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Embodied Syntax and Queer Relationality in Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (2013) and *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016)

This article offers a comparative analysis of Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (2013) and *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016) by examining how each novel mobilises linguistic fragmentation as an embodied mode of narration. Through a queer and poststructuralist critical framework, I read McBride's syntax as a site where trauma, desire, and relationality are materially inscribed. In *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, fragmentation articulates the somatic pressures of violence and the dismemberment of female subjectivity; in *The Lesser Bohemians*, it becomes a vehicle for erotic apprenticeship and vulnerable becoming. Drawing on Ahmed, Butler, Sedgwick, Kristeva, Halberstam and Wittig, I investigate how McBride reconfigures formation through corporeal intensity rather than psychological coherence. By placing the two texts in dialogue, I also argue that McBride reimagines the contemporary *Bildungsroman* as an anti-teleological process shaped by affective entanglement as well as the body's resistance to normative narrative structures.

KEYWORDS: Embodied syntax; queer formation; trauma and relationality; poststructuralist narrative; Irish contemporary writing; Eimear McBride.

1. Introduction

Eimear McBride's fiction has become one of the most striking contributions to contemporary British and Irish writing, especially for the extremity of its linguistic experimentation and its foregrounding of the body as the generative principle of the narrative. In her first novels, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (2013) and *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016), language is not a transparent medium for narrating events, but becomes a sensory material shaped by tactility. McBride's syntax expands and contracts according to the intensity of the embodied experience of her female protagonists. By linguistic fragmentation, I refer to a disruption of conventional syntactic order (sentence segmentation, elliptical structures, broken clauses, non-linear phrasing) that defies

narrative coherence and mimics the discontinuities of corporeal and affective experience. This concept draws on poststructuralist and feminist theories of language (cfr. Kristeva, 1984; Cixous, 1976; Wittig, 1992), where syntax is not a neutral container of meaning but a politically charged structure embedded with ideological assumptions about identity, gender, and subjectivity. In McBride's prose, fragmentation becomes both an aesthetic and epistemological gesture: it enacts the pressure of trauma on narrative form and foregrounds the somatic origin of utterance. Rather than representing the body, the syntax itself performs it, by turning language into a field of rupture where memory, desire, and violence are inscribed. The characters' bodies enter language as a disruptive force that destabilised subjectivity and narrative linearity alike. Meaning is thus produced through corporeal textures rather than through psychological interiority. McBride's writing proposes a form of embodied consciousness in which the linguistic line becomes inseparable from affective and corporeal memory, as well as the narrative, embodied rhythms of sensation.

Born in Liverpool in 1976 and raised in Ireland, McBride trained at the Drama Centre in London, and this performative background deeply informs her prose. The vocabulary of gesture and corporeal discipline circulates within her writing, which often feels closer to a vocal performance than to conventional narrative. This theatrical grounding facilitates a prose that is attentive to the body's movements by incorporating patterns of muscular tension into the very structure of the sentence. The artistic sensibility that emerges from this formation is also shaped by the decades-long struggle to publish *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, a novel completed in 2003 but released only in 2013 to immediate critical acclaim. Its reception confirmed the extent to which McBride's experiments with fragmentation, narrative rhythm, and embodied voice resonate within contemporary debates on modernist legacies, feminist corporeality, and experimental form. *The Lesser Bohemians* came out a few years later (2016), followed by the more recent *Strange Hotel* (2020), the collection of stories *Mouthpieces* (2021), the non-fictional work *Something Out of Place: Women & Disgust* (2021) and her latest novel, *The City Changed its Face* (2025).

Existing scholarship on McBride's early production has been rich and varied, yet it gravitates toward a set of recurrent themes, such as trauma, the influence of Catholicism, sexual violence, and the fractured subjectivity and narrative style of her protagonists. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* in particular has been read predominantly through the lens of trauma and violence theories, with special attention to the novel's portrayal of sexual abuse and gender violence within the Irish women's literary tradition (cfr. Rose, 2016a; Cahill, 2017; Lyons, 2021). In my own article, I have argued that the novel enacts a gradual process of textual dematerialisation in which trauma manifests

itself through linguistic dissolution and bodily disarticulation, drawing an innovative connection between McBride's prose and modernist poetic experimentation (cfr. Antosa, 2015). *The Lesser Bohemians* has received less critical attention, which has mostly focused on its exploration of sexuality alongside the complexities of intimacy as a performative form of expression (cfr. Gilligan, 2017; Antosa, 2018; Smyth, 2019; Ostalska, 2021).

Despite this growing body of criticism, there is little comparative analysis of *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* and *The Lesser Bohemians*; in particular, scholarship has not fully explored McBride's foregrounding of embodied syntax and queer relationality within a more general reconfiguration of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. This article addresses that omission by arguing that McBride's fiction develops a poetics of becoming, in terms of corporeal and affective vulnerability. Trauma is central in both novels, although it manifests itself at different levels of intensity. As I have discussed elsewhere (cfr. Antosa, 2015), McBride engages with the almost impossible task of giving voice and representation to young girls' sexually traumatic experience (cfr. LaCapra, 2004; Ward, 2012). From this perspective, both novels grapple with the narrative paradox of articulating through a highly experimental style what Cathy Caruth has aptly defined «the unspeakable core of trauma» (Caruth, 1995, pp. 153-154).

