

CARLY ROBINSON completed her BA in European Philosophy and Literature, with Women's Studies and her MA in Women's Studies at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. She is a first year PhD student in the department of Arts & Humanities at Birkbeck. Her thesis is an interdisciplinary exploration of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of becoming with a view to deploying it as a model in the service of a progressive feminist politics within contemporary fiction.

carly_robinson@hotmail.co.uk

Article

The Becoming of Contemporaneity through Experimental Fiction

Carly Robinson



THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL IS A VAGUE AND WIDE REACHING CONCEPT, MUCH DEBATED AND DEFINED. Ideas about contemporaneity lean towards notions of the Now opposed to a specific point or period in time as a categorised temporal frame of reference.¹ Rather than situating the contemporary as a defined period of linear time supplanting the postmodern, this essay seeks to address the experimental form of the contemporary novel as a mode of temporal-reflexive being in the world, grounded in subjective self-awareness as a bonded relationship between author and reader. I will be looking specifically at a feminist form of experimental narrative as a development of modernism which engages the contemporary in a reflexive in-process perpetual becoming. Moving on from the modernist desire for the new, this form of experimental fiction uses the modernist techniques of stream of consciousness style writing and alternative presentations of the development of time combined with an estrangement of language to offer a new view of the contemporary novel. As Peter Osborne asserts in his distinction between the modern and the contemporary, the contemporary has been elevated above categorisations of time (modernism, avant-garde, postmodern et cetera) to a multifaceted ideological concept encompassing 'complex temporal-existential, social and political meanings' with notions of the historical present as a multiplicity of temporal spaces.² The contemporary then,

becomes a self-referential strategy for how we think about and act out our presence in the world and through lived time.

Contrary to Graham Swift's assertion that 'there's no such thing as the contemporary novel' - where he contends the novel can never be a true representation of the Now due to the necessary time lag incumbent upon the process of production and public circulation - 2016 was the year that proved it is not only possible but a realised actuality for a novel to be written and published in the same year.³ Responding in fiction to the seismic political and cultural shifts in a chaotic and confusing post-referendum Brexit-bound divided Britain, Ali Smith's *Autumn* is an immediate reflexive response in literature to the Now unfolding, with time and our subjective experience of it, as its central theme.

If a literary text being of, and in response to, the Now is the only criteria of the contemporary novel, seemingly any established author with an obliging publisher could take up the mantle of Smith's fast paced writing and publishing turnaround to produce similar works in response to the present happenings. If the contemporary novel can only be a response to twenty-first-century life, what place does this leave for new historical fiction? Must the genre of historical fiction be counted outside of the contemporary? In a recent discussion at the Cambridge Literary Festival about the relevance of historical fiction, Sarah Perry vehemently argued against this idea and explained that historical fiction has less to do with the past and more to do with the Now:

I really wanted to write a version of the 19th century that, if you blinked, looked a little like ours. I wanted to write a version of the Victorian age that wasn't a theme park of peasoupers and street urchins. The more I looked, the more I found that not a great deal has changed – an ineffectual parliament, the power of big business and the insecurity around housing. And contemporary Conservatism going back to this idea that morality and poverty are in some way linked.⁴

New historical fiction then is not necessarily exempt from the category of the contemporary novel on the basis of a setting outside the immediate present. In its alternative retellings of historical events; its re-positioning of temporalities; often focussing on the microcosm or marginalised peoples, historical fiction allows us to rethink the established historical accounts of these events; re-evaluate the position of privilege from which they have been constructed; and consider the myriad of possible alternatives of affect based on the personal and subjective influences of the unwritten characters which potentially still reverberate through our notions of lived and abstract time into our contemporary mind-set.⁵

In this paper, I argue that the contemporary novel is less about the time it defines and more about the future it moves towards, the becomings it enacts and enables for author and reader alike, and the spaces it creates for further experimental developments within fiction. I will return later to the concept of becoming to clarify its meaning and development within this paper.

In consideration of the contemporary and our participation within the cultural, social and political changes of the day, a self-reflexive mode of thought is necessary to assess the epistemological response to a constant unfolding of the contemporary moment. Turning to literature as a mode of cultural production in which the contemporary is expressed as an author responding to current events and issues which in turn generates a response or reaction from the reading collective, it enables a heightened awareness of

being in and of the world at the present moment which is capable of permeating into wider thought mapping processes yet at the same time, is at one remove from the total immersion in that specific temporality. Giorgio Agamben's conception of contemporariness highlights the dualism involved in this process:

Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it. More precisely, it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. Those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it.⁶

Using the Deleuzo-Guattarian theory of becoming as my theoretical framework, I would like to suggest the direction of the contemporary novel is ultimately attuned to a more progressive and challenging form, combining self-reflexive lines of questioning and accessible philosophical ideas bound up in readily available and easily readable fiction. My approach is to combine a reading of Deleuzian theory through the novels of Eimear McBride with a view to assessing their value as ground-breaking accessible experimental fiction. I will turn first to the issue of accessibility in the sense of a wide general readership outside of academic study and the increasingly prevalent value placed upon literary prize culture as an indicator of how McBride's novels have been received as texts of contemporary merit. I will then turn to the process of writing, deploying my theoretical underpinning of Deleuzian becoming to forge a link between the philosophical theory and the literary techniques in practise in McBride's novels as a site of contemporaneity. I will contextualise the development of the contemporary novel by situating McBride's work as experimental and using close textual analysis to show how her specific literary techniques can be traced back to her modernist predecessors.

