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Sally Rooney and the Politics of Post-Celtic Tiger Disability Aesthetics: Neurodiversity and Endometriosis as Metaphor

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Abstract:

This essay surveys the exclusion of neurodiversity from the first wave of Cultural Disability Studies by analysing Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017). It locates the protagonist, Frances, within a feminist disability discourse that reconsiders her disabilities through interdisciplinarity. Frances' endometriosis is connected to the notion of crisis and linked to post-boom Ireland by remarking its neoliberal traits. The essay likewise accounts for her presumed autism and tackles the issues raised by fictional representations of ASD. A double reading of autism is suggested in the form of C-PTSD. The article concludes by contextualising Frances' disabilities in relation to both Irish disability tradition and theorised Post-Celtic Tiger disability aesthetics.

Keywords: Autism, Disability Studies, Neurodiversity, Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, Sally Rooney

1. On Neurodiversity, Feminism, and Literary Ethics

In fiction, the representation of female disability has often occupied an ambivalent position, working as a reflection of existing social biases. Many proclaimed feminists have metaphorised women's mental and/or neurological dis/ability[1] to account for the marginalisation and suppression of able-bodied womanhood within a ruling patriarchal system. Sandra Gilbert and Susan

[1] Using "dis/ability" instead of "disability" aligns with Dan Goodley's theorisation on the dis/ability complex occurring at the level of the individual. "The dis/ability complex refers to the complicated though necessary ways in which disability-ability and disablism-ableism feed into the production of one another" (2014, 51). The binary oppositions imply that non-able-bodiedness can exist and be understood only in dialogue with its opposite, namely body normativity.

Gubar radically set forth this agenda by asserting that literary representations of mentally and/or neurologically impaired women function "as asocial surrogates" (1979, xi). This paved the way for a long tradition of feminist criticism that sees disabled women's embodiment as a social performance orchestrated on the written page to advance social critique. Said predisposition is the scholarly manifestation of a much widespread tendency to metaphorise and neglect dis/abled women's voices. This propensity, which alludes to feminist theory's incompleteness, as, till the 1980s, there was no interest in addressing the interactions between gender and dis/ability (Morris 1996b, 5), has been contrasted by the rise of Feminist Disability Studies. Since feminist issues and ethics are interweaved with dis/ability, Feminist Disability Studies "recognizes the power of identity, at the same time that it reveals identity as fiction; […] [it] seeks equality, and it claims difference" (Garland-Thomson 2002, 28). Adopting a feminist disability viewpoint has to do with more than scholarship about women with dis/abilities. It elucidates the pioneering processes of identity formation that lie at the core of contemporary tactics of exclusion and, as such, it reconfigures dis/ability under a self-aware and inclusive lens (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1557).

Literature of and around dis/ability is informed by material accounts of lived dis/ability. Socio-cultural narratives about what dis/ability entails are, in their turn, influenced by fictional accounts, often produced by able-bodied authors. Their relationship is mutual: as Leonard Kriegel claims, "the image [of the disabled] exists in literature because the reality exists in life" (1987, 33). Scholarly interest in this matter has been palpable since the first wave[2], testifying its relevance in shaping past and current discourses on dis/ability and correlated social, cultural and affective practices. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson encapsulates this construct in the notion of "the normate", referring to the corporeal materialisation of culture's collective narrative which puts limitations on the lives of people with "deviating bodies" (1997, 8). David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder similarly argue that "literary representation bears on the production and realization of disabled subjectivities, in the manner in which those representations are disseminated and consumed" (2000, 9). Disability, Tobin Siebers concurs, presents a challenge to the representation of the body, since "the disabled body changes the process of representation […]. Different bodies require and create new modes of representation" (2008, 54). All these theorisations, born independently, point at a collective apprehension for the material impact of fictional narratives. They highlight how disability narratives do not stand on their own, detached from the lives of those who read and write them, but render instead "fictional depictions […] and public interpretation of actual events […] mutually sustaining social artifacts" (Freeman Loftis 2015, 20). This rhetoric, pertaining to a mutual, and often damaging, dialogue between literature and cultural perception, is accurate for representations of dis/abled women and neurodivergent individuals.

To grasp the change from a physical disability paradigm to a growing neurodivergent dimension one has to be cognisant of both disability's cultural history and Neurodiversity Studies. Reflecting a departure away from the visual in favour of the perceived invisible, the emergent interest in neurodiversity reminds us of dis/ability's wide spectrum of fluctuation. It deconstructs what we think we know of dis/ability and how we have been conditioned to materially imagine it and look at it. Neurodiversity Studies does not stand for a collective

[2] The first wave of Critical/Literary Disability Studies took place from 1990s to early 2000s. It distinguishes itself from being US-based, as opposed to the UK-based social modelist categorisation. Its main feature is a prominent interest for physical disability and correlated literary implications. On the contrary, the second wave of Cultural Disability Studies, currently underway, focuses on mental and neurological disability and criticises its predecessors for marginalising neurodiversity and its representational analysis.

absorption for the academic topic of the moment; rather, it reflects a broader revolution that is reframing the understanding of human embodied variety. "Neurodivergent" and "neurodiversity", developed in online autism activist communities in the 1990s, have in this sense been both intentionally adopted in scholarly conversations on dis/ability to depathologise neurological difference. The notion of neurodiversity thus relates not solely to differences in neurology, but to "perceived variations seen in cognitive, affectual, and sensory functioning differing from the majority of the general population of 'predominant neurotype'[3], more usually known as the 'neurotypical' population" (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Stenning and Chown 2020b, 1). Therefore, it refers to a manifestation of cognitive design that can absorb autism, PTSD, epilepsy, ADHD, schizophrenia, depression, and more.

