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Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900357

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Textual Practice

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Textual Practice on 12 March 2021, available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1900357

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Measures of Obliviousness and Disarming Obliqueness in Anna Burns’ *Milkman*

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In this essay, I explore the techniques by which Burns uses and explodes the myth of the unspeakable through the deployment of a picaresque mode that enables an ethical trauma narrative. I demonstrate how Burns’ work refutes an ‘event-based’ reading of trauma and discuss how the narrative of *Milkman* enacts the difficulty of finding vocabulary with which to make traumatic experience intelligible. I suggest that the novel enacts a refusal of suspicious reading by insisting on the authority of its narrator and her capacity to name harm, which instantiates belief as the primary ground of reader reception. This is linked to the possibility of re-thinking trauma narrative in the public sphere and to articulating the specificity of gender-based violence. Modifying the received wisdom of the field of trauma studies associated with Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, and others, I expand on Clare Hutton’s sensitive reading of the specificity of language in the novel to demonstrate the significance of reading *Milkman* as a novel of voice, per Peter Boxall’s work, and illuminate the connection between *Milkman* and work by Rita Felski and other feminist theorists through discussion of the significance of the aesthetic or ‘literary’ quality within the telling of trauma.

Keywords: *Milkman*; trauma; picaresque; metoo; paramilitarism; predation

**Difficult To Say**

Northern Ireland is an unspeakable state. In local parlance, a ‘state’ means a mess, a show, a spectacle: ‘Look at the state of yer wan.’ A state is, too, a condition of being, a way in which one is. It is also, of course, a form of organisation under government: the British state. How is one to name or speak of a state whose very existence is a state of un-being, an annexation of one part of an island made to quell the violent and unsettled history of that same island, a splitting off that represented a psychic sacrifice on a national scale: 6 counties given to an uncertain future, so that 26 might know peace? The name, then, presents our first difficulty. Should I say ‘Northern Ireland’ throughout this essay, and in so doing tacitly endorse the existence of an unjustly gerrymandered
territory? Should I say ‘the north,’ and overlook Donegal? Language is quite clearly a
problem here, and it is this same problematic that Anna Burns thematises in her

In approaching the framework of ‘the Troubles’ Burns also troubles language,
reflecting on the ways in which language is troubling. In one conversation the narrator
recounts within the novel, various terms are proffered to name the violent unrest: ‘the
political problems’ (by the narrator) and ‘the sorrows, the losses, the troubles, the
sadnesses,’ by her (third) brother-in-law. *Milkman* gives an account of the predation of
a Republican paramilitary (Milkman) on the novel’s narrator during her late
adolescence. The narrator is usually addressed, if at all, as ‘middle sister’ or ‘maybe-
girlfriend.’ The setting is usually read as the Ardoyne, an area in North Belfast, but the
city is never directly named: this absence of proper nouns is a recurrent linguistic
feature of the narrative, which some readers have found disorienting, off-putting, or,
euphemistically, ‘difficult.’ Allison Pearson’s infamous review in *The Telegraph*
described the novel in these terms: ‘Anna Burns’s Milkman is One of the Oddest, Most
Impenetrable Novels Ever to Win the Man Booker Prize.’

This technique is innately connected to the way in which the novel exceeds the
‘representational Troubles paradigm,’ as discussed by Stefanie Lehner, Aaron Kelly,
Colin Graham, and others. This paradigm rests on a model of ‘passive entrapment’
that tends to overlook the complexity of life as lived under prolonged and extreme
conditions of terror and, in so doing, to produce a ceaseless circular logic. This
circularity removes the territory from any standard account of historical progression, or,
indeed, of wider cultural circumstance, such as the general inequity of gender relations
throughout the 1970s. The problematics of naming stem in no inconsiderable part from
the fundamental question of whether Republican activity may or may not be classified
as warfare and situated within the larger history of IRA action on the island of Ireland, a
difficulty that continues to create tension between Northern Ireland and the Republic of
Ireland, though this is only one part of the difficulty in naming a conflict so various in
its valences.⁷ What does one do with a war that cannot be named as such, where the line
between civilian and combatant is vanishingly narrow, and where the condition of peace
is one of ‘fragile equilibrium’?⁶ This is a state of great difficulty indeed.

In tackling the difficulty of and in *Milkman*, a few misconceptions have arisen in
popular and critical comment. Firstly, that the novel is written as a stream-of-
consciousness, and secondly, that its narrator is a teenage girl.⁷⁻¹ To address the first of
these claims: while the novel features a circumlocutory narrative style that frequently
sees the unnamed narrator reflect on their thought processes and embark on what appear
to be segues and digressions, there is no direct access to the continuous flow of thought
or feeling for reader or for narrator. The extraordinary difficulty of accessing self-
knowledge under conditions of erasure and encroachment is one of the central themes of
the novel and is enacted in its recursive narration. This is connected to the second
popular misreading, of the narrator of the novel as a teenage girl.

Although Burns may well ‘take seriously the concerns of Northern Irish teenage
girls’ (Magennis, 2019) her narrator is eighteen, legally an adult, and the concerns she
recalls are that the insidious encroachment of Milkman’s desire will deform her life
beyond recognition and possibly see her partner murdered by a car bomb, as Clare
Hutton notes.⁸⁻¹ This is part of Burns’ persistent efforts to undo the pervasive logic of
what Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem calls the ‘cruel Belfast ordinary,’ or Dominick
LaCapra’s ‘reductive contextualism.’⁹ As Lehner has suggested, Burns struggles
fiercely to refuse any domestication of the Troubles (Lehner, 287), including those
recuperative narratives that seek to stress the ongoing nature of ‘everyday life’ as some
evidence of inbuilt resilience. These narratives risk the implication that the conflict and its psychic incursions were simply some sort of backdrop against which life struggled to continue, instead of being an expression of longstanding and omnipresent hatreds that coloured the very texture of life itself.

In this essay, I discuss the modal form of the novel to explain how Burns’ use and détournement of the picaresque works to create a protective distance between the narrator and the events she recalls, refuting Clare Hutton’s reading of the novel as Bildungsroman; I outline the significance of reading Milkman as a ‘novel of voice’; and I suggest that Burns’ novel operates a radical challenge to the received wisdom of trauma as ‘unspeakable,’ situating her oeuvre firmly within a feminist framework. Throughout my reading, I emphasise the necessity of difficulty in and to the novel, seeking to redeem the term from pejorative use and to demonstrate that the apparently ‘impenetrable’ nature of the novel does not mean it is not giving. Burns’ work is, as I suggest here, a masterclass in reading as much as it is in writing, and there is much to learn from middle sister’s story.

It’s The Way She Tells ’Em: The Modal Form of Milkman and the Novel of Voice

To further assist in understanding the form of the narrative and position of the narrator in the novel, the primary intervention I seek to make here is to highlight its modal form: the picaresque. Generally, the picaresque is a mode or form in which the narrative follows the adventures of a central (male) protagonist – the roguish pícaro, usually an outlaw or at least an outsider in society, who ascends through the course of the story through a progress of tricks, role-playing, and survival by his wits. In developing this understanding I have largely followed Ulrich Wicks’ definition of the mode, noting a number of ways his description may be mapped onto the novel. Wicks’ work is distinct
in that it focuses on the modal qualities of the picaresque rather than its material-historical context, unlike the work of his near-contemporaries such as Howard Mancing and Richard Bjornson.

There is a clear subversion of this characterisation in the figure of our protagonist although her community (mis)read her as a *picara*. They (including her mother and maybe-boyfriend) come to believe that she has actually ‘taken up’ with Milkman, which would grant her some roguish status as the paramour of a paramilitary. This reaches its nadir when she is (silently) blamed for the murder of the district’s local poisoner, tablets girl, which the community (probably correctly) believe was carried out by Milkman to avenge middle sister’s poisoning. True to the logic of the novel, the community are doubly angry. They blame the narrator for being the cause of the murder and also for being the reason a paramilitary (or ‘renouncer,’ in the novel’s terminology) has ‘sullied’ himself with a non-political murder. The misogynist reasoning is bone deep.

Far from being any kind of willing participant in the affair, our protagonist is an *unwitting exploiter* of an *unwanted social status* that derives its power from illegal *actions*; this invokes the same insidiously creeping logic of misinformation that sees the protagonist increasingly dispossessed of self as the novel progresses. The reader is aware of this because of the split first-person narrative characteristic of the picaresque mode, which operates on the difference between an, ‘experiencing I’ and a ‘narrating I,’ per Wicks’ definition. He suggests, ‘There is thus *irony* between the quality of the events narrated and the narrating attitude of the protagonist, paralleled by the ironic gap between the social nonstatus of the protagonist and the presumptuous act of writing his autobiography’ (1974, 244). Unlike the narrative of Burns’ first novel, *No Bones* (2001), this is not an ‘indistinct, mumbling history’ (Ruprecht Fadem,144). In *Milkman*,
the ironic gap exists to demonstrate the distance between the dispossessed teenager and
the self-composed narrator; that is, the speaker who has found a way to make what was
unintelligible intelligible through the careful and precise use of language.

