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A Half-Formed Thing, a Fully Formed Style. Repetition in Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*

Abstract

The article begins with addressing alleged similarities between Eimear McBride's debut novel *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* and James Joyce's works to suggest that they cannot be systematically sustained. Her much praised, experimental style relies on the opposite of Joycean richness. Limited vocabulary, jumbled word order, and lexical and phrasal repetitions are one of the most salient features of her style. McBride applies rhetorical variants of *conduplicatio* to create an emotionally powerful idiom to narrate an anti-Bildungsroman about a loving sister and her dying brother, her sexual abuse by an uncle and final suicide. So despite some thematic parallels, and linguistic experimentation, *A Girl* bears only superficial resemblance to the modernist master, which is additionally evidenced by stylometric findings.

Keywords: Irish novel, Eimear McBride, James Joyce, repetition, style.

Eimear McBride's debut *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013),¹ the winner of the inaugural Goldsmith Prize for “boldly original and utterly compelling” fiction,² has been widely praised for its unique style and daring experimentation. In the first review of the novel, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, David Collard confessed to have been “repeatedly (as the author puts it) ‘gob impressed’”. Writing of this quality is rare and deserves a wide readership”, he declared.³ Anne

¹ E. McBride, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, London 2014, further parenthetically quoted as *GHFT* and a page number.

² Dr. Tim Parnell qtd. in *Eimear McBride Wins the Inaugural Goldsmith Prize*, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-prize/media/eimear-mcbride-wins-inaugural-goldsmiths-prize/>. The novel was also awarded Irish Novel of the Year, the Bailey's Prize for Women's Fiction, the Desmond Elliott Prize and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Award.

³ D. Collard, *Eimear McBride: Gob Impressive*, “Times Literary Supplement” 2013, 17 June, <https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/eimear-mcbride-gob-impressive/> (access: 1.03.2018).

Enright, the most lavish in her complements, called McBride “that old fashioned thing, a genius”, and her book “a constant classic”.⁴

Surprisingly, her plot is “reassuringly conventional in structure”⁵: it is a chronological account of a girl’s life from her first, antenatal impressions to her suicidal death at the age of twenty. But stylistically, it is a remarkably innovative achievement, unanimously compared to those of Beckett and Joyce.⁶ Such a bold comparison has prompted me to take a closer look at the alleged similarity between Joyce and his contemporary “successor”, especially that McBride herself mentions the author of *Finnegans Wake* as her inspiration: “[...] Joyce’s observation – ‘One great part of every human existence is passed in a state which cannot be rendered sensible by the use of wideawake language, cutanddry grammar and goahead plot’ – pointed somewhere interesting. So I wrote it on a scrap of paper, stuck it over my desk and began”.⁷

Critics usually point out parallels between *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* and *A Portrait of the Artists as a Young Man*.⁸ Both novels trace the protagonists’ lives from early childhood to young adulthood, though McBride’s story kicks off at the moment when the eponymous Girl is still in the womb: “For you. You’ll soon. You’ll give her name” (*GHFT* 3). Likewise, her narration is focalised through the main character. When the Girl is born, we watch the world from her perspective: “But I saw less with these flesh eyes. Outside almost without sight. She, asking after, and I’m all fine. Hand on my head. Her hand on my back. [...] I curled there learning limb from limb. Curled under hot lamps” (*GHFT* 3). Such truncated, anacoluthic, repetitive sentences communicate her physical sensations and perceptions, but unlike Stephen’s, her language does not change, develop, or grow. Such style remains consistent throughout the whole story.

It soon becomes noticeable that lexical and phraseological repetitions, and parallelism permeate the texture of the novel, producing a strong effect of foregrounding. This stylistic consistency conveys an impression of extreme emotional tension that impedes expression. The narrative voice breaks off, stalls, chokes,

⁴ A. Enright, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* by *Eimear McBride*, *Review*, “The Guardian” 2013, 20 September, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/20/girl-half-formed-thing-review> (access: 1 March 2018).

