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Redefining Identity through Emancipation: Exploring Female Self-Representations in Contemporary Irish Autofiction*

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Abstract:

Drawing on transfeminist critique and autofiction theory, this essay explores three autofictional writings by three female Irish authors. Acknowledging the systemic and patriarchal oppression of women, the analysis of the novels *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* by Eimear McBride (2013), *A Ghost in the Throat* by Doireann Ní Ghríofa (2020) and *Checkout 19* by Claire-Louise Bennett (2021) will focus on how each author deals with individual manifestations of this condition. Furthermore, the different strategies of emancipation and liberation that each writer adopts will be taken into consideration. The main goal of this essay is to demonstrate how the experience of oppression distorts the authors' perception of their identities, leading them to represent themselves as autofictional characters.

Keywords: Claire-Louise Bennett, Doireann Ní Ghríofa, Eimear McBride, Identity Renegotiation, Irish Autofiction

Introduction[1]

Over the last fifty years, the international publishing scene has witnessed the emergence and rise of autofiction, a well-known form of autobiographical writing that blends referential and fictional elements to varying degrees. Serge Doubrovsky's *Fils* (1977) is considered the first autofictional novel, and, since its publication, a debate has arisen and still remains unresolved.

* This essay is an adaptation and a translation of the third chapter of the author's MA Thesis: Mini Alberto (2024), *Storia e teoria dell'autofinzione: alcuni casi studio irlandesi*, Firenze, Università degli Studi di Firenze.

[1] This introductory section summarises the main points that the author has addressed in the first two chapters of his MA Thesis.

On the one hand, some scholars argue in favour of a panfictional understanding of this writing, prioritising the fictional aspects over the referential ones (Lejeune 1980, 1986; Robbe-Grillet 1986; Colonna 1989, 2004; Genette 1991; Darrieussecq 1996; Vilain 2005a). On the other hand, others such as Philippe Lejeune – he adopted this position after 1987 –, Arnaud Schmitt and Philippe Forest contend that autofiction can only be read as an autobiography, therefore excluding the fictional elements that characterise it (Lejeune 1990 [1988]; Forest 1999; Schmitt2007). In between these positions, there are those who contemplate the possibility of a mixed reading, where both the referential and the fictional elements of a text can co-inhabit and enrich one another (Doubrovsky 1993, 2003; Laurent 1997; Baudelle 2003; Gasparini 2004, 2008).

The debate has extended beyond the question of "what is autofiction?". It has considered other issues, such as "Is Doubrovsky its father, or does it have more ancient origins?". In this respect, arguing that self-fictionalisation was part of world literature before the 1970s, some scholars have identified noble predecessors to autofiction, such as Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote*, Marcel Proust's *Réchèrche* and Jorge Luis Borges' self-representations in *El Aleph* (Genette 1991; Colonna 1998; Gasparini 2004; Vilain 2005b). Instead, other academics believe that autofiction is not Doubrosvky's invention. Still, they consider it as the product of the postmodern *Zeitgeist* (Robin 1997): the postmodern "crise des récits" (Lyotard 1979, 7) and a new self of sense – due to the advancements in psychoanalysis – produced a cultural context where pure autobiographical writing has become impossible. Hence, any attempt at autobiography will end up being spoiled by an "I" that cannot give a faithful reconstruction of its own life, therefore resulting in autofiction.

Building on Robin's work, Thimoteus Vermeulen, Robin van den Akker and Alison Gibbons have sought to define the new cultural framework that succeeded postmodernism: "Metamodernism" (2017). They argue that, with the transition from one epoch to another, cultural products change too, including autofiction. They indeed claim that metamodern autofiction is different from the postmodern one: while the latter concentrates on the impossibility of faithful self-representation, the former tries to portray reality as it is to recreate the "new depthiness" (Vermeulen 2015) that characterises this new cultural era. Indeed, metamodernism wants to substitute the postmodernist "depthlessness" (Jameson 1991 [1984]) for a new depthiness: "[i]f Jameson's term 'new depthlessness' points to the logical and/or empirical repudiation of ideological, historical, hermeneutic, existentialist, psychoanalytic, affective, and semiotic depth, then the phrase 'new depthiness' indicates the *performative* reappraisal of these depths" (Vermeulen 2015, italics in original).

Robin's, Vermeulen's, Akker's and Gibbons' theorisations consider another crucial question: "Why write autofiction?". While they answered by identifying the cultural reasons behind autofictional writing, this essay will answer that same question by considering the individual experiences of the chosen authors – Eimear McBride, Doireann Ní Ghríofa and Claire-Louise Bennett – and how they write about it. To carry out the analysis of the texts we will refer to the following definition of autofiction: a type of writing that can neither be interpreted as autobiography nor as fiction and that is particularly suited to represent the traumatic experiences of individuals that belong to oppressed social classes. Furthermore, these experiences make the narrator reconsider their identity and the way they perceive reality by having them undergo a process of identity renegotiation that produces that clash between autobiographical and fictional which characterises autofiction.

The novels that will be analysed – *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*[2] (McBride 2014 [2013]), *A Ghost in the Throat*[3] (Ní Ghríofa 2020a) and *Checkout 19*[4] (Bennett 2022 [2021]) – all fit this definition. Indeed, all three of the protagonists have almost the same life experiences as their authors but each novel has its own way of displaying its fictional elements. Furthermore, the experiences that do coincide between the authors and their autofictional versions are those crucial and traumatic events that make them reconsider their identities. Moreover, said experiences all derive from forms of patriarchal oppression. The corpus was chosen specifically to illustrate how each character finds their own path of liberation from conditions of subordination. This analysis will demonstrate how the characters, through their emancipation, come to realise that their identities have been transformed, consequently undergoing a process of identity renegotiation that culminates in the creation of an autofictional identity.

