 1984: 81)

While modernist literature still held on to a belief in a faithful representation of life, postmodern fiction radically undermines the idea that any 'truthful' representation of reality is possible.

The evolution from modernism to postmodernism not only comprises a shift from belief to disbelief, but also from modern *consciousness* to postmodern *fictionality* (Waugh 1984: 14), which "refers to the condition of being fictional, that is to say, the condition of

being constructed, narrated, mediated" (Nicol 2009: xvii). Metafiction is not exclusively, but nevertheless predominantly present in postmodernist fiction, which achieves a higher degree of self-reflexivity than realist and modernist literature. Metafictional techniques in postmodern fiction, Lee Konstantinou (2016) explains, "draw attention to practices of reading and writing, often by exposing how worlds of fiction are embedded within higher-order fictional worlds." Consequently, postmodern novelists both question fiction's relation to reality and expose fiction as fiction, thereby raising self-reflexive questions with regard to the writer, the reader and the narrative itself (Armstrong 2014: 106).

Other characteristics of postmodern fiction include irony, intertextuality and pluralism, as discussed by Armstrong (103-105). Firstly, an element of play and irony pervades postmodern fiction, which experiments with bricolage or the construction of something new out of previous works. Secondly, postmodernism often uses the practice of rewriting, an intertextual technique whereby authors rewrite known stories from a new and challenging perspective. Thirdly, postmodern fiction defies unity by celebrating plurality as it replaces the realist coherent self with a set of simultaneous, overlapping narratives. Meaning is therefore never fixed, but constantly shifting and susceptible to new interpretations. Postmodern fiction consequently contains multiple fragmented images, which often render the work ambiguous. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*, Bran Nicol summarizes the most salient features of postmodern fiction, as follows: firstly, postmodern literature entails "a self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text's own status as constructed, aesthetic artefact" (2009: xvi), secondly, it offers "an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional 'world'" (xvi) and, finally, it shows "a tendency to draw the reader's attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text" (xvi).

Additionally, postmodern literature poses a challenge to "the psychological realism central to realist fiction" (Armstrong 2014: 102), even more so than modernist fiction. Indeed, postmodernism opposes any form of continuity, thereby generating fragmented, dislocated and abstract fiction that includes short, disparate and self-contained narratives. As postmodernity offers a more fluid and multidimensional perspective on reality, postmodern literature confutes the idea of stability and fixed meaning through the use of textual gap. Realist fiction, Armstrong argues, achieves "an unproblematic relationship between the actual world and what the world evokes," while postmodern fiction maintains "no correspondence between the signifier and the signified" (102). Furthermore, in its attempt to separate fiction from reality, postmodernism shows the influence of post-structuralism. Jean Baudrillard

proposes the idea that elements in a system find meaning, not in their relation to something outside it, but rather in their relation to other elements within the same structure. With regard to literature, postmodern fiction implies that "specific words in a literary text mean what they mean because of how they relate to other words in the text and to other literary text rather than how they relate to the real world" (Nicol 2009: 7). As a result, literature and the realm of language become independent from the non-literary world.

Finally, Armstrong (2014: 106-108) discusses some of the similarities and differences between modernist and postmodern fiction. Firstly, postmodern authors playfully foreground fragmentation as a celebration of the freedom from fixed truths and beliefs. Postmodern literature consequently experiments with eclecticism, which involves an anarchically combining of different styles, genres, discourses and techniques, as well as of high and popular cultural forms. Modernist writers, by contrast, lament fragmentation and see it as symbolic of the disintegration of meaning and value. Modernist fiction therefore does not identify with popular culture, but instead distances itself from the popular. Secondly, the modernist aspiration for a prevalent, yet elusive truth is left behind in postmodern literature, which more fundamentally "questions the possibility of saying something truthful in a world where there is no longer an agreement on what truth or reality is" (107). Thirdly, modernism ponders epistemological questions concerning the manner in which reality can be known, whereas postmodernism raises ontological questions whether reality is knowable at all. In conclusion, postmodernism follows in the footsteps of modernism, but adopts a celebratory attitude rather than showing an inclination for pessimism and nostalgia, as explained by Armstrong:

> Modernism's multiplication of perspectives can be seen as leading to postmodernism's dispersion of voices, and modernism's collage can be seen as leading to postmodernism's self-conscious genre-splicing and mixing. In addition, the deconstruction of signs and their reconstruction allows the modern writer to create new meaning through juxtaposition. In contrast, postmodern fiction, by its very practice of playful fragmentation and intertextuality, collapses all meaning.
>
> (Armstrong 2014: 108)

1.2. Experiment in Contemporary Fiction

The following overview of the most recent developments in literary experiment will not entail an exhaustive inventory as there is little research conducted on this topic due to its relative novelty. Nevertheless, as Armstrong states, there is a new tendency in contemporary fiction, which emerges as a reaction to postmodernism:

> Currently, there is a wave of fiction which appears to be reacting to the shallowness of postmodern fiction; this new wave asks big questions such as, What is the meaning of life? It is fiction that is searching for meaning and something to believe in whilst also acknowledging the spiritual
>
> (Armstrong 2014: 159)

In reaction to postmodern literature that is "all surface, no depth" (165), the New Era fiction embraces philosophical question with regard to purpose in life. It is preoccupied with inner consciousness and explores its characters' minds, thus encouraging the reader to actively look for a meaning that defies the *old* values of religious doctrine. A central element in the New Era fiction is the concept of spirituality, in an attempt to find the meaning of life (167). As regards the form, contemporary literature shows traces of technology and social media, for instance in fiction with a plurality of authors (160). Additionally, contemporary authors experiment with anti-novels built from scraps by composing their fiction from scraps of different discourses from other media (181). Finally, the new fiction frequently displays the second-person perspective in a spare, factual language (172).

Literary critics such as Jennifer Rohn and Courtney Traub give prominence to the emergence of new genres in the literary field that respond to the threat of global warming. Due to the prevalence of science and the rise of technology, emerging genres like lab-lit and cli-fi (i.e. lab literature and climate fiction respectively) come to the foreground. The former includes "realistic novels that contain scientists as central characters plying their trade" (Rohn 2010: 552), while the latter uses formal experimentation to represent *unrepresentable* ecological and technological crisis (Traub 2016: 30). Both genres respond to actual evolutions in present-day reality, but lab-lit uses realism to depict this changing climate whereas cli-fi deploys formal experiment.

The anthology edited by Bray, Gibbons and McHale, *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, includes essays on specific literary experiments in contemporary fiction. In "Unnatural voices, minds, and narration" (2012: 351-367), Alber, Nielsen and

Richardson argue that unnatural narratives have become more popular. This type of experimental fiction offers a critique on narrative conventions and a challenge to the aesthetic experience and thus widens the cognitive horizon of the reader. It subverts "the presuppositions of nonfictional narratives" as well as "the practices of realism or other poetics that model themselves on nonfictional narratives, and that transcend the conventions of existing, established genres" (Richardson 2016: 389). Examples include "we" narration, animal narration, dead narration and homodiegetic narration with zero focalisation. In some cases, previously unnatural narrative techniques, such as the omniscient narrator or the first-person present tense, have developed into standardised conventions and are therefore no longer considered "unnatural."

In her essay "Impossible worlds" (Bray, Gibbons, McHale 2012: 368-379), Marie-Laure Ryan introduces the poetics of impossible worlds, which extends the possible beyond the natural. Consequently, whereas realist fiction adheres to the principle of minimal departure or the reality principle, literature with impossible worlds follows the principle of maximal departure, which "offers no guidance for making inferences and filling in the blanks in the text" (376). Some instances of impossible narrative forms comprise contradiction, ontological impossibility, impossible space, impossible time and impossible texts. These different types of experimental literature emphasise the narrative process, thereby foregrounding the meta-textual dimension of fiction, and thus force the reader to critically reflect on conventional narratives.

In "Post-Postmodernism" (212-223), Robert McLaughlin describes post-postmodernism as a popular movement in American fiction in the late 1980s. This new tendency reacts to postmodernism and the growing prevalence of television in popular culture. Where postmodernism foregrounded the fragmentation of the self, the breakdown of metanarratives and the deconstruction of language, post-postmodernism celebrates realism and minimalism à la Raymond Carver, in that it de-emphasises formal experimentation and reemphasises "a more stylistically translucent representation of the world" (216). In doing so, the post-postmodern fiction seeks to "reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real" (213).

In "Altermodernist Fiction" (238-252), Alison Gibbons proposes another form of post-postmodernism, i.e. altermodernism. This "literature of our contemporary globalized world" (251) entails a return to or reclamation of modernism and additionally evokes an "aesthetics of heterochrony" (Bourriaud 2009: 21). Altermodernist authors take a different approach than post-postmodernist writers in that their poetics comprise formal experimentation, a

heterochronic temporality, and a fluidity of identities. These three aspects are inherently intertwined and consequently reach a certain level of polychrony. "In altermodernist fiction," as Gibbons argues, "form, time, and identity, are intertwined in an intricate narrative network, a polysemous archipelago" (Bray, Gibbons, McHale 2012: 252).

Experimental fiction in the twenty-first century additionally reacts to the expeditious rise of technology and, more specifically, the Internet. Pressman (2009) draws attention to a new literary strategy called "the aesthetics of bookishness" as a result of the so-called "death of the book" in the digital age. While people are said to read fewer books as they turn more and more to e-readers, computers and laptops, writers such as Steven Hall want to cast a new light on the power of the print page and the book as a multimedia format by experimenting with media-specific properties of print. In this way, "literature retains a central role in our emergent technoculture as a space for aesthetic expression and cultural critique."

While the aesthetics of bookishness foregrounds medium-specific properties of the print page, conceptual authors such as Kenneth Goldsmith incorporate digital styles and techniques of the Internet in their fiction. In books like *Soliloquy* (1997) and *Day* (2003), Goldsmith represents conceptual or uncreative writing. This media-based poetics adheres to the motto "the world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more" (2011: 1). As the rise of the Internet age completely transformed and deflated traditional concepts of creativity and originality, the "unoriginal genius" (a term coined by Marjorie Perloff) uses writing techniques, previously considered unliterary, such as "word processing, databasing, recycling, appropriation, intentional plagiarism, identity ciphering, and intensive programming" (2). Uncreative writing thus scrapes words from the Internet and recycles them, thereby making no claim on originality. Rather, conceptual writers propose that "context is the new content" (3). This cut-and-paste method is, however, not completely exempt from subjectivity and creativity for "the suppression of self-expression is impossible," according to Goldsmith, who states that "even when we do something as seemingly "uncreative" as retyping a few pages, we express ourselves in a variety of ways" (9).

Finally, four post-ironic movements seek to move beyond postmodernism in a return to sentimentalism. As David Foster Wallace argues in his essay "E Unibus Pluram" (1990), postmodernist scepticism and self-reflexive irony have become so ubiquitous in popular consumer culture that it triggered a counter-reaction in literature. This new school, frequently referred to as post-postmodernism and associated with Dave Eggers' *McSweeney's Quarterly*, signals a return to reality, communication and the author. In its shift from irony to belief, this new movement nevertheless continues to use postmodern techniques. In his essay "Human,

All Too Inhuman" (2000), James Wood coined the term "hysterical realism" as a combination of postmodern playfulness and a belief in human connection. The following four movements signal this dialectical opposition and attempt to reconcile postmodern detachment with post-postmodern commitment.

Firstly, Tim Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker propose a new poetics, which is not so much a set of rules, but rather a structure of feeling, called metamodernism:

> Ontologically, metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.
>
> (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010)

Metamodernism is a combination of postmodern irony and a non-postmodern commitment to the world, between postmodern scepticism and a form of seriousness prevalent in contemporary literature. The basic attitude is one of "informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism." Metamodernism is on the one hand critical of the truth, but on the other hand attempts to find it in spite of its inevitable failure. In this sense, it seeks to "pursue a horizon that is forever receding." A key term in metamodernism is oscillation: it is the oscillation between modern commitment and postmodern detachment, between belief and irony. As Vermeulen and van den Akker express it: "The metamodern is constituted by the tension, no, the double-bind, of a modern desire for *sens* and a postmodern doubt about the sense of it all."

Secondly, Adam Kelly describes a new tendency in literature, i.e. the poetics of the New Sincerity as represented in the work of David Foster Wallace. In an interview, Wallace states that as a contemporary artist he seeks to identify "not just what's true for me as a person, but what's gonna sound true – what's going to hit readers or music-listeners (…) as true in 2006, or 200, or 1995" (qtd. in Kelly 2010: 135). In the postmodern world, "vastly more complicated, difficult, cynical and over-hyped than it used to be" (135), being authentic is impossible as our identity is based on the way other's perception of us. As a result, we base our actions on the anticipated effect and interiority consequently becomes an effect of this anticipatory logic. The New Sincerity writers do not attempt to abolish this recursive cycle of endless anticipation, but rather aim for sincerity in a cultural context where belief in the relation between interiority and external behaviour is no longer credible. As Kelly points out,

"sincerity must involve 'intent' but cannot involve 'motive.'" (140). Authors therefore abandon themselves to their audience as they implicate the reader in the literature process, which means that the novel is not a self-contained unit, but its meaning depends on the reader's participation. In short, the novel needs the reader to function as a novel.