The temporal distance between the narrator and the events she narrates
confounds the ‘affect of immediacy’ (158) by which Ruprecht Fadem claims *No Bones*
achieved an experiential quality seen by her as essential to the historiographic status -
and testimonial authenticity - of that novel. In the anonymised setting of *Milkman*,
Burns makes it quite clear that the truth status of the narrative relies not on its
invocation of specific instances of historical trauma but on the existence of what
LaCapra calls ‘structural trauma.’ This mode of structural trauma is, in LaCapra’s work,
one in which the melancholy of nostalgia – loss, of some real or imagined state – is pre-
empted by the reality of lack – a state that never was, for which there can be no
imagined halcyon period. La Capra warns specifically of the dangers of converting
absence to loss, suggesting that this instantiates an, ‘impossible mourning, and
interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical
losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted’ (698). Absence, by LaCapra’s definition, is
transhistorical; loss may be conflated with absence, but it bears a specific character that
situates it in a particular moment of history and thus cannot be an absence, recalling as
it does a state that once was (whether real or imaginary). When LaCapra writes of
absence, ‘one may recognize that one cannot lose what one never had’ (701), he
highlights the very crux of difficulty in addressing ‘Northern Ireland’: a place that never
was, and never can be, that at the same time defines and circumscribes the lives and
identities of those born within the six counties still subject to Westminster rule.

It will not, I hope, be too much of a surprise to readers that I do not seek to
follow La Capra’s Freudian reading more fully; in this particular context, I think we
have had quite enough of Mother Ireland. Nevertheless, my reading here extends his account of *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*, which he sees as novels capable of resisting the overdetermination of narrative plot ‘which seeks resonant closure or uplift and tends to conflate absence with loss or lack’ (704). My positioning of *Milkman* as picaresque thus sees it as written in a mode that makes possible that revelation of the basic structural trauma instantiated by colonial action, and further, through the centring of female experience, reveals the impossibility of ever conceiving of, ‘some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity’ (707). There is a tremendous gulf that exists between those who know this condition of absence and those who have experienced loss, at a structural level, and it is this gulf that Burns’ narrator seeks to cross in her account of life lived at the very margins of existence. Here LaCapra’s work also tacitly critiques the cultural imperialism of the ‘traditional’ novel form by pointing to ‘experiment’ as widespread in what we might call ‘minor’ literatures in the vein of Deleuze and Guattari, a suggestion that does much to rescue Burns’ novel from the charges of ‘postmodernism’ that have been levelled against it. As I show throughout this essay, the ‘fragmented’ form of the modern and postmodern is refused by the ‘narrative act’ which is ‘both a shaping (aesthetically) and a reshaping (morally) of disordered fragments; if the [narrator’s] life has been a welter of paradoxically continuous disintegration, the narrative act is an attempt to integrate and make moral and aesthetic sense of the dismembered past’ (Wicks, 1979, 170).

One reason this distinction is so crucial is that the efficacy of Burns’ novel relies on a narrative mode in which voice validates the authority of the speaker (middle sister) and at the same time allows the reader to receive the narrative without that ‘infection’ of trauma that marks ‘toxic’ trauma stories, as Richard F. Mollica explains in his work on trauma in refugee populations, *Healing Invisible Wounds* (2006). There, Mollica
discusses the necessity of navigating ‘strong emotion’ in order to avoid ‘overwhelming’
the listener, which is particularly significant in light of his account of the ‘social’ aspect
of healing; alone, one may survive. It is only with others that we can thrive. Mollica
suggests that, ‘In our society, many forces act to carelessly and even intentionally elicit
toxic emotions associated with trauma – debriefing sessions, media reporting of
violence, films, and public ceremonies that emphasize the most sensational aspects of a
community’s violence’ (123). Although Burns’ narrator describes at least one instance
of spectacular violence (the massacre of local dogs, discussed at length below), the
narrative as a whole is scrupulous in its focus on those invisible and insidious forms of
harm that resist representation and thus communication. This focus avoids sensationalist
or titillating presentations of trauma and thus works against the drawing out of ‘toxic
emotions’ in the listener.

In her blog post on *Milkman*, Claire Hutton described the experience of listening
to the novel as an audiobook and recognised that it might be described as a ‘novel of
voice,’ a reading emphasised in the delineation of its lexical features.xii This must
remind us of Peter Boxall’s work on the novel voice in *The Value of the Novel* (2012),
where he suggests that the legacy of the hermeneutics of suspicion (via post/structuralist
theory) has been a training not to ask ‘who speaks’ in the novel: ‘we have been
accustomed,’ he writes, ‘to treating the question of the speaking voice, as it relates to
reading and writing, with some suspicion’ (20). Boxall goes on to assert that the
question of voice – or rather, the question of hearing – is one that has been unresolved
by the literary theory of the twentieth century, and that it goes to the heart of the
question of how novels make meaning. This position suggests that literary critics must
move towards a willingness to listen alongside their disciplinary training to suspect.
This practice of suspicion is precisely what Rita Felski addresses in various work, most
notably *The Limits of Critique* (2015) where she traces the inheritance of Paul Ricoeur’s theory of hermeneutics in the academic practice of literary studies, which she sees as in danger of limiting critical practice to a mode of ‘againstness’ (Felski, 189).

Significantly, such an approach means that ‘Critique cannot yield to a text’ (188), but as I seek to show here, this is exactly what the reader of *Milkman* is asked – and *allowed* – to do.

Such a critical approach is not intended to be naïve, but it does require the critic to trust the text to mean what it says, which can be difficult in the face of the urge to ‘unmask.’ This trust goes beyond the refusal of irony or of ‘hidden meanings’ and involves practicing a faith in language that rather reverses years of scholarship in which language has itself been treated as an object and instrument of suspicion. In writing a picaresque novel of voice, Burns treats language immensely seriously, framing it as the best possible mode of articulation of trauma and thus inviting the reader to treat it as testimony, which is to say, a solemn declaration of sworn truth. This is not Cathy Caruth’s speaking through the wound, and indeed Burns’ novel quite radically rejects the implicit Cartesian dualism of Caruth’s reading of trauma as a wound to the mind where the language of trauma somehow ‘defies, even as it claims, our understanding.’ This is no ‘enigmatic testimony’ but a repurposing of language to offer a sense of historical truth in which experience is primary. This is evident too through Burns’ repeated emphasis on the physical manifestations of trauma, its embodied expression, which is a form of knowledge in and of itself.

This is rather closer to recent work on neurocognition, which considers the question of perceptual priming in trauma response as a nonconscious process. This points to a shift in understanding the relationship between memory and perception; ‘A person perceiving a familiar object is not aware that what is perceived is as much an
expression of memory as it is of perception’ (Schacter and Tulving, 301). By foregrounding the sensory and networked memories of her narrator, Burns intervenes in the reader’s ability to perceive through expanding their perceptual framework by intervening in their ‘priming’: her novel is a landscape of memory into which the reader enters with the narrator as guide. Here the emphasis is on the listener – or reader – and their approach to the text. While suspicion may constitute a form of attention, it is by both Felski and Jureic’s understanding, an inadequate receptive mode. Instead, Burns establishes a relationship of solidarity between teller and listener as part of a turn away from the hermeneutics of suspicion and towards the ‘willingness to listen’ that constitutes an often-overlooked part of Ricouer’s formulation.

Boxall’s analysis of Charles Dickens and Samuel Beckett has much to offer readers of Milkman too, given that the novel works through a remarkable symbiosis between the two forms of homo- or autodiegetic narration he traces through the work of those authors. For Boxall, first person narrative voice in Dickens produces ‘an extraordinarily powerful presence’; for Beckett, first person narrative voice works ‘towards the evacuation of presence, the dismantlement of the myth of the self-identical subject’ (25). The voice of Burns’ narrator mediates between this sense of presence and evacuation through the picaresque mode of narration. Middle sister narrates the evacuation of presence that occurred through the process of dispossession by which Milkman sought to subjugate her but her linguistic mastery gives her an overwhelmingly powerful presence that constitutes the entirety of the novel; voice is everything.

Indeed, the reader is promised safe passage from the outset of the novel, where the denouement of Milkman is laid out in its first sentence: ‘That day Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me
was the same day the milkman died. He had been shot by one of the state hit squads and I did not care about the shooting of this man’ (1). This introduction rapidly generates a wider contextual account of itself, synopsising the themes, subject matter, and characters the reader is about to encounter: Milkman, and other sexual predators; the community, and the power of rumour; first-brother-in law, and unhappy marriages or fear of intimacy, also tied to the difficulty of hope. It further introduces the naming technique by which these characters are known: Somebody McSomebody is as ‘proper’ as names get, with the exception of milkman, whose name is eventually revealed to have actually been Milkman.xv

This naming strategy is one of the three distinct lexical elements Hutton outlines as constitutive of middle sister’s distinctive narration; the others are a recurrent play with the linguistic features of Hiberno-English (one example given is the ‘wee’ of ‘wee sisters’) and a ‘neutralised’ language used when referring to things or people directly associated with warfare: ‘military intelligence,’ ‘plainclothes people,’ and ‘anti-personnel devices’ are the examples given here (Hutton, 359). Hutton sees these ‘lexical choices’ as key to allowing Burns to ‘communicate the character and mentality of ‘middle sister’, and to deconstruct the mentalities and structures of Northern Irish society as it was before the Good Friday agreement’ (Hutton, 358). Extending this through Hutton’s reading, the naming structure of the novel, by which every character is ‘described . . . by their relationship to [middle sister]’ (360) points to the close kin and community bonds prevalent within Irish society, in rather terminal decline by the late 1970s as the ‘brain drain’ saw many leave for both economic and political reasons, dispersing these intimate networks (this is a feature of Burns’ first novel, No Bones, when protagonist Amelia ultimately leaves Belfast for London as so many did).
The play with Hiberno-English Hutton outlines is a form of dialect writing immediately recognisable to any local, further serving as a marker of truth even as it allows the emergence of a certain ‘dramatic lexicon’ (Hutton 364) which is at once humorous and at the same time totally apt for the life-and-death stakes of the novel, reminding the reader of the drama of nationhood against which all this plays out and subtly undermining the romanticisation of paramilitary action as heroic resistance as it does so. Although the seriousness of Milkman’s predation means he can never be fully read as a figure of ridicule, it is nevertheless clear that the age of heroes is well and truly winding down in the novel. This occurred as leaders of the Republican movement were imprisoned or exiled and the question of power became a murky one; liberation, in these terms, began to look rather like coercion by another name, as those who remained sought to exercise their own authority in arbitrary and apolitical modes, such as Milkman’s relentless pursuit of middle sister.xvi

