
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Unwitnessable: External and Embodied Foreclosures of Testimony in Anna Burns' Milkman and Eimear McBride's A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2014), through a combined reading of the primary philosophical frameworks of Emmanuel Levinas' (1969, 1985) ethics of the face, and Giorgio Agamben's (1998, 1999, 2005) concept of bare life, with Dominick LaCapra's (2001) theory of trauma to distinction between the signs of foreclosed witnessing and their critical expression. It argues that both novels depict what can be theorized as the unwitnessable: a condition that emerges when political and gender-based violence becomes extreme enough to disrupt the possibility of ethical witnessing. Each novel presents the unwitnessable differently. In Burns' it is created by social regulations and ideological adherence reinforced through community surveillance, and in McBride's it results from psychological fragmentation. This comparison shows that the unwitnessable is not only a narrative strategy but also a condition where some individuals' experiences cannot be expressed, understood, or witnessed. Through close analysis of the narrative strategies, this paper demonstrates that both authors not only present the impossibility of testimony but reproduce it, forcing the reader to be part of the ethical failure. Hence, this study proposes the unwitnessable as a critical category for the analysis of literary works involving political and gender-based violence in which testimony is rendered impossible, offered here as a working hypothesis to be tested against a wider corpus rather than as a fully generalized claim.

KEYWORDS

Anna Burns, bare life, Eimear McBride, Emmanuel Levinas, Giorgio Agamben, witnessing

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Introduction

Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2014) are two radical Irish novels that share concerns that transcend their literary geographical setting. Both narratives present a world of violence where the act of witnessing is at risk of marginalization or erasure. Burns' novel follows the story of an unnamed young girl, referred to as Middle-Sister in her unnamed city, who endures the unwanted attention of a paramilitary operative known as Milkman. McBride's narrative also presents the story of a young female nameless narrator who experiences physical and psychological violence that destroys her ability to narrate her story. Both novels focus on the collapse of the conditions that sustain witnessing rather than on the representation of testimony, highlighting the question of how it can occur when the witnessing subject has already been compromised.

Testimony in both literature and philosophy requires certain conditions: there must be individuals who can speak and listen, a language to express, and a social space where the testimony can be heard and believed. According to Levinas the most important condition is the face-to-face encounter with the Other as it creates ethical responsibility, since "the face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no 'interiority' permits avoiding" (1969, p. 201). For Agamben, the greatest threat to these conditions is what he calls "bare life," where people are reduced to biological existence without social or

political recognition. This reflects his claim that “sovereign violence is in truth founded not on a pact but on the exclusive inclusion of bare life in the state” (1998, p. 107). These conditions in both works discussed in this study are simultaneously compromised. The faces are concealed and considered dangerous, and the narrators are silenced by violence and trauma. As a result, testimony becomes difficult, if not impossible.

Approaches such as trauma theory and narrative ethics do not fully address this problem. They explain the foreclosure of testimony mainly as a response to a traumatic event, rather than as a condition that exists prior to the event and shapes it. Hence, this study uses LaCapra's trauma theory because it provides the language for describing these patterns. However, trauma theory alone cannot clarify why the conditions for testimony were foreclosed. To explain this, the study draws on the frameworks of Levinas and Agamben. This gap has not been adequately theorized in existing scholarship, either as a philosophical problem of witnessing or as a comparative framework through which Burns and McBride can be read together. While there have been studies on *Milkman* that discuss feminism, trauma, and linguistic innovation, comparatively little attention has been paid to continental philosophy as a framework to analyze the novel. Similarly, studies on *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* have examined its embodied female experience, stream of consciousness and syntactic experimentation, yet few have provided a philosophical framework for understanding how the novel's fragmentation performs the unwitnessable rather than merely representing its causes. Consequently, the unwitnessable remains underdeveloped as a critical category for explaining how testimony may be structurally, rather than merely psychologically, foreclosed.

To address this gap, the study introduces the concept of the unwitnessable: a condition in which political and social repression and gendered violence suppress testimony and destroy the ontological foundations that make witnessing possible. The concept names the structural situation in which the conditions necessary for the emergence of a witnessing subject are foreclosed. Through close reading drawing mainly on Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the face (1969, 1985) and Giorgio Agamben's theory of bare life (1998, 1999, 2005), and applying Dominick LaCapra's (2001) distinction between acting out and working through as an analytical tool for examining the novels' formal strategies, this study argues that both novels do more than depict the impossibility of witnessing; they draw readers into the ethical failure they expose.