Thirdly, Irmtraud Huber (2014) observes how the epistemological concern of modernism and the ontological focus of postmodernism eventually move to the background, while the pragmatic structure of the mode becomes the dominant. The pragmatic aspect of contemporary fiction foregrounds "the role genre (or mode, for that matter) plays in structuring reader expectation and response" and thus contemplates the *effect* of the text on the reader (12). Contemporary fiction turns away from postmodernism to the mimetic stance of realism as it "reclaims its fictional world as coextensive with experiential reality", while remaining conscious of "the constructed nature of its testimonial claims" (22). In this regard, contemporary authors show a reinforced commitment to realism, while keeping the dialogue with postmodernism ongoing:

> On the one hand, the conscious engagement with, but transformation of, postmodernist attitudes, as an act of impossible rebellion against revolution; on the other, a fiction that is no longer centrally concerned with unmasking, dissolving, subverting and unsettling, but sets out to gradually displace postmodernism's fantastic paranoia by attempts to reconstruct, (re-)connect, communicate and engage.
>
> (Huber 2014: 24)

Fourthly, Nicoline Timmer introduces what she calls the "Post-Postmodern Syndrome" (2010). Contemporary fiction moves away from the postmodern perspective on subjectivity and shows "the empathic expression of feelings and sentiments, a drive towards inter-subjective connection and communication, and also a sense of 'presence' and 'sameness.'" (15). In their experimental fiction, contemporary authors explore a new sense of the self, which can be seen as *relational*. In this respect, post-postmodernist fiction signals a shift from solipsistic postmodernist subjectivity to communicative bonding. The contemporary novel depicts characters that undergo a 'narrative breakdown,' which calls for new narrative strategies or discursive practices. An important element in post-postmodern fiction is intersubjectivity and the need for sociality and inclusiveness, while a 'what if' mentality or 'willingness to believe' pervades contemporary fiction. Even though postmodern

techniques function as ‘realistic’ devices, the contemporary novel signals ‘a turn to the human’ with a focus on empathy and a ‘heterophenomenological’ approach (359-361).

Chapter 2: *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*

2.1. Biography: Sara Baume

Sara Baume was born on 5 May 1984 in Lancashire, England. As her father was a foreman working on old gas lines, her family lived in a caravan and constantly travelled around the country. When she was four years old, her family moved from her father's to her mother's home country and settled down in a town called Whitegate in County Cork, Ireland. Baume then studied fine art at Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design, after which she completed the MPhil in creative writing at Trinity College, Dublin (Baume 2015b). Her education thus reveals her two passions, art and literature, which for Baume go hand in hand: "First and foremost I see; I see the world and then I describe it. I don't know another way to write. I always anchor everything in an image" (Baume 2016a).

Before publishing her debut novel *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* (2015), Baume wrote online articles on visual art and later published short stories in *The Moth, The Stinging Fly* and *the Irish Independent*. One of her stories, "Solesearcher1", won the reputable Davy Byrnes Award in 2014, while her short story "Dancing, or Beginning to Dance" was awarded the Hennessy Literary Award for Emerging Fiction. One year later Baume was named the Hennessy New Irish Writer for 2015 and was granted the Lannan Literary Fellowship for Fiction. Her first novel *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* was long-listed for the Guardian First Book Award, the Warwick Prize for Writing and the Desmond Elliott Prize for New Fiction, while also being shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award. Additionally, the novel won the 2015 Rooney Prize for Irish Literature as well as the Irish Book Award for Best Newcomer, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the Kate O'Brien Award. Baume's second novel appeared in 2016, *A Line Made by Walking*, which narrates the story of Frankie, a 25-year-old Irish artists. Three years of her grandmother's death, Frankie feels depression settle in. Soon, she resigns from her job at a Dublin gallery and retreats from urban life in the capital to her deceased grandmother's bungalow situated in the Irish countryside, where she takes photographs of dead animals, which represent her own feelings of disintegration. In this way, she attempts to grapple with life through the lens of her camera (Cross 2017). Sara Baume presently lives in West Cork with her two dogs (Baume 2015d).

2.2. Spring Summer Fall Winter: Plot Summary

Spill Simmer Falter Wither narrates the story of two misfits, a man and a dog, who live in a small Irish seacoast village. The protagonist adopts the one-eyed dog, One Eye, whom he thus frees from captivity and from a life of badger hunting. In the first chapter "Spill," One Eye finds a new home with the protagonist, a fifty-seven-year-old man, who is "too old for starting over, too young for giving up" and whose name is "the same word as for sun beams, as for winged and boneless sharks" (Baume 2015a: 12). Ray lives isolated from the world in his deceased father's house, who had justified his son's secluded upbringing by claiming he had a mental disability. In reality, Ray is merely a man who is socially awkward; yet through his friendship with One Eye, he becomes more confident in social interaction. However, in "Simmer," Ray's anxiety increases and a crisis emerges as One Eye attacks a little boy. As the authorities come to claim One Eye, Ray decides to flee to protect One Eye. In the following chapter "Falter," "[they] are driving, driving, driving" (133) without every reaching a destination. Ray and One Eye wander around the country and Ray discovers the world for the first time in his life. As the wind rages on the outside, Ray's car becomes their safe haven. In "Wither," "things are freezing, freezing, freezing" (201) as Ray returns home to confront his past. The truth about the death of Ray's father unfolds: he choked on a sausage, while Ray did not interfere. Ray then buried the body in the attic, where it still rots away. When others are celebrating Christmas around the fireplace, Ray is setting his own house afire. At the end of the chapter, Ray goes to the sea and attempts to commit suicide, but in the epilogue we learn that One Eye is on his way again to rescue his friend:

> He is running, running, running.
> He is One Eye.
> He is on his way.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 278)

2.3. Voice: Second-Person Narration

One of the most striking aspects of *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* is its experimental voice. Even though the novel is a combination of second-person and first-person narration, as Baume adopts both the pronouns "you" and "I" with regard to One Eye and Ray respectively, the main focus lies on the second-person narrative. The "you"-address is the most prominent as Ray narrates his story to One Eye:

> And now I address it all to you. You who never spoke anyway. You who misunderstands almost everything. I describe the things we pass even though nothing is interesting, even though I've already mentioned it several times over, even though I know now I sound like the imbecile.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 163)

In the main body of the story, Ray functions as a homodiegetic first-person narrator, who addresses One Eye in the second person. As the story-world is perceived from Ray's perspective, he serves as the internal focalisor, while One Eye is the externally focalised object. The prologue and epilogue are exceptions as the novel additionally adopts the third-person narrative "in order to contextualise the story and give and explanation as to who this lonely man is and why he's the way he is" (Baume 2015c). The third-person narrative therefore offers a more objective, distanced perspective, which functions as a framework to the story.

Literary narratology has yet to reach a consensus on the definition of the contested concept "second-person narrative," as the term offers a challenge to standard narratological categories, such as Gérard Genette's dichotomy between homo- and heterodiegetic narration (Fludernik 2002: 226). Furthermore, second-person narration is a narrative category that both contradicts and overlaps with first- and third-person narrations as the latter "are defined along the axis of narrator", whereas the former "is defined along the axis of narratee – more precisely, by the coincidence of narratee and protagonist" (DelConte 2003: 204). In Baume's novel, the first-person narrative consists of a homodiegetic narrator, i.e. Ray, and the third-person narrative comprises a heterodiegetic narrator, while the second-person narration is defined in its address of the narratee, i.e. One Eye. Subsequently, multiple (often ambiguous) definitions of second-person narration circulate in the literary field, one of which is Matt DelConte's:

> Second-person narration is a narrative mode in which a narrator tells a story to a (sometimes undefined, shifting, and/or hypothetical) narratee – delineated by *you* – who is also the (sometimes undefined, shifting, and/or hypothetical-principal actant in that story.
>
> (DelConte 2003: 207-208)

In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, the first-person narrator (Ray) tells his story to the narratee (One Eye), whom he addresses as "you" and who occurs in the story as a principal actant. In this case, there is both a function of address and an existential link between narrator and addressee, who are both actants in the story-world (Fludernik 1993: 221).

As Phelan notes, the second-person pronoun may denote both an intradiegetic or textual "you" (i.e. the narratee-protagonist) and an extradiegetic or extratextual "you" (i.e. the flesh-and-blood reader) (1994: 350). Hence, we "oscillate in complex ways between being participants in the fictional world and in the literary world" (DelConte 2003: 206). With regard to the overlap between reader and character, Phelan argues that "the greater the characterization of the "you", the more like a standard protagonist the "you" becomes" and the less likely the reader will occupy the addressee position (1994: 351). In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, the second-person pronoun addresses One Eye, a distinctly delineated, one-eyed "copper-coated cocker spaniel" (Baume 2015a: 10) with a "mangled face" (7) and a "maggot nose" (15).

> Now that your face is healed, you have a hollow and a gaudy scar in the place where your left eye used to be. A gouge of your lower lip is missing, and it draws your mouth down to an immoveable grimace. Save for a feathery white beard from underside muzzle to uppermost nipples, you are solid black, dark as a hole in space.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 31)

Baume's novel thus specifically characterises "you" as the character One Eye (whom is never referred to as a "dog") rather than generally addressing the reader. Nevertheless, the reader finds him- or herself caught up in this world between the animal and the human. The effect is of an estrangement from the human and an identification with the animal.

The question of involvement consequently arises, because "*you*-narration employs direct address and thus creates a quasi-communicational set-up with real readers" (Mildorf 2016: 146). In this respect, Mildorf differentiates between two different functions: *communication* – "readers' feeling of being 'addressed' by *you*" – and *immersion* - "emotional engagement and potential 'identification' with characters" (156). Consequently, readers may still be emotionally involved with the characters, even if the second-person pronoun does not directly address them (156), as is the case in *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*. Baume's novel does not explicitly address the reader but that does not diminish the reader's

immersion in the story and identification with the addressed character, One Eye. Furthermore, Mildorf distinguishes between two different types of involvement, i.e. aesthetic-reflexive involvement, which "denotes a more intellectual response to, and pleasure taken from, the (often postmodern) playfulness of *you*-narration," and affective-emotional involvement, which "is close to what is otherwise labelled as 'empathy,'" (148). As Mildorf further argues, both types of involvement depend on textual cues, not solely limited to the second-person pronoun, and other factors related to the reader's own reading experiences and knowledge (148). Moreover, the question of involvement relates to the second-person pronoun and its specific functions as well as to the linguistic context of "you" and of the narrative techniques the text employs (155). In other words, Mildorf attributes the reader's possible feelings of address and identification to what McGregor calls the "interpersonal semiotic" (1997: 74) in the text's grammatical constructions and textual design rather than exclusively to the usage of the second-person pronoun (Mildorf 2016: 152).

Spill Simmer Falter Wither reinforces the address function of the second-person pronoun with various narrative techniques and linguistic devices that attempt to implicate the reader in the fictional world. An example is rhetorical questions, which both One Eye and the reader are unable to answer: "What do you think my compost smells like? Like the kind of soil a man in a factory made, like moistened rootlings and flittered bark but with an aftertaste of chemicals?" (Baume 2015a: 76). By means of such questions, Ray attempts to view life from One Eye's perspective, while this rhetorical device serves to describe the setting. Another means to set the scene is the use of the imperative mood: "Now follow me up the stairwell past the salon's partition into the upstairs hall. See my ornamental plates covering the decomposed plasterwork" (19). As Ray invites One Eye into his home, Baume invites the reader into her story. The reader becomes an active participant in the fictional world as the narrator/author says: "come here, I've something to show you" (85; 102).

The use of the present tense and present deictic markers, such as 'now' and 'here', additionally give the reader the sense of being present in the moment. Previously, late-modernist authors showed interest in the present moment and the consistent use of the present tense, as "either the narrative instance is effaced in a bare report of events, or plot becomes secondary in the full exploration of the narrative voice" (Huber 2016: 11). *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* thus displays fascination for the subjective present in its use of present-tense narration. Furthermore, the abovementioned examples set the scene through particularly visual descriptions. Baume has noted that images drive her writing (Baume 2015e) and the

same therefore holds true for the novel. The novel zooms in on minuscule details, such as "old nose smears" on the window, and thereby paints a vitalist, meticulous image:

> The wet of your nose smears against the glass in the spot where you're pointing, and all around this spot, there are old spots with old nose smears, dried and crusted and yet still glimmering. Like the aimless trails of a night slug, like a whole posse of carousing night slugs.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 61-62)

The result is a profoundly visual and poetic prose that allows both Ray and the reader to see the fictional world through the eye(s) of One Eye.