The final lexical feature of middle sister’s narration to which Hutton draws attention is ‘the way in which it anatomises the “Troubles” while avoiding words and phrases such as the Six Counties, the Orange Order, the border question, the peace wall, the Loyalists, the Provos, the Republicans’ (365). Hutton sees this as a renunciation of the community and a sign of middle sister’s ‘distaste for everything that community values’ (365), which seems to me rather unfair, given the severe restrictions on what may or may not be valued in a para/military state. There are numerous examples in the novel that suggest the community has a fraught relationship with the armed struggle, from ‘real milkman’s’ refusal to store a cache of weapons, to the actions of both the ‘normal women’ (those who have not experienced feminist consciousness raising) and the ‘issues women’ (those who have) who are always responsible for the breaking of the
arbitrary state-imposed curfews through mass return to the streets in defiance of the instruction to stay home after four o’clock, to the suicide of ‘nuclear boy.’

This is an important point to make because it reminds us that many of those who were ‘affiliated’ with one ‘side’ or another during this conflict were not actively engaged in paramilitary action; were, instead, simply trying to survive in a state of chaos where rules were unspoken, changeable, and not of their own making. Hutton reads this linguistic feature as a form of ‘making strange’ in order to force a ‘reconsideration of the kinds of things that happened in Ireland at this time’ (366). Certainly, this is one effect of middle sister’s distinctive phraseology, but to my mind Hutton’s rationale here is inadequate and fails to consider the innate politicisation of language in the North, where your pronunciation of the letter ‘h’ can betray your ‘affiliation’ as quickly as the name of your school; where many are Seamus at home and James on their birth certificate; where, as Heaney had it:

    half of us, as in a wooden horse
    Were cabin’d and confined like wily Greeks,
    Besieged within the siege, whispering morse.

Middle sister’s language for and of warfare is far from ‘neutral,’ but it is precise. It names things as they are, without the baggage of cultural signification; to follow Deleuze and Guattari again, this is a deterritorialization by which those terms and phrases seen as ‘unique’ to ‘the Troubles’ – the Six Counties, the Orange Order, the border question, the peace wall, the Loyalists, the Provos, the Republicans – are reterritorialized within a more general language of conflict. This highlights the way in which language may obscure meaning through these additional significations – the way in which we say more than we might mean to by the words that we choose. What is a ‘peace wall,’ after all? How does that name tell us that these are barriers erected at the
interfaces between CNR (Catholic Nationalist Republican) and PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) communities, who often live side by side or near enough? What has a 25-foot wall with armed guards at its gate to do with ‘peace,’ really? This emphasises, too, the problem of history with which Burns is so much concerned, that ‘reductive contextualism’ by which things are made to mean within one specific frame of reference.

‘Decoding’ this language – or rather, recognising the way in which middle sister’s lexical choices decode divisive and historically-determined language – it is clear that this is a novel that only pretends to mislead its reader, or rather, it only misleads if the reader isn’t paying close enough attention. In this, it matches the accusations of ‘improper reading’ levelled against the narrator by the community:

[I was] prone, according to the community, to back-to-front reading, starting on the last page and working back to the front page because I didn’t like surprises . . . I put bookmarks in books, they said, or else turned down the pages not correctly where I’d left off, but slyly at misleading paces so as to deceive the public for personal round-about, paranoid reasons . . . .’ (208).

The protagonist’s ‘back-to-front reading’ describes her narration too, which also begins with its end. Here again we may think of LaCapra’s work and the refusal of ‘uplift’ or narrative closure within the picaresque: this story begins with its end, which is to say, it is already resolved, even as it apparently unfolds before us, confounding the standard narrative structure of beginning-middle-end. Further, as stated in the opening of my essay, the narrative often seems to meander off toward misleading places, moving readers to find themselves never quite where they expect to be in its temporal twists and turns. Rather than being deceptive, however, this tendency or technique is central to the success of the story and to its testimonial function. These twists and turns are not some distraction from the ‘real’ story; they are the story, the total landscape of the text,
marking middle sister’s concerted efforts to give the fullest possible picture of events through the lens of her experience in words that are all her own. Despite Milkman’s efforts to induce doubt and uncertainty, middle sister emerges as an expert witness to this incident in her life.

Further, the authority of voice here refuses suspicious readings instantiated by the ‘reality gulf’ of modernist efforts to capture reality. The distorting effect of the ‘modern’ is evident in middle sister’s distrust of twentieth century fiction, which she refuses for the same reason she refuses the technologies of modernity (namely, the telephone): ‘so I wouldn’t have to get involved into any modern-day, fraught, involved stuff’ (Burns 2018, 245). Burns subverts the nineteenth century standard first-person narrative mode whereby a narrator existed in present tense and narrated in past by employing what looks like a continuous present tense (the reason so many have mistaken the narrative for a stream-of-consciousness) but what is in fact a continuous past. xviii The narrator is not trapped in any moment of the past (the ‘moment’ of trauma) but the past has a crucial sense of continuity that defies the ‘fragmentary’ model of trauma narration.

*Jamais Vu: The Never Seen?*

The temporal distance between the narrator and the events she recounts is marked in the novel when she describes maybe-boyfriend’s predilection for hoarding car parts:

I saw a programme on TV years after I had been split from maybe-boyfriend, about people who hoard things but didn’t consider they hoarded things, and although nobody was hoarding car, I couldn’t help noticing a similarity between what those individuals were doing all those years forward during what is now the era of psychological enlightenment, and what maybe-boyfriend was doing, way back when enlightenment didn’t yet exist (Burns 2018, 37).
The ‘enlightenment’ the narrator refers to seems to be the expansion of discussion around mental health issues (and subsequent commodification of this in exploitative reality television). In this, we see the same future horizon as in Burns’ second novel, *Little Constructions* (2007), which is also concerned with a state of chaotic conflict and similarly ambiguous in its setting, and where the narrator makes reference to ‘these days, all these years on – in the days of therapy and sitting in-group’ (78). However, returning readers will know already that the narrator is ‘split from’ maybe-boyfriend not by the actions of Milkman, who is killed before he can deliver on his threats, but by the accidental discovery that his true love is his lifelong friend, chef. This is another form of enlightenment, connected to the condition of *jamais vu* that characterises her interactions with and framework for the world even before the intrusion of Milkman. This condition undermines the possibility of intimacy and makes impossible any form of closeness in which a substantive future might be imagined, never mind planned.

The reader is introduced to this concept early on, in a discussion of the uncertain relationship status between the narrator and maybe-boyfriend:

> And this was what happened. Always it happened. I would suggest closeness as a way of forwarding on our relationship and it would backfire and I’d forget I’d suggested closeness and he’d have to remind me when next I suggested closeness. Then the boot would go on the other foot and he’d suffer a misfiring of neurons and go and suggest closeness himself. Constantly we were having memory lapses, episodes of a kind of *jamais vu* (Burns 2018, 43).

Initially this *jamais vu* is presented as a sort of *folie à deux* between maybe-boyfriend and the narrator, but as the novel progresses it becomes apparent it is more than this. During a run in the waterworks with her third brother-in-law (the husband of her third oldest sister), the narrator becomes aware, apparently for the first time, that she is being covertly photographed by state security forces. Her brother-in-law ignores the ‘click’
that signifies this surveillance and asks what she’s going to do about it. She responds:

"Well, I was going to have amnesia of course. In fact, here I was, already having it. ‘I don’t know what you mean,’ I said, ‘I’ve forgotten,’ his forthrightness having sent me immediately into *jamais vu*. This was my answer – something that should not be familiar was not going to be familiar . . . ’" (66).

*Jamais vu*, then, is a sense of unfamiliarity. Literally the ‘never seen,’ it represents the opposite of *déjà vu*, already seen. Herman N. Sno describes the *jamais vu* experience as one in which ‘the present is excessively dissociated from the past’ (Sno, 339) and categorises it alongside *déjà vu* as a *paramensia* or false memory state. Markova and Berrios discuss the history of *paramnesia* at length, charting the clinical evolution of these states from ‘disturbances of perception’ to ‘falsification of memory.’ Such an understanding is useful in considering the perceptual framework of Milkman as explored earlier with reference to Schachter’s work: perception is memory, to some degree, and so in order to align her perception of the moment with her memory, middle sister is, as above, moved to refuse memory in order to refuse confronting the emotional forthrightness of maybe-boyfriend, which presents her with the possibility of being known – and thus being vulnerable – within this state of chaos. Or, as Bob Dylan sang, ‘when you ain’t got nothin’, you got nothing to lose.’ Elsewhere, Dargan Svrakic and Mirjana Divac-Jovanovic stress that these experiences are ‘frequently mistaken as disassociative phenomena [but] are actually reflective of dysfunctional memory, not dissociation.’ This is to say that middle sister does not actually forget or dissociate from her memories – this much is evident in the persistence and strength of her feelings towards maybe-boyfriend, as well as the pleasure she takes in their physical relationship, a clear sign of connection to her embodied perceptual state. Whilst I do not intend to undertake a diagnostic reading of Milkman’s narrator, this distinction is useful in understanding the phenomenology of *jamais vu* within which the story
operates.