⁵ D. Collard, *Eimear McBride: Gob Impressive...*

⁶ A. Mars-Jones, *All Your Walkmans Fizz in Tune*, “The London Review of Books” 2013, vol. 35, no. 15, 8 August, p. 31–32; A. O’Keeffe, *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing Review – Eimear McBride’s Daring and Dazzling Novel*, “The Observer” 2014, Sun 18 May; J. Wood, *Useless Prayers. A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* by *Eimear McBride*, *Review*, “The New Yorker” 2014, September 29, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/useless-prayers> (access: 1.03.2018).

⁷ E. McBride, *How I Wrote A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, “The Guardian” 2016, 10 September, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/10/guardian-book-club-eimear-mcbride-how-i-wrote-a-girl-is-a-half-formed-thing> (access: 2.03.2018).

⁸ J. Wood, op. cit. Anne Fogarty and Jacqueline Rose do not mention this particular novel, but they classify *A Girl* as a kind of Bildungsroman (respectively: “*It Was Like a Baby Crying*”: *Representations of the Child in Contemporary Irish Fiction*, “Journal of Irish Studies” 2015, vol. 30, p. 13–26 (access: 18.04.2018), and *Feminism and the Abomination of Violence*, “Cultural Critique” 2016, Fall, vol. 94, p. 4–25).

making the reader work hard to infer what's going on. Anne Enright comments that

[t]here are moments when you long for the style to settle down, or evolve; the prose at 18 is just as broken as it was at five. But the style is also direct, simple and free of intertextual tricks and, after a while, the language becomes its own kind of object. The narrator is better at hearing things than telling them: there are riffs of reported speech and scraps of banter, and these are put to virtuoso use in building scenes and describing action. There is also, surprisingly, a strong storyline when, at the grandfather's funeral, what seemed aimless becomes completely gripping.⁹

Enright's description of the Girl's consciousness as made up of different intermingled voices might suggest an affinity with *Finnegans Wake*; and indeed, occasionally, the rhythm of her prose seems to resemble Anna Livia Plurabelle's diction.¹⁰ But McBride's story is far from the lexical complexities of Joyce's experiment. Her mind perceives and records instructions, orders, requests, admonishments addressed to her, as well as scraps of conversations, as if her thoughts were half-made of someone else's voices.¹¹ Following this autodiegetic narrator the reader gradually learns that the Girl is growing up in an unspecified Irish town, where she lives with her strict, devotedly religious mother and elder brother (the father walked out on them when he learnt the boy was suffering from a brain tumour). She is deeply attached to him; in fact, the whole text is a kind of soliloquy addressed to her sibling.¹² He was operated on but the growth could not be removed completely, so the family live under a constant threat of a recurrence. When the Girl is thirteen, she is seduced and raped by an uncle. This, and her attempts to protect the brother from bullying at school, induce her to engage in haphazard, serial, masochistic sex, first with schoolmates, and then with other men, when she goes away to college. When the boy's cancer relapses, she returns home, where she is again seduced and abused by the uncle. Consequently, she alternates attending to her dying brother with roaming dodgy areas to be beaten up and brutally raped, as if to anaesthetize herself. And when the brother dies, she follows in his wake, drowning herself:

What's left? What's left behind? What is it? It is. My name for me. My I.
Turn. Look up. Bubble from my moth drift high. Blue tinge lips. Floating hair. Air famished eyes. Brown water turning light. There now. There now. That just was life. And now.

What?

My name is gone.

(*GHFT* 203).

⁹ A. Enright, op. cit.

¹⁰ Cf. Mark Lawson describes this as "the hyper-Joycean modernism of its torrent of unspecified speakers and non-chronological incident" (*On Stage, A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing Becomes Fully Formed*, "New Statesman" 2016, 25 February, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2018/04/oh-magic-feeling-intergalactic-connections-between-space-travel-and-rock> (access: 16.04.2018); and Anne Fogarty notes similarities between the final scenes of *Finnegans Wake* and *A Girl* (A. Fogarty, op. cit., p. 24).

¹¹ This could be analysed in terms of Bakhtinian heteroglossia.

¹² He is the "you" she addresses.