Another effect of second-person narration is that it blurs the distinction between the human (i.e. Ray and the reader), the animal (i.e. One Eye) and the material. One example here is Ray's collection of "junk treasures," which he introduces to One Eye. While he reflects about inorganic objects, he correlates them with the human as well:

> Now let me show you my junk treasures. Here are my crabs. (…) Although brown-green under water, once dismembered and risen to the surface, their shells are baked to the colour of marmalade, Seville marmalade. The colour reminds me of Aunt's open casket in the funeral home. Her cheeks had been bronzed by the blundering undertaker and the tanned head on the coffin pillow was a stranger to me, creepy as a ventriloquist's dummy, only without the ventriloquist to make it seem harmless, even funny.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 106)

In this blurring of the boundary between organic and inorganic, the novel shows that the inanimate world is not merely a world of junk treasures as it brings the two universes together in its vibrant imagery.

In her lecture on "Women, Nature and the Post-Human in Contemporary Irish Fiction" (2017), Anne Fogarty places *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* within a post-anthropocentric movement, as described by Rosi Braidotti as a vitalist-approach that displaces the distinction between human and animal life. Among the three post-human processes she distinguishes, she mentions the becoming-animal axis of transformation, which comprises "the displacement of anthropocentrism" as well as "the recognition of trans species solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other

species" (Braidotti 2013: 66-67). In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, the point is not to anthropomorphise or humanise One Eye, hence Baume's repudiation of the first-person narration from the dog's perspective, as this does not capture the essence or otherness of animals and rather imposes a kind of intelligence upon animal protagonists that is not realistic (Baume 2016b). Rather, the novel seeks to animalise Ray and the reader. In alignment with its anti-anthropocentrism, Baume's novel describes Ray as becoming animalised in that he adopts "a wildness that [he] learned from [One Eye]" (183) and starts to resemble his dog:

> Now I glance at the side of my own face in the mirror's foreground, and I wonder have we grown to resemble one another, as we're supposed to. On the outside, we are still as black and gnarled as nature made us. But on the inside, I feel different somehow. I feel animalised. Now there's a wildness inside me that kicked off with you.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 146)

In the course of the novel, the gap between Ray and One Eye is thus reduced. Another instance when Ray feels animalised is the scene with the sky burial, which people perform because "they believe a dead body is just a vacuous slab of meat to be disposed of in as munificent a way to nature as possible" (240). This rather unsentimental idea places all species, human and non-human, on the same level. In this sense, the animal becomes part of the human. In the end, however, Ray remains incapable of knowing One Eye fully, who will always remain a "you" outside of the "I": "when I wake, I am me again, and you are you" (186). Yet, Ray still continues to communicate with this essentially 'Other' who is incapable of human communication:

> I know you don't understand, and so I bellow a sentence made up entirely of your words. 'WALKIES, BICKIES, BEDTIME,' I bellow, 'ALL GONE, WAIT, FOOTBALL, BOLD,' I bellow, 'SPEAK, ONE EYE, SPEAK.'
>
> (Baume 2015a: 165)

2.4. Repeating, Repeating, Repeating

Spill Simmer Falter Wither employs a poetic narrative style by means of a variety of literary techniques, such as alliteration – "free as a fart" (48) and "grunting your greeting grunt" (121) – and assonance – "the sound of yipping and whinging" (11) and "maggot twitching and

eyeball swivelling" (95). Such stylistic devices give a lyrical quality to Baume's prose. One of the most prominent stylistic features of her prose is, what literary theorists call, epizeuxis, the free repetition of form in immediate context (Encyclopædia Britannica 2015). The novel's experimentation with repetition is usually three-fold as in the example "I'm jumping, jumping, jumping" (Baume 2015a: 151). Nevertheless, repetitiveness appears in many forms. The following fragment shows how rhythmic repetition characterises Baume's poetic prose as the novel organises language into a literary expression of visual imagery:

> He is running, running, running. And there's no course or current to deter him. There's no impulse from the root of his brain to the roof of his skull which says other than RUN.
> He is One Eye now.
> He is on his way.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 4)

The foregoing sentences provide an example of epizeuxis and assonance (i.e. "running, running, running") and of alliteration (i.e. "course or current"; "root"-"roof"). Another style of repetition is anaphora, which repeats a specific phrase at the beginning of every clause (i.e. "he is") (Encyclopædia Britannica 1998). The segment additionally demonstrates how typography can add to the overall atmosphere the novel is portraying. In this case, the use of small capital (i.e. "run") emphasises the sense of urgency and embodies an animalistic drive or intuition.

These stylistic devices supplement the rhythm of Baume's lyrical fiction and reflect the movement depicted by the repetition. For instance, "the years passed and passed and passed" (Baume 2015a: 75) echoes the steady cadence of time passing, while also establishing a sense of duration. Another example such as "DROPPIT DROPPIT DROPPIT" (66) evokes an atmosphere of urgency by means of short syllables and stop consonants, addition to the fitting typography. Baume's densely evocative style thus correlates meaning with rhythm. In her use of abovementioned literary techniques, the novel displays an almost poetic or ornamental prose, which "denotes the result of an over- determination of the narrative text with specifically poetic devices such as rhythmicizing and sound repetition" (Schmid 2013: 1).

Furthermore, repetition establishes a link between both characters, thereby strengthening the narrative cohesion, as in the following example, which draws a parallel between the emotional disposition of Ray and One Eye:

> Sometimes I see the sadness in you, the same sadness that's in me. It's in the way you sigh and stare and hang your head. It's in the way you never wholly let your guard down and take the world I've given you for granted. My sadness isn't a way I feel but a thing trapped inside the walls of my flesh, like a smog.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 51)

Although the language is ostensibly simple, by repeating the word 'sadness' the novel not only depicts a relationship and a feeling that is almost inexpressible, but it also creates cohesion. Another example emphasises the way others perceive Ray as strange:

> They've long since marked me down as strange, a strange man, I am a strange man. And it's because of my strangeness that they make a special point of knowing where I live. And they wait, and have been waiting all the time I've been in this house in this village, all my life, for strange things to happen for which they can finger me, for which they can have me and my threatening strangeness removed.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 117)

The lexical repetition of 'strange' adds to the overall coherence of the narrative, and ties all the elements together.

With regard to their effect, the abovementioned stylistic devices depict the rhythm of the seasons and the regularity of the characters' lives. Firstly, repetition conveys a cyclical movement, characteristic of nature and its seasons. Where cyclical time emphasises repetition related to seasonal cycles, the novel's repetitive style recalls the same connotation of cyclical motion in its recurrent images and phrases, thereby drawing back from the reader's memory other instances and thus creating a sense of continuity. In this respect, the act of running repeatedly refers to One Eye, not only in the prologue (3, 4) and the epilogue (278), but also at other moments in the novel: "now you're running, running, running, as though by running, you might understand" (24) and "tongue flapping free, you're running, running, running" (55). Interestingly, the one instance when Ray is "running, running, running", he is dreaming that he is One Eye: "Now I dream myself into the woods and I'm running, running, running. I've forgotten every part of myself and all the parts of my surroundings except for my maggot nose" (50). In his dream, Ray feels animalised as if One Eye has become an essential part of

himself, the part that feels liberating and empowering. Consequently, nature finds its way into the human world both in the cyclical movement evoked by repetition and in the identification of Ray with his dog.

Secondly, the narrative techniques follow the current of Ray and One Eye's lives, marked as it is by repetitiveness and everyday routines. For instance, Ray emphasises how every week he goes on his "Tuesday trip to town" (7; 31; 44), where he each time gives the same answer to the postmaster's remark about the weather: "*Sure you'd never know from one minute to the next what's coming*" (32; 44). The two spent their days mostly the same; they sit at the window and look outside, take a walk on the beach and in the evenings watch television. Even as a child, Ray "used to sit here in this window and watch children with satchels and lunchboxes passing on their way to school" (63), waiting for his father to return from his work. The difference with now is that he is no longer alone.

The regularity of their lives is, however, interrupted by One Eye's violent attacks on a dog and a child, which force them to hide in the house: "It's Tuesday. But there'll be no trip to town today, not post office" (126). What is more, the two creatures of habit find themselves breaking their routine and taking to the road. At first, Ray feels anxious in the prospect of a life without set tasks and activity:

> I expected that the freedom from routine was somehow greater than the freedom to determine your own routine. I wanted to get up in the morning and not know exactly what I was going to do that day. But now that I don't, it's terrifying.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 135)

Then he sees the silver lining in the adventure lying ahead of them: "no longer are we creatures of routine; now we're creatures of possibility" (166). Yet, even their days travelling are rather repetitive and monotonous. For instance, they "sleep in gateways, a new gateway every night. And every night, you watch the wraparound cinema screen until the mulch and stretch has warped into our lacklustre reflection" (158). Furthermore, their adventure is one long sequence of "driving, driving, driving" (133; 134; 135; 136; 198). The novel thus bears out Olson's observation that "routine and habit, enacted by linguistic repetition, become more important than heightened or chronologically ordered events" (2009: 6-7).

2.5. The Ordinary

"Narrative concerns itself with what is happening all the time, history concerns itself with what happens from time to time," Gertrude Stein famously argued (2010: 30). *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* too focuses on the ordinary, offering evocative vignettes of everyday objects and experiences in the life of Ray and One Eye. In doing so, the novel pays close and detailed attention to commonplace objects, experiences or places, such as Ray's junk treasures or his garden, the changing seasons, or the effects of the weather in the coastal town. In its portrayal of the minute and the ordinary, it filters these descriptions through the eyes of Ray, who imagines the world as he thinks One Eye sees it. In this way, the novel shows the everyday from a different perspective, casts it into a new light, and yet nevertheless retains its sense of ordinariness. Ray thus discovers his own surroundings anew now he has a friend with him for the first time. Together they also discover a (to them) new world when the two outsiders mingle among others after months of seclusion in Ray's car. Their adventure and the places they visit, such as the market, are rendered with great attention to the surrounding smells, colours, movement and sounds:

> I know the market's disorientating; it's disorientating for me too. All of this colour and movement and sound, after so many weeks just you and me in the quiet capsule of the car. The smells are of stoneground flour and ripe cheese and broken eggs and lavender and shit-coated feathers. So many new smells that you're tossed about by the whimsy of your maggot nose, from cured hams strung up on hooks to feathery creatures innocently scratting.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 215)

As he blends into the crowd for the first time in his life, Ray feels "faintly ordinary, faintly inconspicuous, faintly unsuspicious" (216), yet later he wonders whether maybe he "didn't seem regular in the market after all, inconspicuous, unsuspicious" (219). He then returns to the road, where his only company is a one-eyed dog.

Additionally, the novel often offers ordinary nature descriptions, meticulously rendered. The minute details of everyday life and of nature sometimes function as a metaphor for Ray and One Eye. For instance, in the following passage Ray compares the dog to a weed, but then translates the term to himself and to his relationship with his father:

> I should never have adopted you. You bring trouble and then just when I think the trouble has passed, you bring trouble again. Caring for you is like keeping a nettle in a pretty porcelain flowerpot, watering its roots and pruning its vicious needles no matter how cruelly it stings my skin. (…) And now I think how I was my father's nettle. His big lump of an embarrassing son. A son with no life of his own, no apparent trace of intelligence, of personality.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 110-111)

Even in these similes, nature is not romanticised: "flowers with their throat's slit and berries chopped, popped" (138). Ray's garden is therefore not a beautifully cultivated Zen garden, but rather a chaotic wilderness full of weeds.

> Avoiding the weeds and tufts and buoys, the rotary line, the patio table, I'm trying to rake the gravel into smooth lines. I want it to look like a Zen garden, like the picture in my library book, remember? A floor of stones in a swirling pattern of perfectly parallel ridges. But it doesn't. There are so many obstructions it's just a mess. Now one of the jackdaws from the chimney pot hops down to the gutter, peers over the edge of the roof and croaks, as though it is taunting me, taunting my dismal attempt to impose order.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 113)

Whereas Romanticism sought to elevate the most ordinary to the extraordinary or even the idealist, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* strives to celebrate the ordinary in its ordinariness.

The novel's portrayal of an ordinary reality dense with detail resonates with the modernist attempt to turn towards everyday life as a subject for art and literature. The very epitome of such modernist writing is the Irish writer James Joyce and his novel *Ulysses* (1992), in which he strives to remove any symbolic or romantic illusion from ordinary life. In one of his interviews with Arthur Power Joyce explains that he wants to "keep close to fact" to represent an authentic reality:

> In realism you are down to facts on which the world is based: that sudden reality which smashed romanticism into a pulp. What makes most people's lives unhappy is some disappointed romanticism, some unrealizable or misconceived ideal. In fact you may say that idealism is the ruin of man, and if we lived down to fact, as primitive man had to do, we would be better off.

> That is what we were made for. Nature is quite unromantic. It is we who put romance into her, which is a false attitude, an egotism, absurd like all egotisms.
>
> (qtd. in Power 1999: 113-114).