1. Eimear McBride: A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing

AGIHFT is an anonymous girl's autodiegetic narration which covers her entire lifespan, from when she was a foetus to her suicide. The first sentences of the novel show some of the main points that structure the novel: "[f]or 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" (*AGIHFT* 3). The "you" refers to the girl's elder brother, with whom she develops a symbiotic relationship. It is he who chooses his sister's name, as his mother tells him: "[y]ou'll give her name" (*ibidem*). Then there is a focus shift: "[b]ounce the bed, I'd say" (*ibidem*). Here the girl's voice appears and she imagines her brother's reaction when his mother told him she was pregnant. The conclusion of the incipit is ambiguous – "[t]hen lay you down. They cut you round" (*ibidem*) – because the girl can either refer to her birth by caesarean delivery, or to her brother's eventual death by brain tumour. The final phrase – "[w]ait and hour and day" (*ibidem*) – is even vaguer, as "wait" has three possible meanings: the pregnancy, the wait before the brother's surgery, or the wait for his awakening from anaesthesia after said surgery (Fischer 2019, 76). The uncertainty is then dissolved in favour of the third hypothesis: "[w]alking up corridors up the stairs. Are you alright? Will you sit, he says. No. I want she says. I want to see my son" (*AGIHFT* 3). The girl's father appears here for the first and only time, as he abandons his family early in the girl's life.

Her brother, her mother and her uncle are three key characters who shape her identity and fate. The symbiotic relationship she develops with her brother is "a kind of incest of the soul" (Sutherland 2014) that, however, does not evolve into sexual behaviour. It "exists above or outside the realm of the physical, and instead manifests in a pre-sexual (and for the foetus Girl, pre-birth) state" (White 2018, 566). The brain surgery he undergoes at the beginning of the novel has serious repercussions on his cognitive skills, rendering him a victim of bullying at school and leading his mother to a nervous breakdown:

> And when you come back that last day there's envelopes. […] It's the start of the end of this life. Well it seems so. Then. Maths F Irish E English E History E Geography E Chemistry Incomplete. Oh love I'm sorry. […] From the Irish Defence Forces. Stamp. We're sorry to inform you height weight IQ

[2] From this point on, we will refer to this novel as *AGIHFT*.
[3] From this point on, we will refer to this novel as *AGT*
[4] From this point on, we will refer to this novel as *C19*.

and eyesight are are but we wish you the very best. You there staring across the table. Weeping mother press her faces into hands. Oh what. Oh what. What will you do? Eighteen years and no exam. You mumbling things like join the navy. (*AGIHFT* 75-76)

The girl always stands by his side and starts defining herself in relation to him. However, she eventually wants to create a distance between herself and her brother to start a path of individual growth. This decision has serious consequences on her psyche:

We were moving off now. From each other. As cannot be. Helped. I didn't help it from that time on. You know. All that. When you said sit with me on the school bus. I said no. That inside world had caught alight and what I wanted. To be left alone. To look at it. To swing the torch into every corner of what he'd we'd done. Know it and wonder what does it mean. I learned to turn it off, the world that was not my own. […] But somehow I've left you behind and you're just looking on. (61)

Going away to college, she creates an even greater distance that will be reconciled when she gets back home because she hears that her brother's tumour has grown back and there is no hope of survival. At this moment, they re-establish their symbiotic relationship to such an extent that, when he eventually dies, there is an evident change in the girl's writing style:

Please don't go no. Not. Go. I. Please don't leave. There's the. Air flying out. Your eyes on me. They. You are.
Silent.
Breath.
Lungs go out. See the world out.
You finish that breath. Song breath.
You are gone out tide. And you close. Drift. Silent eyes. Goodbye.
My. lllllllllllllllll. Love my. Brother no.
Silent.
He's gone. (188)

The collapse of her brother's body is paralleled by other collapses: the girl's inability to articulate words – "My. lllllllllllllllll. Love" – due to her emotional breakdown and the disintegration of her writing style. She will finally reconcile with him by committing suicide:

Will I say? For you to hear? Alone. My name is. Water. All alone. My name. The plunge is faster. The deeper cold is coming in. What's left? What's left behind? What's it? It is. My name for me. My I.
Turn. Look up. Bubble from my mouth drift high. Blue tinge lips. Floating hair. Air famished eyes. Brown water turning into light. There now. There now. That just was life. And now.

What?

My name is gone. (203)

Letting herself drown in a lake, the girl releases herself from traumas, including her brother's death, but, most importantly, she frees herself from her name – "My name is gone" –, which was the last tie to her brother. By doing so, she goes back to an amniotic stage where she can reconnect with the only person who really mattered to her: "the narrative comes full circle – as she commits suicide, her 'name is gone', and she gives up her living identity to become symbiotically reunited with her brother once again" (White 2018, 567).

While her relationship with her brother is cyclically recomposed through suicide, her relationship with her mother, conditioned by her strong religious beliefs, will never change and can be understood as a "maternal archetype […] of the suffering mother, a self-induced victim, who is also ready to dismantle any attempt of subversion to keep a gendered hierarchy of dominance and submission" (De la Peña 2022, 291). Indeed, the girl's mother is dominated by both her father and the religious beliefs he instilled in her. She is also abandoned by her husband (for an unknown reason). Her traumas and her ideology made her a very rigid, aloof and sometimes violent mother:

> Mammy sorry that I sorry I didn't know. Your hands can't keep her off. […] And hits you on your ear. On your cheek. That hard. Ah Mammy sorry. Sorry. Sorry please, all you say. She have you by the jumper. Slap you harder. Slap and slap and slap. […] Screaming. You imbecile. […] You'll never manage anything. You're a moron. He's right. You're a moron. Hail Mary. How hard can it be? Hail Mary. I've had enough of you. (*AGIHFT* 17)

This is the first episode of violence in the novel. The reason for the beating is that the girl and her brother are unable to recite a "Hail Mary" to their very religious grandfather. This episode marks the girl's first serious trauma. Even when she goes to college, her mother remains an oppressive figure who still wields power over her. Besides physical violence, verbal assault characterises their interactions. For example, when the girl considers returning home from college due to concerns about her brother's health, her mother rants: "[t]elling me what to do you're a fucking slut" (119).