While this dynamic may seem to mirror a social modelist division by neglecting a medical standpoint, studies on neurodiversity move forward. They embrace an inclusive comprehension of human minds and the way they function bioculturally, meaning in constant interaction between biological adaptations and cultural constructs (Carroll *et al.* 2017, 2). This allows to see our cognition as a physical part of our body (Murray 2008, 8), leading the discussion back to the issue of visibility. Under this lens, physical, sensory, and cognitive[4] dis/abilities merge to highlight how their rhetoric originates from the body, and outside of its vessel it is further shaped through conceptual transmission. As a consequence, "disabilities are not *either* physical facts or discursive constructs, but both" (Osteen 2008b, 2).

Seeing the physical and the mental as co-existing, while in a cartesian sense they are permanently separated, equals denying a vision of reality that positions intersectional conversations at the basis of its reasoning and inherent (mal)functioning. We are not body-and-mind, separated, but bodymind[5]. The physical and the cognitive do not only influence one another, but, acting as one, they also give rise to each other (Price 2015, 268).

The embodied and the discursive dialogue within a dis/ability context inevitably clash with the material. Revised feminist theory renters the conversation by connecting biocultural theory, neurodivergence and our surroundings through the formulation of the "misfit": "Misfitting serves to theorize disability as a way of being in an environment, as a material arrangement. […] A misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it" (Garland-Thomson 2011, 594).

The interdisciplinarity of the biocultural also hints at the broad scope of neurodiversity. Since every brain is different, unique in its formation and development, neurological diversity is limitless (Irish 2025, 3). Asserting that there is no limit to neurological variation means that every human, regardless of the presence of a diagnosis, falls within the spectrum of neurodiversity, as each of us senses, feels – emotionally –, thinks – cognitively – and reacts to life differently.

Given that Disability Studies does not posit a power disparity between physical and cognitive dis/abilities, the nature of initial frictions seems a residue of historical forces and sensationalist

[3] Developed by Bradley Irish (2025), the notion of neurotype refers to a form of neurological style. We can thus speak of a neurodivergent neurotype, or, more specifically, of a dyslexia neurotype or an autism neurotype. Nonetheless, while developed within Neurodiversity Studies, this notion does not refer specifically to neurodivergence alone.

[4] Cognitive disability and intellectual disability are not synonyms. The former relates to a wide range of symptoms and conditions pertaining to the neurodiverse dimension, while the latter addresses individuals displaying IQ parameters measured to be below average.

[5] The notion of bodymind was formulated by Margaret Price (2015) to address the understanding of body and mind as one single entity which works together and is simultaneously affected by the other. This idea reinforces the vision of the brain as a physical part of the body, and consequently of the neurological dimension as worthy and equal of scholarly recognition as the physical.

framings. Across history, the fate of people with physical disabilities has been moulded by their ability to dissociate themselves from their cognitively disabled peers, a phenomenon arising from internalised oppression fostered by institutionally reinforced disability hierarchies (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 3). The focus on visuality, combined with medicalised practices that have for long relegated the cognitively dis/abled to asylums, has resulted in a public and systematically implemented disparity. Forced to undergo a regime of procedures that precluded them from being recognised as visible citizens, cognitively disabled people have likewise been omitted from social participation, in ways that their physically impaired counterparts have not. Therefore, "while physical disabilities have been constituted as political identities in similar terms, cognitive disabilities have not enjoyed the same levels of collective and politicized identity" (Fraser 2018, 11). This also explains why the disability rights movement and the Social Model have originated from the actions of physically dis/abled activists, while the cognitively dis/abled still to this day struggle to form a stable network. The history behind the formulation of neurodiversity in virtual autism advocacy groups is an exemplification of this narrative.

The visual ability, among all of the five senses, is the most involved in the question of dis/ability. Through the eyes we can detect whether a person uses a mobility aid to move and exist in the world, if they miss a limb, are blind, or if they sign. The normative paradigm, omnipresent since humans' conception, instructs us to look at the other and detect whether they conform to the norm. Partly unconsciously, this normative paradigm also deviates our emotional responses on the basis of the scale of "abnormality" the disabled subject showcases. Cognitive dis/abilities escape the power of the gaze. This signals another significant difference that has contributed to their marginalisation, both socially and academically. "The person with disabilities", writes Lennard Davis, "is visualized, brought into a field of vision, and seen as a disabled person. […] The body of the disabled person is seen as marked by the disability. […] Disability is a specular moment" (1995, 12). The invisibility of neurodiversity lacks both mirroring and spectacularisation. Its seriousness cannot be measured, nor does it allow for firm psycho-emotional judgement: the physically normative gaze holds way more power than the cognitive normative gaze.

United by a shared intention to decolonise their medical identification, physical dis/abilities and neurodiversity also differ in matters of actual diagnostic procedures. While it is true that there is no such thing as a fixed dis/abled identity, a common consensus exists, on both a scientific and a socio-cultural dimension, regarding what a physical or sensory dis/ability is and what it presupposes. Neurodiversity, on the contrary, has been defined as a moving target: its definition will continue to fluctuate due to the interactions between neurotypical individuals and the institutions that seek to extend its colonialisation (Chapman 2020, 219).

Autism in particular does not have a single neurological basis. The lack of medical consensus implies that no comprehensive definition of autism exists: it is, hence, "an extremely unstable category" (Osteen 2008b, 10), a "floating term working through loose generic association" (Murray 2008, 28). First delineated by Dr. Leo Kanner in 1943, autism has acquired from the very beginning the label of a psychological rather than an organic disorder or, alternatively, a defence mechanism of the individual (Waltz 2023, 58). Its semantics, pointing at autism as a condition of the self, has implemented this idea, constructing it from the outside in the form of a psychiatric diagnosis. The foundational language attached has consequently been one of pathology. In the definition provided by Laura Schreibman, this connotation seems apparent: "[a]utistic disorder, or autism, is a *severe* form of *psychopathology* evident before the age of 3 years old. It is a *disorder* characterized by a unique constellation of *severe* and *pervasive* behavioral *deficits* and excesses" (2005, 2; my emphasis).