The modernist attention to the ordinary pivots on stripping away the delusions of romantic idealism. In *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Olson explores how modernists foreground the ordinary and how modernist fiction "treats the everyday with a new centrality", thereby not only "putting pressure on the notion of a coherent individual subject," but also "reconfiguring (but not rejecting) representations of temporality and material culture as crucial to a representation of character" (2009: 18). For Olson, this focus on the ordinary is, first, "an effective experience of the world characterized by inattention or absentmindedness." In addition, it "consists of activities and things that are most frequently characterized by our inattention to them," and "can be a mode of organizing life and representing it" (6). Furthermore, Olson refers to the paradox writing about the ordinary: "to say *this is ordinary* is to give significance to what is insignificant" (7). This contradiction of wanting to represent the overlooked by looking at it closely is embodied in modernist writing, such as Woolf's.

Spill Simmer Falter Wither frequently draws attention to moments of ordinariness. In such moments, Olson argues, the ordinary acts as a genre, as it does not comprise heroic events, pivotal moments of plot development or temporal points signifying accomplishment. Rather, it focuses on the "event that is not always an Event" (2009: 6). Baume's novel elaborates on insignificant, overlooked moments such as trips to the post-office, dog walks or morning rituals:

> Can you hear me bumbling overhead? Water running down the bathroom plughole, slippers moving from lino to carpet, the squeak of the wardrobe door opening, the thud as it swings itself shut again. Now silence as I smoke. These are the sounds of my bedtime ablutions and I perform them each night, trance-like, at the same time in the same sequence.
>
> (Baume 2015a: 27)

The novel thus addresses the mundanity that is the reality of day-to-day life, as Ray asks: "Don't you every wonder what exactly people do, all day long, every day?" (98). Furthermore, the ordinary functions as a style, through the representation of routine and

aesthetic forms, such as linguistic repetition (Olson 2009: 6). Both manifest the ordinariness of the protagonists' lives, which are characterised by habits. Despite its emphasis on the mundane, the novel does not evoke the reader's disinterest. What is more, the novel's you-address (and other linguistic markers, such as the imperative) draws the reader into the characters' everyday life and thus into their ordinary experiences, without eliciting boredom. As Auerbach remarks, in the novel's prominence of the ordinary, something new emerges: "nothing less than the wealth of reality and depth of life in every moment to which we surrender ourselves without prejudice" (1953: 488).

2.6. Conclusion

In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, Sara Baume narrates a story in the second-person narration that uses repetition and a focus on the ordinary as means to convey aesthetic, affective, thematic and ideological purposes. As she weaves images into her language, she constructs a narrative plot that is uneventful in terms of heroic acts, yet compelling in its lyrical descriptions of the ordinary. The novel thus explores, to use the words of Martin Heidegger, "the same that is always newly sought" (2009: 311). Additionally, Baume's novel is not just another animal-narrative, for the novel does not fall into the trap of anthropocentrism (i.e. humanizing the animals), but rather has the effect of animalising human beings. For this, the novel employs comparatively unconventional, even experimental, techniques, which retain a sense of post-modern playfulness as well as add a touch of modernist sincerity.

Thematically, and even ideologically, the novel's second-person narration serves to blur the boundary between human and non-human species in accordance with recent anti-anthropocentric movement. Aesthetically, the novel's second-person narrative comprises an aspect of postmodern playfulness, which partly – and playfully - dissolves the line between the intratextual "you" (i.e. One Eye) and the extratextual "you" (i.e. the reader). The affective result of this literary strategy is not so much postmodern irony and scepticism as an attempt at communication and a return to sincerity. In this respect, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* may be categorised as a New Sincerity-novel, which entails a return to reality, communication and interaction, even while adopting certain postmodern techniques. Even though second-person narration is rather unusual in literary practice, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* does not fall under the category of unnatural narratives as it is certainly not anti-mimetic or anti-realistic. The novel's postmodern techniques therefore function as realistic devices, but also involve a return to the human, as in Timmer's Post-Postmodern Syndrome. In addition, in its use of second-person narration and focus on the characters' inner consciousness, the novel resembles

the New Era fiction, as defined by Armstrong (2014), which entails a return to spirituality. The combination of postmodern playfulness with a renewed belief in human connection (in this case, relationships across species) aligns with James Wood's hysterical realism and with Vermeulen and van den Akker's metamodernism, which oscillates between modern commitment and postmodern detachment.

In addition to the postmodern technique of second-person narration, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* embodies the modernist return to the ordinary as the ordinary. It does not feature heroic narrative events, but focuses on the inner life of its characters and on the ordinariness of their lives. Like the modernist novel, it does not romanticize the everyday or the natural surroundings, but seeks to acknowledge the ordinary in its ordinariness. Furthermore, the novel embodies the ordinary in its representation of Ray and One Eye's routines and habits and in its abundant use of repetition. Through the use of repetitive structures and other literary plots, the novel foregrounds specific elements to attract the reader's attention with a specific purpose, whether it is aesthetic (i.e. conveying rhythm), thematic (i.e. manifesting routine) or even ideological (i.e. expressing the animalistic in the human). In this way, *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* combines modernist with postmodernist elements, but gives them a contemporary twist.

Chapter 3: *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

3.1. Biography: Eimear McBride

On 6 October 1976, Eimear McBride was born in Liverpool to Irish parents. She has one younger brother, Fergal, and two older brothers, Donagh and Cillian. Aged two, she moved with her family to Tubbercurry, County Sligo in the Republic of Ireland. Six years later, her father, John McBride, died from pancreatic cancer, which left her mother Gerardine alone to raise their four children. In 1991, the McBride family moved to Castlebar in County Mayo (Collard 2016: 2-3). At the age of seventeen, Eimear McBride left Ireland to study at Drama Centre in London. Six months after graduating, she had to return to Ireland as her older brother Donagh became terminally ill and eventually died from brain cancer in 1999. His death was the inspiration for her debut novel, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013). McBride then mainly travelled and worked as an office temporary worker, primarily in Eastern Europe (McBride 2014b). In 2006 and 2011, she moved first to Cork and then to Norwich, where she presently lives with her husband William Galinsky and their daughter.

When she was twenty-seven years old, McBride wrote her first novel, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, but it took several years to find a publisher for the book. When it was eventually published, the novel won the Goldsmiths Prize and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize as well as the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, the Kerry Group Irish Fiction Award and the Desmond Elliott Prize. It was also shortlisted for the 2014 Folio Prize, the Dylan Thomas Prize and the Author's Club Best First Novel Award. In 2016, McBride's second novel, *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), likewise received wide acclaim, as it was shortlisted for both the Goldsmiths Prize and the Bord Gáis Energy Irish Book Awards as Eason Novel of the Year. This novel narrates the story of Eily, an 18-year-old Irish drama student, who is struggling to fit in and find a place in the big city that is London in the 1990s. She starts an intense love-affaire with Stephen, an older, renowned actor, who seeks casual sex and refuses to be absorbed by his feelings. Gradually, their casual sex develops into a love affair that becomes increasingly more intense, which neither of them anticipated (Feigel 2016). In addition to writing novels, McBride published short stories in *Dubliners 100, The Long Gaze Back* and on *Radio 4*, while sporadically reviewing for *the Guardian, TLS, New Statesman* and *New York Times Book Review* ("Eimear McBride").

3.2. A Half-formed Girl: Plot Summary

A Girl is a Half-formed Thing is a coming-of-age story that draws the reader into the inchoate world of the half-formed girl of the title, who is struggling to fathom out pernicious experiences in half-expressed feelings and thoughts. She addresses her wrenching monologue to her brother, whose brain was damaged by the removal of a tumour in infancy. Her father's absence in the family and her mother's zealous Catholicism unsettle the household, which renders the girl vulnerable to her predatory uncle, who rapes her at the age of twelve. The scene is depicted ambiguously as the girl feels both desire and resentment for her uncle, shame and exultation for her own body. The sexual assault distances her from her mother and brother and even defines her identity as she internalises the abasement brought on by the rape. She endeavours to reclaim her agency and self-worth by seducing the boys in her class, which gives her a false sense of empowerment. In London, she compulsively seeks out sadomasochistic relationships with acquaintances and strangers, and eventually starts a toxic affair with her uncle. She provokes him into beating her and having sex with her, thus re-enacting the primary rape scene that left an ineffaceable stain on her identity. For the girl, violence and sexuality are always two sides of the same coin as she is caught up in a never-ending spiral of increasingly abusive and demeaning situations. Her life is an on-going pattern of subjection and submission, degradation and purification, in which she literally becomes a 'thing' used by men.

The only light in her self-deprecating lifestyle is the love for her brother, for whom she returns home to nurse him when his brain cancer has returned. When he dies, her mother turns to religion to seek spiritual help in the adjustment to bereavement and loss. After a priest has given her brother the sacrament of the sick and has anointed him to cleanse him of sin, the girl wipes the oil from her brother's skin, as she believes she is the only sinner. Desperate for purity and unity with her brother, the girl seeks to re-baptise herself. Yet the baptism leads to drowning and a literal dissolution of her self:

> Turn. Look up. Bubble from my mouth drift high. Blue tinge lips. Floating hair. Air famished eyes. Brown water turning into light. There now. There now. That just was life. And now.
> What?
> My name is gone.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 203)

3.3. A Half-formed You

The novel implicates the reader into this Irish world of sexual abuse, oppressive Catholicism and psychological trauma through the use of you-address. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* combines first-person with second-person narration as the unnamed girl – the "I" or homodiegetic first-person narrator – shares her story with her brother – the "you" or narratee – from the moment he is born, to his own passing away, until her own death: "Things in this day are happening to you. I thought of you. Of you. Of your waking up eyes thinking what's today what's going on?" (McBride 2014a: 132). Both narrator and narratee participate in the story as principal actants and share an existential link on the histoire level (Fludernik 1993: 221). The reader views the world through the eyes of the girl, who is therefore the internal focalisor, while her brother is only viewed from the outside. Together they each form one half of the story, which come together in her death: "Take me where the waters go. I'll take your hand. You'll show. You'll show me all my lands and evil heart as you know it. Brother me" (McBride 2014a: 203)

With regard to second-person narratives, James Phelan remarks that the second-person pronoun may refer to an intradiegetic or textual "you" (i.e. the literary character in the story) as well as an extradiegetic or extratextual "you" (i.e. the flesh-and-blood reader outside of the story). Furthermore, the degree of characterization of the "you" determines whether the pronoun leans more towards the textual protagonist or the extratextual reader (Phelan 1994: 350-351). In *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, the second-person pronoun distinctly refers to the girl's brother, who suffers from brain damage and cancer, who wants to join the army, but fails to and therefore wastes his life on video games and on a job stacking shelves. Due to his chronic brain cancer, her brother struggles not only to survive, but also to live his life fully:

> You are behind. You are way behind in this. I see you lagging. I can see you liming off at the back but I'm getting very tired of looking around and in a bit I'll leave you to the fates. She knows you but she doesn't care and we are speaking less and less because. In all that you make me want to get away. It's too much and you're much too. Young. For me now. Is the simple truth. Where I'm going you cannot come.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 64)

Even though the novel clearly identifies "you" as the brother, it nevertheless avoids specific details and identity markers, such as names and descriptions of appearances as well as

topographical and temporal details. In its refusal of contextual detail, the novel shows a tendency towards universalism, while allowing more room for the reader to identify with the protagonist.

Again, the difference between communication, on the one hand, and immersion, on the other hand, as discussed by Mildorf (2016: 156), becomes relevant with regard to McBride's novel. In terms of communication, the second-person pronoun does not explicitly address the reader, but rather refers to a character at a textual level. In terms of immersion, the distance between reader and character thus closes as the novel gives the reader the possibility to fill in the blanks him- or herself. The reader of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing,* even though not directly addressed, may still emotionally engage and potentially identify with the characters. Furthermore, the reader's involvement with the story can be aesthetic and reflective and/or affective and emotional, and depends on textual cues other than the second-person pronoun and on other factors related to the reader's own background, literary knowledge and interests (148). McBride's experiments with language and voice make the reader aware of the constructedness of fiction, yet also seek to represent life more faithfully, thereby asking the reader to emotionally commit to and engage in the protagonist's inner world.

3.4. Stream of (Pre-)Consciousness

McBride's novel enacts the girl's half-formed coming-of-age through the narrative technique of stream of consciousness, thereby drawing the reader into the girl's whirlwind of emotions. It offers a continuous insight in the psyche of its first-person narrator and is consequently a story of becoming, both in its content and in its form. In *The Art of Fiction*, David Lodge discusses two techniques for representing consciousness in prose fiction, namely interior monologue and free indirect style. In the former, "the grammatical subject of the discourse is an "I", and we, as it were, overhear the character verbalizing his or her thoughts as they occur," while the latter "renders thought as reported speech (in the third person, past tense) but keeps to the kind of vocabulary that is appropriate to the character" (1992: 43). *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* adopts the first type of stream-of-consciousness technique, which offers the reader the impression of "wearing earphones plugged into someone's brain" as the novel provides "an endless tape-recording of the subject's impressions, reflections, questions, memories, and fantasies" (47). The reader thus steps into the narrator's world of sexual abuse and physical violence, invited both by the interior monologue and by the second-person address.