In contrast to the traditional ascent into social integration as theorised by Franco Moretti in his seminal study of the *Bildungsroman*, *The Way of the World* (1987), McBride's female protagonists undergo a form of *Bildung* that is marked by crisis and trauma. Her writing challenges the conventional logic of the *Bildungsroman* by dismantling its investments in self-coherence and progress into a heteronormative world. In addition, it challenges the male-centred perspective that has traditionally constituted the core of this genre by articulating a mode of becoming that is radically embodied and shaped by relational precariousness. Most of all, McBride carefully weaves stories told from the perspective of young, vulnerable female protagonists, who have to come to terms with the outside world through a process of sexual initiation. Drawing on Moretti's work, I claim that McBride's first two novels articulate a queer, feminist *Bildung* that dismantles the genre's ideological core. In order to conceptualise this formal revisitation of this genre, the article adopts a methodological framework grounded in queer theory, affect studies, feminist poststructuralism, and performance theory, each of which offers a distinct yet complementary lens for approaching the corporeal and linguistic textures of McBride's writing.

Central to my discussion is Sara Ahmed's phenomenology of orientation and affect, which provides the tools to think about how bodies are directed, shaped, and constrained by the objects and relations that gather around them.

In Ahmed's words: «Bodies take the shape of what they come into contact with; they are formed by repeated orientations toward some objects and not others» (Ahmed, 2006, p. 2; 2014). Ahmed's work allows us to map McBride's characters in relation to the affective atmospheres that contour their movements and the ways in which they experience space as both enabling and restrictive. In this dis/orienting space, the protagonists' bodies are moved by desire, shame and past and present traumas. Judith Butler's theorisation of performativity and corporeal vulnerability deepens this point by foregrounding the relational conditions of existence through which subjects come into being (cfr. Butler, 1993 and 2004). Butler's insistence that recognition structures the very possibility of embodiment illuminates McBride's characters, whose identities are continually destabilised by the fluctuating frameworks of acknowledgement in which they are embedded. As I discuss in this article, in *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, the protagonist's repeated disarticulations bear witness to the violent pressures that hinder her (self)-recognition; in *The Lesser Bohemians*, the tentative construction of intimacy is conditioned by the fragile recognisability of desire and the exposure inherent in being seen.

While Ahmed and Butler offer ways of conceptualising relationality and affective orientation, Eve Sedgwick (2003) provides a crucial vocabulary for understanding the affective intensities that shape the protagonists' experiences, and especially shame, as I shall discuss in the next section. In addition, Jack Halberstam's theorisation of failure as a queer mode of resistance (cfr. Halberstam, 2011) is another key theoretical concept that helps us understand the protagonists' disrupted trajectories as forms of anti-teleological becoming. Moreover, Halberstam's critique of success narratives, rooted in heteronormative and developmental logics, is a very useful conceptual tool for interpreting McBride's protagonists as figures who embody queer temporalities. They move in jagged lines, and find meaning in a suspended dis/orientation. Together, these theoretical strands shape an interpretative framework capable of attending to McBride's radical reconfiguration of the relationships between body, language, and becoming. These relationships ultimately unfold within a queer, affectively saturated terrain of vulnerability and resistance.

At the same time, this analysis is based on feminist and queer poststructuralist theories of language that articulate the inseparability of discourse and embodiment. A crucial point for this article is Monique Wittig, whose work is instructive for understanding the violent, corporeal dismantling of language that resonates with McBride's prose. In *The Lesbian Body* (1973), Wittig exposes the fictionality of sexed categories by staging a radical dismembering of the body and its linguistic correlates. The novel's explosive syntax tears open the surface of language, making visible the political fabrication of 'woman' as a category produced and maintained by what Wittig (1992, p. 2) calls «the straight mind».

The Wittigian perspective illuminates the ways in which McBride's novels mobilise a corporealised syntax that works against the grain of linguistic coherence. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* stages a dismantling of subjectivity that mirrors the scattering at the heart of Wittig's text: consciousness appears not as a unified interiority but as a series of broken utterances, as well as semantic and somatic eruptions. Language is cut open to reveal the raw material of cognition and memory, while the narrator's voice leaks into her body, and her body into her voice. Similarly, *The Lesser Bohemians* develops a mode of linguistic intimacy that depends on the permeability of bodies and words, as if the syntax itself was the site where sexual and affective encounters take shape. Wittig's critique of sexed categories as ideological fictions helps make visible how McBride destabilises the grammar of identity through anti-linear sentence structures. Rather than asserting influence or genealogy, McBride and Wittig share a radical commitment: to use language to unmake the very body it constructs, by exposing the violence embedded in normative linguistic structures, and imagining other ways of inhabiting embodiment. Reading McBride through Wittig's work thus enables a richer understanding of how her novels stage bodily disarticulation not as metaphor but as political practice, in the form of queer and feminist resistance inscribed at the level of syntax.

Finally, in reading both novels as contemporary queer feminist reconfigurations of the *Bildungsroman*, this article argues that McBride repositions formation as a bodily ordeal structured through trauma in the first novel and through relational apprenticeship in the second. Through an integrated and comparative approach, I contend that *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* writes the body as a site where trauma ruptures syntax and fragments the narrative voice, while *The Lesser Bohemians* writes the body as encounter, using relational syntax to articulate a precarious but emergent form of corporeal becoming. In McBride's fiction, language carries the imprint of bodily experience, and the body remakes linguistic form. Across these novels, the work of becoming unfolds through vulnerability and the shifting textures of traumatic sexual and affective encounters.

2. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* or the Embodied Syntax of Dis/Articulation

A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing stages one of the most radical experiments in contemporary prose by foregrounding an utterly unstable consciousness, producing a linguistic field shattered by the pressures of trauma, where em-

bodiment is not represented but enacted. The novel's fragmented syntax constructs a narrative voice that is both intensely corporeal and profoundly disintegrated, reflecting a subjectivity shaped by sexual abuse, religious and familial violence, and poverty. Rather than offering a retrospective, coherent account of trauma, McBride immerses the reader in the disorienting pressure of corporeal memory, where syntax collapses and language is torn apart by sensations that exceed the symbolic order. The novel thus articulates what Julia Kristeva would describe as the intrusion of the semiotic into the symbolic line of discourse.¹ McBride's stylistic ruptures render the protagonist's consciousness as an unstable assemblage of linguistic ruptures and disarticulated thought.

Trauma in *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* is not only a thematic concern but a structuring force that shapes the very possibility of language. Sentences appear broken and interrupted by sudden shifts in time or ruptured affective connections. These fragmentary utterances enact the protagonist's compromised capacity for narration, which Butler's theorisation of corporeal vulnerability helps to illuminate. As Butler argues, trauma interrupts recognisability, destabilising the frameworks through which subjects become intelligible (cfr. Butler, 2004). McBride's protagonist is caught in the violence of this unrecognisability: she lacks the linguistic and affective structures that might otherwise sustain her emergence as a coherent subject. Her syntax therefore registers the difficulty of speaking from within a world where recognition is foreclosed.

The novel's opening pages depict childhood as a field of disorientation, where bodily sensations and external pressures overwhelm the protagonist's ability to organise experience. The first sentence introduces the two main characters of the text: the narrating I and the 'you', who – we soon get to know – is her older brother. He is her silent listener and addressee throughout the narration: «For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mummy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut around. Wait and hour and day» (McBride, 2013, p. 3). The Girl's brother's illness, together with her mother's religious rigidity and the pervasive social atmosphere of

¹ According to Kristeva (1984, pp. 23-29), the semiotic and the symbolic designate two mutually dependent dimensions of linguistic activity. The semiotic marks the maternal, libidinal strata of language: the drives, affects, tones, rhythms, and imagistic eruptions through which the subject's unconscious energies surface. These pulsions are continuously constrained, not only by social norms but by the patriarchal principle of order that Kristeva names the symbolic. The symbolic, by contrast, corresponds to the rule-bound realm of grammar and syntax. Though the two modalities differ in orientation – one disruptive and bodily, the other regulative and structuring – they are not separable. Linguistic meaning arises only through their co-presence: the semiotic's dynamism and the symbolic's form together generate intelligible discourse.

guilt, create a terrain in which affective intensities accumulate without resolution. Ahmed's theory of orientation can help describe how the protagonist navigates this space. She is oriented toward relentless suffering and shame, and is pulled into directions that contour her body's relation to the world around her (cfr. Ahmed, 2006). Ahmed's model of affect as something that sticks to bodies is thus starkly visible in the protagonist's internalised guilt.

Sexual abuse marks a pivotal rupture in the novel's formation narrative, producing a catastrophic 'reorientation' of the protagonist's body. Her uncle assaults the protagonist when she is thirteen, thus initiating a spiral of self-destructive promiscuous behaviours in which shame, guilt, self-punishment, and obsessive-compulsive repetition become obsessively entangled. Sedgwick's analysis of shame and guilt in *Touching Feelings* is particularly enlightening on this point:

Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. [...] But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational, because shame is both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating. [...] The conventional way of distinguishing shame from guilt is that shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is, whereas guilt attaches to what one does. (Sedgwick, 2003, pp. 36-37)

Sedgwick's formulation underscores shame's paradoxical force, which can be seen in both novels. It dismantles the self at the very moment it compels a new mode of self-recognition, binding affect and subject formation in a volatile reciprocity. By distinguishing shame from guilt, Sedgwick also clarifies that shame operates as an affect that cuts to the ontology of the subject, sharpening and destabilising the sense of self up to its most unpredictable outcomes. Instead guilt is more focused on actions and manifests itself through contextual reiteration.

Thus, to paraphrase Sedgwick's definition, the sexual abuse within the domestic walls is the «disruptive moment» in the delicate phase of her «identity-constituting» process, and shame becomes constitutive of the Girl's own identity. The protagonist repeatedly returns to the sites of sexual abuse from unknown men, seeking new encounters that replicate the violence she has endured:

I'm here. Come for you. Dig his thumb in my sides. Fingers for claws. In my. I called you. I said. Where were you? For. What? This. He pull up my skirt. Put his hand between my legs. Well I'm here doing what you want. Put yourself on me then, in me. Pull all other things out. It's no interest to me and. Throw me. Smash that all up. Do whatever you want. *The answer to every single question*

is *Fuck*. Stitching up my eyes and sewing up my lips. Will you do that? Say. That. Do that. To me. Yes. Fuck. Yes. Help me. *Save me from all this*. (McBride, 2013, p. 107)²

The scenes of compulsive repetition are not simply masochistic but symptomatic of a subject whose experience is structured through shame itself. The body learns through the wounds received, and desire becomes indistinguishable from the memory of violence. This dynamic can be further examined through Jack Halberstam's theorisation of queer failure. The protagonist cannot and does not aspire to normative scripts of development, success, or adulthood; instead, her trajectory is marked by disorientation, refusal and final collapse (cfr. Halberstam, 2011). She experiences becoming not as upward movement but as a series of detours, that refuse the coherence expected of a traditional *Bildungsroman*. McBride's novel explicitly dismantles this legacy: the protagonist is never integrated into a social or narrative horizon in which maturation could take place. Her formation is instead a chronicle of being unmade, a sort of a queer anti-*Bildung*.

