

Representations of Trauma in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*: Novel and Stage Adaptation

Abstract: Eimear McBride's novel, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), tells the story of a young woman who experiences multiple traumas. It was hailed for its modernist-style innovative and experimental prose and won the inaugural Goldsmiths Prize for "fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form". When Annie Ryan adapted the novel for the stage (2014), theatre reviewers were less enamoured of the modernist strategies used in the novel. This paper compares strategies used by McBride to represent trauma in her novel with those used by Ryan in her stage adaptation of the text. Reading the novel through the lens of the theatrical staging reveals the overlooked but important role of McBride's understanding of theatre to her prose writing. It also demonstrates McBride's unique contribution to the representation of trauma in fiction, providing new directions for literary trauma theory.

Keywords: Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, modernism, theatre, adaptation, literary trauma.

Résumé: Le roman d'Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013), raconte l'histoire d'une jeune femme qui subit de multiples traumatismes. Il a été salué pour sa prose innovante et expérimentale de style moderniste et a remporté le premier Goldsmiths Prize pour « une fiction qui brise le moule ou étend les possibilités de la forme romanesque ». Lorsqu'Annie Ryan a adapté le roman pour la scène (2014), les critiques de théâtre ont été moins séduits par les stratégies modernistes utilisées dans le roman. Cet article compare les stratégies utilisées par McBride pour représenter le traumatisme dans son roman avec celles utilisées par Ryan dans son adaptation scénique du texte. La lecture du roman à travers le prisme de la mise en scène révèle le rôle négligé mais important que joue la compréhension du théâtre par McBride dans son écriture en prose. Cela démontre également la contribution unique de McBride à la représentation du traumatisme dans la fiction, ouvrant de nouvelles orientations à la théorie littéraire du traumatisme.

Mots clés: Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, modernisme, théâtre, adaptation, traumatisme littéraire.

Introduction

To write about trauma is to write about pain, be it mental or physical, chronic or acute, individual or collective, with the intention of transmitting that pain via the page to a reader. Each trauma narrative must either find or invent its own strategy to evoke an empathetic response. Much attention was paid to the modernist techniques employed to this end by dramaturg-turned novelist Eimear McBride in her debut novel *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, a first-person monologue written in fragmented

syntax delivered to a reader by the titular Girl.¹ A year after its publication, the novel was adapted for the stage by Annie Ryan.² The discrepancy between the theatre reviews and the initial reviews of the novel is striking, revealing that at least some readers found the modernist strategies of the novel to be an irritation and an unwelcome distraction. Reading the novel through the lens of the stage adaptation allows us to move beyond what Ruth Gilligan describes as the “default ‘modernist’ vernacular”³ that dominated early discussions of McBride’s debut novel to consider other influences at work in the novel, specifically those of theatre. Drawing on close readings of McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, the stage adaptation of the novel, the theatre context in which the novel was adapted, a review of the Vimeo of the play, and a personal interview with theatre director Annie Ryan, this paper explores the influence and impact of McBride’s theatre background on her prose fiction, arguing that what is most innovative in McBride’s representation of trauma is her transference of theatre sensibilities to prose writing which becomes apparent when *Girl* takes to the stage. By shifting the focus off but without discounting the modernist strategies employed by McBride, it demonstrates that the tools of acting and the theatre are also instrumental in transferring the traumas experienced by *Girl* to the reader. This is relevant to current trauma studies discussions on the representation of trauma in fiction, where critics such as Michelle Balaev and Alan Gibbs argue that modernist approaches of mimicking trauma may be overworn and no longer affective. The paper concludes that McBride’s true innovation lies in her combined use of theatre and modernist tools to provide new and affective ways of representing trauma in fiction.

A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing was first published by Galley Beggar Press in 2013. The novel tells the story of a young woman’s relationship with her brother who has developed a brain tumour and of her own sexual abuse. It uses fragmented syntax, abrupt transitions and seeming unchecked flow of thought to represent the grief and sexual abuse experienced by the protagonist, tools often associated with modernism. David Collard, first reviewer of McBride’s novel⁴ and author of *About a Girl: A Reader’s Guide to Eimear McBride’s “A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing”*, declared McBride’s novel to be “by any worthwhile measure superior to almost all contemporary fiction in its aesthetic ambitions and technical achievement”; according to Collard, McBride had “brought life to the avant-garde, and brought the avant-garde to life”.⁵ The reviews which followed were overwhelmingly positive and most fell into line with Collard in focusing on McBride’s syncopated prose. Justine Jordan in *The Guardian* places the novel “firmly in the Irish modernist

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1. Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* [2013], London, Faber and Faber, 2014.
 2. Playscript: Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, London, Faber and Faber, 2015.
 3. Ruth Gilligan, “Eimear McBride’s Ireland: A Case for Periodisation and the Dangers of Marketing Modernism”, *English Studies*, vol. 99, no. 7, 2018, p. 775-792, abstract.
 4. David Collard, “Gob Impressive”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5750, 14 June 2013.
 5. David Collard, *About a Girl: A Reader’s Guide to Eimear McBride’s “A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing”*, London, CB Editions, 2016, p. 172.

