



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report

Štěpánka Klečanská, “Anna Burns’s *No Bones* and *Milkman*: Bildungsroman and Trauma” (BA Thesis)

To discuss the formally complex and original work of Anna Burns in a Bachelor's thesis is an extremely ambitious choice, as evidenced also by the relative scarcity of critical engagement with Burns's novels to date, award-winning as they may be. Ms Klečanská is to be complimented on her courage and determination to bring the project to fruition. Her work discusses two of Burns's novels, *No Bones* and *Milkman*, in the context of the Bildungsroman tradition, with particular attention to the topic of trauma and the ways in which traumatic experience shapes the maturation of the novels' central protagonists. Following the thesis introduction, the essay is divided into two survey chapters that outline the history and development of the Bildungsroman, and the concept of trauma and its relation to narrative respectively. This context is subsequently used in the analysis of the two selected novels.

The outline of the history of the genre is largely based on the work of Franco Moretti, making useful contrast between Moretti's argument and that of other scholars who have focused on the “female”/“feminist” Bildungsroman since the 1980s. The candidate is to be lauded on her ability to succinctly chart an extensive terrain, despite the fact that the concluding summary of the genre's history in Irish literature is somewhat patchy, lacks reference to works published since the 1990s, and at times stretches the definition of the Bildungsroman beyond usefulness (as in the inclusion of Madden's *One by One in the Darknes*). Similarly, the chapter on trauma shows the candidate's competence to give a lucid and sophisticated summary of a complex area of study, preparing the ground for the analysis of Burns's work. The discussion of the novels that follows is relatively brief but provides accomplished and original close readings of these difficult texts, judiciously using existing scholarly commentaries, and regularly referring back to the introductory chapters of the thesis.

The quality of writing is mostly fine, although it tends towards brevity at the expense of elegance at times (for instance, the opening paragraph of the thesis Introduction starts in medias res, and so on). Mistakes in English occasionally creep in, particularly as regards the use of articles and prepositions (the former even in the title of Moretti's book); quotation marks are used inconsistently (round or straight?) and there are some minor errors in the format of references. What is of more consequence are the occasional loose ends in the overall argument: for example, the opening of the chapter dedicated to *No Bones* fails to state clearly that while the novel largely



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focuses on Amelia Lovett, it includes other stories of maturation (and whether this is an original development or distortion of the Bildungsroman conventions); likewise, Amelia Lovett's name is designated as symbolic but the point is not developed any further (23-24); unlike the chapter dedicated to *Milkman*, the chapter on *No Bones* lacks a discussion of the relation of trauma to narrative which seems as relevant in Burns's first novel as in her third. While the candidate's argument that much of the protagonist's maturation in *Milkman* had taken place between the time of the novel's action and the point from which it is narrated may be feasible, it fails to note the multiple flashbacks to middle sister's earlier life, before she has encountered Milkman. Finally, no evidence is offered for the claim made in the thesis Conclusion that the characters in *No Bones* "are able to reject some of the old violent patterns" in the end (40).

A few important matters might be clarified and the thesis defence:

1. As presented, it is not always clear what the trauma that Burns's protagonists suffer from originates in: on p. 15, the candidate asserts that their traumas stem from abuse by family and community, but elsewhere it seems that it is the violent conflict in Northern Ireland that is to blame.
2. The opening paragraph of Chapter 4 seems to involve a contradiction, as it simultaneously claims that *No Bones* conforms to the conventions of the Bildungsroman and is "a distorted Bildungsroman" (20). This might be a mere stylistic shortcoming – but also a significant flaw in the overall argument.
2. To extend the discussion of Burns's work further – also in relation to conventional Bildungsromans – what role does class play in the novels under discussion? (As Moretti argues, the Bildungsroman has been associated traditionally with middle-class, and earlier also aristocratic, individuals; but the setting of Burns's work is firmly working class – is this important? Is Burns unique in the context of contemporary fiction from or about Northern Ireland?)

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade it as "very good" (2) or "excellent" (1) depending on the outcome of the defence.

Prague, 16 August 2022

Prof. Ondřej Pilný, PhD