This harrowing story is delivered in an amazingly immersive language, “dense, interrupted, shattered [...], blooming with neologisms, compounds, stretched senses, old words put to new uses”.¹³ Of course, Joyce’s linguistic experimentation comes to mind as a somewhat clichéd comparison. However, unlike his Ulyssean richness or Wakean neologisms, McBride’s lexical inventiveness is limited to several instances occurring in moments of high emotional pitch. In fact, her lexicon is truly “spartan”.¹⁴ The author reveals that that was her deliberate strategy:

It seemed to me that when attempting to tell a story from a point so far back in the mind that it is completely experiential, completely gut-reactive and balancing on the moment just before language becomes formatted thought, English needs to be made to pick up its feet and move. This clearly wasn’t going to be the place for *bon mots* or delvings into the farthest reaches of the Oxford English Dictionary. Every word had to be drawn from whatever would exist in anyone’s basic active vocabulary and this was the rule I pretty much stuck to.¹⁵

This is confirmed by stylometric statistics that show how limited her vocabulary richness is in comparison to over fifty other novelists. She stands in stark contrast to not only to Joyce, whose vocabulary is by far the richest, but also to other 20th and 21st century novelists included in the sample (see figure 1).¹⁶

She achieves the mesmerising effect mainly through a bold treatment of syntax. As is evident even from this brief excerpt, her sentences are exceptionally short on average, and often elliptical. Out of the nineteen sentences in the above quoted, closing passage only eight can qualify as fully formed; the remaining eleven lack verbs or predicates. In statistical terms, her mean sentence length stands out conspicuously, too, being by far the shortest (see figure 2). The repeated use of ellipsis sharpens the focalisation. The reader feels he is looking at the world from inside the Girl’s mind. Jumbled, inchoate syntax reinforces this impression. Despite her lexical economy, the writer manages to rearrange the words in such a way that the reader is not bored, but drawn into a guessing game that uncovers horrifying details of the protagonist’s existence.

¹³ J. Wood, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ D. Collard, *Eimear McBride: Gob Impressive....*

¹⁵ D. Collard, *Interview with Eimear McBride*, “The White Review”, May 2014, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-eimear-mcbride/> (access: 16.06.2018).

¹⁶ It includes 20th century novelists mentioned as alleged influences on McBride, and a range of 21st century authors of both popular and more ambitious fiction. The vocabulary richness table represents the standardised type/token ratio (STTR, where type: the number of different words; tokens: overall number of words in a text, cf. M. Scott, *Type/Token Ratios and the Standardised Type/Token Ratio*, WordSmith Tools version 6, Stroud: Lexical Analysis Software, 2015, http://www.lexically.net/downloads/version6/HTML/index.html?type_token_ratio_proc.htm).

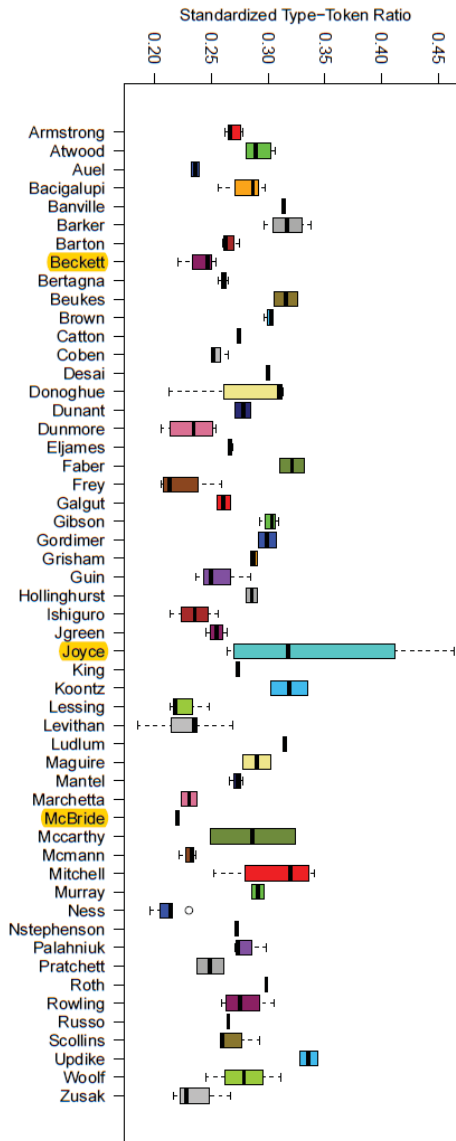


Figure 1. Standardised Type/Token Ratio for McBride and other novelists
 Source: courtesy of Jan Rybicki¹⁷.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Dr. Jan Rybicki, my colleague from the Institute of English Studies, who has carried out the stylometric analyses presented in this article. We plan to present a more extensive discussion of the methodology and further interpretations of the findings in a separate article.