tradition of Beckett and Joyce”;⁶ Sinéad Gleeson, reviewing for *The Irish Times*, praises McBride’s “anti-grammatical” approach which “captures each leaping, real-time thought with staccato phrases, half-sentences and perfectly formed rhymes”, and concludes by invoking James Joyce;⁷ Adam Mars-Jones opens his review for the *London Review of Books* with a discussion of her comma-averse punctuation.⁸

The Observer, as Ruth Gilligan drily states in her 2018 critical essay, “felt confident enough to go one further and articulate McBride’s specific intentions: ‘She set out to pick up the experimental modernist baton from James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and she has done just that’”. Gilligan challenges the “default ‘modernist’ vernacular” which surrounds McBride, describing it as a “lazy packaging tool” and “one that is undeniably gendered”.⁹ In drawing attention to the modernist-centric reviews of the novel, Gilligan is echoing the reception of the stage adaptation of the novel. Ryan’s adaption of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* premiered on 28 September 2014 in the Samuel Beckett Theatre as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival, with Aoife Duffin in the title role and Ryan directing. Reviewing for *The Guardian*, Helen Meany writes that “the narrative transposes effortlessly to the stage, as if this is where it belongs. [...] The clarity of performance moves us beyond preoccupation with McBride’s fractured syntax, so that the core of this piece emerges”.¹⁰ Theatre critic Mark Lawson, following the play’s London premiere, expresses a similar sense of frustration with the novel’s syntax. He suggests that the story of a tragic rural Irish protagonist has become something of a cliché and speculates that the oblique style of the novel was “possibly a strategy to distract from the plot’s potentially risible pile-up of crises”.¹¹ In contrast, Lawson describes the theatrical solution to representing Girl’s trauma as “thrilling”. This paper contends that both novel and play could be described as “thrilling” for many reasons including but not limited to McBride’s effective use of modernist strategies to close the distance between reader / audience and Girl. At a personal level, McBride is experimenting with and developing her craft, influenced by her reading of Joyce, of which she has often spoken.¹² However, in bringing her knowledge and understanding of stagecraft to the novel and combining it with

6. Justine Jordan, “*A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* Is Uncompromising in Style and Subject Matter”, *The Guardian*, 4 June 2014.

7. Sinéad Gleeson, “*A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, by Eimear McBride: Unique, Fearless, Compelling”, *The Irish Times*, 5 October 2013.

8. Adam Mars-Jones, “All Your Walkmans Fizz in Tune”, *London Review of Books*, vol. 35, no. 15, 8 August 2013, online: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v35/n15/adam-mars-jones/all-your-walkmans-fizz-in-tune>.

9. Ruth Gilligan, “Eimear McBride’s Ireland...”, p. 776.

10. Helen Meany, “*A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* Five Star Review – A Courageously Feminist Production”, *The Guardian*, 30 September 2014.

11. Mark Lawson, “On Stage, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* Becomes Fully Formed”, *The New Statesman*, 25 February 2016.

12. For example: “Reading *Ulysses* changed everything I thought about language, and everything I understood about what a book could do” (“My Hero: Eimear McBride on James Joyce”, *The Guardian*, 6 June 2014).

tried and trusted literary trauma strategies she is also doing something new within the novel form.

Although Gilligan argues persuasively against the gendered reception of McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, she accepts the same inherent contradiction on which her argument is based, deeming McBride's novel "radically unique" while at the same time acknowledging that the techniques which make it so could and frequently have been described as modernist.¹³ This is particularly relevant in the case of McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, which, among several prestigious awards, won the inaugural Goldsmiths Prize, established to reward those who "broke new ground".¹⁴ Although it is possible to reuse techniques which were innovative in the past to powerful affect, as McBride does, one must exercise caution when claiming those techniques to be innovative in and of themselves, that is, "featuring new methods".¹⁵ Other critics well-grounded in modernist women's writing also read *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* as giving voice to women's sensibility through modernist technique. Silvia Antosa demonstrates "the speakability of female trauma"¹⁶ in McBride's novel, and the ways in which it "engages with the paradox of articulating the so-called unspeakable core of trauma";¹⁷ however, her reading of the representation of trauma in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* focuses predominantly on McBride's "highly experimental style".¹⁸ I argue that McBride's greatest innovation lies in her application of stagecraft to fiction to represent the trauma experienced by her protagonist.

Writing trauma

Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic model of trauma sees trauma as unspeakable, and therefore unrepresentable.¹⁹ For the novelist who would write a trauma narrative, this presents obvious difficulties. According to Anne Whitehead, author of the seminal *Trauma Fiction* (2004),

Novelists have frequently found that the impact of trauma can only adequately be represented by mimicking its forms and symptoms, so that temporality and chronology collapse, and narratives are characterized by repetition and indirection.²⁰

13. Ruth Gilligan, "Eimear McBride's Ireland...", p. 787.

14. Blake Morrison, quoted in Philip Maughan, "Goldsmiths Prize Awarded to Debut Novelist Eimear McBride for *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*", *The New Statesman*, 13 November 2013.