Another traumatic relationship shaping the girl's identity involves sexual abuse by an uncle when she was just thirteen years old. The shame she feels because of the rape leads her to liberalise her body to reclaim control over it. She feels that lust is the only means to demonstrate ownership over her body. In the beginning, she has sex with her schoolmates:

> There is no Jesus here these days just Come all you fucking lads. I'll have you every one any day. Breakfast dinner lunch and tea. […] They'll say my name forever shame but do exactly what I say. I'm a laughing skirt up round my knees and feathery boy rosen cheek between. (72)

Despite feeling a "forever shame" *(ibidem)*, the girl believes that thanks to lust she will be on everyone's lips and that men will do whatever she desires. Sex becomes also a means of defending her brother: "[t]hey'll not say one thing about us you see because after all, what's fair is fair" *(ibidem)*. When she goes to college, her depravity worsens:

> I met a man. I met a man. I let him throw me round the bed. And smoked, me, spliffs and choked my neck until I said I was dead. I met a man who took me for walks. Long ones in the country. I offer up. I offer up in the hedge. I met a man I met with her. She and me and his friend to bars at night and drink champagne and bought me chips at every teatime. I met a man with condoms in his pockets. Don't use them. He loves children in his heart. No. […] I met a man and many more and I didn't know you at all. (96-97)

The anaphoric repetition of "I met a man" conveys the apathy she feels. One day she tries to confront her uncle to vindicate herself, but he doesn't feel any guilt:

> So are you feeling guilty? What? About what? About that time when you fucked me? Yes. About that. I feel guilty and I am. Because I was thirteen? Look you're no baby now. No. So stop with that. You know me. I do. Know you he says. Well. Go on say it while no one's here. Then. Look, do you think he says. You don't think do you that. What? I abused you? That you abused me? […] No. I don't. (106-107)

Right after this dialogue, he tries to have sex with her, but she stands up to him and has him take her home:

> Will you kiss me coming out of my mouth before I know what I've said at all. […] He look down at his hands sitting flat on his knees. He won't do I think. He won't. That's good. What do I want with. Shame. Jesus. Then he does. As he wants to. Now I see. He wants to. Now. […] This is not like. Coming home. I feel that. There. His lips. I'm. It's too. Much. Jesus. Give my eyes back. Let me. See. My. Choke. Stop. Don't stop he says. Stop. No. Stop. I have to make. Myself. Sit back. Jesus he. What. His breath go. Like the clappers. Are we going to do? Go back now I say. […] Go back. Now. Alright. Alright. Start the car now. (107-108)

Though he traumatises her again, he still is an important figure to her. Indeed, when her brother's conditions worsen, it is her uncle who she asks for support. However, he takes advantage of her desperation for sexual purposes:

> I wanted you to come I say. My My My brother. I needed to. I close to cry. […] He pull [Sic] up my skirt. Put his hand between my legs. […] 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. (131)

Despite being the victim of another abuse, the girl ends up seeing him as a figure of salvation. She also starts seeking sex to cope with her emotions: "I go into the black of trees. […] In this moment in the place like this. I want the. Earth. My legs spread wide. The tremble moment men invade. Boys come in" (168). However, this behaviour turns against her when she meets a group of guys whom she thinks she knows: the attempt to seduce and dominate them is overturned and they rape her. This is one of the last key moments in her life, and it is testified to by a new type of language collapse: some words are written incorrectly to highlight the difficulty of articulating them due to the traumatic experience: "[f]insih in me. Fincsh. Good girl the. End of it" (169). After the death of her brother, she goes back to the lake where she was raped, and she finds a man that abuses her too. Once again, the articulation of the words is made difficult by the traumatic experience: "[d]one fuk me open he dine done on me. […] Kom shitting ut h mith fking kmg I'm fking cmin up you" (193). Some lines later, the word spelling goes back to normal. However, upper and lower cases start to alternate: "Ver the aIrWays. Here. mY nose my mOuth I. VOMit. Clear. CleaR" (194). The only moment when the orthography is respected is when she breathes: "[a]nd I breath" (*ibidem*). In this moment, she thinks of her uncle and, thanking him ironically, identifies him as the cause of her misery: "[t]hanks to your uncle for that like the best fuck I ever had" (*ibidem*).

With regards to the identification between the author and the narrator, there are only a few sources from which to draw a strong parallel between the two. There are some interviews where McBride speaks about her past life. In one of those (Collard 2014), she tells of her brother Donagh, to whom *AGIHFT* is dedicated, who actually died of a brain tumour. The girl's brother and Donagh also share the same nature. Indeed, McBride's brother "was quite an easy-going person, struggled at school" (*ibidem*). In the same interview, McBride also mentions that she was raised in a religious household – just as the narrator was – and that her father died of cancer when she was very young – this would explain the disappearance of the girl's father at the beginning of the novel. Lastly, although the narrator does not give any spatio-temporal information, she makes it quite clear that she lives in the Irish countryside and that she moves to a big city to go to college. Knowing that McBride was actually raised in the countryside and then went to college in London, the description of the city the girl moves to – "[c]ity all that black

in my lungs. In my nose. Like I am smoking am not but still" (*AGIHFT* 83) – corroborates the idea that she went to London too, thus helping us draw this parallel between her and McBride.

2. Doireann Ní Ghríofa: A Ghost in the Throat

While *AGIHFT* concentrates on representing the protagonist's upbringing and (self-) destruction, *AGT* focuses on the relationship between the main character, *Doireann Ní Ghríofa[5], and the poet Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill, author of the *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*[6] [Lament for Art Ó Laoghaire], a funeral lament written in the aftermath of her husband's homicide in 1773 (Ó Tuama 1961). It is difficult to identify Ní Chonaill as the writer of the *Caoineadh* because, belonging to a feminine tradition and, therefore, not benefiting from the same prestige as male-tradition texts, it was passed on only orally: "[t]he caoineadh was one of the most popular yet peripheral forms in which women composed. […] Its origins in liminal and extempore female performance rendered the caoineadh subordinate to an established (and decidedly masculine) manuscript culture in the early modern period" (Lawrenson 2023, 33). The medium characterises this kind of composition. It was only in 1892 that Morgan John O'Connell transcribed it and its translation into English by Peadar Ua Laoghair.