Although *jamais vu* may appear here as a kind of wilful forgetting or a confusion born of a youthful fear of intimacy or loss of self in another, it is later revealed to be a much more pervasive state than this would suggest. Meeting with her childhood best friend, now a ‘renouncer’ or paramilitary, the narrator recalls complaining that she had come under scrutiny from the security forces, now frequently stopping her because they perceived her to be romantically entangled with Milkman, who was known as a senior paramilitary figure. Her longest friend offered this corrective:

‘But they were stopping you [before this]! They do stop you. They stop everybody!’ and here her tone became resigned rather than monitory. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘that even at this minute we’re having another instance of your *jamais vu*.’ ‘What do you mean my *jamais vu*?’ I asked. Then I asked, ‘What do you mean another bout of *jamais vu*? Are you saying that I have *jamais vu* and that frequently I have it?’ which was when it came out that . . . here too, according to friend, I’d experience illusions of never having been stopped previously by the state security forces when it was obvious I was stopped by them, she maintained, all the time (207-8).

It is at this point that our narrator reveals to us that the story we have been offered to date is not so much unreliable as entirely conditioned by what I called above a phenomenology of *jamais vu*. That is, the state of consciousness and awareness of phenomena within the novel are delineated, for reader and characters, by this paramnesiac state in which the present appears to be detached from the past despite being both bound to and dictated by that past. This creates the mode of absurdity that characterises existence and perpetually stymies intimacy within the novel. This limitation is inscribed in the inaccessibility of the narrator’s inner states to herself at the time of their occurrence, the ‘numbnance’ (178) that is the result of Milkman’s
predations and of the effort to adhere to the ‘reason’ of the place, where both follow the same insidiously creeping and dysfunctional – even deformed – logic.

The significance of this outlining of the phenomenology of \textit{jamais vu} is that it moves Burns’ work beyond that ‘poetics of doubt’ Ruprecht Fadem names as Burns’ primary formal innovation in \textit{No Bones}. In this first novel, Burns charted the progress of the conflict in Northern Ireland through a series of vignettes loosely centred around protagonist Amelia Lovett, who grows from ‘war child’ to adult anorexic and alcoholic before she finally flees to London, a familiar move to many coming of age during the conflict. In that novel, by Ruprecht Fadem’s account, ‘Burns renders the past as having involved so much trauma as to render memory im-memorable, history irretrievable, and its witnesses entirely mad’ (147).

Although \textit{Milkman} is similarly marked and demarcated by traumatic circumstance, there is no suggestion of an unreliable narrator here and there is no sense that the reader must ‘\textit{will} themselves to believe that what they read is true in spite of overwhelmingly bizarre content’ (Ruprecht Fadem, 149, emphasis in original). As a friend commented to me after reading the first few pages of \textit{Milkman}, not a single word is wrong here – the precision of language validates authority in the novel of voice. Middle sister’s explanation of \textit{jamais vu} establishes her reliability, despite apparently revealing narrative lacunae, because she both names the phenomenon and delineates its workings, allowing her to reveal the mechanics of forgetting with an exactitude that tells the reader what it is that has been forgotten and so undermines the apparent absence of memory.

The revelation of the mechanics of \textit{jamais vu} demonstrates clearly that the form of reason required for survival in circumstances such as these is anticipatorily paranoid: one must be constantly attentive to intention, appearance, and perception at all levels of
communicative exchange. This is apparent in the narrator’s description of the ‘layers’ of thought that exist both individually and communally. For instance, when Milkman mistakes the narrator’s French night class for one in Greek and Roman, she admits that she had wanted to take the latter class and attributes his apparent misunderstanding to a psychic incursion: ‘He’d read my thoughts about the class, yes, and they’d been top-level thoughts, thoughts from the topsoil, meaning unimportant, not secret, not vulnerable enough to be encrypted’ (Burns 2018, 103). She had not successfully forgotten her desire to take the Greek and Roman class, and so this information was left unguarded, accessible: dangerous. This reasoning constitutes a hyperbolised hermeneutics of suspicion, or rather a ‘blind alley’ hermeneutics of suspicion, where it is inherently true that words do not mean what they seem to, and where the need to read beneath the surface is elevated to a matter of life and death.

Such reading, however, confounds rather than unmasks, because the paranoid logic of suspicion floats free from any central or secure truth and the double bind of doublethink (where meaning may never be apparent because it is always contingent) generates a constant state of instability that occasionally erupts into chaos but can never actually be recognised as such. Although this form of ‘doublethink’ has Orwellian overtures, it is not quite the same: it involves a suppressed awareness of what has been forgotten in order that one might conduct oneself appropriately. To tell her story, and to offer that ‘thick’ form of narrative memory evident in the sprawling and digressive narrative of the novel, requires an overcoming of this paranoid logic and a willingness to be vulnerable in the revelation of one’s needs, desires, and thoughts.

In contrast, the most crucial skill in a society in which the state of conflict has become both absolute and various (or chaotic) is that of not understanding, where failure to do this means failure to anticipate the full multiplicity of meanings that might
be drawn from one’s thoughts, actions, and presentation. The perceptual mode of *jamais vu* allows the narrator to exist in a state of simultaneous knowing and not-knowing, to see things as they should be rather than as they are (a bush as a bush, rather than cover for a state agent with a camera); for, as middle sister asks when espousing the dangers of ‘having a view, ‘how to live otherwise?’ She continues, ‘This was not schizophrenia. This was living otherwise. This was underneath the trauma and the darkness a normality trying to happen’ (112). To survive a place where one word might turn an ally to an enemy, middle sister suggests one must become as free of signification as her reimagined conflict vocabulary is: to offer no potential for misunderstanding through offering nothing to be understood, foreclosing ‘thick’ understandings by the thinning out of self-expression.

The narrator of *Milkman* recounts how she thought she might do this as at eighteen through cultivating an essential nothing-ness that would transform her into some sort of text whose meaning was both strikingly unambiguous and singularly dull, a necessity to head off all interest; she’d be ‘a textbook, some kind of log table’ (176), closed to interpretation. This stands in stark opposition to the picaresque narrative mode in which she tells her story, as Wicks suggests:

> The *picaro’s* own point of view is indispensable in projecting the picaresque condition because he can do it from the inside out and outside in simultaneously. Even if these two perspectives are separated temporally [as they undoubtedly are in middle sister’s narration], they are combined in the narrative act of telling (1979, 169).

Thus, in the narration of this predation, middle sister quite plainly and pointedly has and expresses her own ‘point of view,’ signalling that she has, in the present from which she narrates, perhaps found some way to ‘live otherwise.’
The problem with the phenomenology of *jamais vu*, at least insofar as the narrator is concerned, is that it rendered her eighteen-year-old entirely reactive, which is to say vulnerable to acting without ‘pre-planned military precision’ (177). The need to be suspicious in order to understand how one might be perceived as suspicious is exhausting for the narrator-as-teenager, in the same way that her narrative exhausts the reader in its periphrasis and apparent obliqueness. It is my contention that the interpretation of the novel as difficult or impenetrable stems from the way in which its narrative style reproduces this state of doublethink and *jamais vu* for the reader, which obscures its relatively linear story and chronological structure. In revealing these mechanisms at work, Burns offers a vital avenue to understanding the telling of trauma.

**Speaking Harm**

Judith Herman’s work on trauma and recovery is widely recognised as foundational in the field of trauma studies, most notably her 1992 study, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. There, Herman writes, ‘Traumatic events are extraordinary not because they occur rarely, but because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life’ (35). What happens, then, when these adaptations are born in and of and through a prolonged and general state of trauma, when we are faced with,

>a whole group of individuals . . . a whole community, a whole nation, or maybe just a statelet immersed long-term on the physical and energetic planes in the dark mental energies; conditioned too, through years of personal and communal suffering, personal and communal history, to be overladen with heaviness and grief and fear and anger (Burns 2018, 89)?

The difficulty of *Milkman* is not some effort at obfuscation, nor is its humour an attempt to reassure us of some fundamental ‘ordinariness’ to life lived under conditions of
terror. Instead, difficulty is a necessary feature of the novel’s effort to delineate virtually invisible systems of predation, encroachment, and power. It is clear that Burns’ project in this novel – and in her first two novels – has been a resolutely feminist one. By this I mean that Burns has consistently sought to expose the insidious nature of patriarchal power and its damaging effects for male and female subjects, a strand of her work that has to date lacked clear and consistent articulation.