The neurodiversity movement is challenging this vision by promoting a counter-narrative that rethinks the deficit model, but there is much to be done on that matter. Its rhetoric still lies in the hands of medical practitioners, who establish boundaries to who can define ASD at a broad scale. It follows that first-person stories are seldom included in this picture. This omission contributes to generate a philosophical and political debate, rather than a purely scientific discussion regarding who is entitled to frame the condition (Smukler 2005, 22).

As of 2022, autism is still listed in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), and its broad range of characteristics continue to be understood as symptoms. Among them Simon Baron-Cohen and Patrick Bolton mention: lack of eye contact, inability to make friends, odd approaches to other children – who tend to ignore the autistic subject – and consequent lack of social awareness, lack of imagination, aloneness and special interests (1993, 3-4). While all these characteristics are indicative of ASD, their gravity is not univocal among neurodivergent individuals, and nor is their frequency. It is this peculiar cluster that dictates a diagnosis, as some of these characteristics can be found separately among neurotypicals.

Despite the variety in symptomatology, autism lacks a unifying biological marker. This fluidity, special of autism, contributes to its ongoing public fascination, testified by the growing presence of potentially autistic portrayals in fiction following the boom in neuroscientific research of the 1990s. Deprived of a specific origin and typified by a variegated body of manifestations, autism, more than a medical condition, acquires the cultural attributes of narrative. "[The] diagnoses of autism are essentially storytelling in character, narratives that seek to explain contrasts between the normal and the abnormal" (Duffy, Dorner 2011, 201). Operating at a time when the notion of autism is still up for discussion, twenty-first century autism narratives are, more than ever before, responsible for the discourse they generate. Despite this responsibility, the influence of autism's rhetoric remains pervasive. Most contemporary autism narratives perpetuate stigma by reflecting a non-autistic portrait of the autistic world and, in so doing, reiterating the narrative first advanced by psychiatric and psychological professionals. The "symptoms" of autistic characters tend to be reduced, as for all other dis/abilities, to stereotypes to highlight the disparity between the disabled and the non-disabled. The autistic narrative becomes a narrative of normalcy. Inscribed in a circular discourse between fiction and reality, autism narratives serve the same purpose that disability narratives have had since the nineteenth century. They generate uncanny feelings, evoke fascination in the able-bodied reader and promote a normative canon for both the body and the mind. This result can only be achieved by remaining faithful to the prime attitudinal rhetoric of ASD.

Reducing disabled representations to tropes indicates, as Tom Shakespeare observes, "that the person's individuality can be ignored, as the impairment label becomes the most prominent and relevant feature of their lives" (2014, 95). This is specifically truthful for autism, whose codification and subsequent representation have deprived autistic people of traits deemed constitutive of the human condition: among all, empathy. In his foundational study, Baron-Cohen argues that children and adults with autism suffer, to various degrees, of "mindblindness", namely of the inability, caused by a ToM (Theory of Mind) deficit, to both read and comprehend the mental states of others and to predict their behaviour (1995, 5). Hypotheses like this one – which was later revealed to be false – are especially damaging, as they enforce an othering discourse around neurodiversity. The narratives the dominant majority tell become the story people believe in. The discourse of autism suggests its representation. To change the narrative, the root cause must be addressed and challenged.

2. Does Frances have a ToM? Narrating crisis through dis/ability

Frances, the leading character of Sally Rooney's debut novel, *Conversations with Friends* (2017), is a university student of English at Trinity College, Dublin, who navigates her young womanhood in an extremely unstable period of Ireland's political and economic history: the Post-Celtic Tiger. Preceded by two decades of economic boom and social growth, known as Celtic Tiger (1995-2007), Post-Celtic Tiger years are the result of industry collapse and overall financial instability. The recessionary atmosphere creates, particularly among young adults, a decadent environment of precarity that places a strong emphasis on individual accountability (Kiersey 2014, 356). Said focus on individual agency is one of the prominent themes among Post-Celtic Tiger novels.

Despite the unfavourable economic spirit, post-2008 Irish fiction enjoyed a period of renewed literary proliferation. One of the reasons for such fertility is to be found in the climate preceding the recession, since, as Anne Enright notes in *The Guardian*, "it was hard to write in Ireland during Tiger times" (Jordan 2015). The spark of creativity in the face of decline takes the form of a critique to the neoliberal politics promoted by the government. Its consequences persist long after the actual recession. In an interview from 2017, Claire Kilroy observed on this matter that:

> [t]here weren't many significant literary debuts during the boom […], but, since the collapse, there has been enormous activity and the big prizes and advances have returned to Irish literary fiction. It's happening because in recent years it is acceptable to not be in 'gainful' employment, so people had permission to write again. (Burke 2017, 20-21)

Contemporary Irish prose takes, in this period, two main forms, both reflective of Ireland's stagnation. The former group is composed by novels that reflect an antique modernist style as a symptom of national fragmentation, while the latter, more prolific, centres on conventional realist novels by young Irish women (Darling 2023, 348). The self-assurance of women's writing is epitomised by Sally Rooney. More than a best-selling author and literary prize winner, Rooney, who has been baptised "the literary voice of Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland" (Patterson 2020), is the leading figure of this new generation of female writers.

Rooney's prose style, reminiscent of the classic *bildungsroman* structure, positions young female characters in conversation with both themselves and the outer world, creating a fertile ground for self-discovery and identity-formation in times of uncertainty. Her protagonists face family trauma, economic scarcity, abandonment issues, aloneness, self-harming tendencies and dysfunctional romantic dynamics. Her fiction emerges as novels of formation and/or emancipation. This form is nonetheless adapted to the contextual elements of recessionary Ireland in order to pinpoint the structural violence to which individuals are exposed to, as well as the crises' enduring impact on the self (Barros del Río 2025, 105).