The Contemporary, Modernism and Literary Prize Culture

A Girl is a Half Formed Thing is a hybrid novel of challenging and experimental fiction combining fragmentary prose, poetic in its cadences, with simple albeit liminal language and an engaging yet disturbing plot. Told from an altogether original point of view, that of the pre-language, pre-formed narrator, and starkly contrasting the harsh realism and difficult themes of its plotlines, *Girl* is a novel that crosses boundaries of categorisation and pushes the expectations of the reader. Being awarded the Goldsmiths prize in 2013, an accolade for original and daring work, is understandable and expected for a novel of this calibre but the breakthrough McBride has made is with the Baileys prize; one of its key criterion being accessibility.⁷ An experimental novel selling outside of the literary fiction genre and into the general fiction arena is perhaps a more telling sign of the contemporaneity of our literary times as McBride attests:

I think the publishing industry is perpetuating this myth that readers like a very passive experience, that all they want is a beach novel. I don't think that's true, and I think this book doing as well as it has is absolute proof of that. There are serious readers who want to be challenged, who want to be offered something else, who don't mind being asked to work a little bit to get there.⁸

Seemingly the awarding of the 2014 Baileys prize does demonstrate a willingness to engage with demanding fiction. The following year the prize went to Ali Smith for her dual-narrative and dual-temporal novel *How to be Both* which explores the nature of time and gender through two interconnected yet distinct stories. The impact of the narrative is particular to whichever version the reader picks up as the production of the book was split into two, with half the copies starting with the present-day character struggling with the death of her mother, and the other half beginning with a spirit of a deceased Renaissance artist. The book can be read in either order and the choice is left to the reader with both versions offered as alternative narratives to just one story. The awarding of the Baileys Prize to these alternative forms of narrative then does seem to denote a shift of demand towards more sophisticated forms of literary production.

While a full appraisal of the academic debates surrounding the classification of literary fiction is not appropriate for the scope of this paper, I do need to set out the definitions and categorisations I am adhering to. In using terms such as literary fiction, experimental fiction and accessibility, I am framing my argument within the boundaries of existing literary and academic theory and accepting these frameworks as an established medium of literary epistemology. However, the very nature of the texts I am analysing and the argument I propose necessarily push back and question these categorisations requiring a process of rethinking and possible adjustment of boundaries. Literary fiction then is generally regarded as writing of high calibre which does not fall into specific genre or popular fiction categories. Where we can classify genre fiction as those novels which fall under categories of crime, romance, science fiction, thriller or fantasy the definition of popular fiction is more precarious. Generally accepted as mass produced, 'light' or easy to read and available in outlets other than bookshops such as supermarkets, popular fiction can again be defined by negation, that which is not 'quality' literature. E. L. James' *Fifty Shades* series and Dan Brown's Robert Langdon novels are cases in point – mass produced and widely consumed but cliché laden and poorly written. Geir Farnes argues that generally popular fiction often portrays human successes and offers the reader escapism at the cost of realist truth but the recent popularity of plot driven psychological thrillers such as *Gone Girl*, *Girl on a Train*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* seemingly contradict this view and suggest that the page turning plot twists keep readers engaged as they try to work out the final dénouement.⁹ Claire Squires, responding to Steven Connor's definition of literary fiction based on the negation of what it is not, asserts that:

Any subject, or plot line, could potentially pertain to a literary novel. It could include elements of more closely defined genre fiction (in the 1990s, for example, there was a vogue for literary thrillers), but formal undefinability is its prevailing characteristic. Because of the formal undefinability of literary fiction – a non-generic genre – genre becomes a dynamic and mutable property of its marketing, in which fashions shift and shape literary taste, and novels (and indeed works of non-fiction) which are situated at the borders of literary and other genres offer some of the most revealing sites of negotiation to the analyst.¹⁰

Literary fiction then is a transmutable genre placed above all others with shifting paradigms of categorisation heavily informed by the value conferred and reinforced by the economic drive of literary prize culture. As James F.

English attests in his book *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* that the impact of literary prize culture on cultural production has grown exponentially from the ‘high art’ beginnings of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1901 to the creation of celebrity status for award winners, literary awards as a site of popular interest to the crossover of highly regarded academic texts into the wider readership of the popular market.¹¹ The cultural production of literary value in the contemporary mind set of popular culture is vast: the rise of literary festivals such as Hay, Cheltenham, York and Cambridge where prize winning authors showcase their latest works, the proliferation of book clubs through television and media programmes such as Oprah, Richard and Judy, the Radio Two and Radio Four book clubs and the subsequent inclusion of prize winning texts into the curriculum of academic institutions, is evidence of the depth and breadth of influence that literary prize culture has imbued in the sociology of literature.

