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TRANSMISSION AND AGREEMENT: READING AND THE CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN IRISH NOVEL

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ABSTRACT. ***Transmission and Agreement: Reading and the Contemporary Northern Irish Novel.*** This paper evaluates the capacity of the contemporary Northern Irish novel to act as an agent of transmission for a 'post-Troubles' readership, one distanced by a generation from the 1998 Good Friday Agreement that symbolised the partial end of sectarian violence. The critic Liam Harte suggests that "no part of modern Europe (if not the world) has greater claim than Northern Ireland to the mantle of most-narrativized region", but the transmissive function of fictional works in this context remain under-critiqued. Here, I assess the aspirations of novelistic narrative to cater for what Premesh Lalu has described, in the context of post-apartheid South African art forms, as 'psychic repair' (*Undoing Apartheid*, 2023). The essay engages the 2018 novel *Milkman*, by Northern Irish author Anna Burns, to ask how fictional narrative transmits the detail of the past across a generation first, in parallel to other literary and artistic genres, and second, in relation to an expanding archive of ongoing legal tribunals and government incentives directed towards the production of an 'official history' for Northern Ireland. Through attention to the self-conscious foregrounding of forensic reading practice by Burns and fellow writers, I show the necessary place of fictional recovery in the field of political and cultural memory.

Keywords: *Troubles, Northern Irish fiction, transmission, memory, generation*

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REZUMAT. ***Transmisie și acord: actul lecturii și romanul nord-irlandez contemporan***. Prezentul articol evaluează capacitatea romanului nord-irlandez contemporan de a acționa ca agent de transmisie pentru publicul cititor în perioada de după „Troubles" („Conflictul" din Irlanda de Nord), la distanță de o generație față de Acordul de la Belfast din 1998, care a reprezentat sfârșitul parțial al violenței sectare. Criticul Liam Harte arată că „nicio parte din Europa modernă (dacă nu chiar din lume) nu este mai îndreptățită decât Irlanda de Nord să primească titlul de cea mai narativizată regiune," dar funcția de transmitere deținută în acest context de operele de ficțiune rămâne insuficient studiată. Prezentul demers analizează aspirațiile narațiunii românești de a furniza ceea ce Premesh Lalu a descris, cu referire la formele artistice sud-africane din era post-apartheid, drept „reparații psihice" (*Undoing Apartheid*, 2023). Voi discuta romanul *Milkman* al autoarei nord-irlandeze Anna Burns, publicat în 2018, cu scopul de a afla cum transmite ficțiunea detaliile trecutului generației următoare, în primul rând împreună cu alte genuri artistice și literare și în al doilea rând în relație cu o arhivă din ce în ce mai cuprinzătoare creată de tribunalele legale încă active și de stimulentele guvernamentale menite să producă o „istorie oficială" a Irlandei de Nord. Examinând modurile autoreflexive în care Burns și alți scriitori aduc în prim-plan practicile de lectură investigative, demonstrez necesitatea actelor de recuperare ficțională pentru domeniul memoriei politice și culturale.

Cuvinte-cheie*: Conflictul nord-irlandez ('Troubles'), proza nord-irlandeză, transmisie, memorie, generație*

Introduction: genre, generation, and the novel in transmission

Recent critical discussion of Irish literary culture has concentrated attention on the question of how the experience of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles', the period of violence that lasted (roughly) from the civil rights protests of 1969 to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, has been transmitted to a generation born after the violence itself receded. How does a contemporary society become familiar with the events and atrocities that took place in the 'remembered time' of the previous generation? And how is that experience not only transmitted but mediated? These questions align with broader incentives in Irish academic culture towards defining and critiquing processes of historical memory, a task re-animated by the recently concluded Irish government-sponsored 'decade of centenaries' initiative, a project that intensified scrutiny of commemorative practices, historiographic revisionism, and protocols surrounding the island's

cultural and political heritage.[2] Questions about the transmission of a 'Troubles memory' dovetail too with the strained frequencies of protracted legal processes—the official commissions, court tribunals, and judicial enquiries—through which the violence of the past is carried into the present and which continue to force a traumatic revisiting of that inheritance and its consequences.