Language becomes the site where this process of unmaking is most visibly inscribed. The protagonist speaks in sentences that fracture under pressure into monosyllables and rhythmic idiosyncrasies. These linguistic patterns re-enact the violence inherent in the very process of reappropriation that women have historically had to endure in order to claim their voices and bodies back to themselves. In this way, they echo Hélène Cixous' words in *The Laugh of the Medusa*: «woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies» (Cixous, 1976, p. 875). Violence is thus embedded in women's reclaiming of their voices and bodies. Moreover, McBride's experimental language echoes Wittig's linguistic deconstruction of language and of the subject 'I' [*Je*] alongside the dismantling of the female, lesbian body and the dissolution of the subject into fragments. Wittig's sentences do not merely describe bodily experience, but literally enact linguistic rupture and re-assemblage, as she makes clear in the introduction to her text:

To recite one's own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the words of which the book is made up. The fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire. The desire to bring the real body violently to life in the words of the book (everything that is written exists), the desire to do violence by writing to the language which "I" [*Je*] can enter *only* by force. "I" [*Je*] as a generic feminine subject can *only* enter by force into language which is foreign to it, for all that is human (masculine) is foreign to it, the human not being feminine

² My emphasis.

grammatically speaking but he [il] or they [ils]. “I” [Je] conceals the sexual differences of the verbal persons while specifying them in verbal interchange. (Wittig, 1973, p. 6)

According to Wittig, linguistic violence is the only strategy for exploding the normative economy through which sex and gender reproduce themselves. Wittig’s subsequent reduction of the body to fragments and fluids enacts a total dismantling of the sexed body as a linguistic and ideological construct, by exposing the arbitrariness of the categories male/female and the heteropatriarchal order that sustains them (ivi, p. 28). In this light, Wittig’s anti-representational poetics, which refuses the continuity of the speaking subject, offers a compelling archive for reading McBride’s own textual and syntactic fractures, together with her refusal to stabilise the voice or the embodiment of her protagonist within normative bounds. Her syntax becomes a textual dismemberment: «A slap for every word of warn we get. Never. Ever. Touch. That. dirty. Thing. It’ll. Give. You. Warts. That. Is. Di. Sgust. Ing» (McBride, 2013, p. 9). The protagonist’s voice is an assemblage of wounds, a textual surface where pain and desire are linguistically inscribed.

The novel’s treatment of the protagonist’s brother further reveals the relational dimension of this linguistic fragmentation. His illness becomes a gravitational force that structures the protagonist’s emotional and corporeal life, producing moments of intense tenderness interspersed with eruptions of fury and despair:

Listen in to doctor chat. We done the best we could. There really wasn’t much. It’s all through his brain like the roots of trees. Sorry. Don’t say. That. He’s running out I’m afraid. I’m afraid he’s running down. You should take him home, enjoy him while you can. He’s not. He is. Can’t you operate again? We can’t. Shush. Something? Chemo then. We’ll have a go at that. (*Ibidem*)

The bond between the two siblings is represented through a syntax that oscillates between proximity and distance, mirroring the affective fluctuations that shape their relationship. These compressed utterances capture the tension between care and helplessness, suggesting a mode of intimacy that is visceral yet wordless. The protagonist’s relation to her brother is therefore readable as a form of corporeal communication, that overcomes stable linguistic structures and resonates through silence.

As the novel progresses, the protagonist’s encounters with sexuality become increasingly entangled with physical and psychological self-annihilation. The scenes of sexual compulsion are written in a syntax that oscillates between acceleration and collapse, reflecting the dissociative and hypervigi-

lant states common in survivors of abuse. The novel's most extreme episode of violence occurs on the day following her brother's death. Soon after the wake held in his honour, the protagonist is raped by a stranger. This scene is told in one of the text's most opaque passages. The assault is captured in a wake of broken syllables, dissimilar font sizes, repeated words and ruptured sounds, as if language itself was splintering under the force of the physical violation:

Hurts m. Jesus skreamtheway he. Doos the fuck the fuckink slatch in me.
Scream. Kracks. Done fuk me open he dine done on me. Done done Til he hye
happy fucky shoves upo comes ui. Kom shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking
cmin up you. Retch I. Retch I. Dinneradntea I choke mny. Up my. Thrtoat I. ...
mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. CleaR. He stopS up gETs. (Ivi, p. 149)

In this scene, the protagonist's voice is overwhelmed by the sheer violence of the perpetrator's presence. What emerges is the near-erasure of her subjectivity, leaving her reduced to a body acted upon rather than a speaking self. The linguistic opacity of the passage reflects a consciousness that cannot keep pace with physical suffering. McBride's stylistic choices thus underscore a fundamental rift between the Girl's bodily experience and her ability to articulate it, revealing a fractured relationship between embodiment and awareness that runs through the novel.