Returning to definitions, I am classifying *Girl* as experimental fiction because it is a text which deviates from standard realist narratives of representation through the use of an alternative pre-consciousness point of view and the use of liminal language. As David Lodge asserts, ‘An experimental novel is one that ostentatiously deviates from the received ways of representing reality – either in narrative organization or in style, or in both – to heighten or change our perception of that reality’.¹² Experimental fiction then is work of considerable skill which sets a challenge before the reader and requires an active response in thought and/or reading practice to the narrative style and content. It is moreover this drive in the contemporary author to formulate a response to the perpetuation of consistent literary trends when something new and alternative is required to reflect the contemporary moment in the face of social, political and economic change, as Deborah Parsons explains of the modernist authors:

In the early 1900s, however, it seemed to many young writers, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson among them, that the best-selling novels of the day had become stuck within fixed and limiting rules for the representation of character and reality. For a generation born into the last decades of the Victorian era, yet whose maturity coincided with technological innovation, scientific revolution and the destructive rupture of world war, the sense of living in a new age was acute, and what had become the conventional forms of fiction seemed inappropriate, even hostile, to the depiction of their contemporary moment.¹³

The accessibility value of the Baileys Prize and the subsequent wide readership of McBride’s *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* evidently shows that experimental fiction is not just the territory of the literary elite. Although it took her only six months to write, McBride struggled for nine years to find a publisher as rejections came from agents and publishers who saw the book as too much of a risk. In her interview with Kira Cochrane, McBride explains that while she knew publication would be difficult her narrative style was not without precedent; James Joyce being a significant influence on her narrative style.¹⁴ So when a small independent publisher saw the promise of her book and took a risk, critical acclaim and award status soon followed. The chair of the 2014 Baileys Prize, Helen Fraser, explains why it was chosen, describing the novel as ‘an amazing and ambitious first novel that impressed the judges with its inventiveness and energy. This is an extraordinary new voice – this novel will move and astonish the reader’.¹⁵ A combination of the risk taken by an independent publisher and the specific mix of judges on the literary award

panel have enabled McBride's experimental fiction to be propelled into the general reading public by virtue of the value laden Baileys prize sticker on the cover. It is this emblem of accreditation and the socially constructed value placed on literary awards by the reading public which are the biggest factors in commercial success for contemporary fiction, as James F. English explains, 'The rise of prizes over the past century, and especially their feverish proliferation in recent decades, is widely seen as one of the more glaring symptoms of a consumer society run rampant, a society that can conceive of artistic achievement only in terms of stardom and success'.¹⁶ Once nominated for and/or awarded one of the plethora of literary prizes, books such as McBride's *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* are held up by the big chain booksellers as the must-read promotion for rapid sales. Edward St Aubyn's satirical reflection on literary prize culture in his novel *Lost for Words* is more of a commentary on the personal agendas behind the judge's choices, highlighting the conflict of personal preference and private motivations in the decision process of selecting a winner. While St Aubyn's novel is a humorous exaggeration, its message is a valid one – that the literature invested with merit and legitimisation based on the conferring of an award lends that work a status of value over all others. It is then absorbed into the literary canon as a work of artistic merit with its award-winning status.

McBride has openly admitted she was influenced by reading *Ulysses* and it is easy to perceive the early modernistic and Joycean stream of consciousness inflections in McBride's work together with echoes of Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett and early feminist experimental fiction. The category of the modernist novel, referring to the early twentieth century movement of writers and artists who broke with traditional Victorian modes of realist representation to produce inherently self-reflexive, abstract and innovative forms of literature, is particularly pertinent to an analysis of McBride's work as a new form of emergent contemporary writing. McBride asserts that modernism did not end with Joyce and Beckett because the need to write anew has not dissipated and is a venture worthy of the creative magnitude it demands:

I really don't think they have tied everything up neatly. I'm not interested in irony and I'm not interested in clever. I'm interested in trying to dig out parts of human life that cannot be expressed in a straightforward way, that don't fit neatly into the vocabulary and grammar that are available. To do that you have to make language do something else. I didn't really know how to do it, I just tried and that's what happened.¹⁷

It is that precise understanding and excavation of the inner workings of the human psyche in its specific temporal grounding together with the artistic moulding of new language that constitutes McBride's contemporaneity.

The literary identity of the modernist author was not just that of a writer of fiction but an innovator, a cultural and literary critic and an artist breaking boundaries of conventional literary paradigms through the exploration of human subjective experience implicitly bound up in alternative linguistic strategies such as the stream of consciousness narrative and individualistic representations of the experience of time. As Deborah Parsons suggests, 'Rather than espousing any single and homogenous theory of the novel, Joyce, Woolf and Richardson were committed to a constant exploration and renegotiation of modern fiction's limits and possibilities'.¹⁸ Alongside this development of the modernist novel, I would like to link McBride's work to

the feminist disruption of linguistic codes of experimental fiction embedded in a Deleuzian process of becoming. Experimental fiction then employs the use of poetic and fractured language in the deconstruction of the patriarchal symbolic order of culturally constructed social, political, economic and linguistic codes. In the introduction to their book *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* Ellen G Friedman and Miriam Fuchs map the trajectory of experimental fiction as a specifically feminine project:

In addition to Woolf, Richardson, and Stein, there has been a steady and strong tradition of women experimentalists. Subverting closure, logic, and fixed, authoritarian points of view, they undermine patriarchal forms and help fulfil the prophecy of a truly feminine discourse, one practiced by women. Their innovations stretch from the exploded syntax of Gertrude Stein to the anarchistic narrative colleges of Kathy Acker; they include Dorothy Richardson's stream of consciousness, Djuna Barnes flat, dehumanized characterization, and Anaïs Nin's blurring of genres among numerous other innovators and innovations.¹⁹

Friedman and Fuchs link the practices and techniques employed by these experimental authors to the French feminist theories of Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine* and Julia Kristeva's Semiotic as feminine processes of writing, which disrupt and destabilise the normative frameworks of literary production and cultural codes of subjectivity based on an inherent patriarchal bias. *Écriture féminine* is a form of female writing which advocates expressing the rhythms and flows of the female body and sexuality in non-linear poetic language. Kristeva's concept of the Semiotic refers to the unconscious, pre-Oedipal phase of subjectivity where the identity of the child is bound up with that of the mother in a space where language is not determined by the sign/signifier binary and time is cyclical and fluid.²⁰

It is on this trajectory that I am locating McBride as an innovator who expresses the semiotic in her transformation of language from words we understand into a jumbled and fragmented sequence which we do not, forcing the reader to double take and re-assess both the language we are immersed in and the way we use it, whilst at the same time allowing us to comprehend the events of the narrative when we release our expectations of how language should be used.