The experience of Northern Ireland also brings into focus the shaping role of creative reconstructions and re-imaginings in the relaying of memories of the Troubles era, in painting, photography and film, or in poetry, prose fiction, memoir and theatre. And in this respect it prompts us to consider why certain artistic and literary genres rise to pre-eminence in carrying forward the knowledge of political violence. This question calls for speculation across a wider frame of reference than Ireland itself, inevitably, and spotlights the creative turn of international cultures in comparable conditions of 'aftermath'. One thinks here of Romania post-1989, for example, and the emergence of a vibrant 'new wave' cinema, spearheaded by writer-directors such as Christian Miungiu and Cristi Puiu and charting, often, the transitions following the end of the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceauşescu. Similarly, looking to contemporary South Africa, it is clear that genres associated with the kinetic arts, and in particular, with theatrical puppetry and stage biotechnics, have led the creative field of what Premesh Lalu terms the 'psychic repair' of apartheid trauma (Lalu 2023, 173). While cultural production as a whole may be stimulated by violent social disturbance, some art forms seem to grip harder than others on the material patterns of transmission.

The lived history of the Northern Ireland Troubles has been carried across to a new generation through diverse creative routes and genres. Though never simply determined by context, literature, drama, and the visual arts have all navigated the fall-out of political events, producing the distinctive haunted aesthetic or 'spectral' culture described by Declan Long in defining the artistic imagination of a Troubles aftermath (Long 2017, 4).[3] The role played by different genres in this evolution has fluctuated: public attention was drawn in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s to the poetry of Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley and a circle of Ulster poets; by the late 1980s and early 1990s the political theatre of the Field Day Company, reinforced by a persuasive and theoretically astute academic wing, emerged to dominate the articulation of

[2] For a valuable overview of the decade of centenaries process see Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, 2023. "Historians and the Decade of Centenaries in Modern Ireland," *Contemporary European History* 32, no. 1: 21–26. (https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322000522.)

[3] Long's study remains one of the best accounts of the visual arts/politics interface in contemporary Northern Irish culture; for comparison with the parallel literary response see Caroline Magennis, 2021, *Northern Irish Writing after the Troubles*.

Northern Ireland's disturbed condition. Since the millennium, however, it is arguably the novel that has moved to the foreground in the self-conscious embodiment of a Troubles memory. This was not a given: prose fiction did not always command authority in Northern Ireland's cultural landscape and in Ireland generally the novel was frequently viewed as the poor relation to its companions in poetry and theatre. (Indeed, some Northern Irish novelists have even conducted a metafictional protest against 'higher-profile' literary genres, with comic novels such as Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* (Secker 1996) and Kevin Smith's *Jammy Dodger* (Sandstone, 2012) including cameo satires of the 'Troubles poet' and 'Troubles playwright' in their plots.) But prose fiction now leads the contemporary creative field, taking pole position in what *Irish Times* literary editor Martin Doyle describes as a current 'golden age' of Northern Irish writing (Doyle 2024).

This claim for the novel's rise to prominence is on one level, simply quantitative, the product of increased publishing interest in Northern Irish writing as a saleable commodity. A still-expanding body of both commercial and 'literary' novels reinforces Liam Harte's suggestion that "no part of modern Europe (if not the world) has greater claim than Northern Ireland to the mantle of most-narrativized region" (Harte 2019). At another level, however, it is attributive, reflecting the fundamental 'close fit' of the realist novel to a Northern Irish political reality: its space for Bakhtinian *heteroglossia* and multiple or diverse viewpoints; its conventional drive towards harmonising narrative resolution; its long-standing service (defined and largely inaugurated by Walter Scott, of whom more below) as a form of historiography, whether of individuals or of nations. And arguably, the genre's capacity for the transmission of experience has bolstered a critical alignment, in recent Northern Irish literary culture, between the mnemonic impulses of novelistic narrative and the guided retrospection of the political peace process.

That alignment has become yet closer, I want to argue here, in the tacit alliance that suggests itself between creative literature in Northern Ireland and the landmark document that attempted to resolve the crisis, the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Forged from a fraught process of multi-party talks and complex background diplomatic deals, the Belfast Agreement—usually known as the Good Friday Agreement—was itself the end result of a kind of novelistic narrative, full of twists and turns, and tense to its dramatic conclusion on 10 April 1998, when those cross-party delegates who remained present at the lengthy negotiations finally agreed to sign the accord. The text authorised by Northern Ireland's political and paramilitary representatives (and a large cast of diplomats and civil servants) was the product, essentially, of a creative process; of endless drafts and redrafts, forensic reading and rereading, imaginative will

and necessarily flexible interpretation. In this regard the document was a textual as much as a political triumph, and perhaps a kind of literary achievement in itself. In her survey of Irish literature and the peace process Marilyn Richtarik notes that the political columnist Fintan O'Toole observed at the time that the government representatives involved in the drafting were required "to act more like poets and novelists than like politicians: massaging fixed meanings so that they become supple and fluid; complicating the definitions of words so that they become open and ambiguous" (Richtarik 2023, 5). The Agreement emerged as a creative prose work that flexed to accommodate different voices in a kind of narrative holding pattern, nudging these towards a fragile compromise only just strong enough to suspend, for the most part, the ugly momentum of Northern Ireland's sectarian conflict.