Ultimately, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* stages a formation narrative that is fundamentally structured through trauma's dismantling force. The protagonist's body and language remain unresolved, resisting closure and coherence until the final pages. Her final death (she drowns herself) is not presented as a narrative resolution but as an extension of the linguistic and corporeal erasure that has shaped her life. Through its fractured syntax, its visceral treatment of trauma, and its refusal of teleological development, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* reconfigures the *Bildungsroman* as a narrative of disarticulation. The body is not the site of emergence but the site of collapse. Yet this collapse is not devoid of meaning; it reveals the constraints of recognition, the violence that shapes gendered bodies, and even the linguistic limits of representing trauma. By compelling syntax to absorb and articulate the pressures of a traumatised body, McBride creates a narrative in which the materiality of language itself becomes the site where memory and pain are inscribed until the final word is written on the page.

3. *The Lesser Bohemians*: Erotic Vulnerability and A Poetics of the Fragment

If *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* articulates a linguistic and corporeal field that is fractured by trauma, *The Lesser Bohemians* constructs a different mode of embodiment, shaped by erotic apprenticeship and artistic training. The novel is about the intimate relationship between Eily, an Irish eighteen-year-old drama student newly arrived in London in the 1990s, and Stephen, a much older professional actor. While the novel retains McBride's signature stylistic fragmentation, its syntactic dynamics shift. Fragmentation becomes a mode of proximity rather than a symptom of psychic collapse, even though traumatic past abuse somehow haunts in the narrative (cfr. Antosa, 2018). The novel therefore rewrites the narrative of coming-of-age traditionally oriented toward maturity and integration, into a queer and corporealised *Bildungsroman* in which past and present converge.

From the outset, *The Lesser Bohemians* positions Eily within a space of apprenticeship that is at once artistic and physical. The text repeatedly foregrounds the techniques and rituals of actor training, which signals how the body is disciplined into a new expressive vocabulary. As Ruth Gilligan (2017) has emphasised, «Discussions of learning certain roles and developing scripts, of embodying certain characters and motivations, all invite deeper considerations on the performative nature of the self (and, indeed of love)». Acting becomes a structural force that shapes the novel's syntax, introducing rhythms of rehearsal and improvisation into the prose. Eily's formation thus unfolds through the body's responsiveness to instruction. In so doing, she produces a narrative that echoes what Richard Schechner (2013, p. 29) describes as «restored behaviour», that is, rehearsing a number of acts until they become both embodied and stable within the performance. Readers are thus invited into performing an interpretative mode that resembles watching an actor rehearse.

As the novel progresses, Eily learns to inhabit the collective space of the rehearsal room. This effect is intensified through scenes of group improvisation and duet work. Eily's narrative voice is punctuated by fragmented and sometimes repetitive lines, thus mirroring the physicality of these exercises. Her syntax does not simply describe the process of learning but rather seems to perform it. In an interview for the BBC program *Woman's Hour*, McBride (2016) has claimed that she adopts language in ways that try «to capture the parts of life that are destroyed by conventional language [and] to recapture the singularity of a person's experience». The writer has also explained that

her writing is deeply influenced by method acting techniques. She approaches her characters by analysing their physical and psychological experiences and then developing a language capable of conveying both dimensions at once. She has defined the result as a form of preconscious stream of thought (cfr. also Thomas-Corr, 2016; Gilligan, 2017).

Eily's relationship with Stephen transforms this physical apprenticeship into an anti-linear erotic discovery. She first encounters Stephen in a pub, and she does not that he is a relatively known theatre actor in London. Afterwards, they go to his place to have sex, but when she begins to undress, she begins to worry and all her fears come out:

But Oh my God, I just Oh God, exhale. *Ah now Ireland too much shame.* And he covers as much of me as I'll let. You know, we don't have to if you don't want, right? I do want I really do it's just Alright then, he says Let me have a think. So the fly and Nick Cave get their wicked way as he ponders my state, and I cringe. (McBride, 2016, p. 29)³

She connects her lack of sexual knowledge and her shame about sexuality to her Catholic background, and feels scared. Stephen acknowledges her feelings and attempts to talk to her through, but their first intercourse seems to be traumatic for her (ivi, pp. 33-34). On the face of it, it resurfaces the trauma of the sexual abuse Eily suffered years before by a male friend of her mother who had since been in denial.

Notwithstanding such a difficult beginning, albeit unsteadily, Eily starts to experience the liberating force of sexuality. So, even if her first sexual experience with Stephen is not great, she gradually learns to know herself through another body. Desire itself for her becomes a site of learning. The novel's most intense scenes render intimacy through a syntax that articulates desire as an embodied force that exceeds conceptualisation. Love, sex and intimacy are explored and experienced in different ways, with their powerful liberating potential, as exemplified in the following passage:

Belt first. Next his fly. Both now falling back into time where all the past waits outside. It doesn't matter to me, I say. Then it doesn't matter tonight, he says, now take off your clothes and show me yourself, I want to remember every freckle when you're gone. And I. And bra. Kneels down to my breasts. I. Watch his mouth there. Teeth making twitch running right up to my scalp. How he knows me – and all of me – so much. Kiss. Touch. Already damp his. Slip down where he knelt to. Lick. (Ivi, p. 124)

³ My emphasis.