Burns made no bones about her feminist approach in conversation with Eoin McNamee, explicitly stating that the ‘main thrust’ of No Bones was not political conflict, but the family itself: ‘The family is not a little issue. And the mental effects of violation can happen anywhere. They can be, too, the mental effects of any type of violation.’xxiv Burns’ insistence on the family as a site of terror recalls Steven Morgan’s work on spousal abuse, for which he coined the term ‘conjugal terrorism,’ although when it comes to Milkman Evan Stark’s work on ‘coercive control’ is more accurate in capturing the gender-based violence to which middle sister is subjected.xxv In recounting the effects and techniques of a form of psychic violation, Burns radically reverses the idea that trauma is unspeakable and, just as significantly, rebuffs the idea that the telling of trauma is or must be damaging to the listener, though this is an idea she shows great sensitivity to in Little Constructions. Burns’ re-writing of trauma narrative challenges ‘event-based’ readings of trauma that rely on the Freudian account of the accident, the ‘rupturing’ event. Milkman’s predation is a form of coercive control with no physical transgression, pointing to the cumulative effects of extreme psychic strain as a mode of traumatic experience that demands a reassessment of received wisdom in the field.

Herman outlines a dialectic of trauma: the will to deny and the will to proclaim, or the desire to forget and the need to remember. According to Herman, the will to deny
emerges not only from the trauma subject’s inability to integrate the trauma memory, but also from a larger will to ignorance, which occurs at both an individual and societal level. It is this, for Herman, which drove the study of trauma itself ‘underground’ for much of its clinical history, particularly those accounts of trauma occurring as a result of violence against women. The model of trauma as unspeakable is a rather misstated one, then: where the difficulty of speaking trauma is too often read as an assertion that trauma somehow unmakes language. It is not that language is inadequate to trauma or that it fails in the face of the traumatic experience. It would be more accurate to say that trauma is unspeakable because its articulation falls on ears that cannot or will not hear it for what it is, which is connected to the function of language. Herman suggests that, ‘Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud’ and claims this as ‘the meaning of the word unspeakable’ (11), but in fact, the meaning of the word ‘unspeakable’ is more accurately captured by the valence of the ‘indescribable’: language has evolved in the service of the sayable, as a social, historical, and cultural process. Silence is the chosen language of trauma, and particularly of the type of abuse that middle sister endures: there are no words for that of which no one is supposed to speak or, indeed, to know. Language holds a promise of dignity in its function as an externalisation of subjectivity, a dignity that is undone by the absence of a vocabulary with which to name the insidious harm of predation.

This recalls Ruprecht Fadem’s analysis of the relative critical neglect of Burns’ earlier work, where she wrote of No Bones: ‘Readers neither want to “know” what Anna Burns tells us nor do we want to believe it’ (142-3). Although Ruprecht Fadem reads No Bones as a Troubles narrative, I have been fascinated by Burns’ assertion to the contrary in her interview with Eoin McNamee:
The Troubles, [Burns] said, isn’t just the Troubles. She points out the silence that followed when she told English interviewers that incidents in No Bones in fact took place in a troubled Islington housing estate.

“I could see it was straight out of ’70s Belfast – only it wasn’t. It was ’90s London.” [Burns] questions that silence. “Societal anxieties – of one’s own society or that of others – are strange, aren’t they?”

The ‘political’ context of these trauma narratives offers readers a way to contain them, or to hear them without hearing. People do not want to recognise these anxieties, despite – because of – the fact they reveal real and ongoing forms of suffering. This is connected to the novel’s reception within the ‘MeToo’ moment, as Claire Hutton has also stressed, and the (too slow) shift in public discourse to the mode of belief as the basis of receiving accounts of harassment, assault, coercion and rape.

The difficulty of transmitting the trauma story compounds and prolongs the suffering of the trauma subject in line with the second part of Herman’s formulation: the will to proclaim – the need to remember. For remembering to have some substantive effect, it must take place as a reciprocal exchange, by which the traumatic experience is recognised and thus legitimated. In Herman’s clinical reading, this ideally occurs within the therapeutic model, although her account of group therapy as an effective treatment suggests that this recognition is also bestowed through exchange with those who have suffered similar traumatic experiences; in other words, it is not only the clinical practitioner who validates the reality of the trauma. This is a complicated proposition because the reciprocity of this exchange points to an active mode of witnessing that makes some demand on the recipient. Mollica writes,

A listener’s patience and sensitivity are crucial to an essential element of the trauma story: the listener-storyteller relationship. The trauma story does not in fact completely exist unless it is told to someone else; the listener must choose to
become part of the story. But there is a price to be paid in terms of time, attention, and pain as the storyteller transfers some of her suffering over to the listener (48).

This is a common account of how trauma narrative works; Herman says trauma is ‘contagious’ (116), that receiving a narrative of trauma may be emotionally overwhelming for the listener, even as a trained clinician. By this understanding the telling of trauma may be doubly fraught for the trauma subject – for who would wish to subject any listener to a story that infects like a ‘virus,’ as Lauren Berlant has put it?xvi Mollica’s work goes further than Berlant’s or Herman’s in thinking about the telling of trauma because it looks at the art of storytelling – by his reading, a ‘healing art’ (Mollica, 110). While Mollica does not suggest there is a ‘right way’ or a ‘wrong way’ to give testimony, he suggests that the telling of the trauma story is not exempt from the realm of art or the aesthetic, challenging the idea that the authenticity of trauma narrative relies solely on its transmission of facts or display of fragmentation.

The ‘well constructed’ trauma story is, by his account, a source of empowerment for the teller. Instead of focusing on the language of these stories, Mollica focuses on their content. Mollica suggests two primary reasons for this. The first is based on his experience as a listener. When he and his team began conducting interviews with Cambodian women about their experience of ‘tragic events,’ they realised that for the listener it is often the overtly traumatic event that is received as the ‘primary content’ of such a story. This repeats public understandings of testimony as a story within a legal framework: the story exists to transmit the facts of the atrocity that might be measured and punished by law. This mode of listening is inadequate, as Mollica recognises:

it is so easy to become preoccupied with the tragic events in a story, but to do so is like looking directly into a blinding sun: you cannot see anything else, as these events take up the entire sky of a person’s life (38).
The image of the ‘blinding sun’ here is a telling one when we think of the way light inflects middle sister’s narrative and her insistence on a gradual form of enlightenment. Indeed, middle sister’s early awakening to the power of the aesthetic comes in the form of observing the setting sun, first with maybe boyfriend and a week later with her French class. Of these observations, middle sister remembers, ‘For the first time I saw colours . . . these colours were blending and mixing, sliding and extending, new colours arriving, all colours combining, colours going on forever, except one which was missing, which was blue’ (77). While her class do their best to insist that the sky is blue because everyone knows that the sky is blue, which is to say that language should express the basic facts of a situation as they ought to be, even in the face of incontrovertible evidence to the contrary – a sky full of colours, none of them blue – middle sister finds herself open, most unexpectedly, to beauty, and to the capacity to recognise complexity. The blinding sun removes the viewer’s capacity to see complexity and multiplicity: focusing on the tragic events of a person’s story overlooks much else about the storyteller and their life. This is dangerous not just because it reduces the teller to their tragedy, but also because ‘the most brutal events are often not the most damaging in a person’s life’ (Mollica, 38). By focusing on what seems ‘most damaging,’ the listener may miss what the subject experiences as actually damaging.

Here, one aspect of the utility of Milkman’s digressive narrative mode becomes apparent: although the crux of this story is the narrator’s experience of coercive control in a conflict state, this is not the entirety of the story that she tells. Her narrative ‘digressions’ are expressive of the experience of associative memory that thickens the substance of the narrative, revealing connections between people, places, and things that the narrator sees as crucial to making sense of her story, which is not only the story of Milkman’s predation, but is the story of her experience of that predation. This
associative form is also discussed by Wicks and his diagrammatic outline of the way in which ‘experience’ becomes simultaneous with narration (1979, 168) may also be of use to readers of *Milkman* in understanding the importance of *telling* as a tool of enlightenment, or coming to vision.

The ‘constructive’ approach to memory is discussed in the work of clinicians such as Daniel Schacter, who emphasise the importance of memory in the work of future building, which is a core part of trauma recovery. As mentioned earlier, Schacter’s work points to the neurocognitive foundation for understanding various kinds of constructive memory processes, emphasising the role of episodic memory: that is, memory that relies on the retrieval of contextual information – a form of ‘thick’ memory that is evident in the associative narrative form of *Milkman*.xxvii Mollica ultimately suggests that becoming a good storyteller is part of the work of overcoming trauma, ensuring that one does not tell a ‘toxic trauma story, unhealthy to body and mind with its focus on facts and high expressed emotions’ (133). Storytelling as a healing tool is empowering in his reading because it allows the teller to tell not just the story of their trauma, but to share the ‘cultural and revelatory wisdom’ embedded in their experience – to take the role of teacher in the telling of their story.

**Terminal Spaces: Losing Face**

In taking this role, in telling her story, the narrator shows us that she has moved beyond the ‘roadblock’ of jamais vu or willed forgetting: in *Milkman*, middle sister remembers everything, down to the French verb she conjugated as she lay in bed recovering from her poisoning (*être*, of course (231)). This draws upon the significance of the picaresque concentration on a narrator whose audacity lies in the telling of their own seemingly insignificant story, that ‘ironic gap between the social nonstatus of the protagonist and the presumptuous act of writing his autobiography’ (Wicks, 244). In *Milkman*, it is not
autobiography we are offered, per se, but rather a specific account of violation that
might be read as ‘insignificant’ against the wider backdrop of armed conflict yet which
had a substantial, life-altering impact on middle sister. This reminds us too of the
‘normalisation’ of gender-based violence, addressed in the curfew-breaking scene of the
novel, where the ‘normal women’ fear that the ‘issue women’ are about to launch into
an encyclopaedic dissection of systemic injustice, but instead they:

spoke of homespun, personal, ordinary things, such as walking down the street and
getting hit by a guy, any guy, just as you’re walking by, just for nothing, just
because he was in a bad mood and felt like hitting you or because some soldier
from ‘over the water’ had given him a hard time so now it was your turn to have
the hard time so he hits you. Or having your bum felt as your walking along. Or
having loud male comment passed upon your physical characteristics as you’re
passing. Or getting molested in the snow under the guise of some nice friendly
snowfight (Burns, 162).