Agreement and 'dissensus': reading Anna Burns' *Milkman*

While some individual novels have addressed the Good Friday Agreement directly—Colum McCann's *Transatlantic* (Bloomsbury, 2013), for example, relates the events of Easter 1998 from the imagined perspective of US special envoy to Northern Ireland, Senator George Mitchell—the relation is best seen in a looser contingency. In the context of transmission outlined above, fiction might be seen as a conduit for the emotional and behavioural legacies that run in parallel to the difficult political legacies filtered by the mechanisms of the Agreement. In this respect the novel can be seen as mimetic of 'agreement' itself, its narrative form driven by the momentum of proposition, challenge, revision and attempted resolution that characterises political negotiation and the attempt to find consensus, or to reintegrate individual voices in a communal chorus.

Writing on Northern Irish fiction Fiona McCann engages the terms of Jacques Rancière's *Dissensus* (2010) to argue for the capacity of the Northern Irish novel, which she reads through writers such as Glenn Patterson, Jan Carson, and Anna Burns, to facilitate what Rancière terms '*le partage du sensible*'—the recognised distribution of sensibilities in the interests of forging consensus—and at the same time to register 'dissensus'; that disturbance caused in society "by the inscription of a part of those who have no part". The gloss is particularly useful in identifying that the constructive momentum of human interaction necessarily allows for agreements to consist of both understanding and, simultaneously, the failure or refusal to understand. The creative tension that emerges in between has driven varied aesthetic responses and helped shape the contemporary novel in its rendering of a still-ruffled social landscape. As McCann continues: "In some cases, this discourse serves a conservative agenda of consensus at all costs; in others, it supports a more radical agenda of dissensus

in which the uncomfortable questions (and not always those we might expect) are enshrined as central to narrative aesthetics" (McCann 2022, 551). McCann's insightful reading not only nuances a novel-writing process that replicates the fraught tactics of the 1998 political negotiation but also recalls the sardonic terms in which the Good Friday Agreement, with its hinterland of collapsed deals, breakdowns, stalemates and walk-outs, was frequently presented in popular account as 'an agreement to disagree'.

Reading communities: the peace process and *Milkman*

In the dovetailing of peace process and narrative protocol, the rationale for the novel's pre-eminence in the creative transmission of Northern Irish experience gains weight. I want to develop this approach to the question of transmission by exploring one of the most lauded Northern Irish novels of recent years, *Milkman* (Faber, 2018), by Anna Burns. This novel assembled many *pro forma* elements of Troubles-set realism: a visceral scenery of sectarian and (para)military atrocity, a traumatised community in a closely policed district of Belfast, and an atmosphere characterised by impending threat and the constant presence of different forms of surveillance, both political and sexual. However it is largely the distinctive narrative style of the book that has attracted critical distinction since its publication.[4] Related in the first-person by the anonymous 'middle sister' of a Belfast family, and in a stream-of-consciousness impressionism that initially challenged many readers, *Milkman* appeared to break new ground, stylistically, and to demand a mode of forensic reading that set the novel itself in parallel with the interpretative and quasi-legalistic protocols of the peace process and the guided historical retrospectives of a post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Irish culture.

This positioning can be read into the surface styling of the novel as much as its narrative format: *Milkman* is literally a book to be judged by its cover. The dustjacket image chosen for the UK and European publication of the work is a stock photograph of a sunset-silhouetted figure standing on the southern shore of Belfast Lough and looking back across the water towards the city itself (two figures appear in photographer Patrick Cullen's original shot but for *Milkman* one has been removed, presumably to signal the existential isolation of the unnamed protagonist of the story). Following Burns' winning of the Man-Booker Prize for fiction and the 25th International Dublin Literary Award, the striated lines of sunset orange and rose blazed across bookshops and bookshelves as the novel

[4] For recent overview of *Milkman's* narrative style in the context of postmodernism see Paige Reynolds. 2023. *Modernism in Irish Women's Contemporary Writing: The Stubborn Mode*, 165-194.

gained both popular and academic attention. The image ties in with internal textual detail; specifically, the narrative's motif observations of the sunset sky, when properly apprehended, revealing itself stranded multicolour:

> As for this sky it was now a mix of pink and lemon with a glow of mauve behind it. It had changed colours during our short trip along the corridor and before our eyes was changing colours yet. An emerging gold above the mauve was moving towards a slip of silver, with a different mauve in the corner drifting in from the side. Then there was further pinking. Then more lilac (Burns 2018, 73).