The very choice of adapting the *bildungsroman* informs us of a deconstructive principle that the author may have adopted. The resonance of the *bildung* and the *bildungsroman* in critical and creative explorations of the Irish economic boom lies, for Eóin Flannery, in their alignment with a broader Celtic Tiger narrative that frames progress as destiny (2022, 103). Economic prosperity is fated, and so is the protagonist's psycho-emotional development. Rooney's reliance on the coming-of-age novel is, in a post-boom setting, compelling. In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances is painted as a young woman who relies on the men in her life – first her father and then Nick – for money: her wage is not sufficient to maintain herself and she barely has enough money to buy food. Her emotional world is similarly disturbed and unstable. By the end of the

novel, despite partially awakening to her introspection, she does not show significant signs of amelioration in relation to her self-concept and interpersonal vulnerability. Both her relationship with money and her individuality are precarious, and not destined. The progressive form clashes with the austere content of the Post-Celtic Tiger, reinforcing literature's critique to state policies.

The bodies of Rooney's female leading characters are also as defected as the society they inhabit. Their minds are wounded and result in the inability to form meaningful bonds, as well as to have proper face-to-face adult conversations. Frances, like Marianne in *Normal People* (2018), searches for self-validation in a Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland that, on the contrary, does nothing but reinforce their lack of worthlessness and self-love. The circular relationship between the self and the nation does not allow for external projections. "Formally conservative […], such [recessionary] fictions warrant attention not for their literary innovation but their recapitulation of systems of affect" (Flannery 2022, 12). The neoliberal paradigm informs affect and shapes young Irish women, vulnerable and fragile, into – supposedly – self-sufficient beings incapable of disentangling their individuality to solicit aid beyond themselves. This trait is epitomised in the absence of psychotherapeutic support, which none of Rooney's leading characters, including Frances, neither request nor mention. As the author observed in an interview, the structural deficiencies of neoliberalism mould her character's precarious and fragile conduct, underscoring the system's failures to provide ethical sensibility to both personal and shared suffering (Nolan 2017).

The Post-Celtic Tiger period is itself a crisis: a crisis of economics, faith, affect, and of the body. Rooney's novels, as recessionary novels, have crisis as a core theme, favouring their inscription into a long literary tradition that has developed on, and as a result of, crisis. Jean-Michel Ganteau expands on this tradition as follows:

> the literary text has always been dependent on evocations of crises […]. Not only does it represent the crisis that it chooses as its object of observation, but it incorporates it into its very structure, the plot being reliant on *agôn*, complication, resolution […]. Crisis lies outside the plot *and* is a formal ingredient of any plot. (2025, 19)

Rooney's works have indeed been categorised as "crisis novels", a designation that illustrates how personal and individual accountability can coexist in tension with feelings of impotence and constraint generated by globalisation (McGlynn 2022, 7). In *Conversations with Friends*, the crisis is external and internal, in the protagonist's body-mind. Frances's behaviour is, as the present reading demonstrates, resonant with the cluster of symptoms that dictates ASD. Her psychology is likewise dysfunctional and falls beyond the boundaries of self-acceptance. Her body is, the reader learns halfway through the novel, chronically ill: after enduring turbulence and delays caused by medical inefficiency, Frances is diagnosed with endometriosis. The diagnosis is narrated and received with tones of uncertainty:

> The doctor told me that I had a problem with the lining of my uterus […]. He said the cells were benign, meaning non-cancerous, but the condition itself was incurable and in some cases progressive. It had a long name which I had never heard before: endometriosis. He called it a 'difficult' and 'unpredictable' diagnosis […]. The doctor said 'we' wanted to prevent the pain from becoming debilitating or 'reaching the level of a disability'. (Rooney 2022, 270)

Despite being non-cancerous, endometriosis has much of the traits that cancer has. The illness requires medical surveillance through time, as it can degenerate and invade other parts of the uterus. The doctor advises Frances to start a pain therapy program that, while it cannot properly kill the "damaged" cells in the way chemotherapy does to cancer, it can prevent its symptomatic

degeneration. Diverging in terms of cure – and care –, endometriosis, contrarily to cancer, cannot be cured. Once a woman is diagnosed with it, her health will never be restored. Both cancer and endometriosis appear to be "energetic" diseases that, in different ways, fight and challenge the biology of the human body they inhabit and the medical treatments the patient has to follow. In this way, endometriosis acquires the characteristics and the military tone that Susan Sontag has attributed to cancer: abnormal growth, refuse to consume, and lack of control on the illness (2002, 63). Endometriosis colonises the uterus: its benign nature does not balance the debilitation and the symptoms it causes since, like cancer, it is progressive and can turn into a dis/ability.

It is significant here that the word "disability" only appears once in the entire novel, that is in the passage cited beforehand. Frances, despite having endometriosis and arguably being neurodivergent, is not "obviously disabled". To be "obviously dis/abled" is to use a wheelchair or to have a prosthesis. Recognising who is "obviously dis/abled" brings back the question of visibility and the power of the gaze. Neither endometriosis nor autism can be "visually diagnosed". Frances could easily pass for able-bodied, meaning that her disabilities escape its conventional categorisation: they escape sight's force. Disability passing blurs the divide between dis/ablity and normalcy, since it defines "the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as 'normal' " (Brune, Wilson 2013b, 1). The narrative framing of the disease on the part of Rooney, too, can be said to hint at the act of passing. The unbearable pain Frances suffers first significantly appears – unnamed and minimised – in chapter three. It is only in chapter twenty-seven, out of thirty-one, that her pain is given recognition through diagnostic procedures. Its severity is nevertheless evident from the beginning, with language choices that point at intensity and absence of control:

> I tried to sit up and then felt a *strange*, *wrenching* pain in my pelvis, which made me gasp out loud. […] I was *exhilarated* by the *seriousness* of my pain, like it might change my life in an unforeseen way. […] I was bleeding. It was just period. I put my face in my hands. My fingers were trembling. […] I was a hot pain, *like all my insides were contracting into one little knot.* (Rooney 2022, 22; my emphasis)

When the pain becomes unbearable, Frances heads to the hospital. The A&E doctor barely pays attention to her, mistakes her symptomatology for pregnancy and is unable to convey an accurate diagnosis. In a neoliberal environment, Frances overcomes the unconscious instinct not to ask for help and is met with a return to a mandatory individuality. Few weeks pass before she is assigned an appointment for an ultrasound. The discrimination she undergoes as a woman and now dis/abled is double, and reinforced by the nature of the illness being the epitome of her womanhood: her reproductive organs. An additional indication of endometriosis' need to embrace a Feminist Disability Studies discourse is, in this sense, found in the illness' constant denial by the hands of gynaecologists, both in fiction and lived embodied experience.

Later on, Frances' diagnosis puts a formal end to her identity as a non-disabled woman: "I had the sense that something in my life had ended, my image of myself as a *whole* or *normal* person maybe. I realised my life would be full of mundane physical suffering" (275; my emphasis). The diagnosis disrupts the self, in so far as she now lacks self-recognition and is compelled to create and integrate a new identity, as chronically ill, into her consciousness. This aspect is strengthened by the lack of knowledge surrounding endometriosis: Frances had never heard of it. The author's decision to portray her protagonist suffering from this condition hints at the disinformation regarding the illness in Ireland (Alférez Mendía 2023, 154). More broadly, it alludes to the precarity of Irish bodies within an unstable socio-economic context. As Arthur Frank affirms, "[i]llness is a crisis of self in the specific sense of an uncertainty that one's self is still there as an audience" (2013, 56). The crisis that chronic illness and/or dis/ability represent lies as foundation for their narration.

Frances' endometriosis disrupts her characterisation and codifies her liminality. It produces an impulse to control the body. This same need is found in life stories by autistic individuals, who have agreed on the condition's strong physical component (Murray 2008, 9). Differently from neurodiversity, the narration of endometriosis in the novel is a contextual fact that enforces the protagonist's marginalisation. The first self-description we have of Frances is that of a young woman who, from her adolescence, has lacked self-esteem and displayed clear signs of communication difficulty: "I didn't have close friends and at lunchtime I read textbooks alone in the school library […]. I was lonely and felt unworthy of real friends. I made lists of the things I had to improve about myself" (Rooney 2022, 8). Aloneness, set aside her on-and-off relationship and then friendship with Bobbi, has been omnipresent throughout her life. Prior to her diagnosis, social awkwardness, bisexuality and economic dependency already defined her otherness. Compared with Bobbi – intelligent, wealthy, outgoing, and healthy –, Frances is everything her only friend is not. Bobbi is the criterion for comparison to which Frances aspires but will never manage to reach. Born and raised in New York by Columbia professors of Jamaican descendants, Bobbi, who moved to Dublin as a teenager, is not affected by Irish ancestry. Frances, on the contrary, both lives and embodies the consequences of the Post-Celtic Tiger. The spectrum of traits she personifies concretises her fictional persona in the form of a non-conventional female protagonist. Rooney's choice to paint Frances as dis/abled allows a narrative deconstruction that sets the novel in opposition to the typically English tradition of disability narratives. The conspicuous emphasis of disabled characters in literature, from Victorian times onward, had followed a systematic pattern that placed non-able-bodied as marginal subjectivities. The disabled figure served no purpose in the narrative, aside from accentuating their physical, sensory and/or cognitive singularity. This scheme was perpetuated throughout the "post-Victorian" period, including Edwardian, Modernist and Post-modernist fiction. Contemporary literature, conversely, exhibits an alternation of this trajectory by placing the dis/abled figure as the leading character. The novel under examination is a great illustration of this new paradigm.

Rooney's subversion of this modality paves the way for a new mode of representation that emphasises the individual and their dis/ability. In *Conversations with Friends*, this emphasis takes on subtle connotations: words pertaining to the semantic field of dis/ability are seldom mentioned. Discourses and reflections around dis/ability, either by the author or her characters, never appear. Dis/ability is present, but invisible to those who experience it through third parties. Above all, it is invisible or denied by the dis/abled person who cannot sustain her own vulnerability. After the diagnosis, Frances refuses to acknowledge her newfound identity. She mourns her past as non-disabled, and dismisses her present by keeping Bobbi and Nick in the dark about the prognosis:

> I never told Bobbi about the ultrasound or the meeting with the consultant. By refusing to admit that I was sick, I felt I could keep the sickness outside time and space, something only in my own head. If other people knew about it, the sickness would become real and I would have to spend my life being a sick person. (Rooney 2022, 308)

Frances rejects the sick role that the medical establishment has attributed to her personhood. She refuses to submit to the medical model. Nonetheless, this decision seems to originate more from an inability to accept the self, than from a critique to the institution. The ambiguity of her characterisation frames dis/ability in precarity and uncertainty. Both her endometriosis and her supposed autism function in this way. The narrative ambivalence of neurodivergence is found in the absence of allusions to the condition: neither Frances nor Rooney ever mention

the possibility of ASD's involvement in the plot. This negligence does not render this reading less valid: if we take Baron-Cohen' and Bolton's diagnostic list as point of departure for the protagonist's cognitive and behavioural analysis, Frances' belonging to the autistic spectrum is rather crystal clear. Embarking in a seemingly diagnostic reading of the protagonist puts the critic in an undesirable position that takes on the attributes of medical evaluation: the acts of reading, observing, and evaluating are shared by both the critical practitioner and their medical equivalent (Murray 2008, 17). To avoid the disruptive ableist force of diagnosis, the reading that follows remains faithful to the principles of Neurodiversity Studies by combining the cognitive with the emotional. It rejects a pathological vision of autism and recognises that fictional representations of dis/ability are not comprehensive portraits that can account for the real functioning of the condition. This analysis has consequently purely critical purposes that seek to elucidate post-postmodernist strategies employed to represent autism in fiction. The considerations that will result from it do not aim to stigmatise or categorise, in any shape or form, autistic people and their embodied experience.