Like many before her, Ní Ghríofa wants to translate the *Caoineadh* and in *AGT* she gives this task to a homo- and auto- diegetic narrator with whom she shares the name (*AGT* 28) and many biographical aspects – the number of children they have, where they studied, their writing careers (Birrell 2021). *Ní Ghríofa was first introduced to Ní Chonaill's lament by a teacher when she was still very young – "[w]hen we first met, I was a child, and she [Eibhlín] had been dead for centuries" (*AGT* 10) –, but her initial impression was not very enthusiastic: "[h]er story seems sad, yes, but also a little dull. Schoolwork. Boring. My gaze has already soared away with the crows, while my mind loops back to my most-hated pop-song, 'and you give yourself away … ' " (11). Upon the second encounter with the text, she "falls in love" with the poem – "I develop a schoolgirl crush on this caoineadh, swooning over the tragic romance embedded in its lines" (*ibidem*) – but she does not understand the pain expressed in those words yet – "my childhood understanding of this poem was, well, childish, and my teenage interpretation little more than a swoon" (13)=. As a matter of fact, the adolescent *Ní Ghríofa idealises the text and invents the facts it tells:

> My homework is returned to me with a large red X, and worse, the teacher's scrawl cautions: 'Don't let your imagination run away with you!' I have felt these verses so deeply that I know my answer must be correct […]. In response to the request 'Describe the poet's first encounter with Art Ó Laoghaire,' I had written: 'She jumps on his horse and rides away with him forever,' but on returning, I am baffled to find that the teacher is correct: this image does not exist in the text. […] It may not be real to my teacher, but it is to me. (12)

The third encounter happens much later: she is an adult, married, has children, lives in the city and has already begun her writing career. One day, while driving her car, her eye "tripped over a sign for Kilcrea" (15). After this moment, she starts thinking compulsively about the toponym until she remembers: "*Kilcrea*, *Kilcrea*, the word vexed me for days […] until finally,

[5] To distinguish between the author and the narrator, we will refer to the former as Ní Ghríofa and to the latter as *Ní Ghríofa.

[6] We will use the words "*caoineadh*" "lament" and "keen" when referring to the genre and tradition of this writing; while, to refer to Ní Chonaill's poem, we will call it *Caoineadh*.

I remembered – Yes! – in that old poem from school, wasn't Kilcrea the name of the graveyard where the poet buried her lover?" (*ibidem*, italics in the original). This is why she decides to undertake another reading of the *Caoineadh* that will turn out to be decisive for her life. The emotions she feels are new to her and she grasps new aspects of the text: "I was startled to find Eibhlín Dubh pregnant again with her third child, just as I was. I had never imagined her as a mother in any of my previous readings" (16-17).

*Ní Ghríofa starts feeling such a strong emotional and spiritual symbiosis with Ní Chonaill that "[s]he wanted to know more of Eibhlín Dubh's life, to go beyond the poem and learn of this stranger's girlhood and old age. She wanted to see what became of her children and grandchildren. She wanted to find her burial place and to lay flowers on her grave" (Ní Ghríofa 2020b). She also feels a communion of bodies: she identifies the pregnant body as the element that unites her with the poet. It becomes her medium through which to keep the female tradition alive. However, she soon has to face a harsh reality: Ní Chonaill has almost completely been erased from history. There are just a few documents that certify her existence. She has been overshadowed by the male figures that lived with her – "*Wife of Art O'Leary*. *Aunt of Daniel O'Connell*. How swiftly the academic gaze places her in a masculine shadow" (*AGT* 70) –. The only texts where she is contemplated as an independent human being are *The Last Colonel of the Irish Brigade* by Morgan J. O'Connell (1977 [1892]) and a correspondence between her brothers Maurice and Daniel. Nevertheless, once she becomes a widow, she disappears:

> Nelly finds herself a widow at the age of fifteen. When she returns to Derrynane, she does not return pregnant.
>
> Here: silence.
>
> How I wish that someone had thought more women's words worthy of a place in that old secretaire. All the diaries and letters and ledgers I imagine in female handwriting, they must have existed once […]. We are left with only the judgment of Mrs O'Connell […] to gauge a sense of the aftermath of Nelly's marriage. (*AGT* 91)

*Ní Ghríofa finds herself unable to put Ní Chonaill's life together using the "tools" of historiography, because she also knows she does not possess them. Hence, she decides to invent her own method[7]:

> I begin with an unscientific mishmash of daydream and fact, concocted while scraping porridge gloop into a bin, gathering schoolbags and coats, badgering children into the car, biting back curses at traffic lights, kissing three boys goodbye, and driving back home again. All the while, I keep one eye on Eibhlín Dubh and one on my daughter in her car seat. (71)

It is a combination "of practical, pain-stalking [sic] research, and deeply felt subjective experience" (Dahlberg 2022, 30). She starts looking for any kind of text to find information about Ní Chonaill: "graveyard inscriptions […], clergy and baptismal records in church ledgers, microfilm, letters, lists of student registrations, depositions, examinations, a transcribed family history written into a Bible" (Corser 2023, 124) and she sets the objective to let the poet's life

[7] This methodology coincides with what is called "creative history" (Corbet, Compton, Pooley 2022), a practice that "preserve[s] silences in history, speak[s] in metaphors, juxtapose[s], hint[s], elaborate[s], or embroider[s] in ways that are particularly valuable when trying to preserve the mysteries" (7).

emerge from the silence she was relegated to by men. *Ní Ghríofa feels that by doing this she can do justice not only to Ní Chonaill but to all the women who were erased from history (Patel 2022). Indeed, she believes that she cannot use the tools of traditional historiography because they were created by the dominant gender to write a narration that systematically excludes female figures.