The recognition supplies an accessible metaphor for the necessity of close attention, to seeing how things really are, and for accepting at the same time the multiplicity and diversity of viewpoints, admitting to the impossibility of resolving the plural in the terms of the singular.

In terms of external reference however, the dustjacket image chosen for *Milkman* subliminally recalls another famous sunset and silhouette photograph—that used for the cover of the UK government's public information booklet that presented the terms of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement to the voting citizens of Northern Ireland. The A4-size booklet, which was distributed to every household, laid out the specifics of the Agreement's proposals for democratic power sharing, for policing, and (in the most contentious area of suggested legislation) the early release of convicted prisoners sentenced because of Troubles-related crimes. Its full-colour cover page presented the silhouette of a nuclear family—mother, father, and two children—looking towards a flaming orange and pink sunset sky, with the headline 'The Agreement' presented in block capitals as if a book title, and the words 'It's your decision' below. On its publication this cover image was widely satirised and parodied, with jokes prompted not least by the misfit of a sun-blushed horizon with the reality of Northern Ireland's perennially overcast and rainy skies. Nonetheless the image became iconic. The brochure was placed in all public institutions and its defining sunset image enlarged for a major television and poster public information campaign. It has since been reproduced regularly in school textbooks covering the history of the Good Friday Agreement, and it featured again recently in the concluding episode of the Channel 4 television comedy drama *Derry Girls*, with the posters and brochures depicting the sunset image forming a visual hinterland to the story of a young generation preparing to vote on whether to accept the terms of the accord.

This visual connection between *Milkman* and the Good Friday Agreement sets certain aspects of the novel in relief. Examining the reception of Burns' novel, Clare Hutton suggests that the atmospheric cover photograph—which, Hutton confirms, Burns herself approved—is a strategic means of locating the work as a definitively *Belfast* fiction and that "for those who recognise this landscape, the

paratextual detail of this image has the effect of specifying and confirming the setting at an early stage in the reading process" (Hutton 2019, 362). I would elaborate here that the composition of the image is also crucial in defining *Milkman* as a *historical* fiction. The positioning of the figure looking back from a distance towards the city engages a spatial dimension to stand in for a temporal axis, signalling the importance of this work as an account of times past; an act of memory governed and controlled by cautious retrospective. Again, the outer signal is supported by internal textual detail: while several of the events and atrocities described in *Milkman* speak to the circumstances of the late 1970s—some of the worst years of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland—the recounting of this era takes place in more recent time, with the narrator referring to writing down her thoughts 'twenty years later' (Burns 2018, 6). In thus fixing the narration at mid-to-late 1990s, this minor detail allows the inscription of the protagonist's story to be aligned not only with the violence that occurred two decades earlier but the with subsequent processes of its transmission and attempted resolution, in the protocols of the peace process, and even perhaps with the year—1998—of the Belfast Agreement itself.

Burns' narrative diligence in this speaks to the broader theme of transmission, underlining the value not only of record but of distanced reflection in the response to, and understanding of, 'what happened'. In this she approaches a core aspect of the classic historical novel as defined by Lukács; that it is prompted by a historic frame-shift from individual to social, and concurrently by the fracturing of a civilian peacetime with the disruptions of large-scale violence and war. In a less scrupulous writer this might be coincidental but with Burns, the historical perspectivism is made explicit by the novel's prefatory allusion to Walter Scott. The first literary work (of many) which the narrator-protagonist reads in the course of *Milkman* is *Ivanhoe*, Scott's 1819 historical novel about a knight returned from the crusades to then battle at home in England for the hand of his beloved and his reintegration in society. As with *Milkman* itself, plot is less significant here than genre: *Ivanhoe* is one of the *Waverley* novels and therefore implicitly gestures to Scott's tradition-defining historical method, with *Milkman*'s 'twenty years later' perhaps a subtle echo of the deictic title of Scott's 1814 account of the Jacobite rebellion: '*Waverley*—or—'tis sixty years since'. The choice of internal signal is well considered, harnessing Scott's legacy for the historical novel genre to guide the reader towards an understanding of where, and how, the *Milkman* narrative is positioned first in relation to the Troubles themselves and secondly, to the manoeuvres that led to their cessation.