According to Robert Humphrey, stream-of-consciousness fiction explores the pre-speech levels of the mind, which are "more inchoate than rational verbalization" and "not censored, rationally controlled, or logically ordered" (1954: 2-3). It additionally deals with both the whatness – "sensations, memories, imaginations, conceptions, and intuitions" (7) – and the howness – "the symbolizations, the feelings, and the processes of association" (7) – of its characters mental and spiritual experiences. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* thus offers an uninhibited trauma narrative, which centres on the mental and spiritual experiences of a half-formed girl that struggles to find meaning in her erratic life. The novel "concentrate[s] its attention chiefly on the pre-speech, non-verbalized level, where the *image* must express the unarticulated response and where the logic of grammar belongs to another world" (Holman et al. 1979: 6). The stream-of-consciousness technique thus aims to convey the disjointed and illogical nature of the narrator's mental-emotional disposition, which is too complex and capricious to fit into patterns that are more conventional. Furthermore, Humphrey distinguishes the stream-of-consciousness novel from the *roman expérimental* à la Emile Zola and Theodore Dreiser. The difference lies in the psychological focusing on characterisation: both strive to portray life accurately, but unlike naturalism, stream-of-consciousness fiction concerns itself with the individual's psychic life. In other words, it is rather a question of what one is rather than what one does (Humphrey 1954: 8-9). McBride's novel therefore employs the stream-of-consciousness technique to echo the continuous flow of thought and sensation in its narrator's mind. Consequently, its style is private, subjective and almost uncomfortably close.

In adopting the stream-of-consciousness technique, McBride (2014b) wants her readers to experience "the story from the inside out rather than the outside in." Furthermore, the lack of order in the girl's mind reflects in the deliberately chaotic narrative mode so the reader completely surrenders him- or herself to half-formed disorder:

> Just stop see and cut the cord the thread with this life and I'll be alright. Give it up, uncle up, that's the way. No. And it sounds easy. It sounds not. But what I want. Not to be this. Ripped. Ah I see. Not. To. Do. This. Any. More. What. Nothing I don't do a thing. Few fucks here and then and who's that to do with? No one but myself.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 143)

The novel relentlessly exposes the reader to violent and startlingly bleak scenes, thereby creating a powerfully graphic prose. Through the direct access to the girl's consciousness, the reader witnesses her emotional and physical responses to these pernicious experiences, not just from the first row, but as if the reader is part of her story. Consequently, the stream-of-consciousness technique builds an empathy with the protagonist that goes beyond that of an ordinary first-person narration. In an interview, McBride (2014c) labels her style in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* "stream of pre-consciousness" for it deals with "gut reaction rather than processed thought" and the reader is therefore "right in at the very beginning of every experience the girl is having." One technique to create the illusion of being right in the moment is the novel's use of free direct speech and thought, in which no authorial narrator is present to impose an interpretative filter upon the protagonist's words. The free direct form enables the girl to directly reveal her conscious attitudes and subconscious mental movements without interference.

The stream-of-consciousness method primarily flourished during the heydays of modernism in the figures of James Joyce (e.g. *Ulysses*), Virginia Woolf (e.g. *Mrs Dalloway*), Dorothy Richardson (e.g. *Pilgrimage*) and Samuel Beckett (e.g. *Malone Dies*) and continues to appear in postmodern and contemporary fiction. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* breathes new life into the stream of consciousness of the foregoing modernist writers, and primarily Joyce's, whose words inspired McBride to write her debut novel: "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" (qtd. in McBride 2016). The uncompromising honesty and close intimacy that Joyce evokes in *Ulysses* (1922) is what McBride aimed to recreate in her own novel. Furthermore, the novel shows the influence of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915-1957), which seeks to explore a woman's reality by imitating "the movement of the female mind as it drifts through memory and the perception of the sensible world" (Friedman and Fuchs 2014: 11). Richardson consequently subverted conventional narrative into a fluid prose, which challenged grammatical rules and abandoned traditional plot structure. She thus "rescued her heroine from the inevitable structures of conventional fiction" and "helped carve a fictional space free enough so that the feminine could be expressed" (12). Additionally, Wisker points out the influence of Beckett's "dour, often unnamed and unnameable characters on the brink of partial life and death" (2015: 60). Both Beckett and McBride employ stream of consciousness and an anonymous narrative voice to portray a lack of control and a dissolution of the self.

In its uncensored portrayal of controversially sexual scenarios, however, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* does not strive for modernist impersonality, as Paige Reynolds explains:

> McBride's use of modernism offers a prophylactic from intense absorption, keeping us at bay with its difficulty, its obfuscations, its knowing invocations of literary tradition. Strikingly, this tactic is in dialogue with her endeavor through graphic portrayals of all varieties of transgressive sex (among other unsettling moments in the protagonist's life) to pull us into the narrative.
>
> (Reynolds 2014)

McBride's method is therefore two-fold: on the one hand, she employs the interior monologue to establish an affective and participatory relationship between reader and narrative, on the other hand, she uses modernist forms to remind the readers of their distance from the girl's experiences. The novel's modernist formal strategy "thwarts our readerly empathy, engaging our intellects even as our emotions are pulled into the suffering of this young woman."

The novel, however, takes on a different approach to the representation of consciousness than modernist writers. One of the most prominent and fundamental components of stream-of-consciousness fiction is free psychological association, which determines the narrative structure rather than a logical succession of events and thoughts (Holman et al. 1979: 6). The principle of free association results from three factors (i.e. memory, senses and imagination), which define the movement and direction of the characters' mental processes (Humphrey 1954: 43). But, as O'Toole (2014) remarks, McBride's stream does not flow, but is rather "a stagnant pool from whose dark bottom linguistic bubbles float up, bursting just as they hit the surface." While modernist writing, such as Woolf's and Joyce's, is associative, McBride's style erratically, yet nevertheless poetically, jolts forward. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* jumps from one fragment to another, irrespective of sentence structure, thereby using a stream of free associations to represent the girl's psyche, which responses to internal and external triggers:

> He lived looking out on that. Cliff ahead. No wonder he was such a strange. The front door opens. Inside people there. Such aunts and uncles I've not known before. Even you. Bewildered by all that lot of them. That's a whole ocean of cousins alone. Hordes. In a shipwreck I would chuck the lot.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 99)

In her irregular stream of thought, one observation sparks the next one by a process of contiguity, whether it is spatial or temporal, which is frequently broken up. The scene starts with a memory of her grandfather, which is cut off by the front door opening. As her family members come in, she feels overwhelmed by the flood of cousins and subsequently imagines them in a shipwreck. The novel's jerky writing style maps the irregular stream of the girl's thoughts and sensations, triggered by physical perceptions or mental impressions. Behind the stream of fragments, constantly interrupted by full stops, there is a layer of darkness and "the shards of an inner self that emerge into words point us toward the larger self that remains unknown and without a voice, even an interior one" (O'Toole 2014).

3.5. A Half-formed Language

The harrowing, darkly compelling, broken-up language of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* captures the incompleteness of the protagonist, who rejects the social, sexual and linguistic decorum required of women. Traumatic events and a disjointed sense of identity are rendered in the form of distorted or cut-off sentences, full stops and half rhymes: "For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear you say" (McBride 2014a: 3). In her own inchoate language, the girl pours out her story before her life and herself are fully formed. With this experimental languages, the novel aims to capture the reality and sense of the self even better than with traditional literary language. To quote Gina Wisker:

> Her thoughts come unfettered, unmanaged, as they do in our own inner thoughts but less usually in fiction; this technique emphasises how very managed fiction usually is, and how the structuring of fiction conveys a sense of control over identity and sense-making as well as individual narrative. Such control is lacking in the girl's life, mind, and story.
>
> (Wisker 2015: 58)

Rather than employing regular grammatical sentences, the novel adopts a broken style, violating rules of syntax, spelling and grammar. Furthermore, in order to focus solely on what the girl sees, thinks and feels, McBride omitted all identifying markers, such as names, and other concrete information concerning time and place. By refusing contextual detail, the novel brings the reader closer to its character, as McBride (2016) points out: "I wanted them to feel they *were* her, and that what was happening to her, and inside her, was also happening within themselves."

Although scenes of dialogues in the novel are as a rule more straightforward and less ungrammatical, the absence of quotation marks makes it difficult to unambiguously attribute speech to the characters. The following passage, for instance, depicts a conversation between the girl and her brother's oncologist:

> It's continued to grow. No. I'm sorry. But you said you would. Cut it back hedges weeds like grass? It's not working and what I'm saying is, it's a matter of time. He'll. He's going to die? My brother? I don't think that's right. We did what we could.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 146)

Here, the language becomes less experimental as it no longer comprises pre-speech levels of the girl's consciousness, but premeditated language. The verbal discourse becomes, however, less conventional when the girl's emotions take over: "This doesn't make. Doesn't isn't t t t sense sense sense to me" (146). McBride's novel thus lets the reader indirectly know that the girl is crying, which is far more compelling than any direct statement.

The girl's pre-conscious thoughts are jagged, irregular and intuitive because they are not yet 'edited' by her linguistic consciousness. The novel portrays how the girl's mind jumps from one observation to another by adopting a language that jumps from one sentence to another.

> Were lost at the moment when they cut you off. Cut your head out heart brain. It is not I know was not that but to me it was to me. Like I could have seen you in the bright of day. Like the light could have come up from the sea and take you over. Me over. Is there. Forgive that. Forgive that me that I was fallen down. That I was under the weather under the same sky and did not. Not yet. If I took. If I had taken your good right hand. I might have pulled you. Up. Pulled the black sea out of us. Saw you. Left you. Is there some truth in that?
>
> (McBride 2014a: 151)

The girl frequently starts her sentences with a conjugated verb, leaving out the subject that is either implied or present in a foregoing sentence (e.g. "Cut your head out heart brain"). Additionally, she builds on sentences rather than form a longer construction (e.g. "Forgive that…that…"), while at other times she finishes the end of her thought in a new sentence (e.g. "I might have pulled you. Up."). What gives the novel's prose a broken, jolting style is the

interruption of sentences, when the girl seems emotionally unable to finish it (e.g. "That I was under the weather under the same sky and did not") or suddenly moves on to another thought (e.g. "Is there. Forgive that"). Furthermore, the absence of commas complicates the process of unravelling her thoughts (e.g. "it is not I know was not that but to me it was to me").

The primary form of punctuation is full stops (while question marks appear only sporadically in the novel) and experiments with typography try to capture the girl's mind-set (e.g. "Goodfornothinglumpofshitgodforgiveyou;" 12). McBride's typographical experimentation with closed punctuation results in a convulsive end-stopped style. Adorno and Nicholson argue that the punctuation marks rise above the interplay between language and reader for "they serve, hieroglyphically, an interplay that takes place in the interior of language, along is own pathways" (1990: 300). As Jennifer DeVere Brody states, punctuation is performative in that "one of punctuation's many functions is to endow print with effect and emotion" (2008: 6). By means of its punctuated speech, the novel buries the girl's emotions in the text, resulting in a ripple of emotions. DeVere Brody further argues that "punctuation's figurations are read, discussed, represented, and felt in bodily terms" (6). As Anne Fogarty proclaims, the girl is both captured in and liberated by her own language:

> Her end-stopped style with its frequent neologisms seems at first incomprehensible, but nonetheless establishes its own rhythms, logic, coherence and visceral poetry. The reader is immersed in girl's idiom and forced to take stock of her merciless view of sexuality and of female existence which is construed solely through her enraged and disaffected take on her body.
>
> (Fogarty 2015: 22)

The pre-conscious linguistic world of the novel is thus fully embodied as the marks correlate to the body of the girl. As a result, the novel's full stops draw the reader into the embodied consciousness of the girl.

In its externalisation of pre-conscious and emotional rhythms, the language bears witness to the aftermath of the sexual trauma. When her uncle sexually abuses her, the girl's conflicted feelings are powerfully suggested by means of the experimental diction, suggesting a half-formed self through a half-formed voice. The novel adopts broken, fragmented sentences as the girl's uncle takes advantage of her, while she floats between acceptance and resistance:

> I am sweating here. Ready to give and not. Not at all ready for what I think I'll get. But I give it. I'll give it. Take this cup. I'll drink I'll not. Thy will be done. Let him kiss me. If he wants. I. Brink it. But when he reaches I turn away under his thumb.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 53)

In its formal experimentation, this passage enacts the chaotic violence of an abusive experience, which disrupts the girl's sense of sexual identity. The language emphasises the body as it acts out affect and emotions in response to external events. The novel therefore does not speak the language of the unconscious, but the language of the pre-conscious. This language plunges the reader into the centre of the girl's experiences, no matter how bleak, distressing and disturbing. The more traumatic the scene is, the more experimental the language becomes. The rape at the end of the novel, for instance, exhibits a storm of violence, hence the highly experimental language:

> Soon I'n dead I'm sre. Loose. Ver the alrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. ClearR. He stopS up gETs. Stands uP. Look. And I breath. And I breath my. I make. You like those feelings do you now. Thank to your unkcle for that like the best fuck I ever had. HoCk SPIT me. Kicks. uPshes me over. With his brown boot foot. WitK the sole of it on my stomik. Ver. Coughing my. Y hard. He. Into the ditch roll in gully to the side. Roll. I roll. For it. He. Turn on the. I. Hear his zip. Thanks for fuck you thanks for that I. hear his walking crunching. Foot foot. Go. Him Away.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 194)

The novel throws all literary conventions overboard as it flouts rules of spelling, typography, syntax and grammar in the girl's impressionistic inner monologue. This internalised language expresses her thoughts and feelings before they are fully articulated, at the moment they are thought and felt. In this respect, the influence of McBride's drama training becomes apparent:

> My whole approach to creating character comes from the Method training, from that all-encompassing understanding of character, of a person's life. When you train as an actor you have a much more physical attachment to language because it's all about making it live rather than making it scan or

> making an idea clear. You're making a *person* all along so you have a more irreverent attitude to language.
>
> (McBride 2014c)

Like method acting, the novel requests a complete immersion in the protagonist's physical and psychological experiences through mauled grammar and recalibrated punctuation that capture the rawness and honesty of the inchoate experiences of a girl, unable to escape her own situation.