While alternating parts where *Ní Ghríofa tells her private life with others linked to her research and to Ní Chonaill's existence, the narrator comments on her writing – "[e]ach time I loop back to rewrite these paragraphs, I must watch The Gearagh flooding again. When I type the word 'puppeting', some invisible clock-hand ticks, some secret key twists, and without noticing, I bleed" (*AGT* 196) – and describes her method as such:

> At first, I can't quite see them, these people she knew – they are a sequence of shadows, opaque and distant – but as the weeks pass, the file I build on each name starts to grow. One by one, her people step from gloom to light and walk towards me. They begin to move and to breathe – sometimes flawed and affable, sometimes strange, sometimes violent or irate – […]. They are real and true. […] I compile a long list of facts and quotes, and then, as is my wont, I daydream it to life. (229)

She lets the characters take shape as she collects information. They emerge from the shadows to become people. However, she also acknowledges that:

> Some parts of Eibhlín Dubh's life, I know now, will always remain hidden to me, no matter how closely I look. Instead of resenting the many lacunae where I have not been able to find her, my hand has learned to hover over those gaps in awe. My attempt to know another woman has found its ending not in the satisfaction of neat discovery, but in the persistence of mystery. (280)

*Ní Ghríofa knows that historiography's tools are useless to her goal, but thinking about all the efforts she has made she feels the necessity to write about them: "[i]f I could find a way to communicate all I have learned of her days, maybe others would discover the clues that eluded me, and I might learn more of her from them" (281).

Another means of emancipation is reading. The *Caoineadh* is decisive not only in relation to the novel's motive – the need *Ní Ghríofa feels to know more about Ní Chonaill –, but it carries out a crucial role in the narrator's most traumatic experience: the birth of her fourth child (the first daughter after three sons), who is hospitalised in the NICU for some complications during the gestation: "[m]y baby had not grown in weeks, and both placenta and umbilical cord had failed to such an extent that that she would have been stillborn had she waited any longer" (50). There is a second, and more traumatic, element: *Ní Ghríofa is unable to produce breast milk. This feels like a defeat for her because she has always been proud of producing and donating her breast milk to the Milk Bank in Irvinestown: "*expressed more. squeezed drops on her lips but don't think she swallowed much really. she won't wake. scared now / burped her and tried bottle again. failed. called midwife but no answer / can't stop crying – she's asleep, nappy bone dry – v scared, don't know what to do* […]" (53, italics in the original). She is so disappointed in herself that she enters a spiral of self-blaming that worsens when her daughter is put under intensive care: "I have failed. My baby has been taken from me, hurried away to breathe elsewhere. I lie staring at the wall" (54). Her whole world is crumbling down. The elements on which she based her identity – being a good mother and donating her breast milk – become uncertain and she starts questioning who she really is. In this moment of discouragement, she finds solace in a "tattered copy of the *Caoineadh*" (47) she brings with her while rushing to the hospital. The lament will help her cope with the anxieties that oppress her when she is in "the milking parlour" (58), the room where there are the breast-pumping machines: "[t]here, I pump and

read as I always did at home, and sometimes it feels almost normal" (60). Reading helps her restore her identity and overcome her fears. The importance of Ní Chonaill's text is marked by explicitly saying that she packs it up together with other things when she is dismissed: "[m]y hands shake a little as I clear cupboards of our nappies, babygros, and blankets, the crumpled coffee cups, my photocopy of the Caoineadh […]" (65).

This traumatic experience and its outcome consolidate the relationship between *Ní Ghríofa and Ní Chonaill:

> In the months after my daughter is born the act of reciting the *Caoineadh* comes to feel like time-travel – I am carrying this baby in the same sling and whispering the same verses as I did with her brother. When her sleeping ear rests against my chest, it reverberates with Eibhlín Dubh's words. (68)

She then decides she wants to "donate my days to finding hers" (71). By overcoming her trauma, *Ní Ghríofa sets the goal of her project. She actually does not clarify her objective; she just states that she will nullify herself to let Ní Chonaill speak through her. It is only on the last page of the novel that the narrator confesses her real objective:

> When I get home, I think, maybe I'll try to cheer myself up by opening a new notebook from my stash. This time, I won't let myself begin by writing *Hoover* or *Sheets* or *Mop* or *Pump*. Instead, I'll think of new words, and then I'll follow them. As I turn the bend towards home, I find that I already know the echo with which that first page will begin.
>
> *This is a female text*. (282)

*Ní Ghríofa claims that she will not write poetry to tell this story, but she will pursue a new path that is already clear in her mind: "This is a female text". The last sentence, echoing the beginning of *AGT*, foregrounds the writing of the novel the reader has just finished, thus outlining a cyclical structure.

It is the structure that reveals the autofictionality of the novel: "the author does not mingle reality and fiction in terms of content, but of structure" (Mini 2023, 326). Indeed, Ní Ghríofa builds an almost perfect representation of herself. Her autofictional version seems indiscernible from herself; she gives the reader enough intra and extra-textual information to conclude that they are the same person. Within this information, the most crucial is their poetic careers, which are impossible to distinguish. *Ní Ghríofa writes:

> In those city rooms, I wrote a poem. I wrote another. I wrote a book. If the poems that came to me on those nights might be considered love poems, then they were in love with rain and alpine flowers, with the strange vocabularies of a pregnant body, with clouds and with grandmothers. No poem arrived in praise of the man who slept next to me as I wrote […]. (14)

The "book" she refers to could be *Résheoid* (2011), her poetic debut, whose title means "moonlight" and is paralleled by what *Ní Ghríofa writes in her poems – "the night city's glimmering made stars invisible, but when I woke to feed my first son, and then my second, I could split the curtains and see the moon between the spires. In those city rooms, I wrote a poem […]" *(ibidem)* –, compositions actually written in the moonlight. Furthermore, even the themes touched by Ní Ghríofa in her poems, such as maternity, the relationship with nature and life in the city, echoes through *AGT*. With regards to the extra-textual elements, Ní Ghríofa corroborates the identification by sharing public aspects of her private life that coincide with what *Ní Ghríofa recounts in the novel (Birrell 2021). On these occasions, she also confirms that some of

the episodes told in the novel really happened to her: for example, when *Ní Ghríofa gets used to reading and writing in any kind of situation, like the rooftop of a parking lot, because she cannot work at home with her children (*ibidem)*. A last extra-textual element is the translation of the *Caoineadh*. Both the author and the narrator set themselves to translate the lament but, by positioning her translated version in the peritext, at the end of the novel, the author clarifies that *Ní Ghríofa is an almost perfect representation of herself. Albeit the precision of the correspondences between them, the ending breaks the illusion of pure referentiality by revealing the cyclical structure of *AGT*. It compels the reader to change their attitude towards the text, which "rather than hiding its own structure, prefers to self-evidently exhibit it" (Mini 2023, 327). It creates an interpretative short circuit where the reader must come to terms with two different interpretations: they have to decide whether to understand the novel as referential or to read it as fictional. This oscillation results in an autofictional reading strategy (Gibbons 2022).