Bringing further definition to this alignment requires attention to the protocols of *reading* in this landscape. Again, Scott offers a model here in his practice of prefatory instruction to his anticipated readers on the decoding,

interpretation and reception of the ensuing narrative. Likewise, Burns addresses the reading process directly and immediately in *Milkman*, in effect as a kind of prefatory declaration of interest. Before we know anything else about the novel's protagonist we learn that that she is a reader, and a peripatetic one: "Often I would walk along reading books" (Burns 2018, 3). This is less the pose of the *flâneur*, more a pre-emptive strike against potential aggression on the streets. In her valuable discussion of *Milkman* in the context of totalitarian resistance Lyndsey Stonebridge has identified 'middle sister' as a figure of eighteenth-century female enlightenment whose reading habit serves as an act of defiance against control (Stonebridge 2023). Indeed the physical form of the book becomes a *literal* barrier against masculine aggression: the narrator recalls how her historical novel provided a defensive block against the sexual predator (the eponymous 'Milkman') who attempts to coerce her to get into his car:

> I did not want to get in the car with this man. I did not know how to say so though, as he wasn't being rude and he knew my family for he'd named the credentials, the male people of my family, and I couldn't be rude because he wasn't being rude. So I hesitated, or froze, which was rude. 'I'm walking,', I said. 'I'm reading,', and I held up the book, as if *Ivanhoe* should explain the walking, and the necessity for walking. 'You can read in the car,' he said, and I don't remember how I responded to that. Eventually he laughed and said, 'No bother. Don't you be worryin'. Enjoy your book there,' and he closed the car door and drove away (Burns 2018, 3-4).

Reading, then, is given priority and indeed urgency in *Milkman,* with emphasis placed in particular on the reading of novels. In extended narrative form the world can be given shape and meaning, and, if necessary, kept at arm's length.

In her 'walking while reading' protagonist Burns hails the act of reading as deliberative and instructive; active rather than passive; ultimately protective. She foregrounds reading as a critical practice in the ordering of a society and the comprehension of its condition. Moreover the reading process provides the bedrock for effective decision making. *Milkman*'s narrator is a careful reader: we see her in the process not only of absorbing a series of literary works but attempting to analyse and interpret them. Again, the content of these works, which are listed frequently—*The Brothers Karamazov*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Vanity Fair* or *Madame Bovary*—is less significant than the dramatised patterns of interpretation, misinterpretation, understanding and failure to understand; the connection is made from peripatetic pastime to intellectual judgement: "I liked walking—walking and reading, walking and thinking" (Burns 2018, 17). That 'middle sister' will in turn 'read' the traces of violence on her community confirms her as the internal vehicle for the representation of these events and registers an act of faith

in text as a reliable form of transmission. Perhaps unknowingly here, Burns sounds a further echo of the Good Friday Agreement public information booklet referenced above, which gave on its cover the specific instruction: "This is your document: read it carefully". Knowingly, meanwhile, she illustrates the place and importance of attentive, disciplined, purposeful reading in the context of communal and political understanding.

The directive towards 'careful reading' points finally to a distinctive narrative feature of *Milkman*: anonymity. If the cover of the novel seems to promise a specificity of place, Burns undercuts this with deliberate tactics of namelessness and placelessness. While we know that the novel is set in Belfast we are given very few geographical co-ordinates or topographical details, and the narrator-protagonist 'middle sister' remains, like almost all the characters, unnamed to the reader, though references are made to the use of her given name by her community. The de-naming tactic enforces the radical uncertainty with which the reader must navigate the text, with characters reduced to their relative functions only ('eldest sister'; 'brother-in-law'; 'longest friend'). Hutton comments on the twinned effects of this strategy as a means of allowing the setting to be read as universal and yet remain heavily localised. Burns, she suggests, operates a sustained defamiliarisation by 'making strange' what is to many readers, a familiar Northern Irish landscape, while at the same time allowing the terms of the story to apply beyond the Troubles context. "Neither of these readings excludes the other," she argues, "and the lexicon of the work has a role to play here, with the narrator's tactic of 'not naming' suggesting the work's universality, and the Hiberno-English of phrases such as 'over the water' and 'beyond the pale' seeming to insist on its cultural specificity" (Hutton 2019, 361). Careful reading, in this regard, must allow for both local and universal interpretations to exist simultaneously.