This broken linguistic pattern is stylistically reminiscent of *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* but carries a different affective valence: fragmentation arises not from dissociation but from the overwhelming immediacy of erotic sensation. However, sexual encounters are inseparable from vulnerability, and it is here that Butler's conceptualisation of relational dependency becomes crucial. For Butler (2004), becoming a subject requires exposure to others, a willingness to be undone and reconstituted through relation. McBride stages this necessary process of undoing through the syntax. Thus, the dissolution of grammatical cohesion mimics the dissolution of psychic boundaries in states of desire. Eily's voice often spills into Stephen's, creating moments of almost choral fusion («He breathes me. I breathe through him»); (McBride, 2016, p. 134), before contracting again into the self-conscious stutter of a young woman unsure of her own desirability. The oscillation between these syntactic modes reflects an unstable experience of recognition, as Eily feels at the same time seen and unmade in Stephen's gaze.

Yet the novel does not romanticise this aspect or turn it into a heteronormative romantic cliché. Trauma surfaces in different ways in the narrative, especially because both characters have suffered traumatic abuse in their childhood. According to G.A. Smyth (2019, p. 165), «[...] in *The Lesser Bohemians*, [the protagonists stand] as the latest link in a chain of abuse emerging from an unknowable past, [and] must negotiate an array of negative emotions linked to this inheritance». From this viewpoint, McBride's protagonist speaks through a fractured, eruptive idiom that mirrors the discontinuities of traumatic memory itself, where experience resists linear narration. The fragmented style becomes a formal corollary of survival, as it registers the difficulty of articulating pain while opening a space in which the self can be tentatively reassembled through language.

The narrative is suddenly interrupted by a long monologue by Stephen, who confesses his mysterious past marked by psychological and physical abuse, drugs as well as self-harming behaviour. His section marks an abrupt stylistic change from a fragmented to a more fluent prose. This shift is not merely stylistic but structural: it forces Eily (and the reader) to confront another mode of narrative embodiment, where trauma speaks not through fragmentation but through relentless, unbroken narration. Stephen tells his own story of incestuous abuse as a young boy from his own mother and then continues to talk about his failed marriage and his complicated relationship with his ex-wife and daughter. His unveiling of his own past complicates the relational dynamic between the two lovers. His monologue can be read as a moment of affective transmission that reconfigures Eily's (and the reader's)

understanding of intimacy and agency. It is also the moment where the novel seems to bend toward the conventional *Bildungsroman*, by offering an uninterrupted narrative of confession and reflection.

The contrast between Stephen's narrative continuity and Eily's recurring fragmentation highlights the novel's complex approach to the *Bildungsroman*. Moretti's claim that the form historically relies on a harmonious synthesis between individual development and social integration (cfr. Moretti, 1987) is explicitly unsettled here. Eily's trajectory does not involve an entry into a coherent social world but proceeds in a precarious way. She does not 'grow up' into maturity and stability, but moves laterally, sometimes falteringly. In this way, she seems to follow what Halberstam (2011) calls a trajectory of queer failure, in which deviation from normative temporalities becomes a generative mode of becoming. From this perspective, Eily's 'failures' are not obstacles to her formation but constitutive elements of a queer apprenticeship that invites her to inhabit alternative orientations and desires.

The novel's sexual scenes constitute the core of the narrative. In her erotic apprenticeship, Eily learns to recognise the limits of her own desire, by differentiating between pleasure and obliteration, and negotiating her emotional responses to Stephen's own fragility. The sex scenes oscillate between tenderness and devastation, while the fractured syntax of the text captures the simultaneity of desire and fear, intimacy and self-protection. Monique Wittig's dismantling of the body in *The Lesbian Body* provides an additional conceptual lens through which to read the novel's erotic dynamics. Wittig's project involves a radical unmaking of the sexed body, exposing the ideological structures that produce gendered boundaries. In *The Lesser Bohemians*, McBride's syntax likewise destabilises the coherence of the bodily self through permeation. Eily's repeated sense of losing herself as for examples in sentences like: «I fall into. Through. Him» (McBride, 2016, p. 105), enacts a Wittigian dissolution of the subject, a mode of queer relationality that refuses rigid boundaries and embraces the transformative risks of erotic encounter.

In *The Lesser Bohemians* McBride devotes substantial space to the quiet intimacies of the lovers' shared days and nights in Stephen's room which, far from functioning as a site of confinement, becomes a dynamic emotional landscape. Within its walls, the narrative unfolds a wide register of contrasting feelings: playfulness, grief, erotic charge, and, at times, a stark awareness of fragility and exposure. Yet the novel also insists that sexual contact is neither uniformly affirming nor free from danger. At a moment when Eily attempts to distance herself from Stephen, she becomes involved in a fleeting encounter with a man she meets in a pub. What follows is an episode of sexual violence that imprints itself on her psyche and body alike:

Get off that. Why are you being such a fucking bitch? Oh poor you and your soft little dick. Hey, and I am pushed against the wall I can show you a hard dick if that's what you want. Get off me, I push back. No, him kissing at my neck and Clink through the byre floor, right through my head. Shift spit ert and push from and Get the fuck off! Don't you fucking claw me, and cigarette Jesus right on my arm. You're burning you're fucking burning me! Stop it or I'll scream and. He steps away I wasn't doing anything. You burned me. You fucking burned me! (Ivi, p. 255)

The raw physicality of this scene is reminiscent of the visceral violence that permeates the work of Sarah Kane, whose dramaturgy is an important intertext for McBride. Kane's plays such as *Blasted* (1995), *Phaedra's Love* (1996), and *Cleansed* (1998) are marked by their unflinching engagement with sexual brutality and even death. Her language channels female anger and articulates the consequences of trauma without the protection of narrative distance or symbolic mediation. Eily's assault operates within this intertextual lineage: the burn on her arm becomes a lasting, visible trace of the gendered asymmetries that shape sexual violence. It also becomes a reminder of how such encounters inscribe themselves on the body long after the moment has passed.