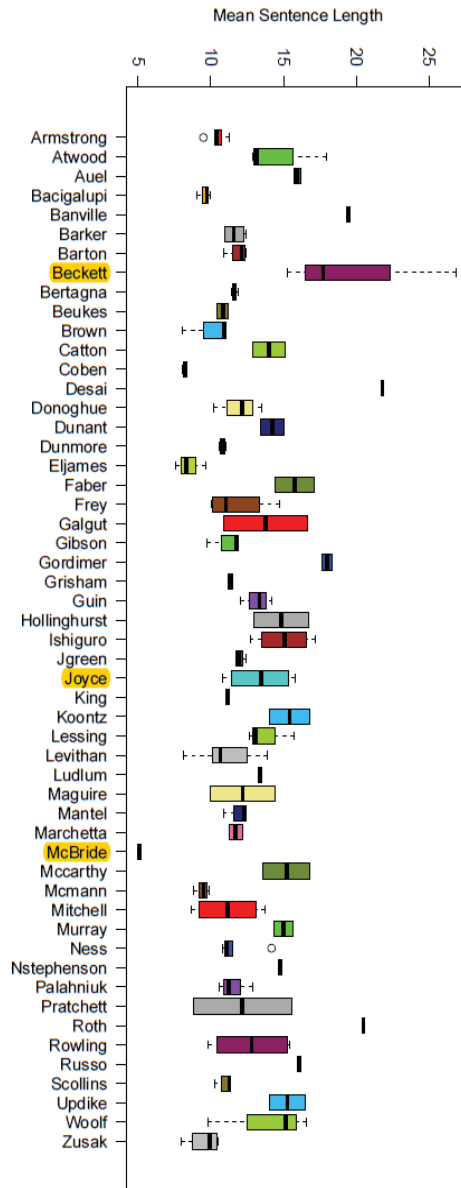


Figure 2. Mean Sentence Length for McBride and other novelists
Source: courtesy of Jan Rybicki

David Collard contends that McBride “has created a new form of prose which employs a deceptively simple lexicon in fragmentary vernacular syncopations to represent thought at the point before it becomes articulate speech”.¹⁸ And John

¹⁸ D. Collard, *About a Girl. A Reader's Guide to A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing*, London 2016, p. vii.

Sutherland proposes that stream of consciousness “applied to McBride’s novel [...] doesn’t really fit. McBride, unlike, say, Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*, offers nothing that ‘flows’ – there’s no ‘stream’, as such. Nor, in any full sense, is there ‘consciousness’. The fact is, we don’t, as yet, have a term that does fit what McBride is doing”.¹⁹ Indeed, her creative manipulation of syntax and punctuation may bring to mind Molly Bloom’s soliloquy (or Beckett’s novelistic or stage monologues²⁰). But her style produces a contrary effect: of a blockage, not a flow, though her inventiveness in this respect is equally compelling.²¹ The Girl’s is a unique kind of “mindspcak”, oppressed, permeated with religious diction, inhibited, which blurts out in spontaneous, emotional outbursts, communicating confusion, pain, desire, shock, guilt, fear, as well as tenderness, love, and laughter.

In fact, McBride’s use of punctuation is distinctly different from Joyce’s. She hardly ever uses commas and never semicolons; and sometimes a grammatical sentence is chopped by full stops, as if to enact dramatic pauses, for example, when the mother’s admonishment beats the Girl’s ears, and her slaps hit the daughter²²:

Never you ever touch it. A slap for every word of warn we get. Never. Ever. Touch. That. Dirty. Thing. It’ll. Give. You. Warts. That. Is. Di. Sgust. Ing. Still we kept its jam jar in the shed until I broke it it died of fright you said and threw it at the cat who ran. Fat cat full of shit. Oh-e oh-e oh-e what you said. Yellow squirting if you touched him. Don’t. Pick. Up. That. Dirty. Cat (*GHTF* 9)

This is where the author’s background in drama and theatre shows. In an interview with David Collard, the writer admitted to this influence: “What I did know, as a result of three years’ drama school, was how to make people. To express a natural, prismatic experience of life through words – rather than the performer’s body – language had to work differently. Be broken, reformed, have its grammar mauled and punctuation recalibrated”,²³ she explained.