Frances' characterisation shows discrepancies as it relates to cognitive, affective and sensory sides of the self. The most evident feature that categorises her as an unstable person and places her in resonance with autism lies in her personality. Three times overall throughout the novel it is stated, either through self-acknowledgement or external judgement, that Frances does not have a proper personality. Not having a personality means not having an identity. Frances' identity, as much as autism in clinical terms, escapes definition: "Bobbi told me she thought I didn't have a real personality […]. Mostly I agreed with her assessment. At any time I felt I could do or say anything at all, and only afterwards think: oh, so that's the kind of person I am" (Rooney 2022, 19). Her lack of identity permeates all spheres of her life: she does not know what career to pursue, how to interact with people in conversation and, ultimately, she cannot detect her emotions. Frances escapes the realm of feelings by taking shelter in systematic patterns of emotional avoidance. Avoidance allows her to obscure, at once, both the possibility of being on the spectrum and of self-neglecting relationships because of trauma. In her romance with Nick, this elusion takes the form of an internet communication that shapes their liaison more in the cyberspace than in real life. This same cyberspace represents the key to a false intimacy (Zhou, Hou 2025, 10). Through the internet, vulnerability is circumvented. In the virtual reality of their relationship, Frances can avoid being in touch with her true sensations and distance the possibility of both having and connecting with her "real personality".

The prominent role of the internet and of internet (non-)communication in the novel alludes to an impactful parallel with autism. Literary criticism on autism has suggested that its spectrum of metaphors reflects the propensity, within postmodern societies, to experience isolation due to technology. "[W]e have come to understand our state of affairs as autistic, a metaphor for the lack of communication among states and individuals in the late capitalist reality of the postmodern world" (Kravitz 2010, 40). The evasive potential of technology and non-physical communication is used by Frances to control all the relationships in her life, including the one with her alcoholic father, with whom she mostly communicates through phone calls. By emotionally detaching from the figures in her life that could create internal turmoil, she both consciously and subconsciously reinforces her incapability to self-analyse. The rejection of introspection as synonym for emotive hybridity designs, again, her character by means of ambiguity: "I couldn't decide how to feel about it, or what it meant" (Rooney 2022, 134). Nevertheless, Frances' lack of clarity with regards to her emotional world does not make her less human, as Baron-Cohen and colleagues would have suggested. She does have a Theory of Mind: what she lacks is the aptitude to comprehend the origin, nature and intensity of her

feelings. The author's focalisation on her relationship patterns does, in this regard, place further emphasis on her "emotionless" world and facilitates a reading centred on autism.

Frances' affective vacancy creates the most uncertainty in her interactions with Nick that, for the entirety of the work of fiction, remain susceptible to her moves. While both parties verbalise this absence, the issue is not confronted directly. Nick chooses sarcasm, in his turn showing avoidant tendencies: "And I am sorry, he said. / I smiled mechanically, and said: oh, for hurting my feelings? […] / Sure, if you have any, he said" (110). Both Frances and Nick evade direct vulnerability. While it is plausible to assert that Frances does so as a result of her cognitive atypicality, other readings are possible. A leitmotif of the *bildungsroman* is in fact trauma, shaped as childhood trauma resulting from emotional and physical neglect and abandonment. According to the DSM-5, trauma takes place when a person is exposed to major life-threatening incidents, meaning actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 271). Recent studies have opposed this exclusive vision, proving that trauma can also result from repeated daily events. This is the case of C-PTSD (Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), also known as Complex Trauma. C-PTSD has been categorised as a disorder specifically associated with stress that refers to "the effect that chronic or repeated trauma can have on self-organisation-related-mechanisms" (Maercker *et al.* 2022, 60). The difference between C-PTSD and PTSD lies in the cluster of symptoms associated with the diagnosis, as the former includes both PTSD symptoms and chronic disruptions of the self in the form of affect dysregulation, negative self-concept, and difficult forming and maintaining relationships (*ibidem*). The proximity in symptomatology between trauma and ASD is relevant in so far as individuals with autism, C-PTSD or PTSD and attachment disorders experience a similar range of indicators with close outcomes in affective and behavioural functioning (Lever, Geurts 2016; Haruvi-Lamdan *et al.* 2020). This closeness often leads to misdiagnoses and diagnostic overshadowing (Au-Yeung *et al.* 2019).

This kind of trauma at work appears more insidious, since the traumatic events to which the female individual is subjected to are enacted by the same people she loved and trusted more (Brown 2004, 469). Frances is the only child of a divorce. Her parents are the source of her developmental trauma. Her father is emotionally absent and self-medicates by getting drunk. Her mother is emotionally immature and does not take the adequate time to listen to her daughter. She grows up in an unpredictable environment, where chaos reigns: her father's swinging mood sometimes even causes eruptions of violence. She has to learn to behave and exist quietly. She is forced to choose coldness and false safety over sensitivity and unpredictability: "I learned not to display fear […]. I was like a cold fish" (Rooney 2022, 49). She puts on a façade to cope with repeated traumatic events. In this way, the only escape to chaos is control: through control, Frances learns to predict the signs of possible disruption. Control is the window through which she can survive beyond the chaos of her home and family life. Growing up, she is forced to adapt this mode of behaviour to the relationships she forms as an adult. It is a way to survive without facing the root cause of her emotional dysregulation. Her life moves in autopilot. Affective distance serves to protect herself, and social media interactions are a safe way to do so. Through the epistolary form, she puts up a performance of the self that maintains said sense of control (Darling 2021, 545).