The novel's final chapters integrate these dynamics into a fragile but meaningful trajectory of becoming. Eily and Stephen do not achieve a stable relationship; instead, they negotiate a shifting terrain of vulnerability and trust. The syntax begins to lengthen, the breath-spaces become less jagged, and the narrative voice acquires tentative coherence. Yet McBride once again resists a teleological closure to her story. Eily's formation remains open-ended, grounded in the body's ongoing encounters with others, in the rehearsals and revisions that mark both acting and intimacy. In a narrative world defined by multiple layers of breakdown at a personal, familial, and even national level, the erotic encounters between Eily and Stephen function as moments of release for both characters. However, they cannot be conceived as a final step in their relational journey. Their sexual acts acquire their full significance only when their vulnerability is laid bare, thus implying that intimacy becomes meaningful precisely at the point where other structures have failed. On this point Smyth (2019, p. 176) has observed that «In a discourse characterised by failure [...] the redemption discovered by Eily and Stephen through sex is liberating; for the performance of this particular sexual act only truly comes into focus when the full extent of the narrator-actor's vulnerability is apparent». While I agree that the characters' «redemption» emerges only when they confront their own vulnerability, in my view the novel's ending is not a linear passage into healing or a liberation of past traumas. Rather, it

marks a moment in which both characters painfully acknowledge and lay bare their vulnerability and learn to inhabit it, by accepting themselves as transient, contingent human beings.

In this way, *The Lesser Bohemians* develops a relational syntax that contrasts with the traumatic fragmentation of *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*. Where the earlier novel enacts the body's disintegration through a rupture which dramatically anticipates the Girl's death, the later novel enacts the painful body's emergence through relation. The syntax becomes an embodied space in which vulnerability articulates the contours of becoming until the end. One reviewer point out that

Despite the euphoric ending, the debris and detritus of these stories will, or so it feels, track the lives of those who will continue to struggle against them. Like all novels with a happy ending, *The Lesser Bohemians* leaves you asking whether the finale is any match for the sheer magnitude of what has gone before. (cfr. Rose, 2016b)

Reimagined through queer and feminist frameworks, this postmodern *Bildungsroman* is transformed into a narrative of exposure. Ultimately, it is an apprenticeship of the senses in which bodies learn not to resolve but to remain in motion in an open-ended closure.

4. *From Rupture to Relation: A Comparative Reading*

Placed in dialogue, *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* and *The Lesser Bohemians* reveal a literary trajectory that maps the evolution of syntax from a mode of traumatic rupture to a mode of relational emergence. While the two novels share a commitment to experimenting with linguistic form, they dramatise two distinct configurations of desiring bodies. The first constructs the body as a site of fragmentation and collapse, where language is continually pulled apart by the pressures of unassimilated trauma. The second envisions the body as a porous, relational medium through which intimacy, vulnerability, and artistic apprenticeship enact new modalities of being. What emerges is a comparative landscape in which syntax becomes the principal vehicle for articulating a spectrum of embodied states, ranging from self-annihilation to relational attunement. This section argues that McBride's two novels collectively rewrite the *Bildungsroman* through queer and feminist frameworks, transforming a genre historically centred on social integration (cfr. Moretti, 1987) into a space of corporeal exposure and anti-teleological transformation.

At the heart of this comparison is the differing nature of linguistic fragmentation in the two texts. In *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, fragmentation functions as an index of traumatic collapse. The protagonist's syntax fractures under the weight of affective intensities that cannot be contained within normative linguistic structures. Her sentences often appear as linguistic debris while registering a subjectivity that is repeatedly torn apart by memories of abuse, shame, and domestic violence. Trauma shapes the conditions under which language can form. This aligns with Kristeva's theorisation of the semiotic as a pre-symbolic force that erupts into discourse, or the symbolic, further destabilising its structure and exposing the tensions between bodily drives and linguistic order (cfr. Kristeva, 1984). In *A Girl*, the semiotic erupts violently, by creating a syntax punctured by various forms of linguistic disturbance that mimic the protagonist's embodied experience of trauma.

By contrast, fragmentation in *The Lesser Bohemians* is a mode of proximity rather than collapse. Here, syntax becomes a vehicle for expressing relational intensities. It expands and contracts in response to erotic and affective resonance, together with the uncertainties of intimacy. Moments of fragmented speech signal overwhelming desire and the awkwardness of erotic apprenticeship. Thus, while fragmentation remains a feature of McBride's style, its affective weight shifts dramatically across the two novels, ranging from the traumatic disorientation of *A Girl* to the sensuous, improvisatory dynamics of *The Lesser Bohemians*.