More specifically, the comparison distinguishes between external and internal forms of foreclosure. In *Milkman*, political and social forces prevent individuals from speaking or being heard, and thus witnessing is foreclosed externally. In *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, physical and psychological violence fragments the narrator's sense of self, which suppresses testimony internally. This distinction between external and internal foreclosures is the study's main contribution, demonstrating that the unwitnessable is a structural condition that result from different forms of violence produced by different mechanisms.

Guided by the following questions, this paper presents a comparative philosophical analysis of the two novels to address this gap. First, in what ways do Burns' and McBride's formal strategies enact the foreclosure of Levinasian witnessing? Second, how do the communities in both novels operate as Agambenian states of exception that reduce individuals to bare life and foreclose ethical testimony? Third, how do both novels make readers experience the unwitnessable rather than simply describe it? Finally, how does a comparison of the two novels deepen our understanding of the unwitnessable and contribute to discussions of political and gendered violence in literature?

Literature Review

Emmanuel Levinas' philosophical ethics, as presented in *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority* (1969), provides the foundational theoretical framework for this study. He argues that through face encounter with the Other, ethical relationships are built. The face is not merely the physical appearance of the Other, but the manifestation of the Other's irreducible identity. In encountering the face of the Other, one develops an ethical responsibility as “the face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation” (Levinas, 1969, p. 201). This ethical responsibility is the foundation of human relationships, coming before concepts such as freedom, knowledge, and personal choice. Although Levinas does not explicitly develop a theory of testimony, his ethical philosophy provides a framework for understanding witnessing. “The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill” (Levinas, 1985, p. 86). From this perspective, if the face is concealed or rendered invisible, as they are in the works of Burns and McBride, the ethical relations with the Other are broken.

However, beyond the violence that results from individuals' interactions, there is also the violence that is produced by social and political structures. Levinas addresses this broader dimension of ethical responsibility through the concept of the third party, a concept developed by Levinas, but usefully clarified by Bernasconi (1999) for literary application. Bernasconi explains that the introduction of the third party indicates that ethics is no longer limited to an individual's exclusive responsibility toward the Other, but also encompasses responsibility for justice among the plurality of others within society. Ethical responsibility, therefore, must be mediated through institutions and principles of justice rather than remaining solely within the face-to-face encounter. Applying Levinas's philosophy of ethics to literary criticism, Eaglestone (1997) argues that reading is an ethical encounter with the Other. As such, readers are morally responsible for responding to the vulnerability represented in the texts.

This perspective extends Bernasconi's (1999) discussion of justice and helps to analyze Burns' and McBride's narratives, positioning of the reader as a witness to political and gendered violence.

Although these perspectives do not invalidate Levinas' framework, they reveal its limit in explaining how political power can prevent ethical relations from emerging between individuals. While Bernasconi extends Levinas' ethical questions of justice, he does not explain how dominant power prevents face-to-face encounter from occurring. Because Levinas' theory begins with the encounter between self and Other, it does little to discuss the conditions that determine who is permitted to enter into that encounter. This limitation could be addressed through Agamben's concept of bare life, which provides a political understanding of how certain individuals are excluded from ethical recognition. Together, Levinas' ethics and Agamben's political theory establish the theoretical framework for this study.

Agamben's theoretical work supplies the second philosophical framework for this study. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben reinterprets Aristotle's distinction between bios, politically qualified life, and zoē, bare life without political rights, arguing that Western politics incorporates bare life into its political order. "The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend / enemy but that of bare life / political existence, zoe/ bios, exclusion /inclusion" (p. 8). According to Agamben, sovereign power is the force that determines who is abandoned to bare life and thereby exposed to violence and who is politically protected. The figure of homo sacer represents this condition. Agamben describes homo sacer as a person who has no legal or political protection but remains under sovereign power. As a result, such a person can be subjected to violence, representing the condition of bare life.

In *State of Exception* (2005), Agamben extends this, arguing that the state of exception is "the legal form of what cannot have legal form." He describes this as "the preliminary condition" for understanding how law "binds and, at the same time, abandons the living being" and thus becomes the normal way of governing people (p. 1). This idea is relevant to both novels under discussion. In *Milkman* and during the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the general atmosphere is governed by emergency powers and parliamentary authority a condition in which law subjects individuals to its authority, and abandons them to sovereign power at the same time. In *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, the unnamed narrator also experiences a similar state of exception within her own family and society, where the patriarchal Catholic order determines whose life deserves protection and whose should be disregarded, mirroring Agamben's concern with the reduction of subjects to bare life. This study extends Agamben's framework by arguing that communities can simultaneously occupy both sovereign and bare life positions, a claim not explicitly made in his work.