This list goes on in this consciousness-raising form, culminating in an explicit
recognition of the unacknowledged gendered intersection between physical violence
and sexual violence. For the ordinary women, this is risible at first, an embarrassing
airing of personal problems – ‘linen they insist on taking out in public all the time’
(164). Here too we see the way in which secrecy operates through the corralling of
traumatic experience into the realm of the ‘private’ and thus the ‘unspeakable’: ‘you
can’t be saying that in public!’

But indeed, all this is public, and these instances and histories of trauma and
abuse proliferate even if they are not spoken. Central to Milkman’s function as a trauma
narrative is the way in which Burns marks trauma as a legacy or form of inheritance in
the novel and the close connections the narrator draws between the individual erosion of
self (she by Milkman) and the loss of sight. This loss of sight is more often figured as a
loss of light(ness), which is the means by which to see. This is a place where people live
‘as if the electric lights were turned off, always turned off, even though dusk was over and they should have been turned on and yet nobody was turning them on and nobody noticed either, they weren’t on’ (Burns 2018, 90). The motif of light is connected to that of reading, and even more so to that of narrating, where the narrator’s telling of the story here functions as both process and proof of enlightenment, becoming light, coming to sight.

To illustrate this account of trauma and enlightenment (I will not say recovery here, for a multitude of reasons), I will discuss one of the most grotesque scenes of the novel: the ‘canicide,’ or mass slaughter of neighbourhood dogs. Following this, I will give some idea of how Burns sketches the hereditary and historic legacy of trauma, and then consider the question of enlightenment, which as stated, I do not equate to any simple idea of being ‘better.’ As with so many other elements of the story within Milkman, the incident of the dog massacre is told associatively, recalled within the narration of maybe-girlfriend’s walk home from her French class.

Recalling feeling too ‘buzzy’ to settle to reading her novel du jour (Maria Edgeworth’s classic picaresque, Castle Rackrent), the narrator retraces the steps that led her to the ‘ten-minute area,’ an eerily ominous area that existed on the border between communities. A bomb ‘from long ago’ (93) had recently exploded in the ten-minute area, causing some confusion given the non-sectarian affiliation of the area. The bomb is revealed to be a Nazi bomb; those interested in ‘mapping’ historical events onto the narrative of the novel may be familiar with the Belfast Blitz, where on 15 April 1941 the city was bombed by the Luftwaffe as part of their WWII campaign. This is also connected to legacies of trauma, tied to the narrator’s father, who recounts his childhood history of abuse on his deathbed in words that recur each time the narrator experiences further encroachment by Milkman, never ‘going freshly into that place of terror’ (56).
While in the ten-minute area, middle sister came across a cat’s head, fleshy debris from the explosion. She felt an immediate protective impulse towards the head, likely precipitated by the association between cats and the feminine that the older narrator explicitly recognises even if her teenage self did not. Contemplating the frequent killing of cats she witnessed throughout her childhood – linked strongly to the wider suspicion of women and their purportedly overwhelming alterity – the narrator is moved to recollect the contrary public opinion towards dogs, seen as, ‘sturdy, loyal, feudal, good for man’s account of himself and with a slavish need to be obedient to someone’ (94). To kill a cat was an everyday act; to kill a dog inhuman. It is to such inhumanity that the narrative turns, then, in recalling the ‘canicide’ when,

the soldiery from ‘over the water’ slit the district’s dog’s throats in the middle of one night. They left the dead bodies in a giant heap, strategically placed at the top of one of the entries . . . Everybody knew that it had been the soldiers, that it had been a statement by them to teach us, the natives, a lesson to announce they . . . could overcome our dogs barking and snarling and warning renouncers of their presence. Our dogs, though, had never been just about that (94).

I am reluctant to take away from the imaginative force of the novel by insisting on some putative reality behind its narrative events. Given the utter horror of this event, however, it is worth pointing out that Burns has acknowledged this particular incident as one drawn from memory. In interview with Tom Gatti, she described the sight of the mound of dogs with their throats slit so deeply it appeared as though they had been fully decapitated as, ‘one of those images that stay with you.’xxx This might prompt further consideration of the ‘anonymised’ quality of the novel too. While I firmly believe this to be a deliberate stylistic choice, it is also useful in softening what might otherwise be considered too unpalatable to print, particularly given the ongoing sensitivity of legal action over the conduct of British soldiers in Northern Ireland.xxxi
This is connected to Lehner’s work and the demarcation of this place as ‘outside normative historical development’ (Lehner, 273), which also means a place defined by its history, static in the imagination of those who exist outside or beyond its realities. As Ruprecht Fadem has it in discussing the relative lack of critical attention accorded to *No Bones*, ‘working with texts of the North typically requires engaging that ancient conflict of which all and sundry have grown tired’ (142). What makes this place unique is also what makes it irrelevant, according to such a reading, which flattens the variousness of violence in a place where aggression and paranoia are standardised as modes of being.

As Burns put it in *Little Constructions*, ‘All crimes in such places got connected with the war, lumped together with the war, as if they were a part of it, and this happened whether they were because of it or not’ (2 – 3). The context of the place both standardises violence and exceptionalises the state(let), obscuring those acts of terror not generated by the central conflict. This poses a problem for the author seeking to communicate the persistent and widespread nature of other forms of violence and injustice.

Hutton is correct, then, in her claim that Burns’ work in *Milkman* seeks to ‘force a reconsideration’ of the ‘Northern Irish context’ (Hutton, 361). The necessity of such a practice of estrangement can be seen in the reasons I outline above, closely connected to the question of listening: Burns seeks to communicate beyond the ‘reductive contextualism’ of the Troubles and to avoid the tendency to fold all violence within the logic of the (unnamed, unacknowledged) war. The unnamed and unacknowledged status of this war is part of this reason too, requiring the deft deployment of the language of neutrality – but not impersonality – in order to protect oneself from those dangerous ‘points of view’ that have become only more ingrained as the Troubles-paradigm has come to dominate popular imagination. Middle sister must find a way to narrate her
experiences so that they are neither mitigated or ‘excused’ by the place and time in
which they happened. If a listener thinks they know this story already, they may distort
or ignore its details; indeed, they may be altogether disinclined to listen to tales of
‘darkest Ulster,’ to borrow from Louis MacNeice. There is another side to this, equally
worrying for author and narrator: the reader/listener may come to the tale because of
their appetite for suffering, their desire for disharmony. Then, finally, there is the
question of harm, and naming harm. As Olivia Lang put it in a recent article on the
utility of writing as a tool of resistance, ‘How do you convey the systematisation of
violence against women when there is a conspiracy of silence around it, when it is so
tolerated and disseminated and sustained as to have merged it with the fabric of
reality?’ xxxii

The ‘canicide’ incident makes explicit the connection between the pervasive
atmosphere of ‘political’ violence and the atmosphere and enactment of sexual
encroachment, depicted in the harassment of local women by the foreign soldiery. This
encroachment is itself a form of violence not, as the novel frequently reminds us,
recognised as such at the time. The narrator recollects the aspect of humiliation attached
to the searches that would be carried out on a man if he was caught outside his door,
where he would be ‘smirked at by those grown men with their guns’ (95). This
humiliation only increased if a wife, sister, mother, or daughter emerged to bear witness
in an effort, perhaps, to confront the soldiers with the basic inhumanity of their actions,
to reinforce the personhood of the ‘subject’ held against the wall. Indeed, this
humiliation was hyper-weaponised by the presence of a woman, shifting into the
vocabulary of sex and shame:

it couldn’t possibly have been agreeable to any woman coming out her door to
have the drip-drip of sexual comments made to her, goaded by those lewdsters of
the very bad remark. ‘Your boot,’ they’d say. ‘Your box,’ they’d say. ‘Your
suitability for doxiness.’ Then, ‘What we’d do to your face if...’ or something like that, and again with their guns and barely contained, often uncontained emotions, spilling out over the brim (95).

The question of security as it intersects with selfhood is also the question of subjecthood, realised in public discourse through the inscription of the self in law, or, to quote Lauren Berlant on Judith Butler’s work in The Psychic Life of Power (1997), ‘we are taught to love the law, and to see its goodness in us.’

The massacre of the district’s dogs is not simply an act of territorial brutality, though it is this, or of inhumane and dehumanising cruelty, though it is this too. Its other signification, as the narrator recognises explicitly, is to enact the total absence of security, of the recognition and guarantee of the self in law. The community here – and all those communities like them, regardless of specific allegiance – are expelled from a law in which they cannot recognise themselves and which does not recognise them, a foundational loss at the level of subjecthood. This absence also predicates the loss of reason as certainty, where the secure self imagined by Enlightenment rationality must also be lost when law itself is revealed to be chaos.