A Deleuzian Framework

I am now going to explore some of the Deleuzian concepts with reference to how this philosophical framework is useful for thinking about the contemporary in McBride's work. The concept of becoming is tied in with several other Deleuzian ideas and themes which are prevalent throughout his entire oeuvre including becoming-woman, molar and molecular politics, collective assemblages, lines of flight, rhizomes and the multiplicity. These ideas all interact and inform one another in the entirety of Deleuze's philosophy and literary criticism so it is necessary to briefly introduce them here whilst elucidating how these concepts can be applied to McBride's texts.

In their jointly authored book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari assert the concept of becoming as a way of life as a perpetual striving, not to reach a certain end, but to continually *be* in process:

There is a becoming-woman, a becoming-child, that do not resemble the woman or the child as clearly distinct molar entities (although it is

possible – only possible – for the woman or child to occupy privileged positions in relation to these becomings) What we term a molar entity is, for example, the woman as defined by her form, endowed with organs and functions and assigned as a subject. Becoming-woman is not imitating this entity or even transforming oneself into it. [...] these indissociable aspects of becoming-woman must first be understood as a function of something else: not imitating or assuming the female form, but emitting particles that enter the relation of movement and rest, or the zone of proximity, of a microfemininity, in other words, that produce is us a molecular woman, create the molecular woman.²¹

According to Deleuze and Guattari the significance of becoming is in the potential it creates by enabling us to move through and beyond the ordinary tracts of our prescribed movements and organised structure of the paradigmatic quotidian, offering multiple possibilities to allow the unexpected, unplanned and unthinkable to evolve from the vivacity of life. Deleuze and Guattari emphasise that becoming is not about transforming from one state of being to another but the perpetual growth of a rhizomatic in-process unfolding. As Beatrice Monaco explains, 'becoming thus designates a refinement of one's perception with its own dynamic processes'.²² It is not based on a pre-defined starting point of being but must be thought away from the grounding of man/being/subject with the concept of becoming-woman as the gateway to access all becomings. 'Although all becomings are already molecular, including becoming-woman, it must be said that all becomings begin and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all the other becomings'.²³ The subject position held by women in our patriarchal society is that of a subjugated and marginalised other in relation to the privileged singular, homogenous and centralised position of man.²⁴ It is from this location on the outskirts and as the opposite to man that Deleuze and Guattari suggest this positioning is in fact privileged, in that it allows the escape from the molar hierarchy of socially constructed codes of identity into the realm of otherness when a continual becoming can form from events into a field of singularities no longer bound up in our social, political and linguistic codes of everyday life. Guattari advocates the self re-construction of subjectivity through an 'existential territory' combining elements of subjectivity through 'refrain, repetitions of gestures, sounds or sensations' as Janell Watson explains becoming operates beyond these distinctions of gender, subject and identity.²⁵ By employing these techniques within literature as exemplified in McBride's novels, the author is able to break through the molar mould of binary distinctions to proffer alternative modes of being. The unnamed protagonist in *Girl* is the essence of the subject in process moving through a perpetual becoming as she navigates the events of her life and attempts to form her subjective self in response to the field of singularities she is both an active part of yet also at a distance from as the stream of consciousness narrative unfolds.

The distinction Deleuze and Guattari draw between molar and molecular allows us to understand the different planes or zones in which thinking, understanding and action can take place. The molar is the grounded, hierarchical and coded sphere of everyday life, whereas the molecular is the plane of immanence that we must strive to reach to elevate ourselves out of these constricting paradigms. By engaging a molar politics, women can activate a molecular confrontation, 'it is thus necessary to conceive of a molecular women's politics that slips into molar confrontation, and passes under or through them'.²⁶ It is through this process of molar and

molecular confrontation that becoming is made available to women, incorporating the embodied lived experience of the molar into a political challenge of re-theorising subjectivity at a conceptual level, 'Becoming is by definition molecular: contrary to molar structures, which define and divide separate entities or subjects, molecular becomings refer to change, transformation and reorganization'.²⁷

Similarly, the concept of multiplicity as a process is developed in *A Thousand Plateaus* from a mathematical proposition as that which is 'never a closed or unified system and it exists as a "work in progress," that is, it unfolds in duration and time' to a theory of biological, social, political propulsion.²⁸ Multiplicities are manifold and operate in a number of fields, they are formed in the human mind and being, actions and effects and are expressed as a constant movement of reaching singularities working both in the conscious and unconscious mind with particular pertinence to a creative output. Necessarily bound up with this concept of the multiplicity is that of the rhizome. As its name suggests the rhizome is akin to an indiscernible root system, it is a creeping growth of non-hierarchical, unordered metamorphosing:

It is only when the multiple is effectively treated as a substantive, "multiplicity," that it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object, natural or spiritureality, image and world. Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudo-multiplicities for what they are. There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. [...] A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature.²⁹

The potential of the multiplicity and the rhizome then is to offer up a new way of thinking that does not follow arborescent delimiters but allows freedom of movement in random and creative free flowing dimensions outside of our existing predetermined structures of logic and sense, continually creating the new.³⁰ Deleuze and Guattari offered *A Thousand Plateaus* up as a new type of metaphysics and a completely original reading experience with individual plateaus which can be read in any order rather than sequential chapters following a linear structure. Their entire philosophical project promotes new thinking, new acting and innovative creative output so is a particularly fertile groundwork in which to situate new ideas about contemporary experimental fiction.

McBride's Novels as a Becoming Narratives

I will now move on to apply the Deleuzian concepts outlined above to McBride's two novels as examples of becoming through experimental fiction. It is within Deleuze's theory of perpetual change, growth, expansion and a creative form of playing with boundaries that I am locating McBride's work as a method of becoming through the process of writing as a free flowing rhizomatic force of narrative. It is a writing away from the molar confines of structured language, narrative conventions and character development that McBride picks up the mantle of her modernist predecessors in a contemporary response to the current molar literary plane and offers us a new way of viewing the self. This organic fluidity of writing is particularly fruitful for producing unexpected outcomes as McBride explains, 'And that very distinctly was me trying not to let that happen in the story, and then realising

that it would ... I thought, "Oh god, don't be the Irish writer who is writing about child abuse." I really didn't want to. But it seems I had to'.³¹ Child abuse is a theme which features predominately in both of McBride's novels and is explored through the shifting temporal spheres of Deleuzian repetition and refrain. In *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* the unnamed protagonist revisits the abusive relationship with her uncle and embarks upon a series of violent sexual encounters with strangers as she tries to reclaim her sexual agency and take control of her embodied subjectivity. Equally, in McBride's second novel *The Lesser Bohemians* the character of Stephen follows a similar path as his drug and sex addiction cause him to lose his wife, child, job prospects and push him to the brink of death.³² Despite this being ultimately destructive to their physical and mental wellbeing, the continual repetition of these encounters offers them a rhythm of agency – they are the ones making the choice and their attempt to grasp ownership of their sense of self is through their sexual availability.

From the very opening line of *Girl is a Half Formed Thing* McBride's use of language jolts the reader out of a passive reading experience and pulls them into a more involved, active reassessment of the way we use language:

For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. They cut you round. Wait and hour and day.³³

The reader is drawn into the fragmented language of the subconscious, jumbled thoughts and feelings not yet structured in the mind of the protagonist or processed into coded linguistic forms, of the unnamed and as yet unborn narrator. The purpose of this unique narrative technique is twofold. Firstly, it acts as part of the character development of the girl. McBride uses subtle changes in the liminality of the language throughout the book to show the reader how the events in the life of the girl affect her ability to think, understand, process and operate within language and more generally within social and familial constructs. The novel is ultimately a *Bildungsroman* with the usual adolescent torments of burgeoning sexuality, the struggle to develop a valid sense of self and self-worth set against the conflicting experience of dealing with her beloved brother's brain tumour and an overbearing, religiously zealous mother, amplified and distorted by the disturbing scenes of sexual abuse inflicted by her uncle.

The narrative begins with very short and fragmented sentences to reflect the pre-formed, pre-language state of being of the protagonist as an unborn child thus immediately posing the question of how and when language, thought and meaning are acquired, understood and expressed. The short sharp sentences and easily recognisable lexicon reminiscent of childlike speech - 'Mucus stogging up my nose. Scream to rupture day. Fatty snorting like a creature. A vinegar world I smelled. There now a girleen isn't she great. Bawling' - steadily take on a slightly more structured format akin to the actuality of the girl growing into socially constructed linguistic structures and received cultural paradigms.³⁴ The language breaks down again in the extreme times of trauma as this quote shows from a scene where she is brutally beaten and raped: 'Puk blodd over me frum. In the next but. Let me air. Soon I'n dead I'm sre. Loose. Ver the alrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I'.³⁵ McBride employs a technique of language scrambling, misspelling and irregular capitalisation to pull the reader in to feel the tangible physicality of the immediate trauma of experience as it unfolds in the text. Although some

readers have found this alternative use of language difficult to get to grips with, reader reviews on Goodreads show that the majority can not only understand what is happening but are unequivocally drawn into the immediacy of the events and the desperate state of mind of the girl but at the same time appreciate the poetic quality of this alternative linguistic form.³⁶

The short time frame in which McBride wrote *Girl* and the narrative flow of the text as an emergence of fluid, mutable language is redolent of the Deleuzian concept of the rhizome. The exploratory movement of language manipulation, growing like the rhizomatic roots in multiple directions is akin to automatic or free writing (that mode of continuous writing which is done without plan or pre-directed thought, pause or hesitation) but with mindful poetic rhythms. It is a technique of writing without a set design or boundary but a method which allows the narrative to take hold and find a way to be born however difficult that process may be, 'It involved pulling it out, pushing it out. It was not something that flowed'.³⁷ In this form, the narrative structure itself is employed as a method to impart meaning to the reader, a technique as argued by Seymour Chatman in *Story and Discourse Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* where he asserts that 'We are justified [...] in arguing that narrative structure imparts meanings, of the three kinds listed above, (event, character and detail of setting) precisely because it can endow an otherwise meaningless ur-text with eventhood, characterhood, and settinghood'.³⁸ In *Girl* the fragmentary narrative is the driver through which we experience the character of the girl in all her broken and liminal selfhood; short sentences often made up of just single words, repetition and the semi-stream of consciousness allow for a total immersion within the workings of the character's mind and her physical and psychological immediacy:

I sleep I can barely sleep next to her in the bed. She's roaring full of it. In-took breaths snorts all sorts wheeze and toss about. But my head's there on the pillow just in case I can. I am dreaming. What's on my secret face she sees? Lines of lies and things I've done. Oh what's coming down the road. Through the curtains. He. If I say no I won't no. I know. But I could but. I think about him. And it would it'd be like? This time. Now that it can't hurt. Now that I'm stretched I know. What could I do. Well we'll wait we'll see we'll. Go to sleep. Who? Shoo you.³⁹

Although the narrative moves through the events of the Girl's life from her beginnings in her mother's womb to her tragic suicide, there is a noticeable absence of temporal grounding with minimal chronology as the character develops. There are significant milestones which indicate time passing throughout the novel such as the rape by her uncle, leaving home, the death of her brother, yet the effect on the reader is that of a suspension of time incorporated in a complete absorption within the inner most thoughts and feelings of the Girl. In his interview with McBride, David Collard questioned the author on her omission of 'temporal and topographical details' within the novel as a considered element of the process of writing. McBride admitted that although she would have liked to have taken the structure of *Girl* completely outside the framework of time and space it would not have been possible to do this within the confines of telling the story of a whole life and aligning it to experiential details which are necessarily grounded in temporal and spatial proximities.⁴⁰ Yet McBride does succeed in disrupting narrative conventions of linear chronology as the overwhelming impression from reading the novel is not that the culmination of a series of tragic events ends

in her suicide but rather that the palpable journey of a life unfolding and the making of a person through conscious and unconscious thought processes, life choices and subjective responses to events is communicated to the reader in a very tangible and real way.

The complete lack of commas in the narrative of *Girl* can be read as a demarcation of the lack of continuity and growth the girl experiences as the events of her life contribute to stunt her personal development and prevent her from developing a valid and positive sense of self and subjectivity. The liminal language immediately makes a request of the reader – to reflect on language, the way we use it, the way we are immersed in it and the assumptions predicated on it based on socially constructed linguistic codes. Upon first encountering the narrative style of *Girl* it is jarring for the reader expecting to slip right in to the text. It performs the literary equivalent of a double take and the reader must acquiesce to move outside of the expected linguistic structure and become an active participant in feeling the experiences of the Girl as they are encountered. As Gina Wisker argues:

The novel pitches us as readers into her experiences of liminality; into the gap between what is felt and begins to form in the mind of the narrator, the girl, and her actions in the shared world. These are largely determined and partially understood as filtered through her consciousness, through the use of stream of consciousness. In this form, they are dominated by certain returning patterns but otherwise unstructured, unmanageable for her, and so also not structured for us, neither explained nor explained away.⁴¹

McBride uses language as the driver for a raw expression of human motivation and internal drives and desires, 'Language is a vehicle for content, not a showpiece in itself. The training [at the Drama Centre] was about what an actor does with the body and I've been trying to make language do that instead. It was also about trying to change language to extend its capabilities'.⁴²

McBride's character development of the Girl is exemplary of Deleuze's notion of how characters in fiction should work, as Clare Colebrook asserts, 'Characters are not harmonious and unified substances but assemblages or 'refrains': a collection of body-parts, gestures, desires and motifs'.⁴³ *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* and *The Lesser Bohemians* are clearly not works of autobiography or memoir but there are certain inescapable parallels between the protagonists in both novels and McBride herself.⁴⁴ This collective assemblage of character is built through the incorporation of the writer's experience into the fiction in a non-memoir, auto-fiction technique. McBride uses her actor training in the Stanislavsky method of character development as part of her writing process – the embodiment of the emotional and psychological aspect of the character are played out through the author as medium. The writing process then is putting herself in the place of the character and drawing in disparate personal experiences to inform the make-up of that character, as well as the deeply personal experience of losing her own brother to a brain tumour that is expressed within *Girl*, McBride uses her own experience of leaving Ireland at a young age to attend London's Drama Centre to inform the character development of Eily in *The Lesser Bohemians*.⁴⁵ The same fragmented language is employed in this novel together with anachronous sequencing of framing personal histories. The framing of the narrative in *The Lesser Bohemians* through the windows of the burgeoning relationship between Eily and Stephen and their independent experiences,

memories, and re-telling of personal histories presents a form of rhizomatics as the characters and plot are assembled through a gradual deepening of understanding of each other and themselves and the world around them as they interact, converge and move apart in a collective assemblage of being.