The two frameworks are not fully compatible, and this study does not attempt to reconcile their philosophical differences. Levinas grounds ethics in the encounter with the Other, whereas Agamben explains exclusion through social and political structures, treating "bare life" as a product of sovereign power rather than a pre-political condition. Rather than synthesizing these theories, this study uses each for a different analytical purpose. Agamben explains the political mechanisms of exclusion through community surveillance in one novel and patriarchal authority in the other. Levinas, on the other hand, provides the ethical language for understanding what is lost when a face is prevented from appearing or being heard.

Before discussing the concept of the unwitnessable, it is important to distinguish it from a similar one developed by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the archive* (1999). Agamben argues that testimony of the victims is inherently incomplete because the person who experienced the most extreme form of dehumanization in camps, the Muselmann, cannot testify. Hence, testimony always speaks on behalf of those who cannot speak. As Agamben states, the "true" witnesses, or the "complete" witnesses, are those "who did not bear witness and could not bear witness" (1999, p. 34). This study draws on Agamben's account of exclusion, yet it uses the term unwitnessable in a different sense. While Agamben, locates the possibility of testimony in the ontological structure of witnessing itself, this study locates it in the historically produced social, communal, and institutional conditions that prevent testimony from occurring.

Unlike Agamben's Muselmann, who cannot testify because of the destruction of their humanity, Middle-Sister in Burns' narrative and McBride's narrator are prevented from testifying because of surveillance, patriarchal power, and institutional exclusion. This distinction is methodologically important. The unwitnessable identifies forms of exclusion that are socially and politically produced rather than inherent to testimony itself. Therefore, it provides a framework for analyzing literary texts in which witnessing is obstructed by social and institutional conditions. Building on Agamben's account of exclusion while drawing on Levinas' ethics of the face, the concept extends beyond the historical figure of the Muselmann to examine how testimony is prevented in different literary texts.

Within these states of exception, where individuals are reduced to bare life and witnessing becomes impossible, Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory serves a methodologically generative function. LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001) provides the framework for analyzing how trauma operates within the texts. He distinguishes between two modes of engaging

with traumatic experiences. "Acting out" indicates the inability of an individual to avoid or master traumatic experiences, while "working through" refers to the individual's ability to develop a critical perspective of traumatic incidents that does not deny their effect and impact (p. 89). This provides the analytical instrument for understanding how testimony is foreclosed in both Burns and McBride, and whether that foreclosure occurs during the production of testimony or its reception.

Applied comparatively to Burns and McBride, it becomes the instrument that shows that both novels foreclose witnessing at different points in the testimonial process. Burns' indirect narration and McBride's fragmentation show signs of acting out through repetition, delay, and the avoidance of direct expression. At the same time, each novel works through trauma by revealing the social and political structures that produce these patterns, allowing readers to reflect on them. LaCapra does not define the unwitnessable, but his distinction between acting out and working through does more than supply descriptive vocabulary. Hence, Levinas' ethical framework stresses what is lost when witnessing becomes impossible, and Agamben emphasizes that sovereign violence creates this condition. Together, they provide the philosophical foundations for conceptualizing the unwitnessable, while LaCapra provides the analytical tool for examining how it is represented.

Existing criticism of Anna Burns' *Milkman* has examined the novel through a range of critical perspectives. Hutton (2019) investigates the novel's feminist politics, explaining that giving characters no proper names is a form of resistance to patriarchal surveillance. Routray and Gaur (2024) similarly adopt a feminist perspective by arguing that the novel's first-person narrative focuses on the protagonist's experience of gender and social conflict that conventional narration would not capture. Hossain (2023) extends this, demonstrating how silence within the text functions as a means of exerting control over the characters. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they offer different explanations for the use of namelessness and silence in the novel. Rather than interpreting these narrative strategies either as forms of resistance or instruments of discipline, this study argues that they represent the unwitnessable, showing how sovereign violence prevents the distinction between resistance and control, thereby foreclosing testimony.

Other scholars examined themes of trauma and community in *Milkman* with particular attention to its fragmentation and narrative forms. Malone (2021), for instance, states that the novel's indirect style mirrors the protagonist's avoidance of confrontation due to traumatic experiences, while Reynolds (2021) explains that the novel's complex narrative style is intended to provoke readers to engage with its ethical dimensions. These contrasting interpretations raise the question of whether the novel's narrative strategies should be understood as a sign of foreclosed witnessing or as a critical mode of representation. Drawing on LaCapra's concepts of acting out and working through, while engaging Levinas' ethics of testimony, this study addresses that question.