The anonymising of both persons and place serves this dual function then, but additionally—and once again in respect of the novel's provenance in a post-Agreement culture—the strategy can also be understood to refer to and mimic the management of Northern Ireland's epoch of violence and its legacy. Burns describes a society embedded in practices of surveillance and also in the exercise of silencing, censorship, and the cautious policing of information. From the opening line of the novel with its place-holding reference to 'Somebody McSomebody', the text suggestively conveys a Troubles-era culture in which anonymity had a necessary protective function within a fraught civic protocol. During the worst years of the Troubles the police authorities advertised a 'confidential telephone number' for individuals to pass on information without identifying themselves by name; anonymous bomb warnings were telephoned to media offices with the use of a confirmation codename; and paramilitaries

carried out punishment beatings—including the brutal practice of kneecapping, a disabling bullet through the leg—on those suspected of being informers or 'touts'. Northern Ireland's citizens were bound by the edict aptly summarised by Seamus Heaney in observing 'the famous Northern reticence' in a 1975 poem:

> …the tight gag of place
> And times: yes, yes. Of the 'wee six' I sing
> Where to be saved you only must save face
> And whatever you say, you say nothing (Heaney 1975, 59).

In conveying the anonymising protocols of twenty-five years ago to the contemporary reader, *Milkman* transmits the atmosphere of Belfast during the Troubles to vivid effect: 'all that repertoire of gossip, secrecy, and communal policing, plus the rules of what was allowed and not allowed that featured heavily in this place' (Burns 2018, 59).

A distinction can be drawn however between 'anonymity' and a coded, protective *pseudonymity*. In Burns' novel the latter is more frequently the convention or practice: the eponymous 'Milkman' is the moniker for a known but never named paramilitary, and characters are all distinguished by relative coded names. The long chronological time frame of the novel is important here, with Burns reflecting not only the Troubles era itself but the protracted post-Agreement climate against which the work was drafted. In maintaining pseudonymous characterisation in the relation of events 'all those years ago', *Milkman*'s narrator offers lateral allusions to the continuation of an anonymising and pseudonymising protocol, post Agreement, through legacy enquiries and tribunals. Of these, the most notorious was the Saville Inquiry, established in 1998 to investigate the events of Bloody Sunday in Derry, January 1972, when 13 unarmed civilians were shot dead by the British Army Parachute Regiment. The Inquiry did not produce its findings until 2010, delayed not only by the vast scale of documentary and forensic reading which it required, but also—crucially—by legal wrangling over the permission given to those soldiers implicated to remain anonymous, and to give their evidence under labels of convenience or alphabetical pseudonyms: 'Solder A', or 'Solder B', and so on. The Saville Inquiry illustrates perfectly the nature of the 'tribunal culture' through which Northern Ireland's most violent epoch has been transmitted, managed, and 'read' across time, while setting the pattern for the legalistic cautions and restraints that *Milkman*'s narrative deftly imitates.[5]

[5] On the Saville Inquiry, which ran 1998- 2010, see Eamonn McCann, ed, 2005, *The Bloody Sunday Inquiry*, particularly chapter 6: 'Soldiers'. Tom Herron and John Lynch's 2007 study *After Bloody Sunday: Ethics, Representation, Justice* offers a useful account of the portrayal of Bloody Sunday in various forms of arts, including literature.

Belfast *noir* and the role of forensic reading

The theme of 'careful reading' in the case of a Northern Irish history speaks to broader intellectual interests in the recovery or transmission of the past. To turn to this briefly, I want to place *Milkman* beside a body of writing that might be described as 'forensic' in its treatment of the Troubles. I take the term 'forensic' here with acknowledgement first, of the Forensic Architecture movement and its influence on a creative arts initiative to assemble narratives from 'traces'—including sensory, emotional and aesthetic traces—of the recent past. In their 2021 study *Investigative Aesthetics*, Matthew Fuller and Eyal Weizman speak to a forensic accounting that looks to artistic forms in order to read against the grain of media and history texts, and to propose instead "a counter-reading, a counter narrative that gathers all these different kinds of trace, and is attuned to their erasure" (Fuller 2021, 2). Their focus raises the primary question of what we consider to be 'evidence' in understanding the past and gestures towards a field of research that looks beyond objective or factual detail to secure memories of Northern Ireland's experience.[6]

The second sense of 'forensic' here relates to the idea that *Milkman* can be considered not only a historical novel but a detective thriller. The backdrop presence of the thriller genre heightens Burns' practices of anonymity, speculation, ambiguity and 'evidential' narration; at the same time it aligns her text with a large array of detective novels and thrillers that have come to constitute the sub-genre of 'Belfast *noir*', as showcased by writers such as Anthony Quinn, Stuart Neville and Eoin McNamee. This category, comprehensively outlined in Aaron Kelly's pioneering 2005 study *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969*, has proliferated since the end of the Troubles in an arc that speaks to commercial opportunity, admittedly, but also to the compelling post-Agreement momentum of narrative dissensus, discovery, retribution and resolution. The flourishing of Belfast *noir* since 1998 reflects a renewed commitment to narrative forms invested in the exposure of what is hidden, the recovery of bodies, the tracking down of the criminal, the sentencing of the guilty and the symbolic restoration of social and civic order. In many such novels (as in a long history of British and North American wartime detective fiction) the single body—murdered or mutilated or disappeared—becomes allegorical for the traumatised body politic.