Conclusion

As I have demonstrated in this paper, Deleuzian theory is particularly useful as a tool to consider experimental writing as a contemporary process of becoming through literature. As Beatrice Monaco explains, 'both the style and content of Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, which functions as a kind of "machine", engenders a new "pragmatic" reading space in the context of the academic text, which is otherwise beset by its own obligation to what Deleuze understands as "organic" thought'.⁴⁶ Monaco explains that the Deleuzo-Guattarian project sets out to replace the concept of organic thought with the Machinic function of process in a drive to open up philosophy as an accessible, pragmatic tool rather than abstract theory.⁴⁷ This concept of the pragmatic machine then can be applied as a combination of philosophical thinking and everyday thought processes with regards to literature, imbuing literary texts with prompts which engage the reader in a self-reflexive pragmatic journey of thought. Here distinctions between academic philosophical theory and general fiction are broken down and allow for multiplicities of understanding to propagate. Life expressed through literature is based on a combination of experience and imagination, empiricism and cognitive meanderings, why then should reading be a pure absorption of the authorial views on life without the active involvement, interaction and participation of the reader? Layering and infiltrating the reader's own personal and subjective thoughts and experience into the reading experience of the text enables language and thought to move forward and beyond the everyday or molar concerns.

McBride's narratives provide a new way of thinking about how we experience time and language as embodied subjects and how we locate our molecular subjectivities within a possible molar politics. The pre-language stream of consciousness form and rhizomatic temporal shifts in these novels allows for alternative literary productions of subjectivity as becoming narratives. The collective assemblage of her characters is in a constant state of flux and process, there is no resolution, but a continual becoming. McBride and Deleuze offer a positive progression of experimental stylistic modes of storytelling by inverting them so communication is possible but through a new medium of alternative linguistic structure that can be easily understood by a wide general readership. By using language in experimental styles to avoid the automatic association of word-meaning, the author is freed from the confines of the sign/signifier symbolic hierarchy and can use language not to confer meaning but as an alternative form of communicating the eternal refrain of the contemporary and our experience of it.

Birkbeck, University of London

Notes

- 1 See Terry Smith, 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry*, 32.4 (2006), 681–707; and Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso Books, 2013).
- 2 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, p. 17.
- 3 Graham Swift, 'Graham Swift on "Contemporary" Novels', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2011, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/04/graham-swift-contemporary-novels>> [accessed 15 January 2017].
- 4 Emine Saner, 'The Essex Serpent Author Sarah Perry: "Kids at School Found Me Strange. I Didn't Mind"', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/31/the-essex-serpent-author-sarah-perry-kids-at-school-found-me-strange-i-didnt-mind>> [accessed 15 January 2017].
- 5 See Perry Anderson 'From Progress to Catastrophe' in the *London Review of Books*, 28 July 2011, 24-28 for a detailed account of historical fiction as a transforming genre.
- 6 Giorgio Agamben, *"What Is an Apparatus?" and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 41.
- 7 The Goldsmiths Prize 'celebrates the qualities of creative daring associated with the University and to reward fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form'. <<http://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/>>. The Baileys Prize website gives this explanation of the judging criteria: 'The judges are given the key criteria for the Prize – accessibility, originality and excellence in writing by women. They are asked to forget about reviews, publicity spends, an author's previous reputation, the sense of 'who deserves it' and choose simply on the basis of novels that inspire them, move them, make them think – and that they admire and enjoy!' taken from <<http://www.womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/about/judging>>.
- 8 Kira Cochrane, 'Eimear McBride: "There Are Serious Readers Who Want to Be Challenged"', *The Guardian*, 5 June 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/05/eimear-mcbride-serious-readers-challenged-baileys-womens-prize>> [accessed 13 December 2016].
- 9 Geir Farner, *Literary Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) <<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/literary-fiction-9781623560249/>> [accessed 17 April 2017], p. 52.
- 10 Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p. 5.
- 11 James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 28; p. 51; p. 223.
- 12 David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992), p. 105.
- 13 Deborah L. Parsons, *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.
- 14 Cochrane, 'Eimear McBride'.
- 15 Helen Fraser, 'Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction 2014 - Winner Announced | Reading Agency' <<https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/news/baileys-womens-prize-for-fiction-2014.html>> [accessed 5 May 2017].
- 16 English, *The Economy of Prestige*, p. 3.
- 17 Susanna Rustin, 'Eimear McBride: "I Wanted to Give the Reader a Very Different Experience"', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2014, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/16/eimear-mcbride-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing-interview>> [accessed 13 December 2016].
- 18 Parsons, *Theorists of the Modern Novel*, p. 15.
- 19 Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'Introduction', in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, ed. by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 3-51 (p. 7).
- 20 Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 231.
- 21 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 303.
- 22 Beatrice Monaco, *Machinic Modernism: The Deleuzian Literary Machines of Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 38.
- 23 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 306.
- 24 "Man is traditionally defined as *being*: as the self-evident ground of a politics of identity and recognition." Claire Colebrook and Ian Buchanan, *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 2. It is from this privileged position of authority and control that the rule of the male gender has been imposed

over social, political, economic and cultural systems that subjugate the position of woman to the other.

25 Janell Watson, 'Introduction: Guattari and Gender', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16.3 (2005), 267–70 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09574040500321313>>.

26 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 304.

27 Audrone Žukauskaitė, 'Intensive Multiplicities in A Thousand Plateaus', in *Understanding Deleuze, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by Paul Ardoin, S.E. Gontarski, and Laci Mattison (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 75-88 (p. 81).

28 Ibid., p. 76.

29 Deleuze and Guattari, p. 8.

30 Brent Adkins, *Deleuze and Guattari's: A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 23.

31 Cochrane, 'Eimear McBride'.

32 Eimear McBride, *The Lesser Bohemians* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).

33 Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing*, p. 3.