15. Aa Dictionnaire, version 2.3.0, 2005-2024, Apple Inc., s.v. "innovative".

16. Silvia Antosa, "'My name is gone': Trauma, Sexuality and Language in Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*", *Textus: English Studies in Italy*, no. 1, January-April 2015, p. 143.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

18. *Ibid.*, abstract.

19. As developed in Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), based on her reading of Freud within the context of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

20. Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 3.

Whitehead notes that “novelists draw, in particular, on literary techniques that mirror at a formal level the effects of trauma”, and lists a number of key stylistic features which tend to recur in these narratives, including repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice, all of which could reasonably be applied to McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*.²¹ Contemporary trauma theory shifts away from this psychoanalysis-based idea of trauma as unrepresentable towards a more pluralistic approach, “in part through the interdisciplinary approaches informed by psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory”.²² In line with new trauma theories, literary critic Alan Gibbs argues that fiction has the capacity to represent trauma but critiques what he sees as a “damagingly formulaic body of literary production and attendant criticism, the trauma genre”, which favours the avant-garde and “has led to a narrow, derivative, and only superficially experimental genre of works”.²³ He suggests that modernist strategies such as fragmentation and temporal disruption may be over-used and formulaic and no longer equal to new understandings of trauma.²⁴ In the context of this necessarily brief review of trauma studies, although McBride’s use of fragmented syntax and her eschewal of conventional punctuation can be said to contribute to the effectiveness of the novel, in and of itself it is neither truly experimental nor does it represent women’s trauma in a new way.

Gilligan was among the first literary critics to reassess the modernism that dominated the novel’s initial reception.²⁵ Fast forward to 2024 and Paige Reynolds refers to McBride’s “laundry list”²⁶ of modernist technique and her “aggressive display of modernist form”.²⁷ Contending that McBride and other contemporary Irish women writers who use modernist strategies have been dismissed as peripheral to the modern literary tradition, Reynolds advocates for reading *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* through what she calls the “stubborn mode”, that is, “tried-and-true literary tactics that trigger a sense of recognition when readers encounter them, a constellation of traits – including style, tone, forms, content and history – commonly associated with a particular literary movement or school that travels across

21. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

22. Michelle Balaev, “Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered”, in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, Michelle Balaev (ed.), Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 5.

23. Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, p. 242.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 244–245.

25. See also Paige Reynolds, “Bird Girls: Modernism and Sexual Ethics in Contemporary Irish Fiction”, in *Modernism and Close Reading*, David James (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 173–190; Liam Harrison, “Post-Millennial Modernism: Late Style and Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*”, *The Modernist Review*, 3 July 2020, online: <https://modernistreviewcouk.wordpress.com/2020/07/03/post-millennial-modernism-late-style-and-eimear-mcbrides-a-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing/>.

26. Paige Reynolds, *Modernism in Irish Women’s Contemporary Writing: The Stubborn Mode*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024, p. 80.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

time”.²⁸ She argues that reading the novel through the prism of prayer “allows us to see past the accepted narratives of modernist literary authority, to regard those long-standing assessments as the artefacts that they are so that we do not continue to replicate their limitations”.²⁹ Reynolds’s “stubborn mode” offers a persuasive approach to texts featuring modernist strategies in a contemporary context but it merely extends the modernist discourse that has adhered to McBride’s novel – stubbornly – since its publication.

The problem with this is that McBride placed herself firmly in the modernist tradition, plain and simple. As Jacqueline Rose puts it in a review of *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), McBride’s follow-up novel, in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, McBride “proudly trailed James Joyce in her wake, claiming her allegiance to a European modernism”.³⁰ Most critics acknowledged this allegiance when the book was first published. This paper seeks simultaneously to acknowledge McBride’s position *and* to set aside the well-rehearsed modernist debate in favour of a theatre reading of the novel. Critical discussions on the influence of theatre on McBride’s first novel are surprisingly limited, especially when one considers that McBride is a trained actor. While Antosa comments on McBride’s theatre background and her acknowledged debt to playwright Sarah Kane, the focus of her essay remains on McBride’s articulation of trauma through her “highly experimental style”, as noted above. Likewise, Nina White, in her 2018 article, “‘It was like lightning’: The Theatrical Resonances of Sarah Kane in Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*”, focuses as the title suggests on Kane’s influence on McBride, paying particular attention to the thematic similarities between the two, including sexual abuse, incest and mental illness.³¹ White extends her discussion to include McBride’s theatre background, contending that “McBride’s experience as a trained actor encouraged a form of ‘method-writing’ which contributes to the inherent theatricality of her writing”.³² However, she does not contest the novel’s “Joycean resonances” or “the innovative language and form of the [...] novel”.³³

It is important to remember that the novel form has its origins in theatre, or as James Wood puts it, “[t]he novel begins in theatre, and novelistic characterisation begins when the soliloquy goes inward”.³⁴ A short digression into the history of the novel form here serves to provide a broader context than is generally afforded McBride’s novel. Literary scholar Anne F. Widmayer demonstrates how dramatists and novelists Aphra Behn, Henry Fielding and other authors

28. Paige Reynolds, *Modernism in Irish Women’s Contemporary Writing*..., p. 3.

29. Paige Reynolds, “I wanted to write a book about Irish women’s writing. They told me to include men”, *The Irish Times*, 10 July 2024.