This is the instantiating burden of trauma that afflicts those who exist at such margins: the loss of the love of the law as tied to the concept of goodness and secure selfhood. The dogs were, the narrator says, ‘a safety buffer’ (96), a way to efface the totality of this loss through evasion i.e. through not facing it (the soldiers). Without the dogs, there is nothing to alert the community to the imminence of disruption: this is the truly insidious nature of terror. This loss of security is nominally felt most by the men of the community, who are seen as active ‘renouncers’ and are thus the ones ostensibly subject to persecution. However, Burns shows that this loss of safety is actually a permanent and ongoing feature of life – an absence, then – for the women of the community and, without reaching for generalisation, for women living under patriarchy.
I am somewhat troubled by the nature of this comparison and do not make it lightly; indeed, I am mostly concerned that it might appear trite or easy, when in fact it is anything but. That the material consequences of patriarchal power are hyperbolised within a state of existence predicated on violent machismo on all sides seems nearly too obvious to say, and yet I can find no other way to say it. This is connected to the capacity to speak, to articulate the experience of this terror: what Berlant and others call testimony.

A central problematic of testimony as framed by Burns is the question of what is political – or rather, what is not – in a conflict setting. This question opens onto the nature of the public/private dichotomy particularly insofar as it concerns sexual violence. Lehner moves towards this in her reading of *No Bones* but continues to frame Burns’ strategy in terms of a political/personal division. Of *No Bones*’ central character, Amelia, an anorexic or ‘hunger striker,’ Lehner suggests, ‘Burns inscribes the political trauma onto the private body of an individual who is at the same time a representative victim-survivor’ (274). In this, Lehner follows Fiona McCann’s reading, by whose account the ‘signifiers of war’ are ‘displaced’ onto the ‘personal realm.’

What *Milkman* makes clear, underlining Burns’ work in *Little Constructions*, is that this violence is not a displacement or abstraction of the political realm. One of the most unsettling effects of Burns’ novel is the way in which it reveals the consanguinity of (para)military violence and sexual harassment. The latter is not an effect of the former but its strategy and even at times its begetter. Sexual harassment does not ‘creep under the radar’: it hides, as it has always hidden, ‘in plain sight,’ and in *Milkman* Burns works hard to bring this to light. Violence against women – physical, psychic, and otherwise – is not merely representative or synecdochic for the actions or effects of the Troubles. It is, instead, a distinct demonstration of Burns’ staunch insistence that
gender-based violence is a political problem in its own right, and that its political nature lies in its public presence, despite efforts to contain it within the domestic or personal realm.

Shame is social here, and predation is pervasive. This returns us to the colloquial and vaguely archaic dialect of sexual harassment encountered above: ‘Your boot,’ . . . ‘Your box,’ . . . ‘Your suitability for doxiness’ (Burns, 95). This vocabulary of harassment echoes of the opening pages of the novel, where we are introduced to the narrator’s first brother-in-law. This character is bound up with Milkman from the beginning of the novel, where we hear how first brother-in-law would remark to the then twelve-year-old narrator,

about my quainte, my tail, my contry, my box, my jar, my contrariness, my monosyllable – and he used words, words sexual, I did not understand. He knew I didn’t understand them but that I knew enough to grasp they were sexual. That was what gave him pleasure (2).xxxvi

Later, the narrator and her third sister attempt to warn their three youngest sisters about this creeping unwholesomeness. These younger sisters possess an unquenchable desire for knowledge and their older sisters are attempting to signal to them that if their brother-in-law approaches them with freighted questions they should take care not to engage with him. The problem is that the older sisters cannot give this warning without inadvertently imparting the very type of knowledge from which they are trying to protect their younger sisters. ‘What will he be really after? What is it you mean?’ ask the younger sisters: ‘Third sister then said, ‘It’ll be something abusive, sexually invasive, a violating, creepy thing, always a verbal thing, but on second thoughts, never you mind. You three are too young to know of that yet’ (212). To give this warning or share this knowledge is to risk exactly the same psychological encroachment that the
teller is seeking to ward off. This encroachment is ineffable and yet it is entirely real; its open disguise is part of the predator’s titillation.

The adult narrator recognises this, recognises too that her teenage self remained dangerously oblivious to this insidious tactic: ‘Wouldn’t have occurred to me either, that cultivating helplessness and a growing mental dispossession might all be part of this man’s world of stimulation too’ (169). The problem, then, is how to render this intelligible when it exists beyond what may be spoken and when speaking it involves an ‘infection’ for the listener. Narrating a harm that leaves no physical mark expands understanding of harassment and its unspeakable nature because it directly challenges the insistence on physical injury as primary mode of injury and site of truth. Forms of knowledge can be injurious, but this has historically proven difficult to inscribe in any legal framework and so continues to elude articulation as a mode of injury to dignity: this tells us much about the efficacy of trauma stories in producing the conditions for their reception, as emphasised by Mollica’s work. This recalls earlier work by Leigh Gilmore, who in *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001) suggested that what she calls ‘limit-case’ autobiographical texts allow alternative knowledges to appear and thus offer ‘an alternative form of jurisprudence about trauma’ (147).xxxvii The necessity of the ‘literary quality’ of such stories is emphasised by Gilmore, Mollica and others, and it is this that allows the narrator of *Milkman* to offer us a narrative that is both revelatory and impenetrable: this distance is protective, for both speaker and listener. Given my emphasis on the significance of the picaresque mode in facilitating a non-toxic trauma narrative through the ‘ironic gap’ of the narrator’s temporal distance from the events she narrates, we may now reconsider other efforts to understand the form of the novel.

**Spinning A Yarn That Winds Towards Enlightenment**

Hutton sees the novel as a *Bildungsroman*, asserting that it focuses ‘in the end, on how
middle sister resolves her difficulties and develops’ (366). The problem with the
Bildungsroman classification is that we do not actually see the development of middle
sister. Although the immediate threat of Milkman has been dispelled by the story’s end,
there are many signs that even this older narrator is not yet fully ‘recovered’ from these
events, that she does not yet fully comprehend them, though this narrative is a clear
effort to do so in its refusal of jamais vu and demonstration of ‘thick’ memory through
its associative form. Despite this, although things are better by the end of the novel,
you are far from good. The existence of a second abuser following the death of the first
shows the entrenchment of these systems of predation and although the violent
retaliation meted out to the truly hateful Somebody McSomebody might seem like just
desserts it also reminds the reader that violence is the rule, rather than the exception, in
this story.

The revelatory function of the narrative emerges, then, not from or within its
events or ‘plot,’ but in its language. The narrator uses linguistic control to name and
thus defuse the nebulous force of the insidious sexual threat; the truth is brought to light
in its telling. As Wicks has it, ‘The picaro’s [or picara’s] is a life that – whatever the
claims [s] he makes to “historical truth” – takes shape only in the telling’ (1979, 170).
Further, where Wicks suggests that the picaresque ‘satisfies our darker yearnings for
demonic disharmony, dis-integration, ugliness, disorder, evil, and the gaping abyss’
(Wicks, 244), Burns’ détournement of the mode forces the reader to recognise the cost
of this desire and its material consequences. This reminds us too of Wicks’ claim that
the narrative distance of the picaresque mode allows readers to “‘watch out’ for
ourselves, as the picaro early in life learns from hard knocks to watch out for himself”
(1979, 170-1).xxxviii It is here that middle sister takes the role of teacher, in her
revelation of the mechanics of predation. Burns’ picaresque mode cannot be seen as a
‘trick’ because there is no ‘reader-victim’ in this work; instead, it is a warning, a revelation of manipulation rather than an act of the same. In telling her story, middle sister risks that openness and intimacy she could not imagine at eighteen, when telling anyone how she felt, what she was experiencing, was virtually unimaginable. The desire for disharmony that middle sister unmasks in her telling is explicitly connected with the unsettling force of sexuality and those psychic violations of the sort practiced by Milkman and first-brother-in-law, who thrive on the indefinable nature of their encroachment.

In contrast to this insidious and covert form of predation, the narrator offers the sumptuous vision of the new game taken up and played out in the streets by her little sisters and the other girls of the district towards the close of the novel. This game involves ‘playing’ the ‘international couple,’ maybe-boyfriend’s parents, who happen to be internationally acclaimed ballroom dancers. These parents left their children in order to pursue their dream of sequin-clad glory and are much heralded as an ‘alternative’ symbol of possibility by the residents of middle sister’s district. This game is described thus by the narrator:

Little girls were falling over everywhere. It seemed the whole district of them was out, playing, flouncing, and at first glance they appeared mainly to resemble chandeliers with added lusciousness such as golden brocade and embossed wallpaper. By the time I did go out, all the streets were overrun with them: beribboned, besilked, bevelveted, behighheeled, bescratchy-petticoated and in pairs or alone but pretending to be in pairs, waltzing and periodically crashing over (341).

The sight of the girls playing is imaginatively rich, all this finery seemingly summoned up from a ball scene straight out of one middle sister’s nineteenth century novels. In contrast, the little boys of the district are playing a different game, ‘oblivious of the little
girls’ (341). Their game involves a re-enactment of the ‘martyring’ of Milkman, the ‘Renouncer Hero . . . shadowed, set upon, then gunned down in their usual cowardly fashion by that murder squad spawned by a terrorist state’ (341).