This shift in syntactic function reflects a deeper transformation in how each novel conceptualises the process of growing and becoming for the two protagonists. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* presents a narrative of unformation, in which the protagonist's identity is continually destroyed rather than developed. If the classic *Bildungsroman* enacts a reconciliation between individual aspiration and social expectation, McBride's protagonist remains radically unreconciled, trapped within a cycle of shame, abuse, and self-annihilation. Eventually, she never enters the social order nor resolves the contradictions that structure her world. This dynamic resonates strongly with Halberstam's theorisation of queer failure, which identifies alternative modes of temporal and affective orientation that do not align with normative success narratives (cfr. Halberstam, 2011). The protagonist's erratic and anti-linear movements embody queer temporalities in which forward motion is neither possible nor desired. Her failure to grow up and to become part of society stands for a queer refusal of the demands of heteronormative development.

In *The Lesser Bohemians*, the structure of becoming is equally queer and non-linear, but it unfolds through relation rather than through solitary collapse. Eily's trajectory is shaped by the shifting dynamics of intimacy and

artistic training. Her development is not an ascent into mastery but an apprenticeship in exposure. The drama school becomes the institutional site where this apprenticeship takes shape, as her body is trained to open to new forms of expression. Eily becomes herself through her proximity to others, and especially Stephen. Her *Bildung* thus emerges not as self-possession but as relational attunement, a mode of queer becoming that privileges vulnerability over autonomy. The erotic encounter between Eily and Stephen is central to this relational becoming, and it marks one of the most striking divergences between the two novels. In *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, sexuality is inseparable from violence, and desire is marked by shame and self-erasure. The protagonist seeks encounters that replicate her trauma, producing a syntax that collapses under the affective weight of these repetitions. The erotic scenes in *The Lesser Bohemians* are involving and intense. Eily discovers her own desire while testing the limits of her vulnerability as well as the demands of recognising another person's pain. These scenes are written in a syntax that mirrors the unpredictability and tenderness of erotic communication. Fragmentation expresses the awkwardness of intimacy rather than the violence of trauma.

Stephen's monologue forms a crucial comparative hinge between the two novels. In *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, trauma is linguistically expressed through fragmentation; in *The Lesser Bohemians*, it is expressed through narrative continuity, suggesting that trauma can also produce a compulsive fluency. The uninterrupted narrative flow of Stephen's confession, with its long sentences and its thematic coherence, contrasts with Eily's fragmented voice, and seems to convey the need to impose a narrative order over a chaotic memory. This stylistic divergence reveals a relational pedagogical tension, as Eily must learn to hold another person's trauma without losing herself in it. Butler's concept of relational vulnerability helps illuminate this dynamic: both characters expose themselves to being undone by the other, and their narratives mark the traces of this exposure. In this way, the monologue is not a stylistic anomaly but a structural challenge that the novel stages as part of Eily's formation.

As discussed throughout this article, Wittig's project of dismantling the sexed body in *The Lesbian Body* offers another important comparative frame. In *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing*, this occurs through literal and linguistic violence. The protagonist's corporeal boundaries dissolve under the weight of trauma, and her voice fractures accordingly. In *The Lesser Bohemians*, dissolution occurs through intimacy and the lovers' bodies merge into one another. Eily's sense of losing herself within Stephen enacts a Wittigian process of undoing that exposes the ideological construction of the unified subject. Yet

where Wittig's dismantling is explicitly political and conceptual, McBride's is affective and emerges from the body's encounter with another body, from the porousness of desire rather than from the violence of oppression. Both novels therefore engage in processes of bodily scattering, but the emotional and epistemological stakes differ.

Finally, both novels reconfigure the *Bildungsroman*, but in contrasting ways. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* dismantles the genre from within, replacing the progressive trajectory of formation with a narrative of disintegration. The protagonist's life culminates in a suicide. *The Lesser Bohemians* is equally resistant to a linear development, however it stages a relational and corporeal formation grounded in queer fragility. Eily's becoming is not progressive but transformative. It unfolds through tentative articulations, thus echoing the uncertain temporality of queer life. Taken together, both novels chart a genealogy of formation that departs from Moretti's model of harmonious synthesis and embraces instead the complexities of language, affects and embodiment.

To conclude, this comparative analysis reveals that McBride's early fiction deploys embodied syntax to articulate radically different forms of becoming. *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* writes the body as wound, constructing a syntax that collapses under trauma's pressure. *The Lesser Bohemians* writes the body as encounter, shaping a relational syntax that emerges through intimacy, vulnerability, and artistic apprenticeship. Across both novels, McBride reimagines the possibilities of the *Bildungsroman* by showing how language can carry the imprint of bodily experience and how the body can remake linguistic form in turn. What emerges, then, is a portrait of McBride as a writer who explores vulnerability not as a deficit but as a generative force. Her protagonists gain sensitivity to the fluctuating intensities that shape lived experience. Their *Bildung* is queer, precarious, and sensorial rather than social or psychological. In reimagining the *Bildungsroman* through these corporeal and affective registers, McBride contributes a powerful and innovative voice to contemporary feminist and queer writing. Her fiction demonstrates that the body is not merely represented in language but actively produces it, and that language, when pushed to its limits, can become a site where suffering, desire, and becoming inscribe their deepest marks.

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