30. Jacqueline Rose, “From the Inside Out”, *London Review of Books*, vol. 38, no. 18, 22 September 2016, online: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n18/jacqueline-rose/from-the-inside-out>.

31. Nina White, “‘It was like lightning’: The Theatrical Resonances of Sarah Kane in Eimear McBride’s *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*”, *Irish Studies Review*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2018, p. 564-577.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 571-572.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 564-565.

34. James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, London, Vintage Books, 2009, p. 107.

“imported dramatic techniques into their early fictional work to provoke readers’ and authors’ meta-awareness of the constructedness of prose fiction”³⁵ while Jill Syverson-Stork draws attention to Miguel de Cervantes’s and Fielding’s shared theatrical apprenticeship which “introduced the modern novel by combining drama’s ability to show, with the narrative’s ability to tell”.³⁶ In his PhD thesis, James Joseph Howard explores the impact on the evolution of the novel of women playwrights of the Restoration period.³⁷ He examines the work of women who wrote both plays and novels, “women writers whose theatrical experience, in the broadest sense, appears to have informed their novel writing and consequently helped shape the new genre”, beginning with Behn, followed in the 1690s by the “Female Wits” – Mary Pix, Katherine Trotter, and Delariviere Manley – and their successors.³⁸ A significant contribution of these authors, according to Howard, is the interiority of their female characters, which they achieve through asides and soliloquies on stage, which is matched by a corresponding delving into the minds of their female characters in their fiction.³⁹ This interiority which came to be associated with the novel, and which could be described as the novel’s main advantage over theatre or film, came to prominence in the late 19th / early 20th centuries with the development of the field of psychology and the novels of Woolf and Joyce: the modernism with which McBride is aligned. But McBride also belongs to another tradition, that of theatre, and despite the wide separation that has grown over the centuries between the genres, the boundaries have always remained stubbornly porous and intersections between the two are manifold. It is tempting here to situate McBride in the tradition of modern and contemporary Irish women novelists who also write for the stage, from Kate O’Brien and Molly Keane to Edna O’Brien, Jennifer Johnston, Emma O’Donoghue and others, but, although McBride has subsequently written for the stage,⁴⁰ at the time of the publication of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* she had eschewed acting and the theatre, declaring the novel to be “the only form I’ve ever really be [*sic*] interested in”; and, moreover, she did not consider herself to be an Irish writer.⁴¹ Nor was she acquainted with the

35. Anne F. Widmayer, *Theatre and the Novel, from Behn to Fielding*, Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2015, p. 2.

36. Jill Syverson-Stork, “Theatrical Aspects of the Novel: *Don Quixote*, *Joseph Andrews*, and the Example of Cervantes”, *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos / Journal of Hispanic Studies*, vol. 9, 1982, p. 248.

37. James Joseph Howard, *The English Novel’s Cradle: The Theatre and the Women Novelists of the Long Eighteenth Century*, PhD thesis, University of California, Riverside, 2010, p. vi.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 236-237.

40. *Mouthpieces*, the collection of three performance texts which McBride wrote as inaugural Creative Fellow at the Samuel Beckett Research Centre, University of Reading, published by Faber and Faber in 2021.

41. David Collard, “Interview with Eimear McBride”, *The White Review*, May 2014, online: <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-eimear-mcbride>. Asked if she sees herself as an Irish writer, McBride responds: “No. I’d like to set up my stall up [*sic*] as a European writer”, but allows that she “probably belong[s] in the diaspora set because [she] only ha[s] clarity from a distance”. In the same interview, she recalls trying to write novels or stories as a child “but teenage poetry aside, that’s the only form I’ve ever really be [*sic*] interested in”.

work of Marina Carr, arguably Ireland's most important contemporary woman playwright, who rose to prominence in an era when high-profile Irish women playwrights were not plentiful.⁴² So while it is true that McBride is a novelist who has also written (three very short) plays, it would be misleading to define her through this lens. Thus, in its aim to explore theatre influences at work in the representation of trauma in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, this paper focuses instead on the convergence of theatre and novel forms in adaptation.