Another striking feature of her style, also rooted in oral performance, is lexical repetition. McBride’s systematic application of rhetorical variants of *conduplicatio* becomes another strategy to maintain an intensely emotional tone, and to impart the sense of oppression to which the Girl is subjected. Repetition flags the points when she becomes agitated, perplexed, frightened, or emotionally confused. This is in tune with its function in classical rhetoric, in which this device serves to appeal to *pathos*. McBride skillfully handles its nuanced variants to

¹⁹ J. Sutherland, *Eimear McBride’s Novel Doesn’t Fit any Terms We Use to Categorise Writing*, “The Guardian” 2014, 6 June, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jun/06/eimear-mcbride-novel-terms-writing-consciousness> (access: 1.03.2018).

²⁰ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for suggesting a further stylometric, and stylistic comparison with Beckett’s *Not I*, which is definitely worth pursuing. However, the former methodology might not be fully reliable because of the relative shortness of Beckett’s text (approx. 4600 words) in comparison to McBride’s novel.

²¹ A. Mars-Jones, op. cit.

²² Jacqueline Rose describes her novel as “modernism as slut walk, language as a type of synopated abuse – the constant line breakage as the literary form for injury or self-harm” (“Feminism and the Abomination of Violence”, p. 21).

²³ D. Collard, *Interview with Eimear McBride...*

produce vivid scenes. So it is no coincidence that one of the most frequently quoted passages relies on an elaborate structure of repetitions (marked here with italics, bold type and underlining):

(1) *I met a man. I met a man.* I let him throw me round the bed. And smoked, me, spliffs and choked my neck until I said I was dead. *I met a man who took me for walks.* Long ones in the country. *I offer up. I offer up in the hedge.* (2) *I met a man I met with her.* She and me and his friend to bars at night and drink champagne and bought me chips at every teatime. *I met a man with condoms in his pockets.* Don't use them. He loves children in his heart. **No.** *I met a man who knew me once. Who saw me around when I was a child. Who said you're fine looking woman now. Who said come back marry me live on my farm. **No.** *I met a man who was a priest I didn't I did. Just as well as many another one would. I met a man. I met a man. Who said he'd pay me by the month. Who said he'd keep me up in style and I'd be waiting when he arrived.* (5b) **No is what I say.** (6) *I met a man who hit me a smack. I met a man who cracked my arm. I met a man who said what are you doing so late at night.* (1) *I met a man. I met a man.* And wash my mouth out with soap. I wish I could. That I did then. (3a) *I met a man.* A stupid thing. (3b) *I met a man.* Should have turned on my heel. (4/5a) *I thought. I didn't know to think. I didn't even know to speak. I met a man.* And I lay down. (7) **And slapped and cried and wined and dined.** *I met a man **and** many more **and** didn't know you at all (GHFT, 96–97; emphasis KB).**

It begins with *epizeuxis* (1), a simple repetition of the same word or phrase. Then, the phrase “I met a man”, repeated anaphorically several times, segments rhythmically the whole paragraph. It adds speed and vehemence to the Girl's monologue. Further, the initial *epizeuxis* is elaborated into *mesodiplosis* (2),²⁴ and *diacope* (3a; 3b), i.e., the repetition is intersected with remarks “A stupid thing” and “Should have turned on my heel. I thought. I didn't know to think. I didn't even know to speak”. The latter insertion constitutes a repetition within a repetition, and is an instance of *correctio* (4), in which the speaker retracts what she has said, realising it was wrong. This conveys a sense of confusion and regret. It is followed by *exergasia* (or *expolitio*) (5a) – an elaboration on the repeated phrase. The *exergasia* offers an explanation for the fact that she felt helpless, numbed, unable to respond intellectually or react verbally. The only word she is able to say to the men is “No”. Repeated three times, and reinforced by *expolitio* (5b) in the form of reinforcement of the repeated negation, it adds force and poignancy to the Girl's refusal. Tellingly, the third “No” is followed by an *isocolon* (6) – a series of parallel clauses in which she describes physical violence she experienced. Her weak protests drown in a wave of sentences characterising the men: who took her for walks, who knew her once, who were priests, who hit her, who cracked her arm, and who pretended to be concerned about her. This tedious and almost inane repetition (*homilogia*) wears the reader off, so it is only appropriate to slow down at the end and close the scene with *polysyndeton* (7), which employs a series of conjunctions “and” (characteristic of spoken and children's language).