Unworthiness dominates Frances' character. Her self-esteem is so low she is unable to make and hold eye contact – also a core indicator of ASD. Her impotence in this regard is repeatedly stated, fostering her proximity to the spectrum. In social situations, her insecurity reaches its peaks and paves the road to dissociation: "At this point I felt a weird lack of self-recognition, and I realised that I couldn't visualise my own face or body at all" (Rooney

2022, 39). As a typically neurodivergent individual, Frances is cognisant of her intelligence and resorts to it in order to make herself feel better. Her intellect acquires value only in so far as it can be utilised to sense superiority and surveillance:

> My ego had always been an issue. I knew that intellectual attainment was morally neutral at best, but when bad things happened to me I made myself feel better by thinking about how smart I was. When I couldn't make friends as a child, I fantasised that I was smarter than all my teachers, smarter than any other student who had been in the school before, a genius hidden among normal people. (34)

Frances' high consideration of her brain does not compensate for the physical repulsion she perceives. Self-injury is used to both take the upper hand on the pelvis pain she cannot control and to suppress her trauma. Both actions result from deep-seated feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem. The encounters with her father cause most of the episodes of self-harm. In these occasions, two characteristics common of autism are combined: sensory sensitivity to cleanliness and self-injurious behaviour (SIB). The most frequent forms of SIB performed by autistic children and adults include self-biting of the hands and wrists and head banging, while other disruptive behaviours, such as self-slapping or self-scratching, are less common (Schreibman 2005, 46). Frances pinches her skin every time she feels overwhelmed by her surroundings. Hearing the voice of her father elicits anxieties regarding personal hygiene: "his drunkenness made me feel unclean. I wanted to shower or eat a fresh piece of fruit" (Rooney 2022, 120). The agitation escalates when the stimulus becomes visual, arising executive functioning difficulties and disgust, as in the following episode:

> When I opened the door, I could hear nothing inside the house. The hall smelt of damp and of something worse than damp too, something slightly sour. A refuse sack was tied up and abandoned under the hall table. […] The smell was so rancid that it felt physical, like heat or touch. Several half-eaten meals had accumulated around the table and countertops, in various states of *decay*, surrounded by dirty tissues and empty bottles. The fridge door was ajar […]. Standing in his house was like watching someone familiar smile at me, but missing teeth. I wanted to hurt myself again, in order to feel returned to the safety of my own physical body. (181-182)

Viewing Frances as neurodivergent allows the reader to combine these traits and form a coherent picture of her character. This perspective can then inform on aspects of her sensitivity, cognition and behaviour. It is both shaped mechanically by the self and inscribed in an outer world that fortifies its negative connotations. Her dis/ability, experienced either as chronic illness or neuroatypicality, or both, is constructed bioculturally, in conversation with the environment. Her conception of self as non-able-bodied is inevitably moulded by internalised ableism. The only written allusion to dis/ability makes this point apparent. The idea we get of her characterisation eventually reinforces the foundational methodology that novelists have followed to portray autistic individuals in their works. This paradigm, reiterated by Murray, argues that "within narrative, autism works to create a space, figured precisely because of how the condition is perceived to function, that, rather than allowing for the presentation of autism within the terms of the autistic individual, […] reflects back upon the non-autistic-world" (2008, 13). This mode of narration favours standardisation over singularity of representation. The dis/abled character becomes a prototype to be reiterated in successive works, employing the same set of distinctive qualities. Standardisation benefits metaphorisation, since the character is deprived of human individuality and made to comfort to social critique. The insertion of Frances into a Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland explains this idea.

3. Frances and Post-Celtic Tiger disability aesthetics

The analysis of Frances' dis/abled body through the lens of Irish Studies opens the possibility for at least two readings. The former relates to the Irish body as a location of (semi) colonial subjection to the British ruling class, while the latter focalises on the Post-Celtic Tiger as a metaphor for instability. Both readings follow a metaphorical pattern that sees disability aesthetics as, to borrow Mitchell's words, "an exceptional textual fate in that it is deployed in literary narrative as a master metaphor for social ills" (2002, 20). Disability as master metaphor functions as a locus of social critique and representational subjugation. The literary/social body becomes a vehicle for the materialisation of discussions around the nation. The idea of the social body serves in this sense to talk about the connection between the country's public sphere and the privacy of individuals: citizenship is the measure of goal of its health (Gilbert 2007, 8). Combining Irish disability aesthetics tradition to the peculiarity of recessionary Ireland serves to access an inclusive understanding that regards the historical, the political and the cultural as co-occurring sites of the human experience.