The adaptation of novels for the stage is perhaps the most obvious point of intersection of the forms, but beyond adaptation, novelists might well cast an envious eye on theatre, with its ready-made three-act structure, audiences primed to respond to conventions of tragedy and comedy, and real people – actors, stage crew, directors – who collaborate on telling the story to optimal effect. While both theatre makers and novelists might wish to bring their characters' experiences as close as possible to audiences, many of the strategies employed by the more innovative theatre makers are unavailable to the novelist. Humans experience the world through the senses, but no matter how innovative the novelist, a hand will never reach out of the book and physically touch the reader. Nor can smell or sound be utilised in the novel beyond the author's descriptive powers. Nevertheless, novelists have risen to the challenge of representing the traumas of war, famine, migration, sexual and physical abuse, grappling with form, structure and language to inspire empathy. But there is a danger that over time tried and tested techniques can become tired and hence less effective, as argued by Alan Gibbs and others, perhaps necessitating new strategies for representing trauma. Theatre and the performance arts have advanced the trauma project in ways that would seem to extend beyond anything the novel is doing currently, but McBride had the advantage of a background in theatre, and like other women playwright-novelists before her, she had the tools of theatre at her disposal.

Adapting *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*

Ryan's adaptation of the novel for the stage was "conceived for a solo performer on a spare set with no props or furniture". It is about eighty minutes long, roughly one-ninth the length of the novel. Ryan notes that "there's just no way you could sustain something like this for even ninety minutes".⁴³ It begins, "Part 1, Lambs, 1", followed directly by McBride's words, without any mediating directions. Ryan explains: "The deal was I would cut loads but I wouldn't invent any language", making the two *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* texts, novel and play, ideal for comparison and analysis.⁴⁴ Ryan divides the play script into roughly the same chapters and parts as the novel "to help the performer and creative team to

42. "I don't know [Carr's] work at all" (personal correspondence with McBride, 2018).

43. Author interview with Annie Ryan, April 2017.

44. *Ibid.*

understand the arc of the narrative".⁴⁵ Dialogue layout, however, diverges from the original text for the same reasons:

Whereas the dialogue in the original text is rarely attributed to character and only indicated through spacing in one scene in the entire book, I have used line breaks to point to dialogue, as well as shifts in character, time and location.⁴⁶

Compare the following excerpt from McBride's novel with the same piece of dialogue between Girl and her mother in the adaptation:

She says I've something to tell you after all. Your father's hmmm. Your father's, sit down. What? Shush. Dead. A while ago I got a letter from his mother, once it was over and done. She said he took a stroke. Quick. Probate won't be long. But you never told us? Why didn't you tell us? There wasn't much I could say, not like he loved you, us I mean, and now he's dead.⁴⁷

I've something to tell you after all. Your father's hmmm. Your father's, sit down.

What?

Dead. A while ago I got a letter from his mother. She said he took a stroke.

But you never told us? Why didn't you tell us?

There wasn't much I could say, not like he loved you, us I mean, and now he's dead.⁴⁸

As Anne Fogarty notes, Ryan's

[...] rendering of the girl uncovers the degree to which she ventriloquises and is scripted by the voices of others, her berating mother, her moralising grandfather, her beloved brother and the succession of men whom she violently seduces or allows to sexually abuse her.⁴⁹

Ryan's modified formatting introduces clarity for her readers, in the first instance actors and other theatre professionals, whereas McBride's dense paragraphs, without speech marks or other indication of speech or change of speaker, while effective in creating an immersive effect into Girl's thoughts, seem designed to deliberately frustrate reader access, despite McBride's stated intention "to go in as close as the reader would reasonably permit".⁵⁰ Paige Reynolds interprets this immersion into a difficult text as a strategy that ensures that the reader is not allowed to simply observe or consume Girl's pain but is instead forced to slow down and to experience, witness or empathise with something akin to what

45. Annie Ryan, "Note on the Adaptation", in Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, p. 11.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, p. 33.

48. Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, p. 21.

49. Anne Fogarty, "Ripping Up the Original?: Fictional Adaptations in Contemporary Irish Theatre", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance*, Eammon Jordan, Eric Weitz (eds.), London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 511.

50. David Collard, "Interview with Eimear McBride".

the protagonist endures and perhaps feel something in response.⁵¹ Still, artistic decisions are made by constant weighing of effects, and in this, McBride took a considerable risk; while there is no doubt that many readers finished and enjoyed the book, one wonders if her formatting decision could have contributed to the well-publicised difficulty she experienced in getting the book published. After publication, too, despite the stellar reception and strong critical interest the book received, there is evidence that many readers put down *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* and did not pick it back up.⁵² Interestingly, an informal discussion at a literary conference revealed that several of those (literary scholars) who abandoned the text succeeded in finishing the novel when they swapped it for the audio version. This is significant because an audio reading provides an experience for the reader that is closer to the stage adaptation in that it minimises the impact of many modernist or other formal strategies of the text. Layout, formatting, and punctuation are lost to the listener and can only be inferred. Stream of consciousness effects (or “pre-consciousness”, as McBride prefers⁵³) are mediated through a human voice, rather than a reader’s eye, which necessitates breathing and with it the natural pauses usually denoted by punctuation absent in stream of consciousness texts. Innovative word construction becomes more or less an approximation of the conventional word or words being replaced.⁵⁴ What the listener gains is the clarity provided by the voice actor’s interpretation of the text; in the case of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, McBride herself narrates the audiobook, eliminating its textual impenetrability.⁵⁵