[6] See for example, the Leverhulme-funded project *Sensing the Troubles* (PI Roisin Higgins, 2021-2), which recovers witness experience of the violence through sensory record: https://sensingthetroubles.com. In this vein see also a valuable discussion by Maria-Adriana Deiana, 2022, "'Feel the Trouble(s) around you:' Sensing the Everyday Politics of Conflict through Anna Burns' *Milkman'*, *Political Anthropological Research on International Social Sciences* 3, no.1, 29-39.

In this regard the practice of careful or forensic reading, intrinsic to the detective genre, links *Milkman* to other works that transmit the material of the Northern Ireland Troubles through the long-term processes of its decoding and deciphering. This is the strategic directive of Eoin McNamee's *Blue Trilogy*, for example, a set of three linked novels in which crimes committed decades apart are connected through the drawn-out processes of their respective criminal investigations. The middle item in the series, *Orchid Blue* (Faber, 2010), reconstructs the real-life murder of a young woman for which a local man, Robert McGladdery, is arrested. Desperate to improve his chances of a fair court hearing, Robert works on his own defence while in prison, reading the assembled paperwork in penetrating detail:

> Legal documents were served on him every day, the story of his life opening into new dimensions. Robert felt as if he had access to whole new languages. His solicitor brought him writs and affidavits, laid them out on the bare prison table. You thought of them as being written on archaic materials, parchments and vellums, the scribed wisdom of ages. Robert loved the sound of the Latin terms in his mouth. *Habeas Corpus*. He hadn't thought the bare events of that night could be told in such a way… He read the documents late into the night. The warders who checked on him saw him as scholarly, hunched over (McNamee 2010, 137).

For NcNamee, whose writing practice is consistently legalistic in method and indebted to 'true-crime' antecedents, the novel approaches the territory of criminal forensics, with Northern Ireland's experience carried forward not in grand narratives but through discrete and small telling traces, the past read and interpreted as carefully as if it were laid out in a courtroom document. Again, this emphasis self-consciously aligns the novel genre here with a post-Agreement paper trail in which the legacies of a violent past must be 'read carefully', with the huge responsibility this implies. Across the *Blue Trilogy* as a whole, the casting of procedural functionaries—solicitors, journalists, detectives—elevates a cohort of professional 'interpreters' over and above their gunman counterparts, the mundane displacing the sensational, while the text endorses the essential protocols of careful reading in the painstaking restoration of the civic order.

Fact, fiction, and the problem of 'official history'

This discussion suggested earlier that the Northern Irish novel has had to 'negotiate' a territorial claim to the material of the Troubles with other creative genres such as poetry and theatre. Its most important negotiation,

however, has been not with other literary forms but with the concept of an 'official' history. The problem of how the experience of violence in the past can be appropriately contained in some kind of formal narrative in the present day remains intractable, despite the emergence of several academic accounts and treatments. There is a sense that the complex and conflicting nature of that experience defies any singular narrativization. Not surprisingly, this question has been tracked from public debate into the pages of the novel itself, with David Park's novel *The Truth Commissioner* (Bloomsbury, 2008) exploring late 1990s South African parallels in imagining, through the experiences of four diverse participants, the difficult fate of a Northern Irish attempt to establish a version of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

This is not to suggest that individual stories of the Troubles period remain untold. The varied accounts of 'what happened' during three decades of intense political and sectarian violence have worked through different routes and at different levels, from community-based 'story telling' in organisations such as *An Crann*, established in 1994, to academic initiatives such as the University of Ulster's digital archive, 'Accounts of the Conflict'.[7] These ventures, often funded through government or philanthropic sources, are dedicated to the recovery of experiences endured by those who suffered or witnessed Troubles-era atrocities. They rely—rightly—on the instincts of oral history or so-called 'history-from-below' methodologies in order to handle what is often traumatic material in appropriate form and in safe contexts detached from political directives of any kind.