Critical scholarship on Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* has focused on its modernist aspects, innovations, and treatments of trauma. Harrison (2020) and Ward (2020) have attempted to situate the novel's fragmented style within or against modernism, exploring the ways in which it departs from modernist traditions. Bazarnik (2018) extends this and examines the role of repetition as a structuring device, suggesting that what appears to be the novel's 'half-formed' style is actually a deliberate strategy (p. 77). Scholar Antosa (2015) relates the fragmented prose to the content of the narrative, as the broken language reflects the psychological and physical effects of trauma. Cahill (2017) further situates the traumatic suffering endured by the novel's protagonist within the social and historical context of Ireland following the Celtic Tiger economic boom, relating her abuse and resistance to national concerns about gender and economic crisis. Reynolds (2014) further argues that McBride uses modernist techniques to represent trauma while creating a critical distance between readers and the painful experiences of the protagonist, suggesting that the novel's fragmented style encourages readers to a more reflective ethical engagement.

Although Bazarnik and Antosa both examine the novel's fragmentation, they offer different explanations. Bazarnik views this fragmentation as a deliberate narrative tool, while Antosa interprets it as a sign of trauma. This raises the question of whether fragmentation should be considered as a sign of foreclosed witnessing or as a critical narrative technique. This study addresses that question through Levinas' ethics. Furthermore, Cahill's focus on national history and Antosa's discussion of trauma identify forms of exclusion that this study interprets through Agamben's concept of bare life. From this perspective, both the family and the post-crash Irish state function as sovereign powers that prevent the protagonist from witnessing.

Despite this rich critical attention, the specific comparative and theoretical gap this study addresses has not been filled. To my knowledge, no study identified in the course of this research combines Levinas' ethics and Agamben's bare life as its primary analytical framework with LaCapra's trauma theory as a complementary interpretive tool or proposes the unwitnessable as the category that emerges from this synthesis. Therefore, the novelty claimed here is narrower and more precise than a claim to the first comparison of these two novels.

Methodology

This study employs a theoretical-philosophical close-reading methodology that approaches literature and philosophy as mutually informing practices rather than as an external analytical framework. The analysis is guided primarily by Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the face and Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, which together establish the ethical and political condition that produces testimonial foreclosure.

While Levinas' ethics of the face and Agamben's concept of bare life explain why testimony is foreclosed, they do not offer a vocabulary to distinguish between texts that reproduce this foreclosure and others that expose it. This study, therefore, draws on LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through solely as a methodological tool. This makes it possible to differentiate between a text's symptomatic reproduction of foreclosure and its critical exposure of it. Applied to Burns and McBride, it shows that both novels foreclose witnessing at different stages of the testimonial process; Burns at the point of reception and McBride at the point of production. Accordingly, LaCapra's framework remains conceptually subordinate to Levinas' and Agamben's theories, which explain the ethical and political conditions that make such foreclosure possible.

The analysis focuses on narrative strategies such as namelessness, indirect narration, and social and internal forms of silence, as well as on perspective and characterization, to demonstrate how the unwitnessable is both produced and contested. This adaptation also distinguishes the study from trauma theory. Whereas trauma theory locates foreclosure in the subject's response to a traumatic event that has occurred in the past, this study argues that in *Milkman* and *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, foreclosure precedes the traumatic event emerging from social, political, and ethical conditions that shape the characters' lives. Methodologically, this study follows Robert Eaglestone's (1997) conception of literary criticism as an encounter between the self and the Other, treating both literature and philosophy as mutually constitutive practices. This approach supports the argument that literary texts generate philosophical insights rather than merely illustrating philosophical ideas. Within this framework, the unwitnessable refers to a state in which certain events cannot be expressed, known, or ethically witnessed because testimony has been foreclosed by social and political forces. This provides the basis for developing the unwitnessable as a critical category for analyzing political and gender-based violence.

The comparative dimension of this study is methodologically necessary. Comparing Burns and McBride allows us to demonstrate that the unwitnessable is not unique to a single novel, but rather exists as a broader concept within literary narratives. Comparing their narrative strategies reveals different modes through which testimonial foreclosure is produced, developing an understanding of the unwitnessable that would be possible through the analysis of either text in isolation.

Discussion

This study defines the unwitnessable as a condition in which testimony is foreclosed by political and social forces rather than being inherently impossible. Unlike Agamben's figure of the Muselmann, where testimony becomes impossible because subjectivity has been destroyed, the unwitnessable in these novels results from systems of power that prevent testimony from being expressed, heard, or recognized. Both Anna Burns' *Milkman* and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* show that this happens in two ways: externally, through community surveillance and political force, and internally, through trauma's fragmentation of the self.