3. Claire-Louise Bennett: Checkout-19

This third novel presents an anonymous, autodiegetic narrator whose identity appears closely connected to Bennett. Although there are no direct references to her personal life, there are significant parallels: both come from working-class families – their fathers are plumbers and their mothers work in retail –, both were born in the south-east of England and later emigrated to Ireland. Additionally, both have a brother, though he is only briefly mentioned in the novel (*C19*, 9, 142, 209). However, the text cannot be considered an autobiography. It actually explores the evolution of the narrator's identity through her relationship with books and her education.

Indeed, the central theme of the novel is the role of books in *Bennett's[8] life, and it is introduced early on in the narrative:

> Later on we often had a book with us. Later on. When we were a bit bigger at last though still nowhere near as big as the rest of them we brought over books with us. Oh loads of books. And sat with them there in the grass by the tree. Just one book in fact. Just one, that's right. Lots of books, one at a time. That's it, one at a time. We didn't very much like tons of books did we. No, not really, and neither do we now. We like one book. Yes, we like one book now and we liked one book then. We went to the library for instance and we soon lost the habit didn't we of taking out lots and lots of books. Yes. Yes. Yes we did. (1)

This *in medias res* incipit establishes a rupture between what has happened before, which the narrator considers irrelevant, and what will come next, what *Bennett believes is important: her literary education. Secondly, this incipit showcases a peculiar use of pronouns: the we-pronoun is not used to report a conversation among people, but it refers to a "multiple self, an older and younger narrator in combination" (Corser 2023, 133). This is because "[*] Bennett isn't especially interested in the way her personal story is echoed in other people's. She's interested in getting this particular story right. Her prose is full of little assurances, checks, correctives and adjustments, as though to establish things once and for all" (Wills 2021). The use of question tags and the continuous rephrasing simulate a dialogue between two different versions of *Bennett, where the present one feels the need to rectify what the past one says. This linguistic feature is repeated throughout the whole novel and is the result of the reconstruction of *Bennett's identity after overcoming traumas.

[8] As in *AGT*'s case, we will refer to Bennett's autofictional version as *Bennett.

Literature's relevance is confirmed by a fifty-page-long list she makes of the books she has and has not read yet (*C19*, 74-122):

> Strange to think but when I first wrote the tale I hadn't yet read a single word by Italo Calvino, Jean Rhys, Borges, or Thomas Bernhard, nor Clarice Lispector. I had read *Of Mice and Men*, and *Lolita*, and 'Kubla Khan', and *The Diary of a Young Girl*. […] I had read […] many Imagist poems, one of which had snow in it and a white leopard I think, or, more accurately, it was a leopard that had no outline – maybe it was penned by Ezra Pound, I don't remember. (74)

Blending personal anecdotes with literary references, *Bennett foregrounds how reading is a fundamental aspect of her existence, shaping her sense of self. Books are not simply a form of entertainment; they are integral to her understanding of the world: "[y]ou feel they wouldn't exist without you seeing them. Just as they wouldn't exist without you… And isn't it true the other way around – that the pages you read give you life?" (122). She emphasizes her symbiotic relationship with literature: reading is not passive; rather, it is an active engagement that enlivens both the reader and the book.

Inside this long excursus, there are two other "biographical" digressions. The first one tells of when *Bennett used to work as a cashier in a supermarket while studying for her A-levels. She recalls a peculiar client, called "the Russian", who used to do grocery shopping following a precise routine (75-76). One day his pattern is disrupted: while the narrator was going towards the "checkout 19" – the novel's title is inspired by this episode – the Russian addresses her and hands her a copy of *Beyond Good and Evil* by Friederich Nietzsche. Nonetheless, *Bennett is not surprised by the man's behaviour but by the cover of the book:

> […] on the cover was a painting of a woman with large naked breasts and her hands are resting down, her hands are resting down because she is a sphinx, […] the way her hands rested down like that, exactly like the way my hands rested down on top of the dark brown lid of the till when there was no one there and nothing for me to do […], and I couldn't help but believe that the Russian man must have thought so too. (76-77)

After this, the Russian story stops to reappear two chapters later. The narrative frame is the same but, once again, *Bennett makes some changes. Firstly, she writes in a new style: "[m]any years ago a large Russian man with the longest tendrils […]" (153). Both the syntax and the lexicon resemble the language of fairy tales. Secondly, a new character appears, his wife. When the old man gives *Bennett Nietzsche's book, the narrator has a completely different reaction:

> I am beyond unnerved because it is abhorrently clear that the reason why the Russian man has seen fit to give me this book is because […] a minor yet far-reaching aspect of my disposition wavered in the periodic presence of the Russian man […] the Russian man has seen through my ruffled yet unbroken flesh. Straight into the quickening revolutions of my supremely aberrant imaginings. (162)

She feels violated by the man who, without ever speaking to her except for the strictly necessary, had been able to penetrate her imaginings. The reformulation of the Russian's story is part of *Bennett's identity building. As she rereads some books and grasps new meanings every time, what she writes is subjected to a rewriting process.