Since the Good Friday Agreement, however, pressure has steadily intensified at governmental level for the production of a centralised 'official' history of the Troubles. Among these incentives, the Stormont House Agreement (December 2014), which was a UK government policy paper directed primarily to the orchestration of fiscal, welfare and legislative arrangements under the new Northern Ireland Assembly, included a section entitled 'The Past'. Here, terms were laid out for the management of the many complex legacies of the Troubles, such as provision for acknowledging the suffering of victims and survivors and the pursuit of justice for still-unsettled murders and assaults. Further to this, Article 22 of the Stormont House agenda proposed the establishment of an Oral History Archive 'to provide a central place for people

[7] Founded in 1994, *An Crann* (the Irish word for 'tree') was a charitable organisation providing a forum for ordinary citizens to relate their experiences of the Troubles in story-form. The organisation produced a collection of these narratives, *Bear in Mind: Stories of the Troubles* (Belfast: Lagan Press/An Crann, 2000). Further details of initiatives for the narrative recovery of Troubles experience are archived at the INCORE International Conflict Resolution Institute, University of Ulster https://www.ulster.ac.uk/incore.

from all backgrounds (and from throughout the UK and Ireland) to share experiences and narratives related to the Troubles.' It added that an academic research project was to be established as part of the Archive, 'to produce a factual historical timeline and statistical analysis of the Troubles' within a 12-month period.[8]

University-based historians were not surprisingly, deeply uncertain about this directive, with leading Irish historian Ian McBride pointing out that his fellow academics would "cringe at the suggestion that their role involves producing a 'timeline'" (McBride 2018, 220). His sentiments reflect an understandable concern that any move towards a comprehensive and official or government-sponsored macro-view of Northern Ireland's experience is premature while the legacies of violence remain 'live' in the tribunals, enquiries, justice campaigns and compensation cases that form a prominent discourse in Northern Irish life. Is an 'authorised' historiography of the Troubles feasible, even in the longer term? Against the backdrop of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement the arguments for and against the evolution of an 'official history' of the Troubles have rumbled on, mired in the difficulty of sectioning off a genuinely independent academic task from the ongoing legislative management of a violent inheritance.

In this context, the adjacent work of Northern Ireland's fiction writers comes into view once more. With an official history held in abeyance, it seems timely to ask how novels such as *Milkman* can supply, in the interim, default versions of a truth commission or proxy histories of the conflict. The idea raises a broad epistemological (and generic) complexity but is worth considering briefly here, in conclusion, not least in order to justify the *retrospective* insistence of contemporary writing that some commentators have seen as a failing. Writing in Northern Ireland's *Fortnight Magazine* in 2021, the author Rosemary Jenkinson lamented the apparent unwillingness of Northern Irish writers to move forward from the material of the conflict in their subject matter. "Why is Northern Irish literature feasting on the dead corpse of the Troubles more than ever?" she asked, continuing "We writers seem to have no more ability than our politicians to move on from the past […]" (Jenkinson 2021). Her question contains its own answer in the necessary positioning of writers alongside their political counterparts. The alignment of the two roles exposes not the indulgence of literature in some kind of trauma-nostalgia, but the still urgent responsibility of the novelist to attend to the transmission of experiences which elude compromised political narratives or vexed official histories, and which might otherwise be lost from account.

[8] Full text at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-stormont-house-agreement.

Conclusion

In his poem "Lunch with Pancho Villa", poet Paul Muldoon riffs—no doubt with his own Northern Irish homeland in mind—on the impossibility, and yet simultaneous possibility, of writing an official history of a revolution:

> 'When are you going to tell the truth?'
> For there's no such book, so far as I know,
> As *How it Happened Here,*
> Though there may be. There may (Muldoon 1977, 12-3)

Can the Northern Irish novel provide such a book? What is suggested by Anna Burns in *Milkman* is not that fiction can somehow solidify the slipperiness of historical fact but that it can propose an ethics of reading—in the terms of forensic detail discussed above—that fits the still uneasy conditions of the post-Good Friday Agreement era. The novel remains the form most "adequate to our predicament", to adapt Heaney's words once more, even if *Milkman* itself displays a society riven with the fractures that show the Agreement to be desperately fragile (Heaney 1980, 56). In *Milkman*, the internal reader—the unnamed protagonist—hails the external reader in a series of subliminal prompts towards the detail of Belfast's Troubles landscape and asks us to 'read carefully' before making judgement. Here Anna Burns shares the defining claim of many post-Good Friday Agreement novels to a contingent relationship with the rippled trails of consensus and dissensus that have contextualised Northern Ireland's public arena since 1998. Through its forensic acuity the novel, with its full repertoire of metaphoric devices, retrospective capacity, and intertextual signalling, transmits to the current generation the essence of that volatile, cross-party compromise, based on 'careful reading' and necessarily flexible interpretations, that brought the Troubles nearer to a point of resolution.

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