The most striking formal feature of *Milkman* is its systematic refusal of proper names throughout the novel. No character is named in the conventional sense. The narrator is referred to as Middle-Sister, the antagonist is the Milkman, the potential partner is Maybe-Boyfriend, and her friends are identified by their positions. The cities and the country in which the story takes place are also unnamed. They are identified only by their political geography, such as over the water, the ten-minute area, and the border. Although Levinas does not directly discuss proper names, he suggests that ethical recognition begins by acknowledging the Other as someone who speaks and addresses us. He argues, "The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that renders possible and begins all discourse" (1969, p. 87). Furthermore, Johnson states that naming is never neutral. On the contrary, names classify individuals within certain racial and political systems of power. She explains that names have a significant impact on people, shaping how they are treated and understood. This shows that names can become tools of domination rather than simply identifying individuals (1995, p. 120). The refusal of naming in *Milkman* therefore, functions as a refusal of ethical recognition, reducing individuals to social and political roles rather than recognizing them as unique individuals who are members of a larger community.

Burggraeve notes that such regimes often strip people of their identities, leaving them as anonymous bodies exposed to violence through reducing them to categories and fluctuating labels (1999, p. 36). *Milkman* also shows what happens when someone attempts to name the Other despite the risks. The forbidding of naming is not only a social custom but also a rule enforced by the community's political order. This is mostly presented in the novel's description of its "psycho-political

atmosphere, with its rules of allegiance, of tribal identification, of what was allowed and not allowed," which "didn't stop at 'their names' and at 'our names,' at 'us' and 'them,' at 'our community' and 'their community,' at 'over the road,' 'over the water' and 'over the border'" (Burns, 2018, p. 24). Hence, naming is considered a political act that can expose both the speaker and the named person to violence. From Levinas' perspective, the face of the Other is both hidden and rendered dangerous by the community's political order. Fear and surveillance displace the ethical encounter with the Other, so that recognition becomes a source of political risk rather than ethical responsibility.

The Milkman, the novel's antagonist and central embodiment of political power is the most philosophically significant of its unnamed characters. He is identified by his role in the community rather than by his name. As the narrator notes, people speak about him through gossip: "it was 'So-and-so said' and, 'it has been said', and 'we heard our uncle's cousin's brother's daughter's friend... said.' Some too, would make mention of the actual word 'rumour', as in 'Rumour says', before going on to personify rumour, as if it weren't they who were launching or perpetuating Rumour themselves" (Burns, 2018, p. 173). His authority operates through both reputation and rumor not through any direct knowledge of him as an individual. From an Agambenian perspective, Milkman is a symbol of power, representing authority that rules through fear and exception rather than through personal identity. In doing so, Milkman contributes to the production of bare life, reducing individuals to objects of political control rather than individual humans.

In Agamben's terms, the community in *Milkman* exists in a permanent state of exception, in which ordinary law no longer applies. Instead, powerful paramilitary groups practice violence beyond legal limits. Hence, people are reduced to their biological and political identities rather than recognized as subjects with rights, systematically producing Agamben's bare life. Büyükbay explains, "for Agamben, bare life represents an existence that is excluded from the political order (*bios*) yet remains completely subjected to sovereign power" (2026, p. 176). The narrator observes:

At this time, in this place, when it came to the political problems, which included bombs and guns and death and maiming, ordinary people said 'their side did it' or 'our side did it' ... 'Us' and 'them' was second nature: convenient, familiar, insider, and these words were off-the-cuff, without the strain of having to remember and grapple with massaged phrases or diplomatically correct niceties (Burns, 2018, pp. 21-22).

Dividing every event into "our side" and "their side" demonstrates how the state of exception controls both perception and language, forcing people to see themselves and others through political categories. Büyükbay notes, "the shift from *bios* to *zoë*, is a process of exclusion, whereby certain forms of life are excluded from the political community yet remain subject to the state's power" (2026, pp. 177-178). As discussed in the literature review, the community occupies a dual position. It exercises power over its own members while also being subject to the British state's sovereign power. Hence, the community experiences sovereign control while also reproducing it within the community. The narrator reflects this situation, stating that even everyday habits are politically controlled. "Often I would walk along reading books. I didn't see anything wrong with this, but it became something else to be added as further proof against me. 'Reading-while-walking' was definitely on the list" (Burns, 2018, p. 3). This passage illustrates how the state of exception structures everyday life, transforming ordinary activities into acts governed by sovereign power. Even a simple walk is watched, indicating that no space remains entirely outside the reach of surveillance.