The second digression nestled inside the bio-bibliographic list regards the reading of Edward Morgan Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908). She loves the novel so much that she actually goes to Florence to experience what Lucy Honeychurch, Foster's protagonist, has experienced. She especially wants to emulate one scene:

I wanted to flicker through the clandestine arcade onwards to the Arno, to stand above the cool wide river, with my hands, yes, trembling and white over the parapet and to throw something, yes, postcards, yes, just like she [Lucy] had done, and to watch them flutter, wildly, yes, before landing upon and being carried off, away, yes, by the River Arno. That's how I always remembered it, for years and years. (*C19* 106-107)

Almost twenty years from the first reading, she reads it again and she finds out that she misremembered the plot: "[t]he story unfolded much more rapidly than I remembered – and there was a lot more straight-talking than I recalled" (108). She is struck when she discovers that it was not Lucy who threw the postcards in the river but George Emerson, a young man who courts her. Then, questioning why she had come to believe that Lucy was the protagonist of the scene, *Bennett considers that "[p]erhaps there has been operating in me a belief that men do not throw anything into water besides hooks and stones. That the impulse to release a thing into the drift is a female one" (109). This digression perfectly displays how her understanding can be tainted by her imaginings. It is also exemplary of how much the narrator's life is conditioned by reading and of the processes of rereading and rewriting typical of *Bennett's text: the second time she encounters Forster's novel she has to face an older version of herself and come to terms with it. Indeed, the whole bio-bibliographical list exemplifies her awareness that it is necessary to take some steps back in our lives as readers because the relationships we entertain with the books we read are bidirectional: as we interpret them; they can change us too.

*Bennett does not represent herself only as a reader, but also as a writer. She discovered her passion for writing by chance while doodling in the back of her exercise book – "[…] a line again, a smooth line relaxing across the page and the line broke off into words, just a few words, then a few words more, and the words set out a story, as if it had been there all along" (42) – and feels that she has discovered a new means of expression she can use to represent her own reality. However, she hides her talent until her teacher, Mr. Burton, finds out:

He'd looked in the back of my exercise book he said. […] A curious little story, he said, and he asked me if I'd made it up myself and I said yes I had and he asked me if I had any more stories and I said yes I did even though I didn't and what did he say then? 'Can I read them?' 'Would you like me to read them? (50-51)

From this moment on, *Bennett will begin writing one story a week to have it corrected by him.

Notwithstanding the haphazardness of her initiation to writing, she considers it an essential part of her identity. For example, she breaks up with a manipulative boyfriend because, despite liking her for being a writer, he wants her to stop because "[w]riting took me away from him" (139). After the separation, he will tear up a manuscript of hers in revenge. Later, she sets herself to reconstruct the story she had written but her memories are so clouded that she writes four endings and she continuously interrupts the narration to justify herself: "[…] I simply wrote 'long ago' at the beginning of the tale and left it at that because I wasn't really sure myself when exactly or where exactly the story happened" (53-54). From the beginning, the story sounds like a fairy tale: "Tarquin Superbus was a very elegant sort of man who lived in a very elegant European city sometime in a previous century" (53). Tarquin is a very lonely and ambitious man who buys a lot of books to impress his only friend, the "Doctor": "everyone knows if you have a lot of fine books about the place people are likely to automatically infer that you're a serious sort of person […] so he went about procuring an entire library of books" (60). He does not want to read them all, he only wants to appear intelligent. When the Doctor visits him, he starts looking at the books and discovers that all the pages are empty – " 'Tarquin

[…] there isn't a single word on any one of these pages!' " (68) – because he did not acquire a normal library, but the "key to complete and infinite lightness" (73). Here, the reconstruction is interrupted by the bio-bibliographical digression. After fifty pages, *Bennett resumes her narration from where she had left it, adding a crucial detail: "his whole library is filled with blank pages, but for one sentence" (74) that:

> contains everything. […] this one sentence that is everything, is not read – it is seen. It cannot be comprehended through the intellect […]. Importantly, the sentence cannot be shown to anyone else – it is an impossibility. It connects with and emancipates only the person who discovers it. Once connection has occurred, and the awakened state has been achieved, the sentence disappears from the page. It vanishes completely, Tarquin, in an instant, and materialises somewhere else, on another page, another page god knows where inside these thousands of books. (72-3)

Thus, Tarquin begins spasmodically searching for that one sentence. *Bennett would stop the tale at this point, but she is overcome by the power of written words and starts frantically adding new material. Tarquin abandons his mission and is consequently struck by a curse: "Rosalia's soufflé falls flat. The lilies in the alcoves hang their heads, shed their pollen, and wrinkle at the edges […]" (129). So, Tarquin and his cook burn all the books to break this curse. However, from the fire a cloud of darkness arises and evil spreads in the streets. Thus, out of guilt, Tarquin goes out to the balcony and inhales the cloud. Then he vomits that "one sentence" out in the shape of a blob. It seems like the story cannot end: "[b]ut [maiuscolo in originale?] that is not all. Down below in the street, while Tarquin Superbus is sleeping soundly, the disgorged blob of phlegm grows. It grows little limbs and […]" (137). *Bennett stops reconstructing the story when she does not recall anything else, even though she feels there is something more. With Tarquin's story, *Bennett takes to extreme the idea that some books feature sentences that change your life. Tarquin's reading becomes a paradox: he just turns the blank pages looking for that "one sentence".

In *C19*, reading and writing distort the narrator's reality. The aspects of the author's life used to build her character are distorted by *Bennett's literary mind. The continuous reformulations, Tarquin's and the Russian's stories and her relationship with Forster's *A Room with a View* configure an unreliable narrator whose mythomaniac mind is shaped by a series of oppressive traumas. Firstly, her literary education is conditioned by different figures. On the one hand, her mother hides certain books from her because she is too young. As she grows up, she reads those in rebellion towards her mother and the school system: "[…] one summer when we ought to have been reading books from the reading list we laid down upon one of the sun loungers in a halter-neck black bikini with a packet of Dunhill cigarettes and read *A Start in Life* by Alan Sillitoe instead" (9). On the other hand, her education is conditioned by grievous male figures. Indeed, she used to read almost exclusively male authors, albeit not feeling represented by them: "I hardly ever saw so much as a glimpse of myself in any of their books" (171). She will approach female writers later on in her life. However, she will not always be free to independently explore the literary world due to the presence of male friends such as Dale, who "wasn't my boyfriend and never would be but often behaved just as if he was" (117). Moreover, thinking he is more intelligent than her because he is a man, he feels entitled to tell her what to and not to read:

> Women can't withstand poetry, seemed to be Dale's view. Women are beautiful and tender creatures and poetry breaks them, of course it does. Poetry rips right through you, makes shit of you, and a man can be made shit of […]. And what kind of a woman anyway is drawn towards poetry? Only a warped sort of a woman. (118-119)

More importantly, he imposes his poems on her: "Dale didn't […] encourage me to read poetry by those women [Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath], showed me instead his own very neat handwriting and terse yet tender verses" (119).