The aesthetic richness of the narrator’s description of the girls’ play points to the feminine as a site of imaginative potential, existing at a remove from the repetitive re-playing of the masculinist violence with which the young boys are concerned. Further, the pattern of the boys’ play clearly echoes Milkman’s own techniques of predation, pointing again to the kinship between (para)military action and gender-based violence and emphasising the need for a new imaginative vocabulary with which to think beyond the inherited limitations of that atavistic history that both exceptionalises and excuses the state of terror in which these people exist. This also recalls the work of Cynthia Enloe in *The Curious Feminist* (2004), which describes the necessity of demystifying the process of militarisation and its associated masculinism. Enloe looks closely at the way militarism produces gendered inequity in both conflict and post-conflict societies noting in particular the way militarism produces and legitimates the public discourse of conflict. Combatants – men – are experts, authorised to speak by their experience. The question of who speaks is also a question of who is heard: who matters, and who has agential capacity in social regeneration.

Burns’ language here is as precise as ever, and it is no accident that her most overt condemnation of this ‘state’ (of being, this place) comes at this moment too, when she describes a ‘murder squad spawned by a terrorist state.’ The condition of violence here emerges from the state of terror produced both by the action of state armies and those who renounce them: the condition of terror is not connected only to the unnameable war, but also to the social conditions it (re)produces, which trap inhabitants in an apparently cyclical narrative of violence that masks and obscures multiple harms.
Looking at the process of restorative justice in Northern Ireland, Fidelma Ashe, amongst others, has pointed out the naturalisation of the figure of the male combatant through ethno-nationalist discourse and the persistence of paramilitarism as a feature of post-conflict states. This establishes a paradigm that sees accounts of the conflict ‘viewed as revolving around the activities of ‘hard men’ prepared and able to transcend common morality through violence and to protect and defend the higher ideal of the nation and its people’ (Ashe, 303). Opening up the ‘story’ of this conflict is a crucial step in confronting its continued reverberations and in moving beyond trauma.

The question of trauma may be understood from two basic positions: that of loss, and that of hope. In this context, I have found the recent work of John Brewer et al in *The Sociology of Everyday Peacebuilding* (2018) to be immensely helpful. This volume puts the experiences of those who have lived through the conflict in the north of Ireland and continue to live through its after effects experiences in a wider landscape of peacebuilding, exploring South Africa and Sri Lanka in the same volume, and suggests that each of these positions, of loss and of hope, is about an orientation to the future, where the trauma of loss removes the conditions of security by which any form of futurity may be imagined and the condition of hope entails a reattachment to possibility or a reorientation towards the future. Brewer et al recognise this in their formulation of ‘hoping-anticipation’:

> Hope has two qualities: hoping, the act of imagining a future desirable set of circumstances and the ways to get there (that is, it supplies a secular eschatology) and anticipation, the internal feelings excited by the desirable end state being envisioned (that is, it provokes other forward-focused emotions) (87).

They also recognise the close relationship between hope and fear, and in charting the paranoid anticipatory logics of *jamais vu* I have demonstrated how fear occludes the possibility of hope. Earlier I described this as a phenomenology, which is to say a total
state of being in and seeing the world; when Brewer et al invoke a ‘secular eschatology,’ they affirm this in their implicit recognition of the way in which the end of fear marks the total end of one form of being. What we see in the narration of now-adult middle sister is this possibility of hope, as passed on by her extraordinary French teacher, who is less interested in teaching her class French than she is in developing their ‘emotional literacy’ or openness to possibility.

This teacher requires her students to look at sunsets instead of speaking French and to interrogate the beauty that they see, which prompts the narrator’s ‘buzzy’ feeling, described earlier. The suggestion of possibility is the insistence that,

nothing of the dark was so enormous that never could we surmount it, that always there were new chapters, that we must let go the old, open ourselves to symbolism, uncover what we’ve kept hidden, what we think we might have lost (Burns, 80).

This openness manifests in a number of ways, the most significant within this discussion being attention to beauty or rather, an anti-modernist faith in the affect of the aesthetic. The novel is a masterclass in careful reading as much as it is in writing. As such, the narrative events of Milkman do not constitute a Bildungsroman, a reading that may be connected to those accounts of the novel that read the narrator as adolescent rather than as adult, but the picaresque mode marks and enables a coming to awareness on the narrator’s part. This is begun in the story she tells, as she suggests in her reaction to discovering the romantic relationship between chef and maybe-boyfriend: ‘The truth was dawning on me. . .’ (294). This image of dawning truth takes the reader back to the motif of light, to the question of sunsets as posed by the French teacher, and to the capacity for hope – for futurity – associated with coming to vision or becoming enlightened, made light, relieved of burden, darkness, fear.
For our narrator, then, this expression of hope is manifest in her logophilia, in the precision with which she tells her story, through her exaggerated diction and pleasure in the intricacies of language, through the ‘thick’ form of her narrative memory and through her humour, as we see at the close:

As we jumped the tiny hedge because we couldn’t be bothered with the tiny gate to set off on our running, I inhaled the early evening light and realised that this was softening, what others might term a little softening. Then, landing on the pavement in the direction of the parks & reservoirs, I exhaled this light and for a moment, just a moment, I almost nearly laughed (348).

This ‘softening’ is indicative of that mode of yielding to the text discussed earlier, and here, as elsewhere, the non-setting of Milkman allows the novel to escape those overdetermined narratives of the north that have emerged through and in the wake of ‘Troubles fiction.’ In allowing the city too to transcend itself, Burns deftly offers an account of trauma and its variousness that resists simple incorporation into particular histories. The materiality of the narrator’s near-pleasure at the ending of this novel comes from her softening and her willingness to tell her story shows us that some of this softening, at least, stuck. In answering the question of how to speak the unspeakable, how to enter ‘the vulnerable reciprocity of giving and receiving’ (269), Burns forges a distinctive, ‘densely dark’ (165), and occasionally gorgeous world that needs no excuse or defence. Only open up. And (t)read carefully.

My every thanks to my more than generous readers: Dr Sarah Bernstein (always), Dr Lola Boorman, Paul Michael, Dr Bernard Keenan, Dr Paul Crosthwaite, and my anonymous
reviewer. All of these provided invaluable comment and insight. Every author should be so lucky; every scholar should be so fortunate; every community should be so kind.

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i Stephen O’Neill’s short piece on the difficulty of naming both the north and the south gives a good précis of the complexity of the question; see ‘The Twists and Turns From the Irish Free State to Ireland,’ RTE Brainstorm, 12 March 2020

ii Anna Burns, Milkman, (Faber & Faber, 2018) pp. 60-1.


v For an account of the formation of ‘Northern Ireland,’ see Paul Bew, Peter Gibbon and Henry Patterson, Northern Ireland 1921 – 2001 (London: Serif, 2002).


viii See Hutton, p. 366.


‘Tablets girl’ is one of the ‘vast gallery of human types’ (Wicks, 1974, 245) who people the pages of the novel. Here as elsewhere these characters are named for some defining feature of the person, a common form of nicknaming in Irish culture. ‘Tablets girl’ is named for her practice of hoarding medication and using it to poison other members of the community.


As well as the frequent absence of proper names, the titles given to characters in the novel tend to be uncapitalised, as in the case of ‘tablets girl’ and ‘nuclear boy.’ There are a few other exceptions, and future work on the novel might consider the details of these naming strategies more fully.

For more on the continued legacies of paramilitarism, see the ‘Ending Harm’ website: https://www.endingtheharm.com/ or consider the still common practice of knee-capping as a punishment for ‘anti-social behaviour,’ as documented in the 2017 documentary *A Mother Brings Her Son to Be Shot*, dir. Sinead O’Shea.

This taken from ‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing,’ first published in *North* (1975).

This first-person narrative also complicates the ‘autobiographical’ mode of the picaresque suggested by Wicks because our narrator withholds that which marks the signature promise of autobiography: her name. This is an intimate form, yes, but only on the narrator’s terms, another sign of her authorial control.


‘Insight into Memory Deficits,’ as above, pp. 204 – 233.

xxii Notably, Milkman’s predation also destroys this sense of pleasure, leading to middle sister’s ultimate revulsion at the touch of her partner (Burns, 171).

xxiii All quoted material is taken from the third edition, published 2015.


xxv See Steven Morgan, Conjugal Terrorism: A Psychological and Community Treatment Model of Wife Abuse (R & E, 1982); also Evan Stark, Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life (Oxford UP, 2007).


xxviii The grotesque is, as some readers may recognise, another of the features of the picaresque as outlined by Wicks (1974, 249).

xxix As is this referentiality (usually parodic, by Wicks’ account on p 245).


xxxiii Taken from ‘Trauma and Ineloquence,’ p. 48.

xxxiv There is, of course, clear irony in the process of enlightenment I have outlined as the crux of the narrator’s quest in Milkman. The humour of this novel may be of the gallows (even levity is dark here), but it is nearly ever-present.
See Fiona McCann, ‘The Good Terrorist(s)? Interrogating Gender and violence in Ann Devlin’s ‘Naming the Names’ and Anna Burns’ No Bones,’ Estudios Irlandeses, 7 (2012), pp. 69 – 78, p. 74.

The narrator also notes the twenty-three-year age difference between this man and herself (twelve and thirty-five); this is the same age difference between herself and Milkman during his period of predation.

Gilmore’s more recent work, in Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives (Columbia UP, 2017) may also be useful in reading Milkman, particularly the idea of the ‘adequate witness’ introduced there.

Part of this détournement is the relative absence of the narrator in the present tense; although there are various comments and gestures to show knowledge since gleaned, this is rarely made explicit, and the reader has no clear sense of who or where the narrator is in the present moment from which they speak.