Since the state of exception can regulate a woman's ordinary walk, its power extends beyond bodies and behavior to language itself. It determines not only what people can do, but also what they can say and how they can say it. Such formal strategies are therefore philosophically significant because they enact the conditions of testimonial foreclosure rather than merely describing them. In *Milkman*, a central strategy is circumlocution: the use of indirect, roundabout expression through repetition and delay. Rather than simply representing the impossibility of testimony, circumlocution enacts it by displacing testimony into fragmented forms of narration. It reflects a narrator who cannot speak directly and instead displaces testimony into hints and postponements. Barry identifies this strategy as "illocutionary dissimulation," a form of linguistic concealment in which "some speakers counterintuitively exert power by camouflaging their intentions." She argues that *Milkman* not only portrays this dynamic through the events, but also through its distinctive narrative style (2024, p. 1139).

That was the way it worked. Hard to define, this stalking, this predation, because it was piecemeal. A bit here, a bit there, maybe, maybe not, perhaps, don't know. It was constant hints, symbolisms, representations, metaphors. He could have meant what I thought he'd meant, but equally, he might not have meant anything (Burns, 2018, p. 181)

The syntax of this passage reflects the narrator's experience under pervasive yet unnamed violence. The repeated phrases in this passage and throughout the novel convey the narrator's uncertainty and confusion, representing a world in which violence is always present, but never articulated. The narrator's description of power: "this stalking, this predation" is "hard to define," reveals her inability to identify the power that governs her. Reduced to Agamben's bare life, the possibility of a Levinasian face-to-face encounter is denied because the source of violence remains obscured. As Barry notes, *Milkman*'s narration unfolds through "extended digressions, lengthy paragraphs, complex sentences, passive voice, pluperfect tense, multiple negation,

archaic diction, euphemism, and the omission of almost all proper names," producing "the sensation of a torrent of words without much real action" while exposing the politics of language under conditions of domination (2024, p. 1140).

The significance of this narrative strategy becomes clearer in the narrator's rare moments of direct speech: "I needed my silence, my unaccommodation, to shield me from pawing and from molestation by questions. ... This was my one bit of power in this disempowering world" (Burns, 2018, p. 205). Unlike circumlocution, these moments reveal that the narrator can articulate her experience but withholds testimony because speaking would only lead to further victimization. Her silence reflects what LaCapra describes as the impasse of testimony, which is not caused by language failure, but by a hostile society where testimony is met not with recognition but with abuse. In this sense, her silence is both repetitive and protective, preventing the genuine working through that testimony requires. The novel's use of circumlocution reproduces the community's self-censorship while simultaneously exposing the mechanisms through which testimony is foreclosed. visible. The community also controls what people are allowed to know: "Of course we knew really that the sky could be more than blue, two more, but why should any of us admit to that? I myself have never admitted it" (Burns, 2018, p. 70). This shows that silence is not merely a personal choice for survival, but also a social norm that determines what may be known, spoken, and believed. As Wall concludes, *Milkman* "highlights the importance of unspoken rules and the ways in which they travel through and become ingrained in the community by actually being spoken covertly by women, who do not constitute political actors" (2023, p. 80). Under these conditions, the possibility of a successful testimony, where a witness can speak and be heard, recognized, and believed, is systematically foreclosed.

Unlike *Milkman*, where the unwitnessable is created by external forces such as community surveillance and social control, Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* presents it as an internal experience. As a result of physical violence and psychological trauma, the narrator's sense of herself is fragmented, and thus it becomes difficult for her to testify or speak of her experience. In McBride's novel, the unwitnessable emerges from the trauma of the body, breaking down the coherence of the witnessing subject from within. Téllez points out that the narrator's "feeling of unhomelikeness in her physical home... mirrors her feeling of unhomelikeness in her abused body," and that her departure for London is also a desire "to be liberated from her corrupted body" (2018, p. 9). The novel's opening sentence announces this condition. "For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin, she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did" (McBride, 2013, p. 1). The broken language reflects the narrator's damaged sense of self. The incomplete sentences, missing subjects, and the use of "you" instead of "I" prove that trauma has destroyed her identity, and so she cannot fully witness or explain her own experience in a clear and complete way. As a result, her voice is not heard, and her testimony is not accepted.