Dale is also the cause of *Bennett's biggest trauma. Indeed, towards the end of *C19,* she confesses that he rapes her one night when she goes to his house and finds him completely drunk. While they are talking, he starts hitting on her – "Dale said I looked like a beautiful mermaid […]. Then Dale said 'I'm going to come over there woman, […] and I'm going to fuck you'" (181) – and she, speechless at first, rejects him in vain – " 'Oh Dale,' I said, 'not now, not now,' and he said 'Yes now, of course now.' [come sopra] And so that's what happened" (182) –. As a means of self-defence during the rape, *Bennett keeps her eyes wide open:

> I kept my eyes open because if I shut my eyes the outside world would be gone and all I'd have to be aware of then would be my interior and my interior was being invaded in and out in and out and I preferred not to be aware of that as much as possible […]. (182-183)

Once the "torture" is over, *Bennett goes back home but she is unable to process what has happened and convinces herself that nothing bad has occurred: "it's Dale fucking you and you're just so tired, that's all, that's all it is, Dale, poor Dale" (184). A few pages forward she tells of a phone call she has with Dale a year after the rape:

> 'When you came back from Brighton last year I raped you didn't I?' […] 'If you're asking me did you have sex with me when I didn't want you to then yes the answer's yes Dale,' and Dale will curse, Dale will say 'fuck, fuck,' and I'll hear him saying things about how I'd already been treated so abysmally and how angry that had made him and how he couldn't bear it the way I'd been treated so badly by the most disgusting arrogant men and yet it turned out that he was worse, worse than all of them put together, and he'll sound very emotional and I won't feel emotional at all, I'll feel embarrassed, and I'll say 'Perhaps I bring out the worst in men'. (188-189)

Rather than asking for forgiveness, he humiliates her; he makes her believe that she is the cause of her traumas. Dale doubles the wound: first, he rapes her; then, he blames her.

This last episode is fundamental to comprehending *C19*'s autofictional configuration. The narrator displays episodes that contribute to her identity-building as a reader and a writer. However, these experiences affect her understanding. That is what happens, for example, when she misremembers the scene in *A Room with a View*. Furthermore, some of the events she narrates in the novel, such as the rape, are filtered by her self-defence mechanisms. The way she sees and represents reality is influenced by her coping mechanisms. This can be related to the continuous reformulations and the use of question tags: *Bennett is unsure that she remembers what she wants to tell and the clash between her old identity and the new one, marked by the traumas illustrated in the novel, produces such a peculiar writing style. She feels she cannot trust her perception of the world. In conclusion, while attempting to reconstruct her education and identity formation through literature, *Bennett showcases how difficult it is to make a truthful account of one's life after having had to renegotiate one's identity due to oppressive and traumatic experiences.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we conducted an analysis of three novels highlighting the different paths of emancipation from patriarchal forms of oppression each character undergoes, focusing on how such experiences can lead to autofictional writing. With regards to *AGIHFT*, we identified three sources of oppression that produce the girl's identity renegotiation process: the

relationships with her brother, her mother, and her uncle. The first one has almost nothing to do with patriarchy, except for her clear emotional dependence on a male figure. However, her tie with her brother is crucial to understanding the destruction of her identity and her suicide. On the other hand, the relationships with her mother and her uncle do present patriarchal aspects. Her mother, who is a victim of her father's religiousness and misogynistic culture, perpetrates the oppression she suffered on her daughter. The girl's uncle represents the apex of patriarchal oppression: by raping her several times, he contributes to the destruction of her identity. In conclusion, the relationships the girl entertains with these three characters bring her to conceive of self-destruction as her only means of emancipation. Indeed, the dismantling of her identity is paralleled by the destruction of the syntax. Furthermore, since the narration is in the first person, her death renders the whole novel an "unnatural narrative" (Alber 2016), thus provoking a short circuit with the referential elements and configuring an autofictional novel. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the oppression she suffers also affects her writing. Indeed, her wrecked syntax parallels the destruction of the girl's identity.

AGT's case is different for two reasons. Firstly, the identification of *Ní Ghríofa with the author is almost exact. Secondly, the patriarchal oppression does not derive directly from a man, but from the cultural expectations imposed on women. Indeed, her trauma consists in not living up to the expectations set for a mother after her daughter's birth because she could not carry her correctly (the baby was born prematurely) and neither could she produce any breast milk. The disappointment she feels is due to the patriarchal ideology that permeates Western cultures. She starts her emancipation process thanks to the copy of the *Caoineadh* she had brought with her to the hospital. This episode is the turning point of the novel, the moment when the narrator understands her purpose: to do justice to Ní Chonaill and all the women who were erased from history by men, she has to write about her journey searching for Ní Chonaill while translating her lament. Eventually, this will result in the writing of *AGT*, whose cyclical structure clashes with the strong referentiality the novel is characterised by, therefore creating an autofictional narrative.

Lastly, *C19* showcases different forms of patriarchal oppression and of emancipation. *Bennett's traumas are linked to a male figure, Dale, and to an ex-boyfriend. The latter is the one that, on the one hand, praises *Bennett for being a writer, and, on the other, wants her to stop. When she eventually breaks up with him, he will tear up the manuscript of Tarquin's story, which she then tells and reinvents in *C19*. Dale harms her even more because he forbids her to read Plath's and Sexton's poems because she is a woman and he forces her to read his own poems instead. Most importantly, he rapes her and then blames her for what has happened. Dale represents the victim-blaming culture that is typical of patriarchal society: even though women are the offended party, men cannot ever be in the wrong and, therefore, it is women who must be at fault. These experiences, together with her upbringing with an aloof mother who hides books from her, lead her to develop a mythomaniac personality that makes her doubt her mind. This results in specific linguistic features – question tags, continuous reformulations – that help the reader understand that *Bennett is an unreliable narrator and that, no matter how referential the novel can be, *C19* is not an autobiography but an autofiction.

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