When we consider the passage as a whole, it becomes evident that it consists mainly of the men's words. The Girl's are mostly function word: conjunctions, pronouns, and the repeated minimal sentence “I met a man”. Since these words

²⁴ The same word repeated in the middle of the sentence.

are fundamental for the stylometric analysis,²⁵ it seemed reasonable to test how McBride's highly idiosyncratic "voice" would compare to other authors, including her alleged influences, especially that these methods have proven useful in demonstrating stylistic proximity in the cases of some evident influences.²⁶ In order to do so, the statistical software determined strings of four words in a sample of over a hundred 20th and 21st century novels, and compared their frequencies in particular authors. Those whose frequencies are the most similar group together, which means that they are most alike in stylometric terms. The results, displayed in Figure 3, contradict the widespread intuitions about McBride's similarity to Joyce, and Beckett. Although *A Girl* may feel "Joycean" to some critics, this preliminary investigation suggests strongly that her style shares little in terms of word and phrase frequencies with the modernist masters indicated as her influences. Instead, she demonstrates stylometric affinities with contemporary writers such as Marcus Zusack (*Fighting Ruben Wolfe*, 2000; *The Messenger*, 2002), Lisa McMann (*Dead to You*, 2012), James Frey (*A Million Little Pieces*, 2003), Emma Donoghue (*Room*, 2010), and... E. L. James (*Fifty Shades of Grey*). Some of them may be classified as "young adult fiction"; others feature children or adolescent narrators, often traumatised, sexually abused, disturbed or imbalanced. It needs to be stressed that the similarity pertains to the frequencies of the function words, and the most frequent 4-word-strings. Among them are "I don't want (to)" and "I don't know (what)", featuring in the top ten most frequent phrases in these contemporary novels; while neither of them appears even in the first 30 items in any of Joyce's books. So it seems that these 4-grams hint at a thematic similarity, and possibly similarity in focalisation in *A Girl* and these contemporary novels.²⁷

This stylometric evidence, combined with more traditional close reading makes me question McBride's self-proclaimed, simple indebtedness to Joyce. Unlike his famous linguistic experiment in *Finnegans Wake*, which inspired her, her language appears to be fully awake and alertly watchful to external stimuli she manages to record in an experientially truthful way. Her story is, after all, a chronological "goahead plot" about a difficult, painful life ended with premature, tragic death. It is her "grammar" that is most unconventional, but, ironically, it can be described as "cut" and "dry". It is at times almost disintegrated, or often follows patterns of spoken language. So if McBride is indebted to Joyce in any way, she certainly does not imitate his style. What she owes him is rather a relentless engagement in experimentation, and an ambition to forge a language uniquely her own.

²⁵ Stylometry applies statistical methods to compare the number of most frequent words in texts in order to determine stylistic affinities among authors. It is useful in establishing or verifying authorship. It can be also used to determine some stylistic tendencies, and to indicate passages of stylistic similarity between two authors (see footnote 26 for some examples).

²⁶ See, for example, W. McKenna, and A. Alexis, *Intertextuality and Joyce's 'Oxen of the Sun' Episode in Ulysses: The Relation between Literary and Computational Evidence*, "Revue Informatique et Statistique Dans Les Sciences Humaines" 1994, vol. 30, no. 1, p. 5–90; and J. O'Sullivan *et al.*, *Measuring Joycean Influences on Flann O'Brien*, "Digital Studies / Le Champ Numérique" 2018, vol. 8, no. 1, p. 1–25.

²⁷ The limited space of this article does not let me elaborate on this affinity, but this definitely calls for further inquiry.



Figure 3. Big network of 20th and 21st c. novelists. POS 4-grams Source: courtesy of Jan Rybicki. McBride is in the centre of the cluster on the left.

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