A Girl is a Half-formed Thing thus evokes modernist minimalism and syntactic experimentation in its attempt to unsettle the reader by means of both its form and its content. By stripping its language from conventional syntax and grammar, the novel seeks to lay bare the patriarchal discourse, prevalent in traditional literature. One of the main phallocentric voices in the novel is the grandfather's, who speaks with an authority founded on Catholicism and paternalism. When he visits his daughter and two grandchildren, the reader hears solely his words:

> No don't you speak to me. I don't want to hear the words of the evil one from my own daughter's mouth. (…) You'll only poison me with your bitterness you Godless creature. I pity you. I really do. Don't come near me. God forgive me. I never knew. I never knew I reared a… No. Enough. That's it. Goodbye.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 16)

In the novel's Irish setting, patriarchy has turned into tyranny. The grandfather's language relentlessly "locks the girl, and the reader, into his worldview and his control" (Wisker 2015: 61). McBride's novel consequently breaks down the authoritative male voice by offering an alternative, feminine, experimental narrative mode. As Friedman and Fuchs argue, in subverting traditional narratives, female authors undermine the patriarchal values that underlie these narrative modes. "In exploding dominant forms," they argue, "women experimental writers not only assail the social structure, but also produce an alternate fictional space," where "the feminine, marginalized in traditional fiction and patriarchal culture, can be expressed" (2014: 4). By subverting causality, linearity and authoritarian perspectives, women writers undermine patriarchal discourses and establish an alternative, female form, which captures the essence of femininity.

Interestingly, religious language seeps into the abovementioned initial rape-scene and at numerous other moments in the novel. The girl's languages echoes and processes all sorts of inherited discourses (such as the patriarchal discourse discussed above), but the discourse about religion is nevertheless equally prominent as the novel is set in Ireland. The girl's idiom is therefore continually riddled with religious phraseology, primarily the language of Catholic prayers. Such phrases are "disinterred and given a renewed power by being wrenched from context" (Fogarty 2015: 23). The girl thus projects sacred texts on her own state of defilement. In her quest for redemption and purification, she wants to re-baptise herself:

> Take hold. I fear not. Hear not. See not. (…) I sink baptise me now oh lord and take this bloody itch away for what am I the wrong and wrong of it always far from thee. Ha. My nose fill with that bog water. It's run a long brown hill to get into me. Its salt its bits and dirty pieces in my eyes and in my lungs. Ah. You are not here. In this world deep and brown.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 55)

The girl attempts to cleanse herself off all her sins, but the water is brown and defiled, indicating that she can never be clean again. Furthermore, the motif of religion predominantly reappears in the form of the mother, who reinforces the patriarchal discourse in society as she speaks with a voice of disapprobation of what is deemed un-feminine and sinful in a Catholic context:

> Well my girl, you may look down your nose at my beliefs and friends but I wasn't out throwing myself on every man passing while my brother was dying. You are disgusting. You are. Sick in the head. How you've lived. This filth you've made of yourself.
>
> (McBride 2014a: 199)

Blinded by the dogmas of faith, the mother cannot see that her daughter finds no solace in religion the same way she does nor that her behaviour is merely an act to overcome the conflicted feelings brought on by the sexual abuse. To draw on Deirdre Sullivan: "Sex, for Girl, is the same as prayer for her mother. A punishment and a refuge. Healthy in one way, damaging in another" (2015: 233).

A Girl is a Half-formed Thing thus shows how the girl suffers under the yoke of patriarchy and sexism as well as religion. She feels virtually immobilized by her mother's

oppressive Catholicism, for which, as Wisker argues, "a girl, any girl, is 'a half-formed thing,' because she is only formed from the rib of Adam, always lacking and secondary" (2015: 63). As the girl is essentially secondary to all men, including her brother, the Bildungsroman confines her to a truncated self with a half-formed sense of adulthood. Consequently, the novel's "form of language is as captured in liminality as is the girl herself: unformed, becoming, caught" (57). She finds herself constantly in a position of flux, an eternal state of becoming, which is always half-formed as "there is no room for her to navigate a version of self which is not directed externally by others or internally as internalised by herself" (74). The girl's inner world of emotions is thus rendered in an uncensored, chaotic and inchoate language, which never changes or matures.

In terms of literary precedents, Fintan O'Toole puts McBride in the same category as Irish writers such as Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett, who tried not so much to articulate but to disarticulate in an attempt to avoid volubility and lyricism:

> They have to throw obstacles in the way of the natural flow that would otherwise carry them onto the rocks of rhetoric, sentimentality, or bombast. Their quest is not so much articulation as disarticulation, the wrenching of overly easy words into some kind of hard syntax.
>
> (O'Toole 2014)

One can detect the influence of Samuel Beckett's trauma-monologue *Not I* (1972) and his late experimental fiction, such as *Worstward Ho* (1984), in which he experiments with "the devolution of language and its role in creating and de-creating a narrative world" (Byron 2014). McBride likewise chooses the unordered chaos life over the unrepresentative harmony of fiction. Anne Fogarty (2017) additionally associates *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* with the "Penelope" episode in Joyce's *Ulysses*, renowned for its lack of punctuation. Molly's inner monologue is a flow of female language, sporadically interrupted by full stops, which indicate that a male authorial voice is actually producing the speech. In the tradition of theatre, actors have to re-punctuate the scene to perform it on stage. McBride's novel takes this practice to the extreme and almost over-punctuates the story. In the words of O'Toole (2014): McBride's punctuation "breaks the back of her sentences, keeping them as half-formed as the character who thinks them," with the result that we as readers feel compelled to complete her sentences and "form for ourselves this unformed person."

3.6. Conclusion

A Girl is a Half-formed Thing is a harrowing, unsettling, avant-garde trauma narrative that is cast as a fractured internal monologue of an unnamed, half-formed girl, who is struggling to become fully formed. McBride tackles contemporary Irish literary topics: rural poverty, a fragmented family, sexual abuse and oppressive Catholicism, which force the girl into a constant state of liminality. In its form, content and style, McBride's novel is thus a continual process of becoming and unbecoming. The girl's story is therefore a difficult read not only with regard to the formal experimentation, but also in terms of the disturbingly bleak traumas she encounters as the reader is caught in her oscillation between sexual empowerment and abasement. To portray the girl's liminality, the novel adopts a formally challenging style inspired by Irish modernist writers, such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and William Butler Yeats, but also Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien. The reader is thus brought into direct contact with suffering, trauma, abuse and psychological problems rather than through mediation of plot and the polished style of the traditional novel. While offering a challenge to patriarchal and Catholic values that inform conventional narrative modes, the novel adopts the modernist strategies to reveal the complexities of sexual abuse and to convey a feeling of raw honesty and intimacy.

The novel's formal experiment cannot be equated to modernist impersonality or postmodernist irony, but rather fits in with the contemporary revival of sincerity as it does seek to communicate psychological trauma by means of experimental language, stream of consciousness and second-person narration. The narrative takes on an unorthodox form, which the reader needs to decode so as to experience the story from within. This emphasis on communication and empathy places *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* in the category of the New Sincerity-novel, which implicates the reader into the literary process. Additionally, the focus on the essentially human, or, as is the case here, the struggle to become fully formed, aligns it with Nicoline Timmer's Post-Postmodern Syndrome. McBride's protagonist experiences a breakdown, which, according to Timmer, necessitates new narrative or discursive strategies. Moreover, the girl exhibits a need for social connection and inclusiveness, but fails to realise her desire. Through its very form and structure, McBride's coming-of-age novel thus demonstrates the difficulties of growing up in a rigidly Catholic and patriarchal environment, where femininity is strictly circumscribed. It enacts her half-formed state in a modernist, half-formed narrative that draws the reader in to make the girl into a fully formed woman.

Chapter 4: *Pond*

4.1. Biography: Claire-Louise Bennett

Claire-Louise Bennett spent her childhood in Wiltshire, England and completed the course of literature and drama at the University of Roehampton, after which she took up residence in Galway. Her short stories and essays appeared in *The Stinging Fly, The Penny Dreadful, The Moth, Colony, The Irish Times, The White Review* and *Gorse* (Bennett 2013). In 2013 she received the inaugural White Review Short Story Prize, in addition to bursaries from the Arts Council and Galway City Council. Two years later Bennett published her first collection of short stories, *Pond* (2015), which was shortlisted for the International Dylan Thomas Prize. One of its short stories, "Morning, Noon & Night" was also shortlisted for the 2016 BBC National Short Story Award.

4.2. A Sign Next to a Pond Saying Pond: Plot Summary

Pond consists of twenty interconnected stories that constitute the recollections, reflections and sensations of an unnamed, female first-person narrator. Bennett's debut records a series of moments in the life of an English woman, who lives in a cottage on the west coast of Ireland to seek solitude and reconnect with nature. The separate texts of varying length that constitute the collection could be called prose poems, soliloquies, sketches or simply short stories or narratives. They dramatize the associative movement of the narrator's mind and invite the reader to experience her world alongside her. She meticulously describes the ripeness of a banana and contemplates the right way to eat porridge (i.e. with black jam and almond flakes organised in simple patterns); she attempts to replace a broken dial on her Salton mini oven; she reflects on her need for alcohol when dealing with the opposite sex and even has a rape-fantasy about a stranger, while wondering if the cows in a nearby field believe she is Jesus. "Most essentially," Philip Maughan (2016) writes, "*Pond* is an account of the mind as it exists in solitude. It attempts to engage with the universe at its fullest and not just the little portion of it we identify as human." The book thus explores the connection between the narrator's mind and emotions on the one hand and her surroundings on the other hand, thereby refraining from maximalist aspirations and instead opting for minimalist realism. What is more, it is "an attempt to be radically receptive to the outside world – material, natural and human – and to feel at home, if only momentarily, in this strange and beautiful universe" (D'hoker 2016: 223).

4.3. A Collection of Short Stories

Pond does not comprise traditional short stories, but variations on sketches, monologues, prose poems, essays and diary entries, thereby deconstructing the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. It offers a diaristic collage of the narrator's reflections sparked off by the minutiae of her surrounding world. In *Reality Hunger*, David Shields defines collage as "an evolution beyond narrative" (2011: 113), in which "meaning and emotion [are] created not by the content of the individual images but by the relationship of the images to one another" (113). As he further argues, the purpose of this kind of art is to convey the sensation of life as it is perceived, not as it is known:

> Conventional fiction teaches the reader that life is a coherent, fathomable whole that concludes in neatly wrapped-up revelation. Life, though – standing on a street corner, channel surfing, trying to navigate the web or a declining relationship, hearing that a close friend died last night – flies at us in bright splinters.
>
> (Shields 2011: 111)

In literature without a thrillingly intense climax or well-considered development towards a resolution or point of no return, "the absence of plot leaves the reader room to think about other things" (112). This fragmentation and the resistance to plot can also be found in *Pond*, even if it does not consist of 'found' texts as in collage fiction. The deliberate rejection of the novel-format and the choice for an integrated short-story collection highlights the fragmentation of self and life.

In an article in *The Irish Times* (2016b), Bennett notes that narrative, as a means to develop "a cogent and enduring sense of self," posed a problem from the outset as she is not interested in the clearly delineated and stable self, but rather the peregrine and fluid self. "How then", she wonders, "to convey the permutations of a formless entity through a medium inherently geared towards the manifestation of a clean-edged and consistent character? Quite the conundrum." The answer to this conundrum lies in the experimental form of *Pond*, which reads more like an integrated collection of short narratives than like a novel. In its juxtaposition of twenty short stories, *Pond* defies established narrative devices and flouts conventional rules of chronology, causality and the length of its episodes. Bennett's collection of short stories offers few topographical and temporal details, never grounding an experience in a specifically situated setting. There is no temporal positioning of the short stories in

relation to each other, only a slight reference to the year in which the story takes place (i.e. 2013): "[Walter A. Sheaffer's] fountain pens were incorporated in 1913, which means this year marks the 100-year anniversary of Sheaffer fountain pens" (Bennett 2016a: 111). In terms of geographical location, the protagonist's cottage is situated "on the most westerly point of Europe, right next to the Atlantic Ocean in fact" (98). *Pond*, in other words, rejects a logical plot that runs smoothly from one event to another, without establishing causal and temporal relations.