Beyond the narrator's fractured subjectivity, McBride also shows how institutional power structures reinforce the impossibility of testimony. Patriarchal family dynamics and the authority of the church decide whose lives are valued and whose suffering is silenced. The brother's brain tumor, the uncle's abuse, and the authority of the Church all contribute to the narrator's exclusion and vulnerability. The passage: "Where until I crack. Break my. Face. Head. Something. Smash. On a stump. Where on the back of my head on the back of my back my back crack that's my eyes" (McBride, 2013, p. 67) shows how trauma is expressed through bodily sensation rather than coherent narrative. As Téllez notes, "stories about physical suffering are narrated *through* the body," yet the body's suffering exceeds language; hence, McBride experiments with narrative and linguistic elements to translate "the protagonist's embodied subjectivity into verbal language" (2018, p. 3). The narrator's experience, thereby, cannot become a complete testimony and remains an example of the embodied unwitnessable.

The narrator's relationship with her body also reflects Agamben's idea of bare life. Whenever she is abused, her body is controlled by others rather than by herself. "She gets my hair. Listen. To me. Listen. What you've done. Shaking me smack and smack my head. Dirty brat. Shivering. Sharp with rage" (McBride, 2013, p. 17). According to Agamben, the body is the most fundamental site where sovereign power produces bare life, leaving a person exposed to violence without protection (1998, pp. 1-2). In this case, the mother takes the role of sovereign authority controlling the child's body and exposing it to violence. Thus, her body becomes an object of violence rather than a source of agency. McBride's fragmented syntax, short clauses, and repetition not only present the narrator's traumatic experiences but also convey the reduction of self to bare life.

LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through helps explain the formal structure of McBride's narrative. As trauma criticism notes, novelists engage "with form, structure and language to inspire empathy" and convey experiences that resist straightforward narration, especially in contexts of "physical abuse," and McBride's fragmented syntax is one such formal strategy (McGrath, 2025, p. 14). At the level of the narrator's speech, the repeated fragments and disrupted syntax exemplify acting out, as the narrative compulsively returns to moments of bodily pain instead of integrating them into a reflective account. The narrator is immersed in her traumatic experience and is unable to work through it. However, working through occurs at the level of the novel's form, rather than the narrator's consciousness. Through using fragmented syntax and disrupted narration

throughout the novel, McBride reveals the effects of trauma without restoring narrative coherence. In this way, the novel transforms formal fragmentation into an ethical mode of representing traumatic experiences.

Having established that the unwitnessable in *Milkman* comes from external social and political pressures, while in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* it comes from internal psychological and bodily fragmentation, it becomes clear that both novels extend these forces to the reader as well. The novels have employed formal strategies to depict the difficulty of testimony and make readers experience it. Thus, readers cannot remain detached observers but become ethically involved in the act of witnessing.

In *Milkman*, the absence of names prevents readers from distancing themselves from the narrative's violence or treating it as a specific historical event. As the narrator observes, "It was the spirit of the community going back in time that deemed which names were allowed and which were not" (Burns, 2018, p. 22). Thus, readers share the narrator's uncertainty because the novel withholds the conventional markers of identity. This narrative strategy places readers within the same limits that shape the characters' lives. From a Levinasian perspective, the withholding of identity has ethical significance. Drawing on Levinas, Ding and Wang (2022) suggest that ethics emerge through speech rather than vision and that ethical engagement requires recognizing the Other's individuality rather than treating them as something to be observed or fully comprehended. (p. 596). The frustration created by this narrative withholding is not merely aesthetic; it reflects the ethical and political condition that prevents testimony and reveals why witnessing can never be complete.

In *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, the reader's involvement is even stronger. The repeated second-person address, "For you," places the reader in the position of the narrator's listener. As the story unfolds and the abuse continues, the reader is no longer a distant observer but is drawn into the events and directly receives the narrator's account. The fragmented language, which is difficult to follow, is not simply a stylistic feature, but an ethical demand. It requires the reader to reconstruct what the narrator cannot fully express. This is underscored when the narrator confesses, "What's wrong here is me me me. Me the thing but I. Think I know. Is that the reason for what's happened? Me? The thing. Wrong. Strangling it is. Me" (McBride, 2014, p. 162). It is a moment in which bodily and psychic fragmentation are rendered through broken language turning reading into an ethical act of witnessing, while making the reader experience the difficulty of fully receiving testimony.

Rather than seeking to emotionally identify the reader with the experiences of the traumatized characters, both texts require the reader to engage critically with the conditions that make testimony difficult or impossible. Therefore, readers are not sympathetic but detached witnesses; instead, they become actively involved in the process and limits of witnessing. As Dori Laub observes, "the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself" (1992, p. 57). In this way, the novels do not simply represent trauma; they convey the conditions that make it difficult to fully witness.