Reviewing the video recording of the play was crucial to my understanding of the representations of trauma in both novel and play.⁵⁶ The one-woman show opens to a dark stage from which a young woman’s voice emerges. As she speaks, actor Aoife Duffin is gradually spot lit. She is barefoot, wearing red and blue checked pyjama bottoms (Ryan’s husband’s) and an oversized t-shirt. This is Ryan’s sole concession to props, a minimalist approach which allowed her to prioritise Girl’s voice. For the eighty-five minutes of the play, stage craft is powerfully deployed through absence: of sound, limited to no more than a few minutes of ominous low notes; of light, which increases and decreases at various points for emphasis; of props; and of characters. The cast of characters including Girl’s mother,

51. Paige Reynolds, “Bird Girls...”, p. 189.

52. The novel was included on a list of “The Most ‘Abandoned’ Books on GoodReads” (<https://www.gwern.net/GoodReads>).

53. “I was aiming for the tiny spot [...] just before thought and impulse become language, which makes the answer to your ‘Is it stream of consciousness?’ question. No, maybe closer is stream of pre-consciousness” (Eimear McBride, quoted in David Collard, *About a Girl...*, p. 116).

54. For example, when uttered by an actor – or indeed by a cat – Joyce’s textually fresh “mrkgnao” at the beginning of “Calypso” in *Ulysses* is lost, as in the 1982 RTE dramatisation (<https://www.rte.ie/culture/2025/0527/1146705-listen-ulysses-james-joyce-podcast>).

55. Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, audiobook narrated by Eimear McBride, Faber and Faber, 2014.

56. Vimeo of *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, provided by Annie Ryan, “filmed on a Saturday matinee in October 2014”.

brother, uncle, school friends and sexual partners is portrayed by Duffin alone and indicated only by alterations of tone and small bodily adjustments, tilting to the left or the right to change speaker. Through an unspoken pact between Ryan, Duffin and the audience, the pyjamas become variously a school uniform, a skirt, a coat; and later, Girl's wet clothes. Scene changes are marked by a few seconds' pause and perhaps a few steps. The shift from kitchen to upstairs bedroom, for example, is marked by three steps across the stage. In the recording, the audience can be heard laughing at some of the play's many comic lines, especially early on, but as the dark tale unfolds, there is a hush, with barely a throat cleared until the play's tragic end.

In contrast to fiction, the space of the stage requires the embodiment of interior thought, and when McBride's character is embodied and her words uttered aloud, something curious happens: syntactical and other modernist strategies are effectively neutralised. That is to say, McBride's syntactical style by and large does not translate to the stage. By highlighting the strengths of McBride's story beyond her syntactical strategies, the adaptation provides a new lens through which to read the novel, one which does not fall into the "default 'modernist' vernacular" Gilligan argues against but which allows the audience to appreciate "the incredible aliveness of the language and the acute awareness of the Girl herself [...] and [her] unapologetic sense of her own agency".⁵⁷

Ryan acknowledges the difficulty of staging *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, which is so dependent on the interiority of its protagonist. She reports an early conversation with McBride where McBride said, "We're inside of her head, so it is very important that we never see her". To which Ryan agreed: "Yes. Yes [...] But we are going to have to cast her!".⁵⁸ From the moment she started reading it, Ryan knew that *Girl* was performable, "but whether it was stagable [*sic*] was another question. I knew the embodiment of the characters would have to be handled very carefully, to somehow prioritise the voice rather than the picture".⁵⁹ Ryan's worries were unfounded, and having viewed a recording of the play, I can attest that the immediacy of McBride's words is amplified when her character is embodied and given gesture and expression by actor Aoife Duffin and the focus on Girl becomes a literal spotlight. Ryan tells us that McBride's stated aim was to disturb the reader, which she does by deploying modernist strategies which collapse the space between the reader and the text which in turn frustrates readers' ability to dismiss the text as mere representation. But Ryan's aim was the opposite:

Mine was how to hold them in the room, how to keep them, how to get them to not leave the theatre. And I know from all the other work I've done that it's very much about controlling the breath. You can read it and put it down and pick it up again. I don't fucking care how the reader treats it. You can fucking burn it for all I care. But

57. Annie Ryan, "Foreword", in Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, p. 8.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

59. *Ibid.*

for us, we need to keep everyone in the room, and what they make of it is what they make of it. It's not going to be for everyone, that's for sure, but the key is to hold them. It means you've got to control the breath and not let too much land.⁶⁰

She retains the "I met a man" monologue almost in its entirety, for example, which demonstrates McBride's innate understanding of the importance of breath:

I met a man. I met a man. I let him throw me round the bed. And smoked, me, spliffs and choked my neck until I said I was dead. I met a man who took me for walks. Long ones in the country. I offer up. I offer up in the hedge. I met a man I met with her. She and me and his friend to bars at night and drink champagne and bought me chips at every teatime. I met a man with condoms in his pockets. Don't use them. He loves children in his heart. No. I met a man who knew me once. Who said come back marry em live on my farm. No. I met a man who was a priest I didn't I did. Just as well as may another one would I met a man. I met a man. Who said he'd pay me by the month. Who said he'd keep me up in style and I'd be waiting when he arrived. No is what I say. I met a man who hit me a smack. I met a man who cracked my arm. I met a man who said what are you doing out so late at night. I met a man. I met a man. And I lay down. And slapped and cried and wine and dined. I met a man and many more and I didn't know you at all.⁶¹

While syntax here is relatively conventional, McBride's decision to use mainly full stops to punctuate it creates a syncopated effect. It is significant that McBride trained in theatre, specifically at the London Drama Centre, famous for its use of the Stanislavski Method, an acting system developed out of a "deep and continuous interest in the idea of Prana and the yogic and theosophical philosophies related to it".⁶² Stanislavski used yogic breathing techniques to various ends including relaxation, concentration, and in the interpretation of texts. Put simply, breath control is an essential part of actor training: as it is not possible to breathe and speak at the same time, actors (and non-actors) must pause in order to take a breath, as noted above. The interpretation of the timing and duration of the pause is influenced by the symbols used by the playwright or indicated by the director. Full stops, commas, quotation and exclamation marks tell the actor where to pause, where to place emphasis, and how to express the ideas and emotions of their characters. Playwrights use full stops to end thoughts and to allow those thoughts to resonate for actor and audience. McBride, one can assume, would be very much aware of the impact of the use of a full stop as opposed to, for example, a comma, and in the quotation above, the full stop variously jars the reader by interrupting sentences and breaking the natural flow; forces the reader to absorb the shocking content of the short sentences; creates an off-beat rhythm through

60. Author interview with Annie Ryan, April 2017.

61. Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, p. 38.

62. Jade Rosina McCutcheon, *Awakening the Performing Body*, Amsterdam – New York, Rodopi, 2008, p. 17.

the repeated use of the word ‘no’; speeds the pace for the reader by introducing short sentences; and allows the reader to catch their own breath.

McBride’s deep engagement with, and understanding of the body and its functions, rhythms and pulses is undeniable, as can be seen throughout the novel. Her grounding in stage technique is evident from the start of *Girl*’s first-person, present-tense narrative, addressed to a “you” who is simultaneously the reader and her brother, which translates seamlessly to a theatre audience. According to Ryan, “Really intense performers came out of [the London Drama Centre] and they nicknamed that school London Trauma Centre [...] so they’re looking to go really deep into the emotion of the moment”.⁶³ McBride acknowledges her debt to the Method in a *Guardian* interview:

A lot of the book is like a description of what is going on in a method actor’s head on stage. It’s about trying to draw in all these disparate experiences: so what is being said, and also how a person is reacting and feeling, what they’re feeling about the feeling, what they’re thinking. What other thoughts are going through their heads, and their gut reactions, and physical sensations.⁶⁴

Here, McBride is drawing direct parallels between her writing method and her theatre background. While most writers of fiction will understand how use of the first person, present tense affects pace and creates intimacy, closing the gap between reader and character, McBride can go further because she has access to “what is going on in a method actor’s head”, including pertinently the Method technique of “substitution” (or “transference”), whereby an actor is trained to understand the given circumstances of their characters by using their own lived experiences, for example, an actor who has never physically struck someone can recall an incident in their own life where they felt the kind of frustration and anger that could lead to violence, and in remembering the nuances of that experience, can bring greater truth and accuracy to their performance. In her answer McBride is generously providing us with a mini-masterclass in writing monologue. Ryan explains from a theatre perspective:

There’s technique there in terms of really slowing down to articulate what’s happening moment to moment in the body, which is what an actor does, hopefully, really good ones, where you are brought into the body moment to moment.⁶⁵

The reader is “brought into [Girl’s] body moment to moment” because as a Method actor, McBride knows how to create a character who fully inhabits her role

63. Author interview with Annie Ryan, April 2017.

64. Kira Cochrane, “Eimear McBride: ‘There are serious readers who want to be challenged’”, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2014; and more recently, “I didn’t arrive at the page by myself. I brought Stanislavski with me. More precisely, three years’ training in his acting method [...] where I’d been taught how to make a person, from the inside out” (Eimear McBride, “Novelist Eimear McBride: ‘Studying method acting taught me how to write’”, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2025).