Furthermore, Bennett experiments with storyness and narration in her short stories, which significantly differ in length: some take up no more than a few sentences, others a mere paragraph, while the longest story unfolds over the course of twenty pages. The short narrative "Stir-fry," for instance, consists merely of two sentences:

> I just threw my dinner in the bin. I knew as I was making it I was going to do that,
>
> so I put in it all the things I never want to see again.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 71)

In this example, a fairly trivial occurrence ironically gains special significance through being foregrounded as the sole 'dramatic' event of the story. As in some other short stories in *Pond*, the title becomes an integral part of the story. The use of enjambment also brings the movement of the line to a sudden halt and is characteristic of the fragmented style of Bennett's book. This poetic technique is occasionally used in other short narratives as well. In the third short story "First Thing," which is merely one page long, the second paragraph consists of one long sentence, which continues into the third paragraph. The fifth narrative "Wishful Thinking" consists of only one paragraph, which not only suddenly changes to third-person narration, but which also breaks up its final sentence by means of an enjambment:

> (…) Sees empty bowl and smeared spoon at the edge of the desk. Next to a bottle of Hawaiian Tropic. Factor 15. Thinks,
>
> perhaps that was from another day.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 51)

Here, the enjambed line draws even more attention to itself due to the blank line inserted between the first and the second part of the sentence. In these cases, the fragmentation of *Pond* at macro-level is echoed on the micro-level through the typographical set-up of its paragraphs and sentences at micro-level.

4.4. An Anonymous Voice

Pond also experiments with voice as it employs a combination of first-, second- and third-person narration, even as the protagonist or narrator seems to remain the same person. The novel opens with you-narration, while the main body of the text constitutes a first-person narrative voice, intermittently substituted for third-person narration. In *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Brian Richardson discusses different types of novels that employ multiperson narration. He states that novels with, what he calls, multiperson narratives "allow the free play of multiple voices and can be seen as a practice that generates a greater degree of dialogism than more conventional techniques typically allow" (2006: 68). One variety of multiperson narratives comprises fiction with alternating narration between different grammatical persons, such as "I," "she" and (more sporadically) "you" in the case of *Pond*.

The triple-voice narrative portrays the world of a single figure as it juxtaposes storytelling from first-, second- and third-person narrative position. The unnamed woman is referred to with the first- as well as third-person pronoun, while she addresses an unknown character in the second person. Both "I" or "she" and "you" remain anonymous, for "names in books are nearly always names from real life and so already the reader is bound to have some knowledge about a person with a particular name" (Bennett 2016a: 87). This strategy of anonymity gives the story a more universal reach, as the narrator becomes something of an 'everywoman' and the other characters acquaintances or 'others' in the narrator's world: "All the names mean nothing to you, and your name means nothing to them" (105).

In its opening lines, *Pond* first presents the second-person addressee: "First of all, it seemed to us that you were very handsome" (1). Whereas the initial story "Voyage in the Dark" foregrounds the "you"-persona, the rest of the book only sporadically refers to him or her. Additionally, the identity of "you" remains obscure. The effect of this is that, as argued by Phelan (1994: 351), the reader is more inclined to occupy the addressee position. What is more, *Pond* oscillates between two structural possibilities, with regard to agent roles and implied narrational roles, as presented by Monika Fludernik in "Second Person Fiction: Narrative *You* As Addressee And/Or Protagonist" (1993). The first type of second-person

narrative includes a function of address on the *discourse* level, achieved through an explicit you-address or imperatives. In this case, "the addressee can be a generalized you, or a specific individual (an extra-diegetic narratee)" and "the enunciational instance can be envisioned as, basically, a 'voice' without existential attributes" (221). The following passage demonstrates how the narrator addresses a universal "you" or the reader:

> I wonder who out of everyone will sit on the ottoman? Well, if you must know, that is not a spontaneous point of curiosity and I don't wonder really because in fact I already posses a good idea – a clear picture actually – of who will sit upon the ottoman.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 76)

In the second type of second-person fiction, the function of address is combined with "an 'existential' situatedness on the *histoire* level" (Fludernik 1993: 221), as we have seen in *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* and *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*. Here, the addressee is an actant and an intra-diegetic narratee, who posits "a subjective verisimilar identity between the address-*you* and the protagonist-*you*" (222), while the narrator shares an existential link with the addressee on the story plane. The following fragment shows her addressing a literary actant that inhabits the same story world as her: "And without looking at me you put the knife down onto the draining board sort of immediately and you scooted of along the worktop to where the kettle is" (Bennett 2016: 171).

Additionally, Mildorf (2016: 155) relates the degree of involvement to the linguistic context for *Pond* further enhances the you-address by means of a variety of narrative strategies that strive to implicate the reader into the fictional world. By means of rhetorical questions, the imperative mood and vivid descriptions, the narrator invites the reader to live the story with her as if he or she actually inhabits the fictional realm of *Pond*:

> Wow it's so still. Isn't it eerie. Oh yes. So calm. Everything's still. That's right. Look at the rowers – look at how fast the rowers are going. Ominous – yes, like the calm before the storm. If you like. Look at the rowers.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 169)

The result is a sense of narrative immediacy that brings the reader into the present moment and into the story itself.

The narrator herself appears both in the first and third person. Most short stories are written in the first-person singular, but three chapters form an exception to the rule in that they switch to third-person narration. The two short stories "Wishful Thinking" and "Two Weeks Since" employ verbs in the third-person present tense, but without mentioning the third-person pronoun. The former strings together the protagonist's actions and thoughts in a simple and straightforward sequence or enumeration: "Pads upstairs, scrapples about beneath ottoman, locates green flip-flop. Straightens, eyes bed. Thinks, hmmmm, stylish." (55). The latter consists of four paragraphs, showing the opposite movement of two people. The man first "walks up back road, holding on to hat, what he calls a skimmer, sees first one horse then another" and later the woman "walks down back road, holding on to hat, what she calls a boater, sees the second horse first" (69). As both chapters leave the subject position unfilled, the short stories remain anonymous and general. The final chapter "Old Ground" adopts a third-person narrative in the past tense. Together with the first short story "Voyage in the Dark," it is situated in the protagonist's childhood and the two chapters consequently enclose the main body of the book, which focuses on her adulthood.

In most parts of *Pond*, however, the female protagonist narrates the story in the first person singular: "It's the impression that certain things made on me that I wanted to get across, not the occurrences themselves" (103). The book consequently emphasises the embodied experience of thought. In an interview with *Honest Ulsterman* (2015), Bennett proclaimed that "the voice suggests a kind of experiential mode rather than an ontological construct." In this respect, her collection of short stories shows the influence of German post-dramatic theatre, as outlined by Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). Post-dramatic theatre, and similarly *Pond*, offers an unorthodox inquiry into the human identity and experience, thereby seeking to convey the subject or "I" differently. In Bennett's short story-collection, the first-person narrator constantly fantasises and digresses in a repetitive voice, circling around recollections, and makes assumptions when her memory fails her:

> Real events don't make much difference to me, as such the impact they have upon my mind is either zilch or blistering, and so, naturally, I have to question my facility to form memories that have any congruity at all with what in fact took place.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 182)

She attempts to recall the past, but often she ends up with ‘perhaps’, ‘I believe’ and ‘might have been’:

> I do not remember the interior of the priest’s house. I think the wallpaper in the hallway might have been sage green. It could be the case that I went in no further than the hallway. Perhaps I just stood at the door on the street looking in at the hallway. And then down at the plastic step. Yes, I believe he was wearing trainers in fact.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 9)

Nevertheless, she does not appear as an unreliable narrator, merely one who reflects the unreliability of impressions and descriptions in general: “It’s perfectly obvious by now to anyone that my head is turned by imagined elsewheres and hardly at all by present circumstances” (185).

4.5. A Mind in Solitude

“In solitude you don’t need to make an impression on the world,” Bennett explained (2016b), “so the world has some opportunity to make an impression on you.” Accordingly, *Pond* seeks to disrupt the reader’s perception of the world and make familiar objects seem strange by closely scrutinizing everyday incidents. This defamiliarization process distorts ordinary experiences, covering both human relationships and inanimate objects. Rather than a semiotic interpretation, the book requires a phenomenological reading that reasserts the value of sensory engagement and of embodied experiences. As Bert O. States puts it:

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged
>
> (States 1987: 21)

The object described might be as insignificant as tomato puree, to which *Pond* dedicates a two-paragraph-long prose poem (titled “Oh, Tomato Puree!”), or as unpredictable as a party or low-key soirée in “Finishing Touch.” Another chapter is completely devoted to the control knobs on her cooker as she describes what she thought upon first seeing the mini-oven, how

the control knobs deteriorated and broke one by one, how she tried contacting the manufacturing firm Santon in South Africa to request new control knobs, but eventually failed: "I feel quite at a loss for about ten minutes and it's a sensation, I realise, that is not entirely dissimilar to indifference. So, naturally, I handle it rather well" (Bennett 2016a: 101).

Pond chronicles the life of a solitary woman, who strives to embrace the physical world while inhabiting her own inner world. Consequently, the collection does not necessarily focus on dramatic events or a detailed characterisation of its protagonist, but rather on the permeable boundary between inside and outside. The book offers a highly internalised view on the external world as its protagonist completely immerses herself in her environment and consequently diffuses her sense of self. The following passage represents the continuous emphasis on internalisation, whether it is of language, exterior experiences or memories:

> English, strictly speaking, is not my first language by the way. I haven't yet discovered what my first language is so for the time being I use English words to say things. I expect I will always have to do it that way; regrettably I don't think my first language can be written down at all. I'm not sure it can be made external you see.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 41-42)

In its depiction of the external world, the short narratives thus offer a decidedly internalised perspective from an unnamed protagonist who is completely absorbed in her surroundings, both domestic and natural.

As a result, everyday objects take on a luminous quality in the stories and take precedence over plot. As Bennett argues,

> solitude, by its nature, doesn't have much of a plot and it doesn't throw up too many events either. Life, from the outside, becomes rather small. Yet in that tight spot one's awareness and sensitivity intensifies to such an extent that the daily round, no matter how unvarying it has become, is a conduit to a more transcendent contact with reality so that, for example, objects are not simply insensate functional things, but materials, substances, which have an aura, an energy – even, occasionally, a numinosity. Categories lose their hold and the surrounding environment is rewritten and revealed
>
> (Bennett 2016b)

Pond thus moves towards a more object- and nature-oriented perspective as the narrator's solitary lifestyle allows her to eschew what Italo Calvino calls "anthropocentric parochialism." According to Bennett, Calvino makes us aware of the many wondrous things in the world, asides from the human experience. Bennett further confesses that before writing *Pond*, she used to compose inventories of ordinary objects she deemed stunning and peculiar, thereby feeling inspired by "a perpetual and vivid sense of creation, of being amidst creation. The earth was moving, transforming, had its own intrinsic drama, and was still being made."

This detailed, observant approach to reality and nature by a solitary individual recalls Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). Based on his two-year residence in a cabin near Walden Pond, Thoreau's novel describes how the archetypal Romantic artist turns away from society in his quest for authenticity, solitude and spiritual transcendence. "What is the course of history," the novel reads, "or philosophy, or poetry, no matter how well selected, or the best society, or the most admirable routine of life, compared with the discipline of look at what is to be seen?" (Thoreau 1999: 102). *Pond*, however, romanticises neither nature nor artistic solitude, but is rather embedded within the domestic as the narrator's focus is on her home, both inside and outside. Her garden is not defined in terms of the Romantic sublime, but in the sense of the ordinary natural world, where she composts, gardens and contemplates how to properly sweep leaves. She shares everyday minutiae of her domestic life: from her concern about the shallow pond outside her cottage to the dirt under her fingernails. Furthermore, while "in literary history the lone figure of the man has many archetypes," Bennett (2015) notes, "the lone woman is something that is still uncomfortable to many." The narrator is therefore not lonely in her solitude for she seeks to connect to the world, as opposed to the male Romantic outsider who turns away from the world. To draw on Elke D'hoker:

> If Thoreau left society to find himself, to gain a deeper form of self-knowledge, Bennett's narrator uses her solitary existence to open up to the world. Instead of a Romantic inward turn then, *Pond* is about turning away from the self to the surrounding world.
>
> (D'hoker 2016: 220-221)

In her essay "The Three Genres," Luce Irigaray contrasts the male "I" with the female "I." While the former "is significantly more important than the *you* and *the world*", the latter "often makes way for the *you, the world*, for the objectivity of words and things" (1991: 146).