The comparative analysis of the two novels develops the concept of the unwitnessable as a critical category in ways that a single-text study could not. The comparison distinguishes between the externally produced unwitnessable in Burns' novel and the embodied one in McBride's, indicating that the unwitnessable is created through different methods and sources of oppression. Together, these texts demonstrate that the unwitnessable is a concept that appears in at least two distinct historical and experiential contexts and may extend to others, although this remains to be tested in future research. This distinction has important theoretical implications for the application of both Levinas and Agamben. In both novels, the Levinasian face encounter is rendered impossible, but at different levels of testimony. In *Milkman*, the failure occurs at the level of reception, as the community's sovereign order destroys the social conditions necessary for testimony to be recognized. In *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, the failure occurs at the level of production, as violence destroys the cognitive and linguistic coherence required to articulate testimony. The unwitnessable thus names a double failure of ethical relation: the Other may be unable to speak or may speak into a world incapable of hearing. Consequently, the comparison extends Levinasian ethics beyond the immediate face-to-face encounter, demonstrating that ethical failure is shaped not only by interpersonal relations, but also by social and formal conditions that prevent testimony from either being produced or received.

The comparison also refines the Agambenian dimension of the argument. In *Milkman*, Burns depicts communities living under political emergency, as both exercising and enduring sovereign power, producing bare life under conditions of double sovereignty. By contrast, McBride in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* presents a different mode through which bare life is produced, where institutional and patriarchal authority transforms the body into a site of unprotected violence. This echoes Agamben's *homo sacer*, whose exposure to violence remains unrecognized within the sovereign order. Both novels extend Agamben's framework by showing that sovereign abandonment operates through both state power and everyday social relationships.

The two novels demonstrate that the unwitnessable refers to the structural foreclosure of testimony when violence destroys the conditions required for ethical witnessing, whether prior to or following testimony. Burns and McBride represent this process and make readers experience its limits through different narrative techniques such as namelessness, fragmentation, circumlocution, and narrative disorientation. Thus, reading becomes an ethically challenging act of witnessing, encouraging

readers to confront not only trauma but also the social and political conditions that prevent its recognition. The concept of the unwitnessable, therefore, provides a useful framework for analyzing literary texts in which violence not only harms individuals but also undermines the conditions that make testimony ethically acknowledged.

Conclusion

This study argues that Anna Burns' *Milkman* and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* portray what it conceptualizes as the unwitnessable, a condition in which political violence, gender-based abuse, and dehumanization produce bare life and destroy the possibility of ethical witnessing. Through close reading guided by the philosophical frameworks of Levinas and Agamben and interpreted through LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through, the study depicts the impossibility of witnessing. This impossibility is presented through techniques such as unnamed characters, fragmented language, indirect narration, and reader involvement. These are not simply literary devices; rather, they demonstrate the collapse of witnessing, revealing how violence disrupts both the production and reception of testimony.

The comparative analysis shows that the unwitnessable operates differently in each novel, revealing distinct forms of failed witnessing. In *Milkman*, political violence and community surveillance prevent testimony from being received, whereas in *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, gender-based abuse prevents testimony from being produced by breaking the narrator physically and psychologically. The concept of the unwitnessable is, therefore, a useful term for understanding the different forms of failed witnessing across these two literary texts. As argued at the beginning of the discussion, the unwitnessable differs from Agamben's idea of the impossibility of testimony. This study argues that the unwitnessable is socially and politically constituted rather than grounded in the witnesses' ontological condition.

Building on this distinction, the main theoretical contribution of this article is the development of the unwitnessable as a conceptual tool for literary analysis. The concept is developed through close readings of two novels and is intended as a starting point for further testing across other literary contexts. Although the theories of Levinas and Agamben provide the theoretical foundations for identifying the unwitnessable, the comparative analysis of *Milkman* and *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* extends these theoretical insights by conceptualizing the unwitnessable as a condition that exposes the structured foreclosure of testimony and the limits of ethical witnessing.

Future research may extend the concept of the unwitnessable by examining how it operates across different literary traditions, including feminist, postcolonial, and atrocity literature. It may also investigate the differences between embodied and externally produced forms of the unwitnessable to assess the broader applicability of the concept. Ultimately, this study argues that literature about political violence and gender-based abuse does more than describe traumatic experiences; through its formal strategies, it reveals how social and political violence dismantles the conditions necessary for ethical witnessing, rendering testimony impossible.

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