Compared to the mother country and ruling power, Ireland is located in a subordinated position of inferiority. Declan Kiberd notes that this subjectivity develops as a form of (semi) colonialism with strong economic and cultural connotations:

> As far as the Irish were concerned, colonialism took various forms: political rule from London through the medium of Dublin Castle; economic exportation by planters who came in various waves of settlement; and an accompanying psychology of self-doubt and dependency among the Irish, linked to the loss of economic and political power but also the decline of the native language and culture. (1995, 6)

The body earns attributes common to racial otherness: inferiority, dysfunction, backwardness, femininity and degeneration. Irish otherness is made to coincide with its Celtic foundations, fostering a sense of barbarism. This narrative functions, within the Anglo-Irish semicolonial discourse, as a narrative for disability (Quirici 2015, 77). Irishness is constructed fragmentally and in opposition to Englishness. It is the location of non-Englishness, where bodily deviation resides. This ideology contributed to envision Ireland, as Mark Mossman observes, as "a dysfunctional space in relation to the normalized, modern discursive space actually defining it – a set of discourses possessed by the able-bodied, franchised British policy makers […] and imposed upon the disabled and disfranchised Irishry" (2009, 57). The Irish social body is a symbolic dis/abled body. In the materiality of colonialism, too, the English body is fit and non-disabled: by the end of the Victorian period, Britishness, a symbol for Englishness, became synonym of fitness, whiteness, and masculinity (Davis 2006b, 9). Britain's colonies thus acquired a symmetrical symbolism. The colonial context of nineteenth century Ireland in particular formed a unique environment for the emergence of a social connotation of disability, with most inhabitants viewed by the administration as impaired and needing both cultural and political rehabilitation (McDonnell 2007, 93). As a result of this paradigm, the Irish body is culturally relegated to a detrimental imaginary marked by social exclusion and bodily difference: the Irish (dis/abled) body is necessarily a woman's body. Some historical events, like the Irish Potato Famine (1845-1852) and the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), further contribute to shape Ireland as England's crippled sister. This tradition narrates the Irish body as a fragmented and decadent body.

Ireland's lameness permeates nineteenth and twentieth century imagination and persists even after its political independence. The colonial past of Ireland affects its contemporary historical culture. Intergenerational trauma runs in the veins of young Irish adults who never experienced colonisation themselves. Ancient colonial misery continues, illuminating present

narratives. Discourses on present-day politics, society and affectivity of Ireland cannot be resolved without resorting to its colonial ancestry. After the economic boom, this tradition is revisited and updated to account for both past ideologies and present concerns. Young Irish writers who publish during Post-Celtic Tiger years seem to be aware of this opportunity and decide to put it into practice, giving rise to interdisciplinary conversations that foment a regeneration of Irish fiction. Rooney comments on this in an interview with Alex Clark in *The Guardian*: "if you look at the social change that has emerged in those years since the crash in Ireland, I think it speaks to a deep cultural shift that has taken place in part maybe because of the recession" (2018).

This cultural shift is mirrored in the body. The Irish body is materially malnourished and starved due to the recession. While there is no famine, the crash has obvious consequences on food pricing and Irish people's self-sufficiency. Sometimes, following the housing crisis, the Irish body is also homeless. The austerity of the Post-Celtic Tiger does not attack embodiment directly, but it does affect all its surroundings. Neoliberal policies promote vulnerability and fragility and ostracise the body. Post-Celtic Tiger corporeality is perfectly dis/abled. It is a body in recovery that requires surveillance and treatment, as much as the economy from which it originated. Within neoliberalism, this need is never met accordingly: the body is left in a perpetual state of waiting. The individual wishes to be rehabilitated – as in "brought back to normalcy" –, but faces obstacles, inefficiencies, and ignorance on behalf of the institutions designed to recover it. The Post-Celtic Tiger itself is the very disabling event that causes the Irish body to become once again dis/abled.

In post-economic boom fiction of female authorship, women's bodies gain prominence as a narrative location of blame for the overindulgence of the Tiger period (Bracken, Harney-Mahajan 2017, 2), figuring an imaginary that undergoes a similar evolution to traditional Irish disability aesthetics exposed beforehand. The victimisation of womanhood builds the female body as doubly stigmatised. It is dis/abled because it is owned by a woman, and because this woman is Irish. This same Irishness is dis/abled and abnormal. The narrative of Post-Celtic Tiger disability aesthetics therefore takes on the connotations proper of Feminist Disability Studies.

4. Conclusions

The bodymind of Frances does not become dis/abled as a result of Ireland's post-boom decadence. Its marginality is not intended to critique the establishment in the way earlier non-intersectional feminist theorists would have argued. If *Conversations with Friends* had been set in Tiger years, Frances would have still been dis/abled, as she would have carried the weight of her Irishness on her body. Her body is both a manifestation of this tradition and the additional outcome of the Post-Celtic Tiger.

She is malnourished and struggles to regularly buy herself food. She lives in a city apartment that she can afford only thanks to her father's money. Her millennial anxieties deriving from family dysregulation and intergenerational semicolonial subjugation are both reflected in her chronic pain and her neurodiverse mind. Endometriosis' chronicity is itself a symbol for the individuality to which young Irish women are left to. This individuality is made of self-neglect resulting from the absence of external help, as Frances does not see a therapist, nor does she receive proper gynaecological treatment. The possibility of undergoing surgery in order to remove endometriosis from her uterus is not contemplated: the body cannot be rehabilitated. The medical practitioners marginally featured as part of the illness' narration partake this dynamic and display either intellectual ignorance or indifference. Her affinity with the autistic spectrum captures the fragmentation of the reality she inhabits. The incongruous behaviours that define her character epitomise crisis and precariousness.

Dublin, as the heart of the recession, is another core symbol of this instability. Frances moves through the city without having clear points of reference (the only precise geographical indication given to the reader is Trinity College, Dublin). Set aside university, her transfers throughout the capital city of Ireland speak of economic instability and precarity as she never spends money herself and is either invited to events, or Nick provides for her. What we capture from this reading is the manner in which metaphorical symbolisms invade every possible sphere of the character's life. Rooney's prose encapsulates the essence of recessionary Ireland specifically because the protagonist lives multiple crisis of the self, and her surroundings are equally ambiguous.

The characterisation of Frances serves to outline the politics of representation that have defined, and continue to define, Irish embodied history. Her physicality highlights how, to be deemed inclusive, a reading of Irishness has to acknowledge both past and contemporary cultural disability history. These two perspectives continue to dialogue and inform the ideological framework that stands, at a subconscious level, behind a work of fiction.

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