The persistence on the natural world accounts for a return to the material world, to "dusk and earth" (Bennett 2016a: 26). The narrator wants to touch bare soil and see the earth; she wants to "see naked trees and hear the earth gasp and settle into a warm and tender mass of radiant darkness" (153). What is more, she desires "most of all to get inside there" (154), and in the end she finds herself "beneath the ground" (168). In an attempt to connect with nature, to become "attuned to the earth's embedded logos" and "experience the enriching joy of moving about in deep and direct accordance with things," the narrator experiences a disruption when she encounters the sign that has "Pond" written on it:

> Yet invariably this vital process is abruptly thwarted by an idiotic overlay of literal designations and inane alerts so that the whole terrain is obscured and inaccessible until eventually it is all quite formidable. As if the earth were a colossal and elaborate deathtrap. How will I ever make myself at home here if there are always these meddlesome scaremongering signs everywhere I go.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 36)

Here again, the semiotic obstacle disturbs her phenomenological experience of the natural world. Furthermore, D'hoker remarks that the narrator's effort to make herself at home represents "an attempt to regain a sense of unity with the material, natural and human world around her" (2016: 222). This blurring of categories and boundaries conjures up Rosi Braidotti's post-anthropocentric theory. In her argument for an eclipsing of the human, she propagates vitalism of existence that links the natural, material and human world, which is no longer central. A first example is the reductive role of other characters in *Pond*, which have a limited number of speaking parts and which are often referred to as "terrifying and familiar entities" (Bennett 2016a: 59). Consequently, "they seem to be on the same level as the objects or animals around her, a non-privileged part of the larger world the narrator tries to observe and negotiate" (D'hoker 2016: 221). A second example is the intertextual and metafictional reference to Marlen Haushofer's *The Wall* (1963), which is the account of a solitary woman who survives within a world surrounded by a wall. The narrator of *Pond* remarks that the woman becomes aware of the fact "all the categories by which she has hitherto identified herself are now perfectly redundant" (Bennett 2016a: 90) and all the previously indispensable identity-markers have become dispensable:

> She is not a woman, though neither of course is she a man; she is more like an element. A physiological manifestation perhaps, in the same way the rocks and trees are physiological manifestations. Material. Matter. Stuff.
>
> (Bennett 2016a: 90)

4.6. Conclusion

Claire-Louise Bennett's highly acclaimed debut revolves around the solitary existence of an unnamed female character, who seeks to reconnect with the world in a reclusive cottage on the west coast of Ireland. In its portrayal of various episodes in the protagonist's life, *Pond* paints elaborate vignettes of the countless minutiae of everyday life rather than glaring important life changing events. The short stories touch on a wide scale of subjects, covering natural as well as domestic everyday objects. *Pond* thus radically rejects anthropocentrism, seeking instead to reconcile as equal partners the human, the natural and the material world. Paradoxically, even though the novel depicts intimate and personal moments in the protagonist's life, the reader learns very little about the woman. Furthermore, she directs her soliloquies towards an implied reader in the second person. In this regard, the collection of short stories combines three different voices (i.e. "I", "she" and "you"), further undermining traditional notions of narrators and characters as unified wholes.

In its experimental form, *Pond* clearly draws on some modernist and postmodernist techniques of fragmentation, but she reconfigures them to suit her own purpose, i.e. the intensification of the instant. In its use of second-person narration, the book aims to involve the reader into the literary process, without engaging in the postmodern game of hyper-conscious irony. Rather, like other New-Sincerity novels, it endeavours to move beyond postmodern cleverness and scepticism through a reconsideration of communication, interaction and sincerity. Moreover, her minimalistic realism also reflects the modernist concern with the ordinary. *Pond*, in other words, can be seen to combine postmodern irony and playfulness with modernist impersonality and a contemporary belief in connection, whether with nature or with other human beings. The collection of short stories therefore resembles James Wood's hysterical realism and Vermeulen and van den Akker's metamodernism, both of which commit to reality and communication, while remembering their modernist and postmodernist heritage. In conclusion, *Pond* explores the depths of literature, solitude, nature and the self, which, unlike the pond of the title, are anything but shallow.

Conclusion

Irish fiction has a well-established tradition of literary experiment, most famously in the works of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Flann O'Brien. As I have shown in this thesis, contemporary Irish fiction can be seen to reconnect with this tradition as it subverts traditional literary conventions and challenges readerly assumptions. Remarkably, since its foundation in 2013, The Goldsmiths Prize for experimental fiction in the United Kingdom has been awarded four times, of which three times to Irish authors. "I think it would be smug and premature to herald a golden age but maybe a proper radicalism is at last starting to re-emerge in Irish writing," Kevin Barry, remarks in *The Guardian*, "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 twentieth century" (qtd. in Jordan 2015). Moreover, as the works of Sara Baume, Eimear McBride and Claire-Louise Bennett demonstrate: in the 21st century, literary experiment is no longer only the prerogative of male writers. Indeed, one could argue that women writers are among the most experimental and original in contemporary Irish literature. I have shown how these works go beyond modernist and postmodernist experiment in their unsettling of conventions – and limitations – of genre, form, typography, syntax, and narrative technique. These final pages will address some of the similarities and differences between the three narratives as well as attempt to draw some conclusions concerning contemporary Irish fiction.

The three novelists placed themselves in a rich Irish literary tradition and were influenced (whether directly or indirectly) by Irish writers, both modernist and postmodernist. Baume's *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* draws on James Joyce's *Ulysses* in its vivid depiction of everyday life, while the author claims to admire the work of Irish writers John McGahern and William Trevor (Baume 2015e). McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* builds on James Joyce's and Samuel Beckett's stream-of-consciousness technique, but also shows influence of Kate O'Brien and Edna O'Brien. With her short story collection *Pond*, Bennett writes herself into a long-standing tradition of Irish short fiction, which has recently gained new lease in the work of such contemporary writers as Kevin Barry, Mary Costello, Danielle McLaughlin and Colin Barrett.

In contrast to most contemporary novels, the three stories are not set in the Irish metropolitan area, which is styled as the opposite of the countryside in its embracing capitalism, speed, technology and the new media. In today's globalised, media-saturated

society where everyone connects on countless platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, where authors constantly have to invent new forms and styles to keep up with the evolution of the Internet, the three works go back to nature and to a domestic setting, described with meticulous care for detail. In their exploration of everyday rural life, the books become literary ecosystems, in which the human and the natural live harmoniously and unmediated. The protagonists all seek to return to nature, not the idealised nature of the Romantic artist, but the ordinary nature of domestic animals and overgrown gardens. In choosing a rural sphere over an urban environment, the books return to the rural tradition of Irish literature, but with a twist. Rather than embodying conventionalism and conservatism, the three works consciously focus on the rural and ordinary to convey a particular meaning.

Spill Simmer Falter Simmer is set in a coastal Irish village to portray the characters' geographical and social marginality; yet when they are forced to leave and drive around the country, Ray's car becomes their secluded safe haven. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* does not shy away from challenging orthodox values typically associated with Irish society. In her rural hometown, the girl does not find a sense of community, but only abuse and oppression in name of patriarchy, family and religion. London offers the prospect of redemption, the possibility of a new life and an escape from the small-minded, patriarchal values, but her rural past clings on to her and forecloses any hope for freedom. To draw on Anne Enright (qtd. in Jordan 2015): "Traditionally, Irish writing has been about breaking silences. The biggest silence has continued to be about the real lives of women." *Pond* also addresses the everyday of a woman, who seeks solitude to reconnect with nature. The short story collection provides a bucolic slice of life in a serenely solitary and minutely described Irish setting. In their focus on the rural, all three works thus draw attention to the ordinary and highlight their characters' solitude.

Moreover, the books explore solitude, "what it means to be a person and the way in which this is complicated by language" (Hartley 2016). In other words, these individual works share a concern with the idea of the self and the question of what it means to be an 'I' as they contemplate on relationships between their protagonists and sentient beings or non-sentient things. As a result, the divisions between the human and the non-human, the post-human and the natural are opened up, blurred and at times even crossed. In these closed universes, the narrators avoid human interaction and rather live in accordance to the outer world and to nature. In their constructing of such a phenomenal world, the books assign new meanings to nature, which can be seen as a symbol or metaphor for the self. This post-anthropocentric idea of an inherent connection between the human and the natural, the post-

human and life is further reflected upon in Rosi Braidotti's *The Post-Human*, which further elaborates upon the tendency in these three works to re-establish a unity between the human, the natural and the material world.

In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, an atmospheric novel framed by the rhythm of the four seasons, Ray becomes increasingly responsive to the natural world around him and particularly his dog One Eye. The narrator fails to make meaningful human connections, but has no trouble with establishing a sincere relationship with a dog, even though One Eye has no linguistic abilities. The half-formed girl in McBride's novel likewise has trouble with connecting to other human beings, such as her mother, her uncle and even her brother. Furthermore, a recurrent motif in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* is water and its cleansing powers. It is therefore no surprise that the novel ends with the girl drowning herself, which amounts to a dissolution of her voice, name and self. The female protagonist in *Pond* additionally expresses a desire to return to the earth and a pre-human, pre-linguistic state. For her, the English language is a redundant obstacle that complicates her sense of self, which can only find expression in an internalised language. Like the other narrators, she feels uncomfortable around people and prefers spending time in her garden, digging with her bare hands. In the end, like Ray and the girl, she becomes part of nature as she finds herself beneath the ground.

As I have tried to demonstrate through an analysis of the stylistic and narrative features of these texts, the authors seem to share an ambition of subverting literary conventions and turning the familiar into the strange. *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* magnifies the ordinary to the point where it becomes extraordinary. Aside from richly detailed descriptions, the narrator also implements numerous repetitions to illustrate the quotidianism of his thoughts. *Pond* has even less plot in its mediation on the ordinary, which results in an effect of defamiliarization and the exploration of the astonishing strangeness of everyday life. Furthermore, Bennett embraces cross-formal experimentation as her work of fiction defies categorization. As a collage of different genres and discourses, the short story collection thus explores the ordinary from different perspectives and in different formats. *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* distorts literary expectations differently, not so much through a focus on small details, but through a focus on the narrator's pre-conscious thoughts, which translate into a highly experimental language. The three experimental novels therefore each in their own way complicate mainstream ideas about form, language, style and genre in order to offer a new perspective on reality and on the mind. They experiment not just for the sake of experimenting, but, to quote Anne Enright, to break silences.

Another experimental element is the recurrent use of the second-person pronoun in combination with a first-person narrator. Even though the degree of characterisation regarding the narratee ranges from high in *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* to low in *Pond*, all three stories nevertheless seek to implicate the reader into the literary process, as is typical of New-Sincerity novels, which entail a return to communication. These fictions therefore not only draw attention to the act of storytelling itself, which is one of the distinctive qualities of experimental fiction, but also aim to intensify the reader's involvement with and immersion in the story. The reader is consequently drawn into the world of both "you" and "I", as explained by Joseph O'Connor (2015) in *The Irish Times*: "It is impossible to write about a "you" without revealing whole reservoirs about the "I", one of fiction's loveliest paradoxes." In other words, the works give shape to the narrators' identity by describing them in light of their relations to others, by incorporating, what Judith Butler calls, an indexical "you" that points to the "I" and crystalizes specific characteristics: "If I survive, it is only because my life is nothing without the life that exceeds me, that refers to some indexical you, without whom I cannot be" (2009: 44).

The effect of you-narration is slightly different in each work. Baume's *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* puts Ray, One Eye and the reader all at one level in an anti-anthropomorphic attempt to animalise Ray and the reader; McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* draws the reader into the troubled mind of the girl; and Bennett's *Pond* combines first-, second- and third-person narration to represent a mind in solitude that turns to the world. By inviting the reader to become part of the story and to live vicariously through the characters, the three books move beyond modernist impersonality and postmodernist irony towards a contemporary revival of sincerity. To draw on Rachel Greenwald Smith (2016): "It has become commonplace to define the literature that emerges after postmodernism as returning the personal to the forefront of literary experience." In its shift from detachment and art for art's sake to belief and communication, the gimmick-free works continue to use modernist and postmodernist techniques (such as the stream-of-consciousness and second-person narration), thereby striving towards a post-postmodern poetics of commitment, sentimentalism and authenticity.

Contemporary Irish fiction, as represented by the three works under consideration, aims to reconcile its Irish rural heritage, characterised by solitude, nature and conformity, with experimental strategies to say something sincere about the self, about communication, about language and about reality. These books draw on and subvert many literary traditions and conventions in order to present a new way of looking at reality or of capturing the

processes of the mind. Notwithstanding these experimental procedures, the authors have succeeded in creating life-like characters, with which a reader can identify and empathize. Each narrator is another kind of outcast, pouring out their stories in their own voice, their own monologue, addressed to a you-persona (and consequently to the reader) who in turn also becomes part of the story. As exemplified by aforementioned novels, experiment in contemporary Irish fiction keeps turning over new leaves, writing the beginning of a new tradition. Indeed, these books belong to a growing experimental canon that brings in an Irish (post)modernist literary tradition to address contemporary issues and to unrepress fundamental questions, human as well as literary.