34 Ibid., p 5.

35 Ibid, p. 194.

36 As of January 2017 the Goodreads ratings listed the data as 1323 5* reviews, 1582 4* reviews, and 1269 3* reviews as positive ratings compared with only 700 2* reviews and 566 1* reviews.

37 Cochrane, 'Eimear McBride'.

38 Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Story and Discourse : Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 25.

39 Eimear McBride, *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing*, p. 117.

40 David Collard, 'Interview with Eimear McBride', *The White Review*, 2014 <<http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-eimear-mcbride/>> [accessed 13 December 2016].

41 Gina Wisker, "'I Am Not That Girl": Disturbance, Creativity, Play, Echoes, Liminality, Self-Reflection and Stream of Consciousness in Eimear McBride's A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing', *Hecate*, 41.1/2 (2015), pp. 57–77 (p. 58).

42 Kate Kellaway, 'Eimear McBride: "Writing Is Painful – but It's the Closest You Can Get to Joy"', *The Guardian*, 28 August 2016, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/28/eimear-mcbride-interview-lesser-bohemians-writing-never-stops-being-painful>> [accessed 13 December 2016].

43 Claire Colebrook, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 107.

44 Of Irish descent, although she was not brought up in Ireland, her family background provided the backdrop for setting in the small religious town. The tender but difficult relationship with a brother suffering from a brain tumour is undoubtedly drawing on her own traumatic experience of losing her brother to the same fate. The advice that comes up at each creative writing class is 'write what you know' and this form of autofiction where aspects of the authors life and experience are incorporated into the narrative imbue the text with an authenticity of feeling that is tangible.

45 For relevant interviews see Cochrane and Rustin.

46 Monaco, p. 1.

47 Ibid., p. 3.

Works Cited

- Adkins, Brent, *Deleuze and Guattari's: A Thousand Plateaus: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)
- Agamben, Giorgio, *What Is an Apparatus?' and Other Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009)
- Chatman, Seymour Benjamin, *Story and Discourse : Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (London: Cornell University Press, 1978)
- Cochrane, Kira, 'Eimear McBride: "There Are Serious Readers Who Want to Be Challenged"', *The Guardian*, 5 June 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/05/eimear-mcbride-serious-readers-challenged-baileys-womens-prize>> [accessed 13 December 2016]

-
- Colebrook, Claire, *Gilles Deleuze* (London: Routledge, 2002)
- Colebrook, Claire, and Ian Buchanan, *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000)
- Collard, David, 'Interview with Eimear McBride', *The White Review*, 2014
<<http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-eimear-mcbride/>> [accessed 13 December 2016]
- Connor, Steven, *The English Novel in History, 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996)
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus : Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi, (London: Continuum, 2004)
- English, James F., *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005)
- Farner, Geir, *Literary Fiction* (Bloomsbury, 2014)
<<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/literary-fiction-9781623560249/>>
[accessed 17 April 2017]
- Fraser, Helen, 'Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction 2014 - Winner Announced | Reading Agency' <<https://readingagency.org.uk/adults/news/baileys-womens-prize-for-fiction-2014.html>> [accessed 5 May 2017]
- Friedman, Ellen G., and Miriam Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989)
- Kellaway, Kate, 'Eimear McBride: "Writing Is Painful – but It's the Closest You Can Get to Joy"', *The Guardian*, 28 August 2016, section Books
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/28/eimer-mcbride-interview-lesser-bohemians-writing-never-stops-being-painful>> [accessed 13 December 2016]
- Lodge, David, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1992)
- McBride, Eimear, *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing* (Norwich: Galley Beggar Press Limited, 2013)
- *The Lesser Bohemians* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016)
- Monaco, Beatrice, *Machinic Modernism: The Deleuzian Literary Machines of Woolf, Lawrence and Joyce* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)
- Osborne, Peter, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso Books, 2013)
- Parsons, Deborah L., *Theorists of the Modernist Novel: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf* (London: Routledge, 2007)
- Rustin, Susanna, 'Eimear McBride: "I Wanted to Give the Reader a Very Different Experience"', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2014
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/16/eimear-mcbride-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing-interview>> [accessed 13 December 2016]
- Saner, Emine, 'The Essex Serpent Author Sarah Perry: "Kids at School Found Me Strange. I Didn't Mind"', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2016

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/31/the-essex-serpent-author-sarah-perry-kids-at-school-found-me-strange-i-didnt-mind>> [accessed 15 January 2017]

- Smith, Terry, 'Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity', *Critical Inquiry*, 32 (2006), 681–707
- Squires, Claire, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007)
- Swift, Graham, 'Graham Swift on "Contemporary" Novels', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2011
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/04/graham-swift-contemporary-novels>> [accessed 15 January 2017]
- Tong, Rosemarie, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1995)
- Watson, Janell, 'Introduction: Guattari and Gender', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 16 (2005), 267–70
- Wisker, Gina, "'I Am Not That Girl": Disturbance, Creativity, Play, Echoes, Liminality, Self-Reflection and Stream of Consciousness in Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*', *Hecate*, 41 (2015), 57–77
- Žukauskaitė, Audrone, 'Intensive Multiplicities in *A Thousand Plateaus*', in *Understanding Deleuze, Understanding Modernism*, ed. by Paul Ardoin, S. E. Gontarski Professor, and Laci Mattison (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), pp. 75-88.