65. Author interview with Annie Ryan, April 2017.

in the traumatic scenes she experiences. Here, and elsewhere, she does this through conventional tools of interior monologue and dialogue, and by putting the focus on Girl from the start and leaving it there, thus forcing the reader to experience the world from Girl's point of view. From within this claustrophobic viewpoint, the reader becomes enmeshed in Girl's physical sensations, all calculated to enhance their discomfort, from the relatively minor: "I've eczema, a load of spots, then a bleeding, Jesus, period one day",⁶⁶ through the scenes of rape by her uncle, to the graphically portrayed, shockingly violent scenes with "Girleen man":

Where until I crack. Break my. Face. Head. Something. Smash. On a stump. Where on the back of my head on the back of my back my back crack that's my eyes fucking up with tears.⁶⁷

The immediacy of McBride's language, both on the page and the stage, heightens the traumas experienced by Girl, and propels the audience and/or reader directly into them. Thus, in the first scene with Girleen man, McBride details the mechanics, the verbal and physical ejaculations ("until blah blah he comes"), followed by the aftermath: "After. Sore and used up", then the return home where she offers a soft landing:

I look in at you sleeping. I have never been away. She asleep too. Praying. Bible at her head. And I get into bed when I've washed my thighs. Whisper. I. Thank God. For you. For it. Tonight. Amen.⁶⁸

This simultaneously releases the reader from the tension of the scene while reinforcing Girl's conflicted mental state. McBride is fearless in her themes. She refuses to shy away from even the most uncomfortable moments, instead plunging the reader into the ever-increasing horrors of Girl's life. Stylistic technique contributes to this effect, too; the removal of punctuation, the insistent use of the "you" which is her brother but simultaneously the reader, and the fractured sentence structure which denies the comfort of conventional prose rhythm collapse the distance between reader and narrator. As noted, the reader's discomfort is heightened by McBride's decision to remain at all times in Girl's head, thereby keeping descriptive passages and other distractions to a minimum. But she also knows that such intensity can prove too much for a reader. As an actor, she knows how to hold an audience and she understands pacing, and although her stated aim is to disturb her reader, she knows when she needs to release tension to temper the ever-increasing horrors. In contrast, Ryan cuts after "Hello girleen. / Some man", deliberately giving the audience no space.⁶⁹ She explains: "McBride lands. We can't do that".⁷⁰ Thus, the audience experiences Girl's trauma as closely as McBride intended.

66. Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, p. 34.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 141-142.

69. Eimear McBride, Annie Ryan, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, p. 45.

70. Author interview with Annie Ryan, April 2017.

The context in which Ryan produced *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* bears mention. When Ryan read McBride's novel in her search of a project for her theatre company, the Corn Exchange, she was not reading in a vacuum. In the past twenty-five or so years, what Eamonn Jordan has referred to as "a period of accelerated history", trauma has been presented and represented on the Irish stage by a number of innovative and talented companies and individuals.⁷¹ From Marina Carr's early plays, through theatre responses to the financial crisis and other current social concerns, the representation of trauma has long formed a central preoccupation of contemporary Irish theatre and continues to do so. Dramaturgs are devising ever more innovative methods of bringing audiences closer to the traumatic experiences of their characters. Recalling recent shifts in trauma theory from the assertion that art could best represent trauma by mimicking it, some theatre-makers such as ANU Productions and Fishamble have adopted a more confrontational approach, striving to eliminate the gap between spectator and spectacle to the point where lines become blurred and spectator becomes participant rather than voyeur, experiencing rather than witnessing trauma, and the representation of trauma is replaced with something resembling trauma itself. Others are cognisant of the danger of alienating the audience, as Ryan was when adapting *Girl*.

Conclusion

I have argued here that, while McBride's modernism has attracted much critical attention, what is truly innovative in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* is her transference of theatre sensibilities, in particular her understanding of monologue, to her prose writing. McBride's combination of theatre techniques with conventional novelistic tools creates a powerful effect, evoking a strong empathetic response from readers and, in adaptation, from theatre audiences, suggesting that the theatre tradition she is part of is of as much significance as the modernist tradition for which the novel is best known. The affectiveness of her use of monologue in the novel, which is made all the more apparent in adaptation (and to a lesser extent in audiobook form), demonstrates a unique and important contribution to the representation of women's trauma in fiction and literary trauma studies.

McBride followed up her debut with *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), in which she again utilises the monologue form, this time striving – not entirely successfully, I would argue – to combine the first-person present tense voice of her protagonist, Eily, with the long-reported first-person present tense voice of Stephen, her lover. Reading McBride through the lens of theatre offers much scope

71. Eamonn Jordan, *Dissident Dramaturgies: Contemporary Irish Theatre*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2010, p. 2, quoted in *Perspectives on Contemporary Irish Theatre: Populating the Stage*, Anne Étienne, Thierry Dubost (eds.), Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 1.

for further study of this novel and her other works, including *The City Changes Its Face*, her 2025 follow-up to *The Lesser Bohemians*. It is surely relevant that McBride's output as inaugural Creative Fellow at the Samuel Beckett Research Centre (University of Reading) consisted not of fiction, but of two performance pieces and one prose / performance.

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